

Modern Marriage in Sierra Leone by B.E. Harrell Bond.

Mouton, The Hague & Paris, 1975 xxii. 369pp. £6.25.

The Creoles, though less than 2% of the total population of Sierra Leone, form 64% of the professional group - the educated elite of university degree holders on whom Dr. Harrell-Bond's study of marriage and family life focuses.

Under the guidance of missionaries and philanthropists, the Creoles, descendants of repatriated slaves and those identifying with them, readily accepted the ideals of Western (specifically British) "civilised life" - education and Christianity with the latter's necessary correlate, monogamous marriage.

They saw themselves as having, and were accredited with, a cultural superiority over the indigenous (Provincial) populations whose contact with the British colonists came later. Though the Creoles now hold no overt political power and are feeling increasingly insecure in relation to the Provincial majority, they still "set the pattern for the social development of the rest of the population" (33). In fact many Provincial professionals were raised by Creole guardians, so are no strangers to their ideology, and nearly all have spent time abroad (mostly in Western Europe or the United States).

The Creoles have rejected the idea of traditional African marriage in favour of an "idealised version of the Western model" of companionate monogamy, yet in reality the situation reflects an interplay between the often conflicting traditional values and "western" or "modern" ideals.

By placing marriage in its legal setting we are shown the complexities and contradictions inherent in the plural legal system that operates in Sierra Leone, particularly as statutory law (a modified form of English law imposed by the British) has both legal and social superiority over customary law though it bears little relation to social reality.

Marriage implies a change in social status, and to be married by statutory law gives high status in the community. The elaborate ceremonial and expense of such marriages bears some witness to this. For a woman, marriage by statutory law gives a legal and social superiority over the inevitable other women in her husband's life. Her legitimate children have higher legal status than any "outside children" (though there is little if any social stigma attached to illegitimacy).

The main source of conflict and "perhaps the most significant factor influencing the organisation of the family" (140) is the inevitability of a husband's extra-marital relationships. Men can maintain the myth of monogamy and thus safeguard their status within the wider community while at the same time enhancing their prestige in traditional terms by having and supporting "outside" girlfriends and possibly children.

In a fascinating discussion of the social consequences of an attempt to equalise the status of illegitimate children (publicity surrounding this proposition led to the general belief that the law had been passed) we can see how women feel their position to be very vulnerable. Marital conflict increased and women felt their superior status being eroded. Men too have become more cautious about having children outside marriage - unwed mothers are very much aware of their rights to increased maintenance, and the belief that their children have equal rights to inherit has led to an increase in paternity suits.

The greater emphasis on personal choice of marriage partner (within the limits of a suitable family background) and the recent innovation of the idea of courtship and romantic love have resulted in women having a

higher expectation of marriage. In courtship, men assume their idea of western behaviour, but once married their values and expectations are largely traditional. A discussion on attitudes towards sex and contraception again highlights some of the conflicts between traditional beliefs and modern ideals or needs.

By looking at marriage in relation to the values of the wider society Dr. Harrell-Bond has shown that for men the ideals of companionate monogamy are not compatible with these. Relationships are to a large extent based on ascription and particularism, to use Parson's terms, so a man cannot advance in the wider society if he isolates himself within the family unit. It can be said that people "value customary ways only so far as these help them attain their ends" (Colson). It seems that in Sierra Leone, as in many places, it is women who are more concerned to increase the structural isolation of the family unit and accept the values of companionate monogamy. Social status is for a woman very much bound up with the idea of being married and perhaps more importantly bearing children. Women feel that traditional marriage is a burden and that they have more to gain, from the point of view of status and economic benefit, as well as emotionally, if the stated ideas of modern marriage are upheld. As it is, women are prepared to put up with a great deal of emotional disappointment as long as the outward appearance of a successful marriage, and thus their status in the community, is maintained, and the home does not suffer financially as a result of the husbands outside activities or obligations.

Regardless of the interests of other parties, marriage is essentially a contract between individuals and one of the merits of the book is that it focuses very much on the individual at a very personal level. The extensive use of conversational material, students' essays, love letters and newspaper articles gives fascinating insights into the way people regard male-female relations and view their own position within them.

The outline of the methodology used and the inclusion of the questionnaires administered to university students (potential professionals) and the professional group itself is to be welcomed, both as a guideline for future research and for the sake of academic honesty.

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Vol 78, no2, pp261 - 72.

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