Parenting and Culture – Evidence from Some African Communities

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Additional information is available at the end of the chapter

1. Introduction

Parenting requires interpersonal skills and makes emotional demands (Santrock, 2006). According to Santrock, most parents learn parenting practices from their own parents - some they accept and some they discard. The author argues that when parenting methods are passed on from one generation to the next, both desirable and undesirable practices are perpetuated. These practices may be cultural values which have been passed on from one parent to another.

Culture on the other hand is a way of life of a group of people- the behaviours, symbols, values, beliefs that people accept, not really thinking about them and are passed by mostly communication and imitation from one generation to another. With regards to African culture, people perceive most of its practices as something which is devilish in the sense that a lot of its practices are attributed to gods. Some people especially Africans, who have not fully experienced the indigenous culture believe that to be too culturally aware makes one backward and or ancient. This is as a result of lack of knowledge of our cultural values and principles.

In the African system, parenting is again perceived to take a lot of forms which is able to lead the child to be a responsible adult. Though there are various parenting styles, there are ways in which the African parent brings up a child in order for the child to imbibe the cultural values of the land and also be a responsible adult. Some of these forms of parenting are through story telling (folktales), the extended family, traditional rites and the mother's care, attention and love. One may ask; are these cultural practices still in vogue? This chapter is an attempt to take readers through some of the parental cultural practices in some African communities.

1.1. Purpose

The purpose of this chapter will therefore be to expatiate on some of the various cultural practices in some sub-Saharan Africa which foster good parenting and also state their relevance or importance to the African. The author will also state their various implications to parenting and suggest some recommendations.

1.2. Significance

Research shows that majority of books concerning infancy are from the western world (Tomlinson & Swartz, 2003). In view of that African cultural values as far as parenting is concerned are being forgotten and the western practice is rather adopted. This chapter will therefore enable readers especially, Africans to be aware of some of the rich cultural practices of parenting. It will also add up to literature as far as parenting and culture in Africa is concerned as well as in the majority world.

In view of this some important aspects that will be discussed in this chapter with respect to parenting and culture are:

• Parenting

• Culture

• Some common values and practices in Ghana, Nigeria and Liberia which foster good Parenting.

• Some relevance of the cultural values and practices

• Implication

• recommendations

2. Parenting

Parenting is the process of raising and educating a child from birth or before until adulthood (Self Growth, 2012). Synonymously, parenting refers to carrying out the responsibilities of raising and relating to children in such a manner that the child is well prepared to realize his or her full potential as a human being. This implies that parenting is the process of taking care or supporting a child from birth to adulthood involving the physical, emotional, social and intellectual capabilities. It can simply mean the process or state of being a parent. In fact one can be a parent both to the biological or non-biological children.

Parenting usually takes place when one meets the defined criteria mentioned in the definition. According to Santrock (2006), parenting requires interpersonal skills and again makes emotional demands. Also, other researchers, for example Baumrind (1967) have suggested that there are four major styles of parenting. The researchers argue that majority of the parents display one of four different parenting styles. These styles are authoritarian parenting, authoritative parenting, permissive parenting and uninvolved parenting.

According to Cherry (2012), authoritarian parenting style expect the child to adhere or follow the strict rules established by the parents. Failure to follow the rules will result in punishment. Usually, because the parents have ordered, it must be done without explanations and questions. On the other hand, authoritative parents establish rules and guidelines that their children are expected to follow. Nevertheless, this parenting style is much more democratic (Cherry, 2012 & Santrock, 2006). Parents with this style are responsive and ready to listen and cooperate. Baumrind (1991) argues that these parents are assertive but not intrusive and restrictive.

Santrock (2006) also stated that permissive parents have few demands to make of their children. These parents allow their children a lot of freedom. They hardly punish or discipline them (Baumrind, 1991) whiles uninvolved parenting is attributed with few demands and little communication. Though the parents fulfil the needs of the child, they rarely get attached to the child (Cherry, 2012). Similarly, uninvolved parents make few to no demands of their children and they are often indifferent, dismissive or even completely neglectful.

