

# **From Marriage to Political Leadership:**

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## *Lessons in Social Competencies from the Igbo Conception of Marriage*

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### **Abstract**

Owing most probably to Western-style modernization, marriage is increasingly understood to be a business strictly for married couples. However, I argue that this is an error, as many inexperienced couples are left to their own devices, and thereby often fail to utilize marriage to acquire the social competencies that are crucial to wider social responsibilities, including political leadership. The modern atomic conception of marriage is influenced by the Kant-inspired Western conception of moral autonomy. Nevertheless, I reject this conception as excessively absolutist, and argue that moral autonomy can be tempered by lack of experience, human desire and circumstantial pressures in life. Many African societies view marriage as a union of societies rather than that of individuals, and I argue that the moral support offered by the extended family and the community at large is ultimately geared to inculcate in the spouses inter-personal and social skills of restraint, prudence, tolerance, constructive criticism and other virtues desperately needed to execute societal responsibilities.

### **Key Words**

Igbo marriage, social responsibilities, social competencies, social atomism, political leadership

### **Introduction**

There has been serious concern that there is no institution for training political leaders in society. This is with special regard to the *qualities of leadership* such as tolerance of different views and modes of behaviour, emotional maturity, capacity for consensus building, and social competencies generally. In today's increasingly multi-cultural political atmosphere, social competencies are increasingly crucial to social responsibilities. Although multiculturalism and social competencies are not exactly the same, the acquisition of social competencies is a prerequisite for dealing with multi-cultural situations, a capacity that is urgently needed in present day political life in Africa. There is strictly no syllabus for teaching these personal qualities at primary and secondary school levels. At the tertiary level

of education, certain disciplines study political leadership, among them political science, political philosophy, and public administration. However, political science deals with structures of government and history of political ideas and ideology. More specifically, it studies the state, government, law, and concepts such as liberty, equality, justice, sovereignty, separation of powers, methods of representation, forms of government, and grounds of political obligation. On its part, political philosophy deals with theoretical and speculative considerations of the fundamental principles used by political science, and examines the thought of eminent political philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Hegel, Mill, Marx, and Gandhi to understand their views on the nature, functions and ends of the state and government. Public administration deals with the organization, control and coordination of administrative machinery.<sup>1</sup> Of these, only public administration comes close to teaching leadership qualities when it reflects on diverse theories of leadership such as centralized and democratic styles of leadership. Of these, two theories of leadership can explain why the Igbo conception and practice of marriage produces the social competencies that lend advantage to handling social responsibilities, including political leadership. They are the behavioural and participatory theories. I will briefly discuss them in my section on the Igbo conception of marriage. These theories tell us that people become leaders not by birth, but by learning (behavioural theory), and that leadership is most effective when it makes people feel included (participatory theory); but these theories do not, by themselves, teach qualities of leadership such as the social competencies to be discussed in this article.

There is more effort to teach qualities of leadership at the individual level: there are books about leadership behavior, but these are motivational texts that are mere exhortations to good behavior. A book cannot, by itself, cause an individual to internalize behavior, except where there is an arrangement to practice what it says for a considerable length of time. Thus the handicap of a book and its prescriptions is that they suffer the traditional and all-too-familiar gap between theory and practice. One particular book about qualities of political behavior comes close to bridging this theory-versus-practice gap by generously providing empirical examples of its prescriptions. It is titled *The Forty-Eight Laws of Power*, authored by Robert Green (1998). However, it focuses on qualities that will help a political leader to survive *personally* in power (and to acquire more power) rather than to work toward the survival of

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<sup>1</sup> For subject matters of political science, political philosophy and public administration, see Samir 2014.

those that he or she leads or rules. Heavily inspired by Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*, this book teaches tolerance mostly only as *pretense* to play for time and/or lure a political opponent (which it may prefer to call an enemy) into a political trap.<sup>2</sup> In general, formal training for qualities of political leadership is hard to come by - hardly anyone thinks of it. In any case, modern society is likely to categorize such character and value education as *subjective*, as religious issues are also categorized.

