

Chapter 14

African Families Faced with NICT: Stakes and Effect on Inter-Individual and Intergenerational Relation

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ABSTRACT

In Africa, family structures are today committed or involved in the dynamics of social transformation which jeopardize their mode of constitution their future, the sustenance of intergenerational and individual relationships as well as the traditional systems of social relationships based on direct and personal communication. This chapter is a sociological analysis of the future of the family through its relationship with NICT notably the Internet and the cellular telephone. The analyses lay emphasizes on the consequences of NICTs on the modalities for the constitution of marriage covenants, family relationships and intergenerational transfers.

INTRODUCTION

In sub-Saharan Africa in general, the family is the lowest social institution, which has undergone several changes during the years (Scanzoni, 1971; Minas, 1987; Locoh, 1988a). Its structures are today caught up in the dynamics of social transformations which affect the modalities of its constitution, future, the equilibrium of intergenerational and inter-individual relationships (Locoh, 1988b) as well as the traditional systems of human relationships

sustained by direct and committed communication. Since technological development in matters concerning communication has been particularly very fast these last years, it is difficult not to mention the influence of information and communication technologies on the life of the family (Rieffer, 2001). However, the new changes affecting the family today are linked to the generalization or the availability of new communication technologies to almost all the societal actors.

Among the diverse factors of change being known today, new technologies of information and

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-822-2.ch014

communication are playing a significant role and hence constituting a major stake for social and intra-family relationships. This explains why at the level of its modes of constitution and in its daily evolution, the family is in a process of being adapted to the new modes of social communication put in place by «*the technological revolution and the move towards the new information and communication technologies* ». This alone puts to question the sustainability of existing cultural values concerning the family. In the North as well as in the south, changes resulting from technological development are not in favor of traditional family ideologies. An unpublished field of study which is opened to researchers, that is the user's sociology and the appreciation of NICT, applied to the observation of practices put in place for the use of ICT in the society in general and in the families in particular (Rieffer, 2001:147). New information and communication technologies (NICTs) refer to information and communication channels such as the mobile telephone, the Internet and the net phone, which were formerly not used. This domain if developed could permit us to understand the impact of these technologies on the daily life of social actors

BACKGROUND

As a communication technique and a means of bringing social actors together, NICTs are progressively becoming preferred social actors for social communication hence, reducing the «*face to face* » social communication which for many years regulated the functioning of African families. The effects of these new trends in communication encourage intensified migratory movements, which in the long run result in multinational families and the breakdown of African traditional solidarity, which relied on effective co-presence of family actors. The main consequence is the destabilization of the latter. In the same way, the irruption of NICTs in social life is becoming a major way

to have a partner through electronic courtship. Furthermore, NICTs have an effect on the daily lives of individuals, and hence, constituting a major stake for the future of African families especially as they lead to a recomposition of intergenerational relationships through new communication mechanisms which sustain them.

This chapter is a sociological analysis of family changes and the future of this basic social institution from its relationship with NICTs as a package with the Internet and the mobile phone as examples. The analyses emphasize on the consequences of NICTs on the modes of constitution of marriage covenants by examining the increase of Internet marriages as a social phenomenon which has upsetted traditional marriage in favor of mediatized negotiations between future partners considered as an ideal type. In fact progress in technology is a threat to the sustainability of traditional family structures. Besides, the progress in the communication systems like the mobile phone and the generalization of these modes of communication among family actors is reducing «*communication based on face to face* » and hence bringing about solidarity crisis. This can be justified by the limitation of family visits and the distant management of family problems by «*social juniors* » who in most cases have immigrated to the cities to look for greener pastures or to improve upon their living conditions or for professional reasons. Equally in favor of an emergence of new financial agencies enhanced by the development of computer software services, intergenerational transfers are becoming more and more mediatized or passed through NICT channels with family members using them more increasingly. The consequence is that interpersonal relationships are becoming more effective only through this NICT channels.

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