

# Individualization in a Web of Kinship System among Nigerian Families: An Emerging Urban Phenomenon

Prof. Innocent V. O. Modo & Dr. (Mrs.) Lydia Isioma Chineyemba

**Abstract** – The paper looks closely at the issue of individuals exercising autonomy across the life circle as alien to indigenous cultural families in Nigeria. Individualization as a way of life, at best, is an urban practice with less than 5% adherents and viewed as people in psychological isolation. Uyo metropolis is chosen as the research zone. In spite of the urban characteristics of anonymity, kingroup affiliation, religious groups, cults (foreign and indigenous ones) have close socio-cultural affiliation in Uyo metropolis. Using culture of poverty theory and lineage descent stability model as point of departure for explanation, the paper argues that individualism within a plurality of family forms in Uyo metropolis could have resulted from culture of discontent or upper class isolation or alienation and to some large extent, culture of poverty. The argument here is that individualization could be a development indicator in an industrial society while it denotes marginality, dependence and inferiority in the Uyo metropolis; a third world city. This paper, observes that individualization within the family circle in Uyo metropolis can be seen among a few second and third generation emigrants who are postmodernist in outlook. The paper gives some definite narratives of autobiographic case studies of families, the analyses of which show that patriarchy is weakening in Uyo metropolis and that single parenting is not well spoken of even in the metropolis. The paper notes the overbearing nature of kinship system in Uyo urban but notes the relativity in culture with regard to the deviation from the European social system. It concludes by observing that individualization, internationalization and the European system of family policy that are becoming a global phenomenon are still alien but not far away from Uyo metropolis urban since the young people are embracing the exotic culture in large numbers.

**Keywords** – Individualization, Kinship, Patriarchy, Marginality, Third-world

## I. INTRODUCTION

Societies all over the world vary in their social organizations, social structures and the entire social system. Cultural differences have to a large extent been defined by the doctrine of cultural relativity [1]. It is therefore not out of place to observe that the issue of individuals exercising autonomy across the life circle, is not a cultural practice that is global, at best it is prevalent in the world's industrial countries such as United States of America, Britain, Germany and France. It is not a common feature in the developing countries of the world such as Ghana, Cameroon, Tanzania and Nigeria. Indeed it is alien and strange to the indigenous cultural families in Nigeria [2].

Nigerians throughout the world are engulfed in a web of kinship system. This to a large extent dictates their social action in spite of changes brought about by Western education. Kinship system is worldwide but African societies see it as the basis for their social organization [3].

We say two people are kin if one descends from the other or if the two descend from a common ancestor. It is now obvious that because of recent wave of migrations in Africa (mainly rural-urban) there is established in cities a generalized social network of relationship by which a migrant kin group community is identified.

Reference [4] argues that “interest in social network has developed partly in response to the inadequacy of structural/functional theories for analyzing relationship in large-scale societies.” Reference [5] suggests that three types of social relationships must be distinguished: structural, categorical and personal. Within the structural aspects, behaviour is interpreted according to the position an individual holds within a corporate group: family association or workplace. In an unstructured, situation, behaviour is interpreted in terms of social stereotypes such as sex, age or ethnicity. Reference [5] further observes that in a situation where we must deal with strangers without a common structure or culture, we usually interact in terms of a categorical identification not as an individual but as a type. In addition to these types, behaviour in either structured or unstructured situations may be based on personal links between individuals; ties of kinship, friendship, neighbourhood etcetera.

Reference [6] found that xhoza migrants to East London, South Africa could be divided into two types according to the nature of the networks they established in town. He called these ‘Red’ and ‘School’, referring to the red blanket which traditional xhoza wear and the fact that most of those in the second category had attended school. Reference [6] said the Reds establish close-knit networks of people from the same rural area, encapsulating themselves against urban influences. Members are under considerable pressure to conform to traditional norms and remain essentially conservative in their approach to urban life. The school xhoza, on the other hand, have accepted schooling and Christianity and tend to use whites as a reference group. Their networks are loose-knit and often based on single-stranded links. They are under much less pressure to conform to traditional norms than the Red migrants and are more open to influences of cultural change. In the urban area, some Red become ‘school’ and the influence of social network is shown by the fact that their former friends say they “got into bad companies”.

