

## **Changing Intergenerational Relationships and their Implications on Family Structure and Functioning in Africa**

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### **Abstract**

Intergenerational relationships have been changing the world over, with greater implications on the family structure, health and stability. The key changes in Africa are often associated with colonial intrusion and the attendant infiltration of Western cultures. The process has in recent times been further exacerbated by the process of globalization. In the past, relationships between generations were stipulated in culture and preserved by norms, folklore and even taboos. These relationships were based on mutual respect, cooperation, obedience and benefit across generations. The honor, respect and reverence of the old by the young were supposed to be passed down the generations. With modern changes, these values have changed and in some cases, are completely eroded and replaced with modern ideals often leading to dysfunctioning of the family. Some of the dysfunctions include lack of care for older persons within the family, child delinquency, lack of internal regulation of the family, lack of external mitigation in times of dispute, resulting to frequent breakdown of the family. As a result, family relationships and roles are changing and so are the intergenerational relationships. The patterns of change also create implications warranting interventions beyond the capacity of the family.

**Keywords:** Family relationships, functioning, intergenerational relationships

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## **1 Introduction**

Intergenerational relationships are an integral part of any cultural arrangement of a society. They are by and large defined by a society's culture. Usually, intergenerational relationships exist where the younger and older generations live in a sustained mutual cooperation and coordination that benefit members of each of these generations (Newman, 1997). A cardinal defining aspect of intergenerational relationships is the fact they are normally governed by exchange as well as the norms of reciprocity. For these relationships to endure, an exchange of care is a part of everybody's daily obligation. Simply put, each generation is obligated to the other so that each generation serves the needs of the other. This interaction between generations and the ensuing obligations constitute what in some literature has been termed as 'intergenerational contract' (Izuhara, 2004, p.650). Ogawa (2002) elaborates that intergenerational relationships constitute a social contract between generations obligating each generation to meet the needs of the other in a process that is neither written or legalized but that subsists within the bonds and relations that sustain the family. Indeed, the UN Second World Assembly on Ageing held in Madrid in April 2002 observed that solidarity between generations at all levels, in families, communities and nations, is fundamental for the achievement of a society for all ages, here referred to as functioning of families.

In Africa, intergenerational relationships are clearly set in the cultural settings and as such each generation is socialized to fit in and assume their place and serve each other and ultimately serve society. The role and expectations thereof of each generation may thus assume a routine nature, for instance, parents taking care of children until that time when in turn the children start to care of their aging parents. Nevertheless, this clockwork of expectations may mask the fact that with the passage of time, these expectations (i.e., intergenerational care giving) and intergenerational expectations may not be fully met due to challenges that have been brought by the forces of social change such as education, Christianity, technological advancements and mass media, among others. All these exchanges of relationships have the family level as the major theatre where they are played out. The net effect is that at the micro-level, (i.e., at the family level), all pressures have a significant bearing with regard to how the family is structured and functions. The purpose of this paper is therefore to discuss how intergenerational relationships in Africa have changed over time and ultimately affected the structure and functioning of the African family.

### **1.1 Family patterns of interactions between generations in traditional Africa**

In most African communities, interactions between generations were based on a hierarchical age-structure, whereby respect and status were accorded on the basis of one's age. The norm was the greater the age, the higher the status. This was further complimented by a gender-based system of awarding status whereby men were given higher status. This was the case largely because most communities, except a few in the southern part of Africa, subscribed to a patriarchy system. As a result, family relationships were subject to a strict order of seniority, with the eldest men at the helm. It is however important to note that children and women also had their place in society. Women

were referred to as the carriers of generations due to their roles of bearing and rearing of children. They were thus often assigned adoring names. On the other hand, children were valued as they were the promise of continuity of the community. It is for this reason that there were elaborate ceremonies to welcome children into the community. Children belonged to the community and the larger society. Again, it was unexpected for married couples to live without a child, hence the acceptance of polygamy especially in those cases where a wife never bore children.

At the family level, the relationships were based on reciprocity and exchange. Children were taken care of in the expectation that they would in turn take care of their parents in old age. Caring for one another among generations was thus an expected obligation, and indeed duty. This reality has endured in most parts of Africa and thus, it is still believed that older and younger generations of a community should live in mutual cooperation and coordination for the benefit of the two groups. This situation is characterised by mutual honor, adoration and respect of the old by the young and is underpinned by a strong socialization culture. Further, it is supported by an institutionalized system of gerontocracy. Hence, in such a milieu of co-existence, each generation 'owes' the other.