Numerous works on parenting have brought about a number of conclusions as far as the impact of parenting styles on children are concerned. Cherry (2012) reported that authoritarian parenting styles normally result in children who are obedient and proficient but rank lower in happiness, social competence and self-esteem. On the contrast, Maccoby (1992) informed that authoritative parenting styles lead to children who are happy, capable and successful. Also, permissive parenting styles breed children who are low in happiness and uninvolved parenting styles lead to children who have low self-control, low self-esteem and highly incompetent.

3. Differences in parenting styles

According to Cherry (2012), parenting styles differ due to certain factors. These factors include culture, personality, parental background, educational level, socio-economic status, family size and religion. Of these factors, culture will be used to explain some similarities that exist in parenting in Ghana, Nigeria and Liberia.

3.1. Culture

Culture is the way a group of people live and it is a learned human behaviour patterns. Tylor (1958, p. 1) defined culture this way: "*that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society*".

According to O'Neil (2006), no matter where people live in the world, they share some human cultural traits which are universal. Examples of such "human cultural" traits include: communicating with a verbal language consisting of a limited set of sounds and grammatical rules for constructing sentences, using age and gender to classify people (e.g., teenager, senior citizen, woman, man), classifying people based on marriage and descent relationships and having kinship terms to refer to them (e.g., wife, mother, uncle, cousin). The others are raising children in some sort of family setting, having a concept of privacy, distinguishing between

good and bad behaviour, having a sexual division of labour (e.g., men's work versus women's work) making jokes and playing games.

While all cultures have these and possibly many other universal traits, different cultures have developed their own specific ways of carrying out or expressing them. So also is parenting. A culture is normally passed from one generation to another, from knowledgeable adult to learning child. Since the adult has imbibed the norms and practices of the culture from older acculturated adults, this transmission is often simply through exposure and through example. For instance the Orangutan mother, who uses a specially prepared stick to fish out food from a crevice, learnt this skill and is now teaching it to her child who is hanging on her shoulder and intently watching (parenting and culture).

4. Some common values and practices in Ghana, Nigeria and Liberia that foster good parenting

4.1. The extended family system

According to Degbey (2012), the family is usually the major source of the basic necessities of life and health; the love and tenderness, food, water, clothing, shelter and sanitation which are made possible by the socio-economic, cultural and environmental conditions. Thus in discussing major issues with regards to parenting, it would be impossible to overlook the functions of the family (Degbey, 2012).

It is basically known that there are two types of the family. These are the nuclear and the extended family. The nuclear family is made up of only both parents and the children. The extended family is also made up of the nuclear family; in addition are the uncles, aunties, grandparents and cousins. It would be emphasized that in the African community, the extended family is traditionally practiced (Degbey, 2012). In the same vein, it is a common knowledge that when one speaks of the family in an African context, one is referring not to the nuclear family but the extended family (Gyekye, 1996).

According to Degbey (2012), the extended family system includes several generations plus cousins, uncles, and aunts living in a compound or close to one another. Similarly, Adinlofu (2009) stated that the extended family is composed of a number of joint, compound, elementary and nuclear families occupying separate but nearby homesteads. Degbey (2012) and Adinlofu (2009) further noted that the extended family provides emotional needs to all involved. It is a cohesive unit which ideally provides economic, social and psychological security to all its members. Adinlofu (2009) made mentioned that the extended family ensures procreation of children and provides for the early care and training of children. Degbey (2012) also added that this same family system defines "social and moral norms and safeguards both material and spiritual customs and traditions as well as providing a variety of role models preparing the way for adulthood". Degbey (2012) emphasized that the dominance of the elders/aged has a relatively high degree of social control on the individual especially, the youth.