In the best of two worlds, reference [7] studied rural-urban migrants of Serbian villages and Belgrade. Reference [7] having had several weeks of research in Belgrade became convinced that reciprocity with village kin was as important to urbanites as it was to the Yugoslav peasants. Although ties to the countryside are seldom single purpose, land most often acts as a focal point for the perpetuation of rural-urban kinship relationship. Many of Reference [7] respondents retained legal title to property

in the village, often held jointly with brothers or patrilineal uncles or first cousins. Reference [8] observes that urban women who come together in a cooperative society have improved their lot and are in position to fund projects in their homes and villages.

Of recent anthropologists have started to look at core values of a country's culture and related personality traits as explanation for what the society is. Reference [9] suggested that the Chinese value kin ties and cooperation immensely. To them mutual dependence is the very essence of personality relationships. Indeed complaint and subordination of one's will to that of family and kin transcends all else. He argued that self-reliance is neither promoted nor a source of pride. Reference [9] and Reference [10] observed that the core value held in high esteem by North Americans of European descent is rugged individualism for both men and women. Each person is supposed to be able to achieve anything he or she likes with the willingness to work hard for it. This fits well with the needs of the industrial and postindustrial society. Reference [10] observes that while individuals in Chinese society are firmly bound into a larger group to which they have lifelong obligations, North Americans are isolated from all other kin save husband and wife and even here commitment to marriage has lessened. Reference [11] further observed in individualism as an American cultural value that many young couples live together without either marriage or future plans for marriage. When couples do marry, prenuptial agreements are made to protect their assets and something like 50% of marriages do end in divorce.

With the world becoming a global village [12] and with the American influence on the developing countries it is believed that Nigeria is fast adopting the culture of individualism. Even though, Nigeria is becoming 60% urban [13] very little studies have been carried out on the influence of kin and lineage relationship on the emerging core value of individualization in Nigeria. It is the aim of this work to explore this neglected theme.

#### *A. Statement of the Problem*

It is contentious that Nigerians especially in the urban areas, (about 60%) have imbibed individualization or individualism as a way of life. Nigerians are known to be traditionally caught up in the web of kinship. The kinship system is all embracing with extended kinship system its principles and structures seen as a way of life. It is therefore a contradiction for those who practice this kinship system with all its trappings to feign individualism as a way of life. It is however understood that because of anonymity as a characteristics of urban people, most kinsmen live in isolation in government reserved areas (GRA) or impoverished ghettos where their kinsmen have no access to. How far could this affect the world view of the people in Uyo metropolis? The paper therefore examines individualization in a web of kinship system as an emerging urban phenomenon.

#### *B. Objectives of the Study*

The main objective of this research is to examine the extent to which individualization has encroached into the culture of the different kin groups in Uyo metropolis.

Specifically, this research is:

- (a) To examine the level of association between kin group relations in Uyo metropolis.
- (b) To discover why some kin group members dissociate themselves from their kindred in Uyo metropolis.
- (c) To find out the cultural influence that could cause some kinsmen to reject their kinsmen in Uyo metropolis.

#### *C. Research Questions*

The follow questions are pertinent in this research

- (a) Do members of the same ethnic group see it as a duty to hold their associational meeting in Uyo metropolis?
- (b) Why do some people boycott or refuse to attend this home based association in Uyo metropolis?
- (c) How do you see those kin group members who refuse to attend this home or village association in Uyo metropolis?

