

## **The Changing Nature of the Family and its Duty as Foundation for Morals and Sustenance of Core Societal Value**

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### **Abstract**

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The foundation of every structure plays a strategic and important role in the kind of building that would eventually take shape upon it. The deeper the foundation, the higher the structure so, a family's foundation for morals and its support has to go deep in order to sustain the core values of the society she finds herself. The family is considered as the basic building block of a life that brings about the existence of the society and every of its members and individuals make up the community in which they find themselves. Through time, the family has always been the foundation from and upon which the moral of children are built, nurtured and developed as no individual is born in a vacuum, which implies that the family is of basic importance and necessity. A child's first contact with the world is the family he/she finds himself/herself (be it biological or adopted) and it is from this contact that impressions about the world is formed and its relation to it based therefore on what has firstly been imprinted by this most basic unit of society. Morals and social values are believed to be part of that which makes a society run while its oil is fueled by the varying family units that makes up the society. A typical family is made up of father, mother and children while in some instances, and the extended family. Morals we would remember refer to the social norms and values that guide both individuals and their interaction with their fellow human beings and communities, and with their environment. Society we would describe as a group of people related to each other through persistent relations, or a large social grouping sharing the same geographical or virtual territory, subject to the same authority and dominant cultural expectations. Hence human societies are characterized by patterns of relationships (social relations) between individuals who share a distinctive culture and institution which the family ultimately happens to be its foundation. The family of late unfortunately is now under attack as there is a consistent attempt to break this vital unit of society and this we find in the attempt to redefine marriage, child care and other pertinent issues that relates to it. The changing nature of the family tends to portray the family as one that has lost its ground to being the foundation for morals and the sustenance of core societal values. This paper intends to show that though there happens to have been varying and new family structures, one thing still stands out; the family still is the foundation and custodian of morals and further acts as the sustainer of core societal values.

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## **Introduction**

Every structure is believed and expected to have a foundation (that is, a base) upon which it is built. The society can be considered to have such a base and foundation and it is the family. The family is the basic unit and foundation upon which society is built and sustained. The family thus plays an important role in the functional nature of the society.

Society we would realize can be described as a group of people related to each other through persistent relations, or a large group sharing the same geographical or virtual territory, subject to the same authority and dominant cultural expectations. Society on its part is made up of these varying units and each of these units ensures the survival and sustenance of the whole. Hence human societies are characterized by patterns of relationships (social relations) between individuals who share a distinctive culture and institution which the family happens to be its foundation.

Morals and social values are believed to be part of that which makes a society run while its oil is fueled by the varying family units that make up the society. A typical family is made up of father, mother and children while in some instances relatives are included. Morals refer to the social norms and values that guide both individuals and their interactions with their fellow human beings and communities, and with their environment.

The family of late is now under attack and its role as the foundation for morals and core societal values is being underplayed/reneged as there are consistent attempts to break this vital unit of society and this we find in the attempt to redefine marriage, child care and other pertinent issues that relate to it.

This paper intends to reiterate the fact despite these challenges that are engineered to ensure its failure and collapse, the family still has a place in the society and also that it still remains as one of the vital means through which morals and core societal values can and would be sustained.

## **An Idea of the Family**

Families are an important feature of every society; very little happens in people's lives that is not affected by family life and that does not, in turn affect their own families (Marcia & Thomas Laswell: 1991; 4). The term family first referred to the servants of a household and then to both the servants and the descendants of a common ancestor. It comes from Latin familia, "household; household servants," which came from another Latin term, famulus, "servant." It was not until 1667 that the term was used specifically for parents and their children (family: [www.thefreedictionary.com](http://www.thefreedictionary.com)). The term family from a sociological perspective is a primary social group consisting of parents and their offspring, the principal function of which is the provision for its members (Family: Collins English Dictionary). According to Bernhard Haring;

The family as a specific social unit one cannot be content with merely considering either the individual or the institution itself. The family is not an arbitrary union or a mere business arrangement terminable by consent. Still less is it an act of blind fate (Haring: 1959, 39).

From the above description we can say following still the thought of Haring that 'the family can be looked upon as a structure passed down to us, rooted partly in nature and partly in the various formative influences operating historically' (Haring: 159, 39). While generally speaking, a family is a fundamental social group in society typically consisting of one or two parents and their children (Family: The American Heritage Dictionary). The United State census defines family as;

A group of two person or more (one of whom is the householder) related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together; all such persons (including sub-family members) are considered as members of one family. (U.S Bureau of the census, CPR series 1988: 151, 60)

Family may seem like a simple concept, but there is no simple definition of family. In its most basic terms, a family is a group of individuals who share a legal or genetic bond, but for many people, family means much more, and even the simple idea of genetic bonds can be more complicated than it seems (Mayntz: [familylovetoknow.com](http://familylovetoknow.com)).