The uniqueness of this system with regards to parenting in our traditional African commun‐
ities is that the responsibility in taking care of the child is not only to the biological parents.
This is shared by all in the extended family. This is buttressed by the African proverb on
parenting which says that, "a single hand cannot nurse a child". This implies that although
the mother has the responsibility of taking care of the child, the responsibility is being shared
by all. Most of us went to school on the strength of this system; otherwise we would have been
stark illiterate and walking about aimlessly (Adinlofu, 2009). According to the author, some
of us must have read and heard comments like: "my parents were so poor that it was my mum's
brother or father's sister, that helped towards my education" or, that "it was my father's brother
that trained me to read medicine, law or pharmacy and it was my in-law that gave me money
to go into business". It is intriguing to know that this system is where a brother trained a
younger brother or sister and they in turn help to train younger ones or older siblings' children.
This is why it is even said that even when parents are dead, a child would always have
'parents'. This is because the extended family is there to cushion or parent the child.

Another uniqueness of this extended family system is that children or the youth stay at home
i.e. live with the family until they are ready for marriage. Even if the young adult is staying
with the nuclear family, the practice is that you marry before you leave the house. According
to Gyekye (1996), growing adults are generally expected to live at home-in the family house
and they may leave only after they marry. Even after marriage the parents would still want to
offer advice and guidance since they believe they the adults have richer experiences than their
children at any age.

At other instances, the extended family may not be together, but then the nuclear family may
live with other nuclear families who may not be relatives. This system of living is what we call
the "compound house" system. Also, this system allows any elderly person to discipline or
correct a child.

4.2. Relevance

The extended family is a strong tool in parenting. It helps to develop a strong sense of social
responsibility in the child from his early years and learns to be respectful, responsible and
supportive member of the extended family and society.

5. Folktales

"A folktale may be described as a story handed down by oral tradition from mouth to ear
among people generally; in fact illiterate, though not necessarily so …" (Dawkins, 1951, p. 417).
Dawkins reiterated that many genuine folk stories have been at first literary and passed later
into oral tradition. In a similar manner Emery (2012) says a folktale is a traditional narrative,
usually anonymous, handed down orally e.g. fables, fairy tales, legends etc. In African culture
Story telling (folk tales) which used to be part and parcel of us is no more seen in our daily
lives. During storytelling, we will have the older ones telling the younger ones stories which
depicted attributes such as giving, caring for one another, greed, selfishness and so on. These

elderly people serve as parents in that their word of advice during the story time helps to shape the younger ones. For instance in Ghana, the Spider (traditionally called Kwaku Ananse) is mostly used in our folktales as the main character. He is used to depict acts of greed, love, forgiveness, wisdom, pride etc.

One will be reminded that the story time is always in the evening; when the sun is set and all activities have come to a halt. According to Martin (2000) often such stories were told by the light of the moon around a village fire after the completion of a long day of work. It is believed that such times children and the youth will have a good listening ear for advice and what is ahead of them as they climb the adulthood ladder. Let us bear in mind that these stories are not told by parents alone, but by any adult who is depicted as responsive and caring and can impact good morals to the children. This even is evidence that parents are not the only caretakers of the child as he/she grows, but any adult in the community who is responsible. Martin (2000) pointed out that the stories rarely ended with the words … "and they all lived happily ever after". Most stories didn't end happily ever after. The author noted, usually, the stories taught a lesson and frequently, the selfish person learned that lesson the hard way.

Here is an excerpt:

One day Ananse collected all the wisdom in the world and decided to keep it all in a large pot for himself. Now he said "I have all the wisdom of the world for myself. At least that was what he thought; being such a greedy person.

