

***FATHER: THE FAMILY PROTECTOR (AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE)**

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Introduction

There are three aspects to this paper: Father as protector of the Family and the African point of view of father and family. In the Nigerian context, which I think is fairly representative of the African context, the concept of father is somewhat linked to the concept of God. The image a child has of his earthly father cannot but influence to a very large extent his concept of God as Father. In the Yoruba language, prior to the advent of Christianity, the Creator of all things is called *Olodumare* or *Edumare*. It is very difficult to translate this word into English and retain the real meaning. You can however guess from the way the word sounds that it conjures awe, respect and power. It is the name that the translators of the Bible retained for God in the early translations of the Scriptures into Yoruba language. In songs that emphasize the mightiness of God in this same language, *Edumare* is used in place of the more common name of God: *Oluorun*, which means the King of Heaven. It is frequently shortened to *Olorun*. But *Oluorun* is a title, *Olodunmare* or *Edumare* is a name. In the Nigerian culture, *oba*, *igwe*, *emir*, *shehu* are all titles, which are generic. Whoever occupies the throne at a particular time has the title as prefix and his name as the suffix. In the case of God, *Edumare* coincides with *Oluorun* permanently and so the two terms are used interchangeably for the Almighty Father of all fathers. There is no doubt that a child's concept of God as Father cannot but be influenced by his relationship with his earthly father whom he sees and knows. A major task as a father as protector of the family is therefore to shield his children from an erroneous concept of God as Father.

The African culture does not equate father as head of the household to God, not at all. It however reserves for the head of the family a reverence that enables him to function as the leader that he is supposed to be, **under normal circumstances**. This paper will examine the implications of this in the relationship between father and the other members of the household in Africa, but more specifically in Nigeria.

Father As Protector

Regardless of religion and race, it seems to be a universal concept that the father of a household is the human protector of the household, God being the invisible Head and Protector. A peep into the Animal Kingdom shows the male to be the dominant gender. However, it is interesting to note that in many species, the female provides for the young ones and dispenses of the male once he has played his role in fertilization of the female eggs. In fact, the beach (female dog) harasses the male out of the vicinity of its puppies for the first few weeks while she is suckling them. The lioness hunts down the prey and submissively presents it to the lion to have its fill before she, the hunter, and her cubs feed on his majesty's leftover. In many Nigerian communities, the woman does sometimes twice as much work as the man in meeting the needs of the family. All the same the father is seen and treated as the provider and protector of the family.

What does the father protect?

Ideally, the father provides physical and, hopefully, economic security for his family. In this regard, nature endows him with physical and emotional characteristics that facilitate this role. Still, there is a saying in my language that if a man sites the snake and the woman kills

it, the important thing is that the snake does not escape! This is a tacit recognition of the fact that even in this area, the woman is not totally excluded. In many African cultures, the man is in theory expected to exclusively provide for his family, protect it and stand between it and the external aggressor, both physically and emotionally. In practice however, the wise woman knows that it is only in appearance that he performs these roles **exclusively**. Although some religions make this his exclusive responsibility, the wise woman knows that she is expected to be a helpmate. However, she is not expected to trumpet her support all over the place if she wants her husband to have any respect in an African community. She is wise, the woman who practices in this terrain, the Scriptural injunction of not letting the right hand know what the left is giving! If he is a farmer, she does the weeding of the farm and maintains it once he has cultivated. We all know which is more time-consuming and more demanding of the two tasks. Yet, when the harvest is due, the produce is his! He has provided for his family! When they are both in paid employment, she is expected to fulfill her domestic duties as perfectly as she would if she were a full time housewife. The Head of the home is by tradition not expected to go near the kitchen or participate in the domestic chores. Some parents-in-law are actually scandalized when they find their sons in modern-day Africa assisting the wife by participating in these household duties. Some wives actually beg their husbands to suspend such assistance for as long as some relations of his are visiting.