The idea of the family can be further approached these varying perspectives; the Functionalist, Feminist and New Right perspectives. The functionalist view the family unit as a construct that fulfills important functions and keeps society running smoothly and further still, the family creates well integrated members of society and teaches culture to new members of society ([www.boundless.com](http://www.boundless.com)). The Feminist view the family from its purpose which is to reinforce the dominant position of men within a patriarchal society while the New Right's see the family as that which teaches children the difference between right and wrong, and to provide a sense of morality more widely known as 'family values'.

From the foregoing making an hybrid of the functionalist and New Right perspectives of family, we can say that, the family is that social construct that keeps the society running smoothly as well as integrates its members (which are children) into the society and teach them culture and the difference between right and wrong thereby providing a sense of morality under the auspices of 'family and societal values'.

According to Barry K. and Janae B. Weinhold, "families are the foundation of society and create our personal template for giving and receiving love in intimate relationships" (Wienhold: [www.wienhold.org](http://www.wienhold.org)). They further buttress their point by stating that "We believe that families are society's most important relational structure. Here we learn about ourselves, about others, and about how the world works. Our early family experiences create a relational model or template that we use in all other parts of our lives..." (Wienhol: [www.weinhold.org](http://www.weinhold.org)).

The implication here in is that, the family serves as a major player in the sustenance of moral and societal values for it's the bedrock upon which society is built.

The family has been classified into varying groups namely; conjugal (nuclear) family, matrilocal family, extended family, complex family, blended family, traditional family, adopted family and foster family which is based mostly on their specific functions and meanings depends largely on their relations to other social institutions.

The term *conjugal nuclear family* is said to have been coined by Talcott Parsons and it is one that is made up of father, mother and children.

This family is traditionally believed to consist of father who is more suited for the workplace and workforce while the mother is being suited naturally for domestic labour, nurturing and caring roles. The nuclear family was something that Parsons claimed was important for socializing and teaching children cultural values and disciplines, as well as structuring personalities. Parsons regarded the "nuclear family" as a unit that produced love and warmth, security and support (nuclear family:[www.sociologyblog-parson.blogspot.com](http://www.sociologyblog-parson.blogspot.com)).

*Matrilocal family* consists of a mother and her children. Generally, these children are her biological offspring, although adoption of children is a practice in nearly every society. This kind of family is common where women have the resources to rear their children by themselves, or where men are more mobile than women (Family: [en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org)).

The term *extended family* has two distinct meanings. First, it serves as a synonym of "consanguinal family" (consanguine means "of the same blood"). Second, in societies dominated by the conjugal family, it refers to "kindred" (an egocentric network of relatives that extends beyond the domestic group) who do not belong to the conjugal family. These types refer to ideal or normative structures found in particular societies. This type of family was of great importance in ancient societies as it brings about a bond of a comprehensive kinship system which bothers on duties, responsibilities, affection and loyalty as its pattern. Any society will exhibit some variation in the actual composition and conception of families.

The term *complex family* is a type of extended family has three or more adults plus their children. This type of family may be formed through divorce and marriage, or it may be formed through polygamy in societies where that practice is acceptable. Some families may be complex even without formal legal bonds between the adults (Mayntz: [family.lovetoknow.com](http://family.lovetoknow.com)).

The term *blended family* or *stepfamily* describes families with mixed parents: one or both parents remarried, bringing children of the former family into the new family (Family: [en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org)). Better put, this is a family where the adults have divorced and remarried, bringing children from other unions together to form a nuclear family.

The children may come from several different parents or be on one or both sides of the new union (Mayntz: [family.lovetoknow.com](http://family.lovetoknow.com)).

Let us take a look at a philosopher's interest in the family. A philosopher's interest in the family bothers upon the duties and right of its members and individuals. Thus we find in Georg Wilhelm F. Hegel's philosophy of right and also in his philosophy of mind. Hegel's own view holds that "the family, as the immediate substantiality of mind, is specifically characterized by love, which is mind's feeling of its own unity. Hence in a family, one's frame of mind is to have self-consciousness of one's individuality within this unity as the absolute essence of oneself with the result that one is in it not as an independent person but as a member" (Hegel's philosophy of right: [www.marxist.org](http://www.marxist.org)). In essence, a family is characterized by the love they share and the ability to be able to renounce their own independence knowing that through this, they are in unity with another other than themselves.