Kweku Ananse then tied the pot of wisdom around his neck with a strong vine rope and let the pot hang in front of him. But then he was afraid that someone would find the pot of wisdom and steal it." What shall I do with my pot of wisdom" He thought and thought and at last he said," I shall hide the pot on top of the tallest tree in the forest." So he searched the forest until he found the tallest tree which happened to be the thorny silk cotton tree and brought the pot of wisdom to the tree. While Ananse was trying to climb the thorny silk cotton tree his son was watching him." Father," he said," "What are you doing" "Well" said Ananse, I have in this clay pot all the wisdom of the world and I am going to hang it on the top of the tallest tree away from everybody, then I will be the wisest in the whole wide world." "I have an idea." said his son" Why not hang the pot behind you instead of in front of you. Then you will be able to climb the tree". Well the sly one Ananse hanged the pot behind him and to his surprise; he was able to climb to the top of the tree with his pot.

Finally Ananse sat on a branch of the tree holding the pot of wisdom. "I thought I had all the wisdom in the world" He thought to himself.

"I thought I had it all in my pot but my own son has wisdom not in my pot." Then he made a statement that we still use today." No one-person can have all the wisdom in the world. "On his way down he dropped the pot and it smashed into many pieces and scattered all the wisdom all over the world.

(This story is contributed by Rev Peter E Adotey Addo from his book, How the Spider became Bald...Folktales and Legends from West Africa adopted from http://www.allfolktales.com/wafrica/ananse_pot_of_wisdom.php).

The following are some examples of stories that were told and the lessons being learnt.

Story	Virtue/morals learnt
Don't pay bad for bad	Friendship
Grasshopper and toad	
Anansi and turtle	Greed
Why wisdom is everywhere (Anansi and the Wisdom pot)	
The jealous brother	Lying
The twin brothers	
No condition is permanent	Kindness
The riot	
The Leopard man	Obedience
Rere, the disobedient son	
Why wisdom is everywhere	Wisdom

These are but a few of some folktales told in the Ghanaian, Nigeria and Liberia communities in Africa.

Table 1. Folktales and the virtues/morals learnt

5.1. Relevance

A folktale in traditional setting is an effective means of inculcating the virtues in children (Gyekye, 1996). It is obvious from the explanations given and their examples that these folktales carry with it values and morals which are being handed from one generation to the other. It teaches good morals which helps in parenting the child so he/she will learn to be a responsible adult.

6. Puberty rites

Another significant traditional practice which instils discipline and fosters good parenting in our youth especially, the young girls is puberty rites. It is one of the main traditional practices which have strongly been influenced by modernization and education.

Puberty rite is a traditional practice which is performed mainly on adolescent girls to initiate them to womanhood. This rite is therefore believed to make women or girls good wives if they are able to go through the process successfully. Though this process is being celebrated or performed by Nigeria, Liberia, Ghana and some African communities, there may be certain practices which may differ among the countries. However, they follow a general pattern. These general patterns include:

• notification of the adolescent,

- period of seclusion,

- initiation rite then

- Reintegration into the family as an adult.

In view of this, the author would like to describe briefly how adolescent girls in Ghana and Nigeria go through this process of puberty.

In Ghana the puberty rite is being celebrated by most of the ethnic groups in Ghana. For instance some ethnic groups from the eastern part of Ghana call it "Dipo" and another from the central and again eastern part of Ghana call it "Bragro". As the time approaches for the initiation, announcement is given on behalf of the gods to prepare young girls who have reached the adolescent stage to partake in the rituals.

Qualified adolescent girls are then taken to the queen mother who will then prepare them physically for the ritual. In the case of the Dipo, the girls are given to the traditional priest. The queen mother will then examine the girls including their menstrual cycle to ensure that the girls are indeed virgins. If they pass the test, their parents will then prepare them to the initiation house. This initiation house is under the supervision of responsible, elderly women and also some girls. The identified pubertal girls are then taught issues concerning women. These are marriage, housewifery, how to dress, pregnancy, child birth and parenting. Similarly, in Igbo land in Nigeria, the young girls (the celebrants) would gather to learn private lessons of life from older women. In this gathering, young ladies learn personal grooming, among other values. Their hair would be plaited and their body polished with ufie (red cam wood) and adorned with uli designs. Songs, storytelling, and dancing would permeate the night. Mothers would lay out the facts of life and what it meant to be beautiful. Traditionally in Ghana, before the final initiation, the girls are regarded unclean. In view of that, they are shaved, cleaned (bathed) and smeared with some sheabutter. The women will then take the celebrants to the river side to wash three times every day. This will last for the period of the ceremony. When it gets to the evening this same girls and women will assist the celebrants to sing and dance with traditional love songs. This is done to invite suitors for the being initiated girls.

