

FROM TRANQUILLITY TO TOXICITY: THE DECLINING STATUS OF DOMESTIC HELPS IN THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY AS DEPICTED IN FLORA NWAPA'S *EFURU* AND CHIKA UNIGWE'S *NIGHT DANCER*.

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Abstract

Domestic helps have been part of households all over the world. In Africa, and in particular Nigeria, they have traditionally been members of the extended household, willingly rendering help to nursing mothers specifically. In spite of the polygamous nature of homes, the family enjoyed tranquillity as everyone regarded the next relative as a 'brother' irrespective of biological links. The peaceful polygamous setting produced healthy relationships even among mistresses and domestic helps. Domestic helps were integral members of the families they served. In time, with the arrival of the British, emergence of urban cities, migrations and consequently loss of moral and cultural values, a new way of work as a domestic help emerged. The tranquillity experienced in the traditional African home began to wane and in turn began to rub off on domestic helps. In this work, we followed this decline in the status of domestic helps in the Nigerian society, through the literature of two female writers who lived in different eras. Enforcing already existing labour laws was recommended to alleviate the poor conditions of service of domestic helps in Nigeria.

Keywords: Domestic help, status, abuse, household, family

Introduction

Domestic helps have been in homes for centuries. Primarily, they are usually either biological members of the family, slaves or bonds men or women. In getting a grasp of their status in the home, we must examine the typical African structure prior to the colonial era. The

African family is composed of grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins from both sides of parents, even unrelated persons (Infield, 2001).

Family as a concept has various definitions. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines family as a group of persons united by the ties of marriage, blood or adoption constituting a single household and interactions. Murdock(1949) defines family as a social group characterized by common residence, economic co-operation and reproductions. It includes adults of both sexes. In present times, the definition of family has become complex as a result gender related issues. Still, the traditional definition resonates in the Nigerian society as it has given recognition to LGBT issues.

The family community was the fundamental element of the African, a basic sphere of action through which he became integrated with the larger human community... he always acted within the sphere of the family (Kisembo, 1998).

The traditional African family is highly accommodating and in a way does not have the concept of nuclear and extended as it is in the Western world. For example, in Igbo societies in Nigeria, everyone related by blood or marriage was regarded as 'nwanne' (child of my mother). In fact, this was a customary greeting regardless of biological relationship. The family structure was so sacred, that everyone who came into a family, was considered a part.

Mwaura (2015) simply explains this in a most simple way. According to him, 'membership' in families varies in different African communities from adopted and fostered children to servants, slaves and their children. The traditional African structure was very generous, giving room to the inclusion of non biologicals. Even servants were considered an integral part of the home.

The traditional African family was a very accommodating structure. This was evident in the fact that pre-colonial Africa did not have hotels where strangers could lodge. After one's presence was made known to the Head of the community, depending on his or her status, a family was assigned to accommodate and take care of one's needs all

through his or her stay. African hospitality is grounded on the fact that no one is an island; rather, each and every one is part of the whole community. This aspect of culture, which was initially pre-literate, pre-scientific and preindustrial was originally expressed in the songs and stories, the customs and the inhibitions of people (Gathogo, 2008).

Having been woven into the fabric of culture, this seeming generosity spilled into polygamy which was an ingrained custom. For the African, polygamy was the simple practical way of managing workforce (Efuru and Adizue had to stop farming in the early years of their marriage because it was becoming burdensome, as they lacked the manpower having children would have provided), barrenness, adultery and perpetual singlehood. Since it solved practical issues, it was seen as a problem solving structure and therefore, warmly embraced.

In Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, we see this clearly depicted. Efuru's first inability to conceive. She brings up the suggestion of getting another wife to fulfil a child bearing role for the household, (26). With respect to the polygamous structure, the first wife was usually accorded the respect of scouting for a suitable bride for the husband. Upon entry into the home, the new wife began to look up to the first wife as mother. They may live in different huts or rooms but always in the same premises. Sometimes, the relationship of co wives was often more than cordial and as a point to note, the concept of 'step' did not exist in the African traditional society. Every child in the household was either a brother or a sister to the other, nothing less. Ultimately, polygamy was never a social malaise but a problem solving one.

Theoretical framework

This paper is built on the post-colonial theory. The Post-colonial theory is a body of responses of erstwhile colonized people in form of narratives, treatise and dialectics to their perennial or protracted colonial experiences (Adigun, 2019). In Nigeria for example, colonialism brought European civilization that came along with urbanism and consequently migration that separated extended families. This in turn had its effect on African traditional way of life. Traditional norms and values were gradually eroded.

As a literary theory, post colonialism deals with the literatures produced by the people who were once colonized by the European imperial powers and the literature of the decolonized countries engaged in the contemporary, post-colonial arrangement with their former mother countries (Evans, 1998).

The texts in study are *Efuru* by Flora Nwapa and *Night Dancer* by Chika Unigwe. Both were written by Nigerian female writers. The time settings of the works enabled an analysis of the gradual decline in family norms which consequently had its effect on the domestic helps.