However, there need be no concern about the platform for the acquisition and internalization of qualities of political leadership, as this platform has been under our very noses since the beginning of human existence - the family, more specifically, marriage between two spouses. Although this institution has been overlooked as training ground for gaining the social competencies that are necessary for modern political leadership, it was not entirely overlooked by George Hegel, who saw marriage as the only other major institution apart from the state for actualizing the Idea. Furthermore, Hegel saw marriage as something more than both a mere contract and a mere activity of love:

Marriage is in essence an ethical tie. Formerly, ... attention was paid only to the physical side of marriage ... it was treated only as a sex relationship, and this completely barred the way to its other characteristics. This is crude enough, but it is no less so to think of it as only a civil contract, and even Kant does this. On this view, the parties are bound by a contract of mutual caprice, and marriage is thus degraded to the level of a contract for reciprocal use. A third view of marriage is that which bases it on love alone, but this must be rejected like the other two, since love is only a feeling and so is exposed in every respect to contingency, a guise which ethical life may not assume. Marriage, therefore, is to be more precisely characterised as ethico-legal (*rechtlich sittliche*) love, and this eliminates from marriage the transient, fickle, and purely subjective aspects of love (Hegel 1990 [1887], 161).

Hegel appreciates the fact that love alone cannot sustain a marriage. In fact, a marriage will collapse if there is love but no rules of courtesy. Without rudimentary politeness and diplomacy, growing differences can begin to lead to verbal (if not physical) aggression, and feelings of love and affection can gradually wither away. The common mistake made by many couples in love seems to be that all the rules of relationship are miraculously accounted for by feelings of love. Yet diplomacy is very often needed to rescue love. The special quality of marriage is that it presents the participant with only two choices: build your inter-personal

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<sup>2</sup> See for instance, Green 1998, pp. 8, 62, 82, 89, 101, 156 (and to a less extent, p. 367).

and social skills or prepare to quit. This is what makes marriage a unique institution for developing leadership and diplomatic skills.

However, Hegel falters when he thinks that the family's virtues are in discontinuation with the virtues of the state. Concerning the transition of family to civil society, he writes:

The family disintegrates (both essentially, through the working of the principle of personality, and also in the course of nature) into a plurality of families, each of which conducts itself as in principle a self-subsistent concrete person and therefore as externally related to its neighbours. In other words, the moments bound together in the unity of the family, since the family is the ethical Idea still in its concept, must be released from the concept to self-subsistent objective reality. This is the stage of difference... this relation of reflection ... portrays the disappearance of ethical life ... this relation constitutes the world of ethical appearance - civil society (Hegel 1990 [1887], 181).

When Hegel argues that transition into civil society is transition to the "state of difference", he assumes that the family is a platform of homogeneity while the state is that of heterogeneity. Yet this is not the case: multi-culturalism has itself been mistaken to emerge with the coming together of diverse societies; but Ward Goodenbough (1976, 4-7) has shown that there is almost as much heterogeneity at individual, family and simpler society levels (which he calls micro-cultures) as there are in ethnically diverse societies (which he calls macro-cultures). The differences in levels of difference obtainable between individuals and between ethnic groups can be simply a matter of degree, and this is because individuals may come from different backgrounds, beliefs, practices, preferences and value systems, even within the same community. This is what often obtains when a man and woman come together to form a union, and this is what makes marriage a unique platform for developing inter-personal and multi-cultural competencies. Because of his conceived dichotomy between the family and the state, Hegel argues that transition from family to civil society is occasioned by "disappearance of ethical life". This dichotomy again presents the state as a Machiavellian platform of deceit. Although I do not argue that there is a perfect symmetry between the degrees of sincerity shown at family and state levels, I argue that the basic competencies built into sustaining a marriage and family are in fact crucially needed at state leadership levels. In what follows below, I shall attempt to show how these relationship competencies are built into the Igbo concept and practice of marriage. In the light of this exposition, I will plead for the disappearance of much of the perceived methodological

dichotomies between the family and the modern state, since, in my view, these dichotomies account for much of the so-called “intractable political problems” of today.

In the next section, I offer an exposition of some Igbo beliefs, norms, practices and conceptions of marriage that encourage the responsible handling of social competence-building experiences. I argue that the responsible handling of these experiences equip people with competencies crucially needed in dealing with wider social responsibilities. I conclude the section by anticipating and responding to four major objections that may arise against the suitability of this conception and practice of marriage to learning the social competencies enumerated. The last section of the article enumerates the lessons to be learned from the Igbo conception of marriage for social responsibilities in general, and for political leadership in particular.