## **II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### *A. The Culture of Poverty theory*

Several researchers have noted that the life style of the poor differs considerably from that of other members of the society. Reference [14] and reference [15] have also noted that poverty life styles in different societies share common characteristics. Indeed similar circumstances and problems tend to produce similar responses and these responses can develop into a culture which is simply the learned, shared and socially transmitted behaviour of a social group. This is what has been termed a culture of poverty or a subculture of poverty; "a relatively distinct subculture of the poor with its own norms and values" [16]. The idea of a culture of poverty was introduced in the late 1950s by Oscar Lewis, an American Anthropologist [14]. His argument is that culture of poverty is a design for living which is transmitted from one generation to another. Following Oscar Lewis fieldwork in Mexico and Puerto Rico, he found the culture of poverty to possess the following characteristics; on the level of individuals (a) a strong feeling of marginality of helplessness, of dependence and inferiority; (b) a strong present time orientation with relatively little ability to defer gratification (c) a sense of resignation and fatalism. [16]. On the family level life is characterized by free union or consensual marriages, a relatively high incidence in the abandonment of mothers and children, a trend towards mother centred families and a much greater knowledge of maternal relatives. On the community level, there is lack of effective participation and integration in the major institutions of the larger society. The urban poor do not usually belong to trade unions or other associations. They do not belong to political parties; they do not participate in national welfare agencies, and make very little use of banks, hospitals, departmental stores etc. They only participate directly in the family [16].

According to Reference [14], the culture of poverty is viewed as a response by the poor to their marginal position in a class-stratified and highly individualistic society. Reference [16] sees the culture of poverty as going beyond a mere reaction to a situation. It takes on the force of a culture since its characteristics are guides to action which

are internalized by the poor and passed on from one generation to the next. The culture of poverty tends to perpetuate poverty as its characteristics are seen as mechanisms which maintain poverty: attitudes of fatalism and resignation lead to acceptance of the situation, failure to join trade unions etc weaken the potential power of the poor. Reference [14] believes that as this culture is established, it perpetuates itself from generation to generation because of its effects on children.

#### B. *The Lineage Descent Stability Model*

This paper upholds the lineage descent stability model [2] that explains the reason for lineage groups to live in solidarity in their communities in Africa and also maintain such solidarity as migrants in African cities. The core structure is the identifiable ancestral land holding of the lineage. The generational rights of the groom in marriage reinforce this patriarchy. In every social system, patrilineal, matrilineal or bilateral, the people have attachment to their community, the land holding and the communal agricultural and other land use practices known to the people. This is very well pronounced in patrilineal societies where lands are inherited by the lineage members especially first sons, or by primogeniture. Reference [17], alluded to this in his divorce hypothesis, arguing that marriage is more stable in patrilineal societies, less stable in bilateral societies and least stable in matrilineal societies.

Reference [17] observed that stability is related to the level of payment. Low bride price of bride wealth is often associated with low stability and high bride price with high stability. This paper rather views marriage stability and the communal solidarity of any patrilineal society to the in-depth kin group structure and inheritance rights of such community. Reference [18] addressed this issue in his research on the copper belt of Northern Rhodesia. Every patrilineal society has an identifiable land area in perpetuity from generation to generation and wherever its members are all over the world, they see that community as their ancestral home. In answer to the question of what marriage gifts are for, Reference [14] said:

*“In the case of bride wealth, they convey rights in the wife from her kin to her husband’s. They also represent a tangible public statement of the marriage transaction which they announce and solemnize.”*

In societies where descent is traced patrilineally, through men, the husband acquires those rights in the wife’s fertility which we call generational. Where descent is traced matrilineally the rights remain with the woman’s natal kin. The emphasis here is on the property rights and the locale with the sentimental attachment to them from generation to generation.

This work intends to utilize these two theories discussed above as its theoretical framework. It is our belief that it is the level of poverty of the urban migrant that drives him or her into isolation alienation and individualization in the city. The level of alienation isolation and ill will could also drive the urban rich migrant into individualization in the city. Lineage attachment and solidarity could also cause a migrant in the city to join the home associations that are floated in the urban setting and cause such a person to

have constant link with his or her primordial home.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The research was undertaken in Uyo Metropolis a city with all the trappings of urbanism; migrants and immigrant of all description. Data were generated through interview in Uyo metropolis; the capital of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Uyo metropolis has a population of 309573 according to the 2006 National Population Commission head count. The respondents were from three different backgrounds: the indigenous Uyo citizens, the Akwa Ibom State indigenes from elsewhere but living in Uyo metropolis and people of other ethnic areas living in Uyo metropolis together with immigrants from other countries. The sampling techniques were purposive. Here respondents were initially located through the researchers’ knowledge of the different groups. Snowball techniques were further used to know new respondents to approach. On the whole sixty five respondents were interviewed. Analysis was done through use of percentages, narratives and excerpts of opinions.