Father as Protector of Family interest

Given the scenario above, it would seem that the real role of the wise father is to protect his family interest and defend it from undue interference from external aggressors and meddlers which in the African setting can be legion except the family head has a good dose of common sense in warding them off with courage and prudence.

Protecting the Interest of the Wife

In most African setting, the wife is not only married to her husband, she is married to his entire extended family. In this regard, she is expected to play the perfect hostess all the time and to whosoever of the extended members of the family chooses to visit, no matter how inconsiderate the timing and duration may be to the family purse, schedule and circumstances. In modern settings, it is very difficult for the average African working family dwelling in a city to sustain the indulgence that many relatives are wont to seek from it. This is one area in which the wife needs the dire protection of her husband for the smooth running of the home. It is my considered opinion that the first two or three years of married life should be spent exclusively as husband and wife without the interference and burden of third parties staying permanently with them except the product of the marriage or a house help who is totally subject to the authority of the woman of the house. The need for adjusting to each other as husband and wife must be met at this period without the complications that relations introduce into the adjustment process of the budding family. Many marriages have been ruined at this stage as a result of cowardice on the part of the man in keeping meddlers out of the home. Maladjustment to each other at this stage is at the root of many later big quarrels and difficult-to-resolve problems. The wife has a reciprocal role to play in this regard by warding off her own relations for the time being too. It is wise to offer whatever assistance can be rendered to the extended family at this stage from a distance.

Experience shows that everybody, including the distant relations benefit from this common-sense arrangement which lack of courage frequently prevents newly-weds from putting in

place to establish their authority over their own affairs. John-Paul II often stressed the importance of the African concept of extended family. It no doubt should be sustained, but it mustn't be at the unbridled expense of the nuclear. Only a wise and courageous father can achieve this. It is a protection he cannot afford to miss out of his duties.

Protecting the Children's interest

In the African context, a child is not expected to be in familiar terms with his or her father. Children are more often than not strangers to their fathers due to lack of friendship and bonding during the early parts of the child's life. Many African fathers are too traditional to overcome this serious defect in the tradition. Many children are therefore happier in the home when their frightful fathers are away from it than when they are in. A man in my neighborhood who took this too far regretfully told me his sorrowful experience one day after a trip that took him away from home for weeks. On his return, he heard from a distance the joyful songs and chattering going on within his home. As soon as he hooted to draw attention and establish his return home so the gates could be opened, the children fled into the respective rooms and hideouts like rats escaping from a cat. Close to tears, he asked his wife who came to meet him at the gate why have the singing and chats suddenly stopped? The wife did not have the courage to tell him his children were afraid he might start caning them for singing instead of being at one homework or chores! He however got the message and from that day tried to begin a bonding process. He recently lamented that it has not been too successful with the very grown-up amongst them. Many African fathers miss out the joy of friendship with their children with the erroneous believe that the children are spoilt by that type of life. One treasure of being a parent is the opportunity to write into the blank minds of innocent children entrusted to us by God. Although good example is a wonderful way of accomplishing this task, friendship from the earliest months of the baby's life turns the parents into role models for the child whose immediate society for the first few years of life is the home. Bonding through trusting friendship facilitates later relationships and prevents many teenage problems and insecure feelings engendered by unfriendly atmosphere in the home. Fathers can prevent this from happening by cultivating the friendship of their children even from the womb. Joyful is the mother whose children are their father's friends. The emotional security his friendship provides for both mother and her offspring is a fulfillment *per excellence* of his role as protector