### **Marriage as Training Ground for Leadership: The Igbo Conception**

Although marriage is basically a *human* affair, it is accorded certain politically relevant (and significant) values in some parts of Africa, values that I will set out to describe here. The association between marriage and political leadership can be so much that, among the ethnic groups of Northern Nigeria, for instance, the first step to prove that one is eligible for a political leadership position or huge financial contracts is to show that one is married.<sup>3</sup> Among the Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria, an extensive form of social recognition has been built around marriage in order to attract youngsters to it. I began to discover the rationale behind the values accorded to marriage when I embarked on marriage among the Igbo, who are incidentally my people.

Among the Igbo, it is believed that if one can sustain a marriage, one is, at the rudimentary level, eligible for leadership positions and roles in society. This is because virtually every stage of marriage is designed to build up the social competencies that are vital to effective leadership. Let me begin with courtship. The decision to settle for a spouse is preceded by extensive investigations into the family background of the prospective spouse (see Nwabude 2001 and Amaegwu 2011). Indeed for some, the circumstances of the spouse’s family are

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<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to several of my friends from Northern Nigeria for these reports.

more important than the idiosyncrasies of the spouse, because it is believed that the spouse cannot be very different from what his/her family is. Such investigations are taken seriously because marriage involves the bringing together of two people from different backgrounds touching on values, beliefs, practices and interests. This is because a husband and wife will live out their lives together with a whole lot of differences in preferences, values, beliefs, hobbies and idiosyncrasies, many of which have become too deeply internalized and will last for their entire lives. Indeed, marriage is a unique platform for practicing (and thus building up) social competencies.

In the light of the (often huge) value differences that beset a marriage, and the very long-term tenure of many of these differences,<sup>4</sup> the possession of social skills is crucial to the health of a marriage, skills such as patience, tolerance, fortitude, diplomacy, constructive ways of criticizing, abstention from verbal aggression, and the ability to overcome temptations to malice. It is the lack of attention to these skills that is responsible for the high rates of divorce especially in Western countries today. Indeed, without requisite social skills, the impact of value diversities can shorten the life of most of the motivational reasons why we marry, reasons such as love, erotic attraction, as well as external social, cultural, economic and political reasons.

Accommodating the entrenched idiosyncrasies of one's spouse is only the first of the numerous competence-building challenges of marriage. It takes great patience to have, nurture and train children. Most babies spend the first months of their lives crying frequently during the nights for mother's milk. Unless it is a house of many rooms, the father is not spared this "entertainment". Later stages of infancy are even more challenging, with the potential of toddlers to destroy precious household items and appliances in the course of play, requiring constant vigilance on the part of adults. The journey of challenges does not stop here, as teenage is a stage where offspring assert their independence, and parents are forced to begin to deconstruct the emotional attachment that they have built towards their offspring through the years, the kind of attachment that made possible extensive patience and understanding for the benefit of their offspring in the first place. It is noteworthy that it is at this stage that many parents are eligible for high positions of responsibility in society. They

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<sup>4</sup> It is much more difficult to change adults than children.

are thus better equipped for such responsibilities if they have experienced, and responded reasonably to, the competency-building challenges just enumerated.

Other opportunities for attaining maturity abound in marriage: temptations to infidelity must be resisted; quarrels must be contained as much as possible within the family to keep out third parties. We can deduce that virtually every feature of marriage is designed to build competencies in self-control. These competencies are particularly significant for learning the exercise of prudence in political leadership.

The Igbo conception and practice of marriage vindicate the behaviorist theory of leadership, which asserts that leaders are made by lived experiences of learning modes of behavior that are crucial to leadership (Northouse 2012). In this case, such behavior involves the same social competencies necessary to sustaining a marriage. I am here referring to the leadership style that best suits a multi-cultural socio-political setting, and this is where the Igbo perspective also vindicates the participatory theory of leadership, which holds that inclusive leadership is best suited for internally diverse societies and organizations (Nohria and Khurana 2010). This is because the leader of the Igbo family is compelled to restrain his or her autocratic desires, and to appreciate the perspectives of others or the other. There is no gainsaying the value of a mentality of participation and inclusivity in the multi-cultural and multi-ethnic configuration of African societies today.