## **1.2 The basis for the changing intergenerational relationships in Africa**

Across the world, intergenerational relationships (i.e., involving grandparents, parents and children) are dynamic and this obviously has great implications on the family structure. The changes are based on either culture or outcomes of the normal social changes taking place in society. To say that an aspect of social fabric is changing may mean that there is an observable modification from what used to be or that the modifications are in perceptions and attitudes. Many changes currently taking place in Africa are often as a consequence of colonization by the Western nations and Christian missionary work, which subsequently resulted to Westernization and to an extent modernization of African cultures. Changing intergenerational relationships are no exception.

Undoubtedly, there is limited literature on the changing intergenerational relationships in Africa mostly due to lack of studies to provide accurate and reliable data, especially for the pre – colonial period. Oduaran & Oduaran (2004), classified generational relationships in Africa in four categories, namely: traditional Africa, colonial era, post-colonial years and contemporary transformations.

### *a) The traditional Africa intergenerational relationships*

Prior to the colonization of Africa, traditional communities were represented by indigenous people. According to Beauclerk, Narby and Townsend (1998. p3) indigenous people have unique characteristics, cultural traditions and ways of using resources and technology that distinguished them from the majority of other peoples. These communities had three distinct age-defined categories, namely the young, middle-age adults and the elderly. The most respected and adored were the elderly due to their seniority based on age, and because of their age, they were revered to

be close to ancestors. It should be noted from history that in Africa, and during the pre-colonial times, there existed ancestral worship in most African communities. As a reinforcement of this respect, disrespecting the elderly was a way of inviting the wrath of the ancestors and a prompt curse for the person involved. It should be noted here that some communities in Kenya continue to uphold this principle.

The said reverence compares to that accorded to classical philosophers such as Plato, Socrates, Locke and others from Western Europe. Similarly, in traditional Africa, the elderly were revered as philosophers because they orally handed down the patterns of relationships and interactions to younger generations, for preservation and/or onward transmission to the next generations. This was mainly through socialization of the young ones into community life and ways of doing things. By extension, intergenerational relationships in traditional Africa were actualized in peoples' way of life and therefore learned throughout the life course.

#### *b) Colonial period intergenerational relationships*

During the colonial era, and according to Oduaran and Oduaran (2004), African culture and traditions were externally influenced. The first of such contacts with outside cultures came during the period of exploration of Africa, dating back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D. but more so after 1460 A.D. (Oduaran and Oduaran, 2004). The external cultures and especially values, belief systems and practices had a lot of effect on intergenerational relationships in especially sub – Saharan Africa. African culture was seen as inferior and it was thought to be in need of being salvaged by the more sophisticated and/or more civilized culture of the Arab and Western worlds (Oduaran and Oduaran, 2004). Rodney (1989, p82) blames this perspective on what he called 'European bourgeois anthropologists whose philosophical outlook on primitive societies caused them to separate African society from its historical context'.

Moreover, in the colonial period in Africa, intergenerational relationships were largely shaped by Western values and practices. The attendant changes were more or less determined by the western powers in charge of each territory after the scramble for Africa. Newer systems of generational relationships therefore emerged and became even more pronounced in the British-ruled colonies in Africa. Some of the notable changes affecting intergenerational dynamics included, 1) the introduction of homes for the elderly as well as remand homes for law breakers of that time. This meant that the elderly Africans were isolated from the rest of the community members; their children, grandchildren and even great grandchildren. This needs to be understood within the context that in traditional African society, care was given within the community and offenders were equally rehabilitated within the community. It was only in extreme cases that one would be excommunicated or expelled from the community; 2) introduction of Western form of education and the accompanying value systems, which were also passed on to African generations., 3) urban way of life – education facilitated urbanization, which was a form of isolation and a process that

eroded and continues to erode harmonious intergenerational relationships, 4) the mass media, as a means of communication, which came around the time Western education was introduced helped in many ways to prepare ways to entrench Western values and interests. The values attached to generational relationships in Africa during the colonial period have often been assumed to have been altered by the educational, social and communication systems which had been introduced by the Western countries.

*c) Post colonial intergenerational relations*

In post colonial Africa, intergenerational relationships have been shaped by both internal and external forces. Immediately after independence, the African political elites who had acquired ample exposure to western values through travel and education began to copy and practice these values.. As a result, there was a move towards Western civilization, value systems and urbanization. In most African countries, it was followed by other transformations (e.g. emergence of individualism, and self-advancement, among others). Oduaran & Oduaran (2004) have argued that the modern world seems to be industrial, expansionist, capitalistic and bureaucratic and is therefore not supportive of the communal and mutual cooperation characteristic of pre-colonial societies. As industrialization and urbanization, expansionism, capitalism and bureaucracy continue to flourish, generational relationships in Africa continue to change in an unprecedented way. At the same time, family structures are getting dismantled as the role of the extended family in fostering harmonious generational relationships is continually challenged.