The last day is more remarkable. On this day, the girls are again led to the river. They are given a boiled egg to swallow. The egg must be swallowed whole. If the egg is chewed there is the fear that they may not have children if they do chew it. After all these, the girls are finally dressed in special clothes and ornaments. These clothes are called 'Kente'. They are then seated in an open place. This is to show to the public that these girls have now entered womanhood and also showcase themselves to the men who would want suitors or wives. During this process, people including the girls' parents present their gifts for all to see. This is done amidst singing and dancing. For the Igbo's of Nigeria, on the last day of the festivities, mothers would cook and send the young girls off for a day of fun at the designated Village Square. Here, the girls would dance, trade tips, share meals, and simply have a great time. Meanwhile, eligible bachelors would watch from the periphery. At the end of it all, the girls can now be taken home to their parents. At this juncture, they are given the right to marry any man who comes to seek their hand in marriage from the parents.

One aspect of this initiation is that, during the past years, whenever a girl ceases to go through the rite due to pregnancy or pre-marital sex, they are known to bring disgrace, shame and a curse to their families and the society. In view of that they are ostracized. This forever will bring a stigma to the girl's family. In some communities, a ritual is performed for both the girl and the man responsible for the pregnancy. The rite is a form of punishment for not waiting to get married before having sex and becoming pregnant. The rite is performed in public in order to deter other young girls and boys who are soon to become adolescents to be patient until they are initiated and get married.

Most often, when puberty rite is mentioned, adolescent girls often come to the fore; but then boys who have also reached the adolescent stage also go through this passage. In Ghana puberty rite for boys is often common in the northern part of the country which is scarcely talked about as compared to the girls'. In Liberia, some communities do initiate boys as well as in Nigeria. In Liberia for instance, Young Mano men of Liberia go through a ceremonial "death" at puberty. These young men are stabbed with a spear and thrown over a cliff to symbolize death and rebirth into adulthood. Actually, a protective padding is kept in the spear from penetrating them, and a sack of chicken blood was tied over the spot to appear as though the young men had been stuck. They are then tossed over the cliff, but a heavy object is thrown over instead to sound like they have been thrown.

Presently, this puberty rite has been modernized due to education and also foreign religion. At present, the duration for the initiation has been reduced. Sometimes it even last for a day. Again, the breasts of the ladies have now been covered and also the adolescent stage is no more strictly enforced. Currently, parents even initiate their young girls as early as 4-10 years. Some do this with the reason being that they don't want the girls to have pre-marital sex or get pregnant when they have not gone through the initiation.

6.1. Relevance

Though puberty rite activities may differ from one African community to another, their reason for this initiation is similar. For instance this puberty rite was initiated to prevent young girls and adolescents from teenage pregnancy, prostitution and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. It was also introduced to teach the young woman how to be responsible and take care of her own family.

7. The mother

Presently mothers are not often seen in the house as they used to be. It must be emphasized that the involvement of more mothers in the modern labour force, deprives the children as well as the whole family of the daily love and care so necessary for proper child rearing and development.

During infancy, the child is breastfed for a longer time as compared to this modern time. This, it is believed, develop a bond between the baby and the mother. As the child grows, he/she sees the virtues being exhibited by the mother and all of these enhance good parenting.