Status of Domestic Servants in Traditional African Homes

Domestic helps in pre-colonial and colonial societies came to make their home in this tranquil abode. Bryceson (2019) describes domestic work as home based in nature with the repetitive work of daily basic needs' provisioning. The International Labour Organization in 2013, referred to a domestic worker as any person engaged in domestic work within an employable relationship.

The concept of domestic helps in traditional African society was quite different from what we have in the present society. Having established the harmonious nature of the traditional family, a new entrant into such tranquil environment was bound to be absorbed easily into the family structure. Domestic helps in the traditional structure came into the home as, members of the extended family who would come to give assistance to new mothers, slaves or as collateral for indebtedness as in the case of Ogea in *Efuru*. Domestic helps were quickly absorbed into the home. They referred to the head of the household as 'father', the wife/wives as 'mother' and the children as siblings. We see the close knot relationship in *Efuru*'s household and the society at large. Even though Ogea was a form of collateral for her parents' indebtedness,

Ogea took care of Ogonim, fed her and changed her dress. When she cried and her mother was late in coming home, she sang this lullaby to her; my sister sleep and don't cry *omerere, omerere*. (40-41)

This is a classic example of the bond between caregivers and their wards. Parents did not need to fear for the safety of their children in the hands of their helps.

The Beginning of the Decline

The arrival of colonial officials brought about the need for domestic service. The colonial masters, now resident among the people, desired natives to help them adapt to the environment. These natives were both domestic helps and informants where necessary. The domestic helps were predominantly male as the natives did not want to place their vulnerable members (women and children) in such positions.

Being males did not give dignity to the job except in the eyes of some Africans who thought it an honour to be the 'white man's boy'. In traditional Africa, domestic service was more of a family obligation; not monetary or demeaning in nature. But for the European, it was a higher version of slavery.

These colonial officials and their servants were worlds apart and so the relationships were highly formal. Religion gave a human face to the jobs sometimes through the missionaries but one thing was for sure; there was a distinct separation already. Smaller housing quarters were built behind the main building for the 'boys'. This was where Africans got the name 'boys' quarters'. In traditional Africa, everyone lived together because they were kin. Now with these new arrangements, the status of domestic helps was gradually taking a down turn. But it would slip even farther.

European civilization brought skill sets that caused necessary relocations and migrations to urban centres where new seats of power were located. Africans were always in the midst of family and ethnic groups. But now, they were suddenly thrust into strange territories. They had to search and pay for accommodation and also live with people from different ethnic groups. This was not without its implications.

In this cultural confusion, there came a new urban culture not subject to the norms of traditional African society. In this urban culture, an individual mostly would subject himself to normal dictates and as much as his conscience would allow. Urbanization saw an increase in vices and a great amount of social distancing as a result of those vices. Crimes were committed with impunity far from the scrutiny of the elders. There were no councils of elders or family heads to restore or resolve disputes. There were no shrines to visit to get instant justice on oppressors and no gods to strike down criminals. With no close family presence except the police force which was instituted for law and order, vices grew in the society which consequently increased social distancing. This social distancing, was at the family and societal levels.

As earlier mentioned, there was less influence and control from rural communities. Distance, religion and inter-tribal marriages played a part. With the advent of Christianity for example, traditional practices were viewed as fetish and there was a natural suspicion of anyone who showed up from such circles. Hostility between in-laws, worsened by ethnic differences in inter-tribal marriages, created more rift in the family structure. This brought couples to the point of searching elsewhere for domestic assistance.

Externally, one knew and cared less about who one's neighbours were and their personal lives. The 'western ice' gradually began to seep inside the society. The family front did not fare better. The new monogamous family began to shrink in size and consequently its tolerance for polygamy and extended family.

This intolerance was caused by, decline in moral values, complexity of city life, the growing societal social distance between the city dwellers and rural dwellers, monogamy and shift to foreign religions. As the family space grew smaller, domestic helps from the family circle began to wane in popularity. City wives felt safer with strangers than family members to avoid conflicts.

With time, recruitment agencies started springing up borne out of the need for domestic assistance in urban centres. Johansson da Silva (2016) states that by 2011, more than half of women (57%)15-64 years

old were in some form of employment. There has been a gradual steady increase in the number of career women in the public space and these women need all the help they can get to keep the home front going. Then again, the norm of getting domestic help from the extended family began to decline in popularity.

Toxicity sets in

The new millennium saw a different system from the traditional era. Firstly, there were less extended family members, living with married couples. The few who made it to such homes usually came as a result of loss of one or both parents or temporally to stay as a result of relocation and any other reason that may fall in this class. Formal and informal recruitment agencies were in business to provide the much needed domestic service.

Chika Unigwe's *Night dancer*, was first published in 2013 and it mirrored the toxic relationship long experienced in modern Nigerian homes specifically between mistresses and their maids. In this modern era, most live-in domestic servants are females. Zahrah Nesbitt-Ahmed (2020), describes domestic work as a highly feminist job with women making up 70.2% of domestic workers.