At this point we can say that the family is unit that is based on love and characterized by the ability to grow and nurture the mind of individuals to be able to fit into the society and environment in which they find themselves. A true family provides its members with emotional and spiritual kinship through: shared values, beliefs, traditions, common experience, activities, unconditional and non-judgmental support (Mayntz: [family.lovetoknow.com](http://family.lovetoknow.com)). The family unit is tied to the development of morals and teaching of socially accepted standards in the sense that, every family has as its obligation to make sure that its members adhere to the ethical standards of the society they live in which in turn would ensure the development that they society works towards. What then is Africa's take on the idea of the family?

### **Africa's Perspective on the Family**

The family is recognized in African cultures, as in other climes, as a fundamental and most valuable institution as it is the model of communal life and thought as well as the immediate context or medium for the concrete and spontaneous expression of communal values such as love, caring, cohesion, solidarity, interdependence, and mutual sympathy, responsibility, or helpfulness. It is also the crucible for character formation, an effective instrument for moral education and the development and inculcation of moral values, and constitutes the root of our pristine identities and community lives.

This happens to be the thought of Kwame Gyekye in his work *Tradition and Modernity* and using this as a foil, we would take a journey through Africa's perspective of the family.

The word family has an indefinitely large, varied set of meaning. Sometimes it refers to lineage for example, "the Okonkwo Family of Onicha-Ugbo is the only Igbo family that has fourteen successive generations of eminent persons". Sometimes it refers to all the descendant, relatives, and in-laws of a particular person or couple, as "Okudishu-Ameobi family reunion was held in Asaba, Delta State in December 2013 with some 250 persons being present".

The idea of family in Africa is a unit that sees to the growth and development of the community, one that ensure that its members adhere to the custom and traditions of their people and further entrusts to it the care of the young and education of all. Traditionally, the African idea of family is one that is based on the extended family system where in an immediate family finds itself surrounded by relatives and kindred basically of the same blood and in some cases persons from the same community.

The family in traditional Africa was mostly polygamous in nature but this did not rule out the fact that there were those who were monogamous. The advent of Westerners and Christianity further entrenched into the African mind set the need for monogamy. Despite this fact, the family still remained an important unit for the education and sustenance of moral and societal values. Being communal in nature, everyone was responsible for the development of moral for upcoming generations.

The extended family system in Africa is gradually weakening and this is related to urbanization, industrialization and exposure to western values. This according to Edwin Kaseke in his article *The International Year of the Family: Reflections from an African Perspective* has therefore meant the disintegration of the traditional social welfare system which revolved around this system. The family unit still in Africa (not minding whether it be nuclear or extended) cannot be said to have lost its influence on the development of morals and core societal values because it still prides itself as the centre of development for every society and community. The mode may have been said to change but its foundation is still intact.

The family unit in Africa though weakening in a sense is still quite strong despite the influence of western values as it exerts itself on how things are done due to its communal nature that has not been totally destroyed.

In other words, we can say that Africa's perspective on the family is that the family is the centre of growth and development of an individual not minding the system which the person belongs to. The family still is the foundation for morals and sustenance of societal values not minding the weakening that is affecting and threatening to bring it to its knees. This would in turn lead us into the discourse on the changing nature of the family.

### **The Changing Nature of the Family**

Change it is said is the only constant thing and this we find is also impacting on the nature and structure of the family. The idea of the family not only in Africa has begun to experience changes in its nature. It is constantly evolving, and every person can define family in a different way to encompass the relationships she shares with people in her life (Mayntz: [family.lovetoknow.com](http://family.lovetoknow.com)). That is, the family as understood in earlier times had gradually or should we say has drastically metamorphosed from what it used to be. The nature of the unifying functions around which individuals came together as families has shifted in the Twentieth Century. Early definition of the family often emphasized its utilitarian functions – the economic aspects of the family unit.

Even during the first 30 years of this century, and throughout the depression of the 1930s, the definition of the family was often coloured by its practical functions (Burgess, Locke and Thomas 1963). Before, the family was viewed as close knit but now there seem to be a shift in the standards that once held the family and also a shift in what a family should actually be comprised of.

In some societies, for example, a family is defined as two parents and their children, while in others a family is considered as incomplete unless it includes extended kin such as grandparents, aunts and uncles (Johnson Allan: 1996; 378). This section intends to focus on the changing perspective of what a family should be or be made of and what orientation is making the round that brings this about.



We cannot know exactly what the family life of the earliest preliterate societies was like for the obvious reason that no records exist but when considering the broad outlines of the history of the family, the evidence suggest that the earliest family group was very similar to the contemporary family in our own society, both being small units with specific social and economic functions, and having a certain amount of division of labour within them.