Protecting the Family from posthumous interference and brigandage

This is a real threat to family well being in Nigeria and in other parts of the African continent. Poverty and covetousness are the twin evils that perpetrate this phenomenon whereby a wife is dispossessed of the family's estate if her husband dies before her with or without a will. Only few women manage to ward off successfully the menace of interloping brothers, sisters, uncles and aunts of her dead husband's. Most watch helplessly while their jointly acquired properties are carted away by these interlopers, especially when the children of the marriage are still too young to put up a fight. This is one of the most oppressive aspects of the African culture which must be fought and which the father of the family must do all that he can to protect the family from suffering after his death. I have no answer to it. Perhaps the best he can do is to cultivate the friendship of reasonable members of his family whom he can beg to ensure that his wife and children are not dispossessed after his death. There was this case of two students of mine who got married shortly after their first degree, set up a livestock farm together and made a huge success of it. Unfortunately, the man died young, and without a child between them. The man's family

completely dispossessed her and it took her church members to come to her aid with a loan for her to start once again from the scratch. It is the pathetic story of many African widows. It is very much dependent on the type of family the man comes from. There are beautiful cases of real assistance by relations of the husband to help the widow to overcome the shock and setback that the loss of a husband necessarily means, but these are the exception. How does the father of a family protect it from this callous brigandage? I have no answer to it. I guess he can only hope and pray. After all, he won't be on this side of the grave to implement or enforce his will.

Writing a will to protect the family after death

As discussed earlier, this is very desirable to provide a legal framework for a courageous wife to do battle with meddling relations of her husband's if he dies first. As said earlier, that's about all he can do. What happens depends very much on the factors earlier stated. It is so dicey in Africa that one of my major requests to God is to prevent the premature death of husbands so that fewer women are exposed to the menace of interlopers on top of the dislocation occasioned by a husband's death. This is one area a father ought to be a protector, but unfortunately cannot be there to play this role once he is dead!

Protecting the Family from the Misuse of Modern Means of Communication and Entertainment

One other tricky area in which the African father must seek to protect his family from damage is the modern means of communication, entertainment and information. Ever so efficient, they can become veritable sources of danger to the unwary family. There are other papers dealing with this, but it bears repetition to say that fathers must attend lessons and workshops on how to use these means of entertainment harmlessly and teach his family to do so. There are increasing evidence to show that television and computers are becoming serious threats to family cohesion and bonding. A wise father must protect his family from this intruding menace by learning and enforcing the proper and regulated uses of these means of entertainment and communication.

Protecting the Family from the Ills and Insecurities of Polygamy and Divorce

There is a saying in my language that the prayer of a woman that they may be two married to her husband does not originate from deep down in her heart. That saying is an indication that the culture accepts polygamy, the women helplessly tolerate it and even sometimes pretend to endorse it. It also, most importantly, recognizes that the natural wish of any woman is to be the only woman in her husband's life and heart. The natural reaction of insecurity polygamy or any semblance of it in the form of adulterous relationships engender in a wife is a clear indication that nature's way for man and woman in marriage is MONOGAMOUS. Even amongst Muslims and Traditionalists, a truly monogamous setting stands out clearly as a peaceful, secure and cordial setting. The African father therefore has a big role to play in protecting his family from the insecure feelings engendered by infidelity and any semblance of polygamous tendencies. He should so relate to with his wife and be so explicitly and implicitly faithful to his family that the thought of him ever being unfaithful does not occur to the wife and children. In modern days, this is an aspect of emotional protection an African father or any father of a family cannot ignore. It is the very basis of husband-wife economic cooperation and the foundation upon which a healthy interpersonal relationship within the home is built. Most wives will give themselves joyfully, selflessly and confidently in an atmosphere imbued with this healthy security. In

the final analysis, faithful husband and father is the happier for his effort in this regard, much as he may seem to be protecting the interest of the other members of his family.

Summary

In summary, it is my submission that the happy father is that who thinks ahead in planning his family, selflessly gives himself without sacrificing his family at the alter of economic provision, devotes time to the children and their mother from the start, recognizes the permanent nature of the marriage bond, works towards establishing and maintaining an atmosphere of cordiality within the home such that everyone looks forward to homecoming everyday, provides emotional security and leads the family to God and with God, the Father of all fathers. That way, he would have fulfilled his role as protector, whether he be African, European, Asian, American or Australian.

Thank you for listening.