Let me, at this point, disabuse a mistaken notion which may arise, namely, that the view advanced here is not worthwhile because the institution of marriage does not guarantee that a participant in it will end up with the qualities discussed above. Indeed, the high divorce rates in the world today testify to the rampant failure on the part of married couples to develop these competencies. Yet it is one thing to say that marriage is an institution that offers people the opportunity to build their social competencies to levels that they will hardly have the opportunity to build on any other platform, but quite another to assert that people *will actually* utilize this opportunity: I have only asserted the former, *not* the latter, because it is a matter of free will to avail or not avail oneself the immense character training opportunities that marriage offers. Again, this is where traditional African institutions such as the extended family and the community at large lend their support to the success of marriage: marriage among the Igbo, as among many other African ethnic groups, is a union of families rather than simply that of two persons. This is a social philosophy that is quite supportive of the



dignity and stability of marriage: married couples enjoy the moral support of the wider family in the form of advice. Thus traditional African communal interest in marriage makes it difficult for a man to solely arrive at the decision to divorce his wife: the wider family and community have to hear about such intent and judge the case on its merit, which involves weighing all the consequences. Compare this with the Western model of marriage where couples are presumed to be autonomous moral agents in line with the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant (2012) and are left to their own devices.

I have two problems with the Western model of marriage, one empirical and the other logical.

Empirically, the Western individual-autonomy model of marriage is disproved by the high rates of divorce in Western societies (see Teows 2014, pars. 1-6). In fact, it can be argued that it is the diffusion of this view of marriage into African societies that has *introduced* the rates of divorce we now see on the continent. I emphasize the word “introduced” because these rates of divorce were absent from Africa prior to Westernized modernity. In this regard, Ohaegbulam (1990, 97) remarks: “The rate of divorce in contemporary Africa has increased dramatically as the traditional cushions against it weaken.” Consider the Western Hemisphere itself. The current divorce rate for North America is 41-50 % of all first marriages, 60-67 % of all second marriages, and 73-74% of all third marriages (Teows par 5; Americans for Divorce Reform 2014).

In addition, I find the individual-autonomy model of marriage to be terribly exaggerated. Individual moral autonomy is perfect only in theory: in practice people do not always make morally perfect decisions - people are *morally fallible*. Again this is shown by the high divorce rates in Western societies, as the solemn moral responsibility that is logical to absolutist conceptions of individual moral autonomy does not sit well with these rates. In contrast, the traditional communitarian orientation to marriage seems to be founded on the much more practical view of individual moral autonomy as somewhat tempered by constraints such as lack of experience, since it is built on the philosophy that young married couples should be guided against repeating “the mistakes of the ages” and generally that they have much to learn from the older and much more experienced.

Another notion that I wish to disabuse is the anticipated criticism that the competencies expected to be gained from marital experiences are not very evident in contemporary African

politics. It may be pointed out that African politicians (many of whom are married) are generally irresponsible and apathetic to the plight of their subjects, a vice that can be seen as central to the political misadventures on the continent, misadventures such as high levels of corruption and mismanagement. Nevertheless, this is an objection that appeals to instances of breaking the rule rather than of discovering shortcomings with the rule: closer scrutiny may reveal that many of the same politicians are by no means responsible husbands and fathers. The crisis of governance in Africa is due to low levels of accountability in politics which resulted from the twin misadventure of colonialism and military rule. Morally distorted by acts of governmental corruption, and powered by the buoyancy that comes from embezzled public funds, many politicians are prone to extensive sexual promiscuity, dubiously citing the traditional African institution of polygamy as an excuse (see Chikwendu 2014, pars. 1 and 5). It would therefore be surprising if such persons were good leaders.

Marriage may not be the only institution where these social competencies and virtues may be cultivated. There are other opportunities in life to build leadership competencies, such as being the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of an organization. Nevertheless, executive positions in the business world, and even in public office, do not, by their nature, offer the challenge of learning social skills such as compassion, tolerance and cooperation. In particular, the position of the CEO calls for a certain level of ruthlessness in dealing with employees, in the sense that a CEO is primarily concerned about the well being of a business corporation rather than that of an employee. In short, the institution of marriage offers a unique environment in which a person learns these qualities *as a matter of necessity*.