The one basic challenge to the idea of the family that seems to enhance its changing nature has to do with the definition of marriage apart from the attendant problem associated with it. Others include economic and financial policy/crisis, divorce, fertility and birth control, sexual orientations, child care and many more. But in the course of this discuss, we would limit ourselves to just a few of them.

In the United States, the institution of the family has become increasingly flexible as it allows for a variety of structural arrangement – including single parent, divorced, and in some areas, gay and lesbian families – all of which are included in the cultural definition of family (see Sherman 1992; Weston 1991). Marriage can be described as a legally relationship, established by a civil or religious ceremony, between two people who intend to live together as sexual and domestic partners (Marriage: Microsoft Encarta Dictionary) and it is normally between a man and a woman who also intend to procreate. The idea of marriage as a union of one man and a woman has further been entrenched by the Judeo-Christian perspective. This does not imply the fact that those who marry more than one wife/woman have done wrong in the sense that, their religious practice or tradition could allow for such.

The major problem with marriage as it involves the ever changing nature of the family is the case of an attempt at the redefinition of what marriage is as against what it should be. The recognition of homosexual orientation (gay and lesbians) and the fact they could legally live together and be allowed to adopt children from orphanages has played a role in the changing nature of the family. This therefore creates a clause in idea of parenting and family orientation. Economic and financial policies/crises has also affected the way families are structured in the sense that during the earlier periods of history (pre-industrial era), the man in the home (the father and husband) is usually saddled with the task of providing for the family while the woman in the home (the wife and mother) is responsible for taking care of the home and children.

The economic and financial policies/crises have led to the fact that all hands have to be on deck to ensure the survival of the family. EddiefloydMaduabuchi Igbo when discussing the changes in family structures inputs that change in the economic pattern and function of the family has also played a significant role in the changing nature of the family. He says that;

The family, except with respect to farm production only, is no longer the basic unit of economic production. Today the family can be described as a unit of economic consumption only. The new unit of economic production are the shops, factory and office (Igbo: 2003, 256).

What can be deduced of this statement is that the family used to be the main economic unit and backbone of every home but now, the unit has finally shifted away from the farm now to offices, shops and factories thereby making the present family a consuming family rather than a producing one in a sense. This would not actually have been a problem but the divide that has ensued from this has led a hand to the changing nature of the family.

The roles that gender plays in the family also adds to the dynamic nature of the family as it appears that either of the spouses sometimes have to take responsibility for actions that naturally should have been done by another thereby bringing about stress and in ability to cope properly or even create a gap in responsibilities.

The breaking of patriarchal mold which is the case for recognition of equality between married partners which could be hinged on economic and financial changes has also facilitated the changing nature of the family as there now happens to be a redistribution in the pattern of labour. What we mean here is that during earlier times, the husband-father is considered as the breadwinner and sole authority in the home but now due economic challenges and equality of gender in a sense, both father-husband and wife-mother has to work to provide for the family which implies also that major and basic financial/economic planning in and of the family has to jointly discussed, deliberated and agreed upon before the execution of such projects.

Today, the old pattern of gender based division of labour is phasing out leaving families with a loose and fluid pattern of task allocation that is not regimented (Igbo: 2003, 255).

Divorce implies the ending of a marriage either through legal means or just separating and living independent of each other. This used to be the last resort before marriages were broken in the earlier days and it was also considered as symptom of moral decay and something that was usually frowned at. But nowadays, the use of divorce is seen as a means of settling marital frustrations. The rate of divorce has also increased as it seems that once there is a perceived inconvenience by either spouse, the next thing is separation which in most cases where children are already a part of the marriage, there happens to be a tussle as to who amongst them should have custody of them thereby leading in some cases to legal tussles and sometimes restraint of either of the spouse from having contact with the children. In some instances where there happens to be a reasonable settlement, the child or children are shipped back and forth from one spouse to the other. This in a way does not always augur well for the children involved.

Fertility and birth control in some countries, has increased (especially in developed countries) while in some it has reduced (mostly developing ones). This has been as a result of the fact that developed countries are trying to control their population thereby encouraging the use of birth controls and contraceptives while in developing countries it is still considered as a moral duty to procreate and any marriage that hasn't is usually assaulted and not valued as such. In this regard also the size of the family is one that has also been affected by this change.