The young men have become more ambitious with the changing times and pursue more lucrative ways of earning money; legitimate or not. The relationship between Ezi and Rapu in the novel, is highly toxic. A major difference between our traditional society and this modern one is, the present crop of wives expect it to be so. The Madam has to establish her authority and position by deliberating dehumanizing the maid. For example, Ezi's friend, Aunty Ifedi, establishes that maids are not entitled to eat the same quality of food the rest members of the household are entitled to. 'Ezi, you are spoiling your maid, *ezioku*. She ate my fish head. What guts!'(pg,162)

Fish heads are not part of the delicacies you serve to guests in Nigerian homes. It is usually left for family members who have a special love for it or for the inconsequential ones. It is not served in parties or public functions. It is considered a form of disrespect; yet the maid

referenced here was not deserving enough to eat the rejects. The dehumanizing treatment of domestic helps has degenerated to the point where the discarded is not even suitable for them.

Rapu lived a traumatized life in Ezi's household. She suffered lack of care and her mistress seemed to enjoy that her maltreatment was obvious.

Ezi watched how Rapu's youthful beauty was marred by the weather. She delighted in it. And when she called Rapu every night into the bedroom to rub *okwu-ma* into her soles, she rejoiced in the girl's palms, like sandpaper smoothing the shea-butter lotion into her legs. (pg., 183)

This is a form of physical abuse. Physical abuse also includes deprivation of sleep and physical exhaustion or over work (Murty,2009). Rapu's treatment is a mirror of the current trends in the society. The following headlines on Nigerian Newspapers speak of the sorry state of domestic helps in Nigeria.

Tortured Starved Abused for breaking a Plate (leadership)

Court sends Woman to Prison for Torturing House Help to Death (withinnigeria.com)

Minister seek Redress over Death of 11 Year Old Maid (radionigeria)

Widow Arraigned for Brutalizing 11 year Old over Meat (Vanguard metro)

These disturbing headlines are a reflection of how the status of domestic helps has declined over the years. From an honourable one to the lowest of the low. The Human Rights' Watch (2006) has rightly observed that employers may inflict physical abuse so severe that it leads to a domestic worker's hospitalization, permanent scaring, paralysis, fractures, deformity, suicide and death. In these days of materialism, and drive for higher education, any child found in such circumstances has assumed one of the most vulnerable positions in Nigeria. Domestic helps should be listed among the vulnerable in the society alongside women, children and aged.

Contrasting then and now, Ogea in *Efuru* on her way to the stream, breaks a water pot which is of great value to Ajanupu. She runs away for fear of reprimand. However, she soon returns and partakes in

the next meal prepared by Ajanupu. This is a far cry from what usually occurs today.

The resultant effect of treatment of maids is presented in both literary works. In *Efuru*, Efuru chooses Ogea to be the third wife of her husband. In contrast to Ezi in *Night Dancer*, Rapu gets pregnant for her master, and Ezi the mistress not able to stand such humiliation, leaves her matrimonial home.

The Outcomes

The blatant disregard of domestic helps and their consequent maltreatment has taken its toll on the society today. As a nation, another vulnerable group has been unnecessarily created and has become a social dent in the society. The low status of domestic helps has brought distrust in the family system. Even as much as it is, that 'helps' may not be biological members of the family, they carry out tasks that bring close proximity and mingling with the household. This has increased household violence and abuse emanating from the toxic relationship between them and their employers. The declined status of domestic helps has increased the number of out of school children. There are reported cases of employers promising to send them to school, but instead leaving them at home or sending them on street hawking missions. Abused children become dysfunctional adults. Dysfunctional adults raise dysfunctional children and the cycle continues. Tobi Awodipe,(2021) a parenting educator describes it this way, 'Nigeria has many dysfunctional adults due to mismanaged childhoods'. Senator Sani Musa of Niger state sponsored a bill in the House of Assembly to regulate and formalize the employment of domestic workers, apprentices, interns and other informal sector employees in Nigeria. He stated that 'many jobs in the informal labour markets still experience decent work deficit and employees in the informal sector were often seen as having no rights and are therefore treated unfairly by their employees' (Premium Times Nigeria 2022).

Recommendations

Even as the African society has evolved to a more complex one, proffered solutions are adapted to the standards of the present day society. This paper recommends the enforcement of the minimum age for a domestic worker as stipulated in the provisions of the minimum age convention. Younger children are more prone to abuse.

There should also be an enforcement of the law that any child under 18 years of age should attend school. Employers who have under age domestic helps should be prosecuted under the labour law. Terms of employment should be stated in a written contract which should emphasize decent working condition and decent living conditions if living with the employer.

Conclusion

The African traditional way of life that promoted peace and harmony has been disrupted by modern civilization. In as much as Africans cannot recreate that tranquil world in today's toxic atmosphere, we can at best enforce already made laws that have been made locally and internationally, to protect domestic helps in our present society. Perhaps with the passage of time, we may begin to have literature that shows us a more healthy relationship between domestic helps and their employers as reflected in the society.

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