As generational relationships change, the gerontocratic ethic is continually challenged. Young people begin to view the older generation as burdensome and parents or grandparents have to make appointments or schedule visits to their adult children or grandchildren especially those living urban areas. Such visits often require prior approval and are expected to last a short time than would be expected in the traditional sense. This means that the youth, the adult and the elderly have been driven apart by modern life, which has a negative effect on intergenerational relationships.

These changes have not come without a cost. Most Africans refer nostalgically at the good old days and even attempt at times to salvage the old values that embraced sharing, caring and mutual respect among generations, In contemporary Kenya for instance, grandparenting is now acquiring value especially in rural areas ravaged by AIDS and civil strife where adults and younger parents have died leaving their children as orphans. Though the role of grandparents in such scenario has been praised, it is noteworthy to mention that such new roles have only added to the increasing burden of grandparents (Bock & Johnson, 2008; Wangila & Akukwe, 2006) (McGadney-Douglass & Douglass, 2008). Eke (2004), adds that the AIDS epidemic has created social isolation and stigmatization of the infected and affected populations in Africa among whom are grandparents acting as care givers to their orphaned grandchildren. The scholar further argues that due to the epidemic, intergenerational relationships have been further affected and therefore the existing social

bonds between generations are weakening. This has taken its toll on most of rural Africa where there is also a high percentage of illiteracy and limited financial resources (Eke, 2004; Aboderin, 2005).

Other challenges facing Africa pertain to dwindling resources leading to competition for the limited resources and in some cases, civil wars and political upheavals. These have directly affected generational solidarity in the sense that there is strain on meeting the competing needs across the generations. In Kenya for instance, land scarcity heavily impacts on generational relationships as whereby there have been cases of intra-family strain as members lay claim to ever diminishing land holdings (Kimani & Maina, 2010). Overall in Africa, there is need for concerted efforts and more focused programmes to respond to the changing generational relationships with a view of salvaging the role of the extended family in that arrangement.

## **2 The contemporary transformation in intergenerational relationships**

There are several emerging realities about the changing intergenerational relationships today. These are manifested in two ways. Firstly, the elderly are taking care of homesteads on their own both in the rural as well as the urban areas. With increasing rural-urban migration and emerging tendency towards nucleated families, the traditional cushion that ensured the elderly lived with the rest of the members of the household has been eroded. As a result, the elderly are increasingly living alone in the rural areas. Second, the system of collective disciplining of children has faded away, and so are the traditional roles of children. Traditionally, children belonged to the community but the contemporary reality is that children belong to individual nuclear family units. This frontier is even being pushed further as children assert their position of independence and autonomy in a world now characterised by human rights activism. Though children have their own rights (and indeed these rights should be upheld) the over emphasis on rights without a counterbalance of responsibilities to family and society by children is somewhat flawed. The Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) rarely mentions the responsibilities of children and could be blamed for this flaw. Hence, in such a scenario, these rights are claimed to the extent that the authority of family unit become subject to supervision by the state. In the process, relationships between different generations become subject to external regulation rather than the traditional African community self-regulation. Thus issues are resolved and regulated from without increasing tensions and over-exposing the family to external pressures.

The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child enacted on November 29, 1999 clearly outlines the responsibilities of the child and lays a more balanced foundation for the claim of rights by children. It also upholds cohesion, solidarity and respect that are the very basic foundations for enduring and harmonious intergenerational relationships. The box below is an excerpt of Article 31 of the charter, outlining these responsibilities.

**Article 31: Responsibility of the Child**

Every child shall have responsibilities towards his family and society, the State and other legally recognized communities and the international community. The child, subject to his age and ability, and such limitations as may be contained in the present Charter, shall have the duty;

(a) to work for the cohesion of the family, to respect his parents, superiors and elders at all times and to assist them in case of need;

(b) to serve his national community by placing his physical and intellectual abilities at its service;

(c) to preserve and strengthen social and national solidarity;

(d) to preserve and strengthen African cultural values in his relations with other members of the society, in the spirit of tolerance, dialogue and consultation and to contribute to the moral well-being of society;

(e) to preserve and strengthen the independence and the integrity of his country;

(f) to contribute to the best of his abilities, at all times and at all levels, to the promotion and achievement of African Unity.

As the focus shifts more on rights than responsibilities of children and the attendant connections thereof, the question that arises is: who do today's children belong to and how do they relate with the older generations?