African culture and values see the mother as the keeper of the house. She is a housewife and makes sure that as the father is the bread winner, she must cater for all the domestic aspect of the children. Currently, there has been a paradigm shift. Since our day to day lives many of us are overstretched, we sometimes approach parenting tired and overwhelmed and as a result leave the children to the neglect of house helps and caretakers. This reduces the amount of time parents should spend with their wards. It should be stressed that even when the extended family is no longer in function, parents especially mothers, should be around to help bring up the child in a responsible manner.

7.1. Relevance

The mother serves as a support to the child especially, when the extended family is not around.

8. Implications to parenting

The traditional African systems as described have gone through the influence of external systems and forces which has transformed the rich parental values we have as Africans. The extended family system which is under pressure is rapidly eroding and failing to fulfil its primary role of socialization. In the urban areas for instance, the nuclear family is prominently cropping up. Presently, there is no cohesion; it is just the individual family, his work and his property. This has resulted in less socialization. Currently, families bring up their children in Estate houses whereby one group of a family does not know who his/her neighbour is. In view of that when problems arise in such communities, nobody cares and families are destroyed as a result of this.

Again, the media has taken precedence in our families that children no longer listen to folk stories anymore; they are rather with the television, internet, foreign books and computers. These modernization gadgets have limited information with regards to African cultural values and proper traditional parenting which can easily be assessed by all. In view of that a lot of young people have lost touch of the rich cultural values we have as Africans. A lot of young people presently no longer give a helping hand to the adult and do not offer their seat to the elderly whether in public or private.

Presently, teenage pregnancy is on the increase. Young girls do not regard their cultural values as far as virginity and marriage is concerned. Young couples give birth before they think about marriage. Some are as a result of the decision of the man to be sure that the woman is fertile before he marries her. This is for him to prevent childlessness in his home and the extended family. Others due to poor parental care and control, lack the love and commitment to stay with one woman. This has ended in the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and bearing children who have been abandoned by their parents; roaming in the bigger cities as hawkers, prostitutes, pick pockets and armed robbers.

Let us take for instance, the wife or mother who works in the bank and wakes up early dawn each day. If she has no extended family staying with her, then, she has to make sure the children

have been bathed, eaten and goes to work around 5:30 or 6 O'clock am. She spends the whole day at work and comes home when sometimes the children are asleep. These often times result in the children not being well fed, and also developing bad habits.

9. Recommendations

From the factors given with regards to parenting, it would be noted that African culture contributes immensely in the upbringing of young people. This exposition is calling on our African nuclear families to rise up if they have completely neglected the extended family. The extended family is tearing apart especially in our bigger, busy cities. Nuclear families should make it a point to visit their hometowns and patch up with their extended families. Parents should frequently introduce their children to their extended families on both sides.

It is recommended that parents should endeavour to visit the old stories, make time and narrate them to their children. During my childhood school days I remember when it is story time; we take turns in the classroom to narrate these folktales to ourselves. Presently, the stories are rather the foreign ones we read. I believe our teachers should be reminded of this practice so the children can have rich cultural training. Again, curriculum developers should be reminded to revisit the times some of the stories were included in the reading books.

There is a statement in the Ghanaian language which says that whenever you neglect or abandoned something and later you go back for it; it is never forbidden. Meaning, you can still revisit whatever you neglected. It then behoves on our law makers and cultural authorities, to make sure that puberty rite is again established. Our parents and community leaders should make sure that every growing child, entering into the adolescent stage has undergone this event.

Working mothers and housewives; in as much as there is so much to be done at home and also at the workplace, please do endeavour to make time for the children. Some parents have so much to do that during vacations and weekends when the children are supposed to spend time with them, they allow these children to go for extra tuition which sometimes is unnecessary. These busy schedules of parents have influenced private schools to organise so many activities for the children that they are not able to socialise properly and also stay home and learn at the feet of their parents.

10. Conclusion

African culture is rich. We should not neglect it out rightly because it is that which makes us Africans. Let us embrace our good parenting practices so we can nurture responsible youth for the African continent.

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