We would notice that during earlier centuries and times, having a large family was considered as the key especially in some Western and even African climes (between the medieval and late modern era). This change was also resulted from government policies where there was the campaign for birth control in order to reduce over-population and its attendant problems. A large family was mostly considered by agrarian societies but due to industrialization, children are no longer viewed or valued as economic asset which used to be the case but they are viewed by some as economic burdens. Implying that changes in the means of production – from agriculture to industrialization is a factor that has affected the structure and nature of the family. It is good to note in this instance also that the idea of having many children is said to amount from a reckless, self-indulgent, and irresponsible lifestyle.

There is also the argument in some quarter that the education of women appears to have gradually eroded some of the traditional values placed on child bearing and nurture in the sense that the traditional long period of breastfeeding and postpartum abstinence which usually guaranteed adequate spacing between children has now been jettisoned.

Sexual orientation has had its own impact on the idea of the family which is also part of its metamorphosis. The fact that homosexuality (gay and lesbian) has become accepted and even encouraged in some climes to the extent of becoming legal (This does not imply that this work is against homosexuality, but how its idea affects the traditional idea of family is that which is being made reference to here) and the opportunity giving to such people to adopt, raise and nurture children has played a role in the changing nature of the family most especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

There are many other issues that has contributed to the changing nature of the family such as technology, education and a host of others but would not be discussed here but those mentioned above is just to show that the idea of the family is gradually if not drastically changing and happens to be part of the challenge the family is facing mostly in this modern time. Despite this fact, we would still want to emphasize the fact that the family (not minding this changes or challenges) still is the foundation of moral and the sustenance of core societal values.

### **The Role/Place of the Family as the Foundation for Moral and Sustenance of Core Societal Value**

The family is the smallest and most personal of all social groups; it is also one of the most important, which have their roots in the biological nature of human beings is a prerequisite of social order (Wilkins: 1976, 137). The foundation for every society is the family and the family in turn is the foundation for morals and core societal values as it also helps in its sustenance. The family plays a vital and important role in ensuring that the society continues to exist and also that it does not lose its traditions, customs and culture. It is the task of each age to impart to the family a form in law and custom which shall do justice to its unchanging reality yet be adapted to the social order of the given period (Haring: 1959, 39). The family is the first world that a child or children know and they are mostly influenced by it as it is what they see they take with them wherever they go. The family is the first port of call for any child and it is where he/she turns to in times of need and joy.

It is the family who teaches a child good morals and values, and how to navigate the world at large (Sorensen: [www.livingstrong.com](http://www.livingstrong.com)).

The family as noted earlier is changing in its nature either due to economic, cultural, social and many other facets, but one thing still remains, it is the centre of activity for any child no matter the type of structure it operates. The family serves as the foundation for morals and the sustenance of core societal values because a good question that many children ask is what makes a person good? And this is the question that most family tries to answer and imbibe in the coming generation. The respect for another person is that which makes a person good and this concept starts within the family because it is from here that children learn to respect and reciprocate in return as this then goes a long way to becoming the norm that society expects and encourages.

Moral is defined as right conduct, not only in our immediate relations, but also in our dealing with our fellow citizens and with the whole human race. It is based upon the possession of clear ideas as to what actions are wrong and determination of our conduct by a constant reference to those ideals (Oladipo 2009; 20, 2: 149). The family happens to be the place where ideas of morals are transmitted to children which in turn impact on their relationship with other.

According to the Child's Development Project, there are five ways that a child archives moral development. Children learn through positive adult-child relationships; through the moral insight of adult society; through moments of peer interaction when they must exercise self-control; through development of their own moral order; and they learn through trying to understand the perspectives of others (Sorensen: [www.livingstrong.com](http://www.livingstrong.com)). This further buttresses the point that The sustenance of core societal values rest with the family not minding the kind of structure involved because the children learn from what they see and are taught.

The society we understand quite well is made up of individual family units and each of these units is made up of individual members and this been the case, societal values and morals are handed down from one generation to the next and the family happens to be vehicle through which this is achieved. In essence, the family no matter its structure still remains the foundation for morals and the sustainer of core societal values.

## **Conclusion**

The family in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been bereft of many changes that have in a way restructured its conception. This restructuring is due to some of the earlier mentioned challenges but one thing still remains and it is that the family is the foundation of morals and she does all in her capacity to ensure the sustenance of societies core values. The essential nature of the family remains immutable; but in each age changing factors influencing outward forms must be taken into account (Haring: 1959, 39). The family we can thus say has not totally failed in her duty to ensure that moral values are sustained even when it seems so.

The changing nature in family structure has not eroded the foundations of morals as she still has as her functions the sustenance of morals and the construction of the foundations needed to build values that are cherished by the society.

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