Thirdly, there is the loss of common language. Language is a medium of communication as well as it is a medium of shared culture and meanings. In Kenya, an emerging language among children and youth alike is that known as *-sheng* - a language that is not based on their traditional culture and as such a language that does not share its meanings across generations. The older generation simply have no understanding of the youngsters' language and as such often have no idea what these youngsters are saying. Worse still, many of the youngsters have little mastery of their local communities' language. In the process, intergenerational communication is impaired. Fourthly, there is the phenomenon of child-headed families which are increasingly becoming common. With the advent of especially HIV/AIDS and the associated stigma, orphaned children are being forced to continue take charge of younger siblings as well as their parent's households. Such children are thus forced to adopt adult roles as they are robbed of care and support as well as the learning that comes from continuous interaction with older generation becomes non-existent.

Given this scenario, it becomes difficult to fathom how these children will manage as they grow up given that they are also being robbed of opportunities to build capacity for their future opportunities. It is of course a fact that, in a number of cases, they are living with elderly grandparents. But then the elderly themselves need care. This reality has meant that there is potentially a disconnect in the chain between the generations as the elderly grandparents have little energy and exposure while the young ones are not very much schooled into the ways of their local community. In the process there is a threat to cultural continuity. This scenario also represents reversed roles in the sense that the

older generations provide care at a stage in their life when younger generations ought to be providing care for them.

Fifthly, there is the working family phenomenon. With the advent of modernization and the empowerment that has been made possible by education, increasingly there are more and more families where in some cases, all generations work away from home. The taking of jobs (whether salaried or self employment) has meant that family members spent far too few hours together. And when they have time together, they are emotionally and physically drained. So as to keep the family unit going, strangers (e.g. house-helps) are brought in to assist with those tasks traditionally done by members of the household. Under the changing circumstances, household members are unable to undertake traditional tasks due to time constraints. The end result of this phenomenon is reduced contact between members of the family. Further, since members no longer serve each other, opportunities for exchange and reciprocity diminish. Ultimately, the strength of relationships weakens. Further, the family arena has become a place of meeting rather than a place of living and sharing. Family members, especially the younger generations, in the process are forced to interrogate the benefits of living at home with parents and the older generations. Indeed, many of them have opted to make alternative living arrangements and away from home. As a result, the prevailing scenario put to question the much touted Cain's (1985) 'old age security' motivation of getting more children in expectation of being cared for in old age. Across Africa today, there are many households occupied by elderly parents with their younger generations living elsewhere in rural as well as in urban areas.

Sixthly, advances in information and communications technology (ICT) have also put pressure on intergenerational relationships. Mobile telephony and the computer have revolutionized sources of information, entertainment and time use. In the traditional African community setting, the elderly persons were reservoirs of information and knowledge. They were also the centre of entertainment through especially storytelling. Advent of mobile phone and the computer technology has increasingly seen younger people becoming attached to these technologies than they are to older persons. The internet is a source of most information, entertainment and a thief of time for the youth. The youth are pulled to become a part of the increasingly globalized world (UN, 2003). Their outlook is thus shaped to be more outward focused with the resultant tendency to be more bonded to the outside world than with the older generation within their communities. The ICT revolution and the attendant globalization is a further blow to intergenerational relationships and ultimately the functioning of families in Africa.

Lastly, gender empowerment as a phenomenon that has been unfolding in most of Africa especially from the late 1990s has seriously affected familial relationships. More women are becoming empowered because of their increasing access to education, employment, business opportunities and consequently involvement in key decision making fora away from home. Indeed, with gender empowerment women are increasingly participating in leadership at the domestic front, at

community and at the national level. The entry of women into decision making has meant that power relations have been renegotiated, and the structure and functioning of families have created space for the empowered women in an otherwise patriarchal society. This has also opened doors for girls to be empowered and escape the otherwise subservient lives they traditionally lived, where they would have been exposed to such harmful practices as early marriage, female circumcision, and denied access to educational opportunities, among others.

### **Conclusion**

As the fore discussed processes of social change continue to impact intergenerational relationships, the end result has been that the family unit has undergone stress and strain. The different actors across the generational spectrum within the family system are increasingly operating individually rather than as an integrated whole. Further, there is disequilibrium in the family system brought about by the dysfunctions introduced by the myriad of factors discussed above. These have made members of families (children, mothers and fathers) to be unable to play their expected traditional roles. In the absence of systematized and institutionalised alternatives, various generations in Africa have to face today's challenges without the concerted assistance afforded by the traditional society. There is thus a pressing need to close the vacuum wrought by these disconnections through well coordinated and programmed initiatives to cater for each generation's need and where possible, strengthen the social bonds that existed in the past. African nations must also embrace the tenets of a welfare society and must institutionalize the provision of care for all through various outlets. Cultural values that supported harmony and upheld the rights and responsibilities of each generation must also be factored in socialization and educational programmes.

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