### IV. DISCUSSIONS

Many of all the respondents were interviewed in their official working places. Of the 65 interviewed 47 were men aged 21 and above while the next were women of like age. Each respondent was above the primary school level in education and could either communicate in good or ‘pigeon’ ‘creole English’. There were amongst the respondents 15 university lecturer (24%) 36 businessmen including supermarket (mall) shop owners (55%) 6 civil servants (9%) and 8 technicians including motor mechanics and drivers (13%).

#### A. *Case Studies I*

A prominent retired staff of a government parastatal gave his better experience about individualism as a way of life.

“We are a family of eight with me as the first child. I would have gone to study medicine in the University in the 1970s but I sacrificed that to work and train my younger ones. Today they are all one after the other immigrants with green card as American citizens. They live as big men and do not even write to ask about me who paid to see the go to school. They all mind their own families. Just see that my daughter traveled to USA and on getting to the house of my immediate younger brother, they did not see her as a relative; not in note as an uncle’s child: Is this not what your talk about special individualism has done to my family? They are lost to me but I spent my life savings to bring them up as my kindred. (Okeke Interviewed 4th April, 2015).

#### B. *Case II*

We are a large family. My brothers are pastors, businessmen etc. I am a girl who was expected to enjoy my seniors according to our culture. They mind their little families and do not care if I sleep in the gutter. I decided to live on my own and feign for myself. As long as God lives hunger will not kill me. This is what my people have

turned me into. I will always respect myself. I am not loose. I will never become a single parent. I believe God will visit me with His favour, Amen.

### *C. Substantive Issues in the Research*

(i) Do individuals in Uyo metropolis of same descent see it as a duty to meet as members of association?

Every respondent appears to see it as incumbent for people from some ethnic group to meet in the town and resolve our home based issues. A trader said “we must meet every month especially as our town is constantly under attack by neighbouring villages who want our farmland. (Edimbe: interviewed 6/7/15).

Another respondent says they of the same local government meet to welcome new ones to the city. Inform members of job opportunities in offices where we work and support the applicants (Kingsley: Interviewed 8th July, 2015).

Another respondent says we meet so as to be like others who meet too. A woman says “after several years of meeting, we women decided to secede and meet as women since we have freedom to speak when men are not around. The men here did not object to our meetings in Uyo so we meet and discuss August meeting, marriage of our children etc.(Ezinne: Interviewed 17/6/16)

It would appear that men from different ethnic groups meet in Uyo metropolis to discuss their home problems while their women meet to discuss problems among women group. These findings agree with the view of Reference [19] who said that town unions in cities meet to resolve their village problems through forming a block to help resolve issues such as land dispute, tribal wars and feuding etc.

(ii) Why do some people boycott ethnic group meetings in Uyo metropolis?

Everybody interviewed had one thing or the other to say on this issue. A vocal businessman said: There are two sets of people in this category. Some are so proud, selfish and self-sufficient. They do not want to attend our meetings. When you visit them they promise to come but fail. Another group is that of some casual workers and unemployed. This people are expected to be the first to attend but they want to be left alone. (Stanley: Town Association President: Interviewed 5/5/15)

A woman leader has this to say: some people especially our big women do not want to associate with us. They are selfish, self centred and never helping their relatives. They are Oyibo” i.e. (Mrs. Odiaka: Women Leader Interviewed 14th June, 2015).

A director in a State Ministry observed that town unions, other groups meet in order to preserve their village to town traditions and educate the young migrants to Uyo metropolis who will ordinarily not associate. (Ndifreke: Interviewed 17/06/2015).