Furthermore, the relationship between marriage and these social competencies is not automatic: it is hypothetically possible that the most tolerant person in the world was never married, just as it is possible that the most ruthless dictator may have marriage in his or her record. Thus it is possible that the desired social competencies can be developed outside marriage. Nevertheless, what makes marriage unique is, first, that it makes the acquisition of these competencies *a calling*, and second, that this calling is unique in challenging us to learn the entire range of *humane* values.

### Lessons for Political Leadership

Let me recall Gyekye's argument that political development, in the form of political stability and conducive political atmosphere, is necessary for other forms of development, and that it is thus pre-eminent among the aspects of development (Gyekye 1997, 50). The greatest contribution of a political leader is enhancing political stability: other aspects of leadership, such as developing the economy, are secondary. Indeed, it can be argued that since it is private enterprises rather than government that drive an economy, political stability (which is a function of the exercise of prudence) is a political leader's greatest contribution to economic development. Yet political stability requires the possession of emotional stability, restraint, caution, courtesy, and the capacity to accommodate differences. Indeed, restraint and prudence are pre-eminent among these political virtues.

I will, for an example, consider the various ways to approach the problem of militancy in Nigeria. This country recently became the largest economy in Africa, but the Nigerian government had little hand in it, with the much celebrated government oil and gas industry recording only 14% of the economy, as against 32% in the 1990's (Liston 2014, par. 10). Much of the remaining 86% came from private efforts and industry. What constitutes the challenge of political leadership in this case is to quell the growing militancy in the less developed parts of the country. Initial government responses to militancy in the oil-rich Delta areas of the South, which were characterized by the use of brute force, proved unsuccessful and even exacerbating.<sup>5</sup> However, President Musa Yar Adua opted to employ dialogue, consensus and amnesty, and only this approach has worked.<sup>6</sup> There are important lessons that can be derived from the institution of marriage in relation to this challenge. This stems from the fact that the solution to a problem depends largely on how it is perceived, and there are two ways that a Head of State can perceive the challenge of militancy and terrorism. He or she can choose to examine it through the lenses of a Commander-in-Chief, in which case he or she could see a primarily military challenge. Alternatively, he or she can choose to see it through the lenses of a politician, in which case he or she perceives a primarily political

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<sup>5</sup> Several villages in militancy areas were bombed by successive regimes using the Air Force. In one case of the village of Odi, residents were massacred and almost every house was burnt down (see *the Environmental Rights Action* 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Amnesty and negotiations were offered to militants of the Niger Delta, and these led to many agreements that are largely responsible for the termination of militancy in the area.

challenge. Or again, he or she could choose to see these militants for the teenagers that they actually are: with the eyes of a father. If the last two perspectives are particularly the case, insights which will not occur to a Commander-in-Chief will emerge, insights that emerge from asking questions such as: what do these people want, what is their side of the story? This approach contains the potential for dialogue, compromise, consensus, amnesty, and other ingredients of building a stable political atmosphere. Yet this way of looking at political conflict can, among other things, be acquired from marital experiences. It is for reasons like these, quite apart from other reasons such as companionship and procreation, that the Igbo place great value on marriage.

### **Conclusion**

I have argued that society need not look to modern academic disciplines for character training especially with regard to political leadership, since such training is guaranteed by the African conception of marriage. In contrast to Western-inspired modern marriages which record abysmal levels of success, many traditional African approaches to marriage, such as the Igbo moral support of the extended family, contribute to the dignity and stability of marriage. The mechanisms of this process involve learning and practicing many virtues of inter-personal and social competence. The Western approach to marriage sees the union as strictly a business of the husband and wife, and hence they are left almost entirely to their moral devices. I disagree with the Kant-inspired Western absolutist conception of individual moral autonomy, since moral autonomy is made imperfect by lack of experience, error, environmental challenges, emotions, sensations, desires, and, most significantly, tendencies to ill will. Many African societies see marriage as a union between societies, communities or families rather than simply that between individuals, and the broader support that this outlook entails offers, in my view, a conception of moral autonomy that is superior to the Kant-inspired Western conception. This kind of broad-based community moral support is ultimately geared to inculcate in the spouses good character, comprising capacities for restraint, prudence, tolerance, constructive criticism and other virtues desperately needed by political leaders.

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