(iii) Do you see those kinsmen who refuse to associate with others as disobedient or dissidents?

A respected mechanic feels that some millionaires or well-placed people have imbibed the culture of ‘isolation’. They have alienated themselves from their people. He said: “we see many of them as selfish and arrogant. They do not want to associate with their kinsmen. They want to

be left alone (Mgbeche Interviewed 7/6/15)

Another respondent said that it is not only the rich that have abandoned their kinsmen. Some poor job seekers living amongst us do not want to associate with us. This is why when they enter trouble they get locked up and no one knows their whereabouts (Johnson Interviewed 10/6/15).

## **V. FINDINGS**

This research in Uyo metropolis has revealed the following facts:

1. The nature of the kinship system of the people; which is patrilineal, with land holdings makes it obligatory that lineage members cooperate where ever they are for the preservation of their inheritance.
2. Some urban residents from such community who refuse to associate with the town unions chose individualism with its attendant loneliness, isolation and alienation from other kinsmen because of their urban life style. Such individuals rarely go back to the village even during festivities such as Christmas or New Year’s celebrations. They live neolocally.
3. Some who do not associate with town unions do that because some are unemployed job seekers. They do not want to associate when they have no money for town union dues, some of them live in suburbs and sub-urban ghettos. From the respondents viewpoint some among such people will associate when they get employed.
4. There are a few people about 5% who are adopting the urban life style of deaf-ear to kinship relations, they live neo-locally far away from kindred. They practice individualism.

## **VI. SUMMARY**

The contention is that individualism is creeping into the culture of Uyo metropolis dwellers. Some respondents have demonstrated that the patrilineal system with its landholdings that citizens defend is no longer attractive. These people (about five percent) have individualism as a life style, live neo-locally and entertain little or no visitors from their primordial lineage. Some others who do not associate do so from their disadvantaged position either as jobless sub-urban ghetto dwellers who do not want to bring to the fore their level of poverty and so keep off from their kinsmen.

In the words of Reference [19] change is sweeping through every environment and since people’s behaviour is constrained by the environment it will not be long before individualism will be a feature of Uyo metropolis since about five percent of the populace could be said to have left associational affiliation in the metropolis.

## **VII. CONCLUSION**

From the respondents point of view there is a constant interaction among Ibibio emigrants in Uyo metropolis and their relatives in their home towns. There is also this lively constant interaction between people of other ethnic groups

resident in Uyo metropolis and their homes towns. It is however observed from the respondents' opinion that individualism is fast creeping into Uyo metropolis as a norm among the people. This is practiced by 'nouveau riche' inhabitants who do not want to associate with their home people for various reasons. It is also practiced by those who feel they are too poor to associate with their town unions. From the look of things individualism could in the next few years become a norm in Uyo metropolis but for now it is practiced by just 5% of the residents. It is obvious from this research also that associating with kinsmen in monthly meetings in Uyo metropolis is a sign of good kinsmen while not associating with others is an indication of individualism with other indicators such as single parenthood, co-habitation, female drunkenness and frequent divorce cases which are seen as exotic or of alien culture.

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### AUTHORS' PROFILE

#### **Prof. Innocent V. O. Modu**

A Nigerian and a Professor of Anthropology. Holds Doctorate Degree in Social Anthropology of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (1986). He has taught in different universities including Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, Nigeria and National University of Lesotho, Southern African. He is presently at the University of Uyo, Nigeria where he was the Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences from 2008 – 2012. He has published widely in journals both in Europe and Africa. He has also published three textbooks. His interest is mainly in research.

#### **Dr. (Mrs.) Lydia Isioma Chineyemba**

Holds a Doctorate Degree in Cultural Anthropology from the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Ibadan, Oyo-State, Nigeria. She holds also the Master's Degree in Public Order and Information Management, Master's Degree in Social Anthropology both of the University of Uyo, Akwa-Ibom State. She has interest in teaching and research areas that include but not limited to development studies, gender studies, youths and children, peace and conflict management.