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IGBO VALUES FOR CHILDREN AND THE REJECTION OF ADOPTED CHILDREN AMONG CHRISTIANS IN ENUGU-EZIKE: A PARADOX

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Abstract

Children are priceless in Igbo culture. The birth of a child is welcomed with much excitement and joy. The value for children is evident in the names given to children in Igboland, names like Nwakego, Nwabugwu, Nwaamaka among others. Couples without children make all effort to get one, and adoption tends to offer a veritable platform for the childless couples to have this desire accomplished. However, in Enugu-Ezike community of South East, Nigeria, child adoption is a forbidden practice. When attempted, the adoptive parents and adopted child(ren) often are faced with socio-psychological challenges such as; rejection, identity problem, disinheritance among others. Scholars have written extensively on Igbo values for children, and child adoption related issues. However, there is a lacuna in literature on the contradiction of Igbo values for children and the rejection of child adoption in Enugu-Ezike community. Hence, this work is geared towards interrogating this paradox. The study adopted a cross-sectional research method. A qualitative research design was used in data gathering and analysis. The finding shows that child adoption is not accepted even among Christians in Enugu-Ezike, irrespective of one's spiritual status. This is due to the socio-cultural belief/worldview of the people about the sacrocant of family bloodline and the issues of inheritance.

Keywords: Igbo Values, children, Adopted Children, Enugu-Ezike Community.

Introduction

Children are greatly treasured in African culture. The birth of a child is heralded with so much joy and excitement. This is because children are regarded as the blessings of the god(s); to their parents, relations and community. They are expressions of the goodwill of the gods, and therefore, constitute a source of pride and joy to their parents. As Onunwa (1988) noted, Africans are insatiably desirous of children. The value of children in African culture makes it easier for the people to accommodate, accept, take in, and even take care of another man's child. This is typified in the Igbo adages that say, "*nwawu nwa, nga nwa siri lo uwa, ya hiri*" (every child is valuable, wherever a child hails from, he should live) and "*nwa bu nwa ora; ofu onye adi amu nwa*" (a child is a community product; it does not belong only to his biological parent). Children are one of the significant determinants of marital satisfaction in African society (Onyishi, 2012; Twenge, Campell & Foster, 2003). They confer an honoured status on the married couple, secure their rights of inheritance, and fortify the continuity of family lineage (Gerald, 2017). Children hold great socio-economic values in tradition Africa culture. A man who has a lot of them in his compound is considered wealthy and fortunate.

Marriage in African culture seems to be primarily about procreation and rearing of children. Thus, among the Igbos, parenthood is the earnest desire and fundamental prayer in any marriage contract. Olanike et al. observed that after marriage, family members, in-laws and friends wait expectantly for news of pregnancy and childbirth (Olanike et al., 2005). When such expectations are not met immediately, psycho-social pressure, intense anxiety and consequently depression follow suit. Most often, the women suffer greatly as they are held responsible for the cause of infertility in marriage. These women are cajoled, taunted and stigmatized, even by their husbands; athough male are found to contribute to fifty percent cases of infertility in marriage (Agarwal, Ashok, et al., 2015; WHO, 2010). The consequences of marital infertility in Igboland range from economic hardship to social isolation, violence and denial of right and privileges (Ohaeri et al, 2019; Dyer, 2017). Following this heavy emphasis on children in marriage in Igbo culture, marriage without children is considered as a failure. Therefore, couples without children do all within their powers to get one, and adoption seems to be one of the veritable platform to have this desire fulfilled.

Adoption is a legal process whereby a person takes permanent ownership of another person, usually a child, from that person's biological/legal parents. Child adoption is one of the commonest form of adoption. According to Vered (2010), child adoption

> is a legal act that brings to an end the child-parent relationship – that is all the rights and duties between the birth parents and the child – and instead creates family relation between the adoptee and adoptive parent by endowing the later with all the authority, rights, obligations that usually exist between a parent and a child; blood ties are severed and alternative legal family relationship of adoptive parenthood, which is lasting and almost irreversible, are created (p.234).

Child adoption is a common practice in igbo land, especially among the childless couple. Child adoption has been of great help to orphaned children in society. It has strengthened family ties, cared for children deprived of their parents by war, illness, abject poverty and even death (Yuseph 2014). The practice of child adoption is viewed as a societal solution to deserted children and an alternative solution to some couples to make up for the sex of child lack (Aderson 2012).

However, in Enugu-ezike community, child adoption is not accepted. According to them, "we don't father another man's child". Child adoption is surrounded with suspicion and socio-cultural bias in Enugu-Ezike community. Adoptive parents and their adoptees are stigmatized, discriminated and deny some rights and previleges. It is however surprising that the Igbo man who are known for their love for children and affinity to adopt novel cultural patterns (Afigbo, 2006) as evidenced in their preference for foreign languages to indigenous language, buying foreign things to the locally made items, imported religion of Christianity and Islam to indigenous religious find it challenging to embrace child adoption. More worrisome is that of Christian indengene, whose beliefs and dogma rests on social inclusiveness, oneness of all irrespective of gender, class, family background and other social identities- and care of the orphans and weak, yet it is difficult for them to accept child adoption. This work, therefore is aim to interrogate this paradox.

Though scholars have written extensively on adoption in Igbo land; igbo understanding and practice of adoption, the challenges of child adoption, the relationship between adopted children and their parents in igbo land, but there is little or no literature that has interrogated the contradiction of Igbo values for children and the rejection of child adoption in Enugu-ezike community This work, therefore, aims to interrogated this paradox. Why is adoption rejected in Enugu-ezike community, even among Christians? Why has the Christian faith not altered this traditional belief of the people, as it did to other traditional belief and practices? What is the impact of this belief on the socio-religious life of the people? To address these concerns, this research adopted a cross-section approach in the study of the phenomenon.

Methods

Study Area

Enugu-ezike, a community situated in Enugu State, South East of Nigeria. It is reputed as the largest single community in black Africa (chukwuemeke, 2015). It has an area of 293km^2 and a population of 259,431 at the 2006 census. It has 36 villages with royal stools in addition to some other newly created political autonomous community. Enugu-ezike is bounded by Benue and Kogi States. On the North is Ette, a non Igbo speaking community, on the East is Ofante and Idoma while the North West flanks are Amaka and Akpanya communities of Benue state. To the South West is Ibagwa while south south is Alor agu, Unadu and itch. To the south east are Obollo Afor, Iheaka and Ovoko (chukwuemeke, 2015)

Being a community well known for its resilience in their cultural belief, they are said to have originated from Benin Kingdom in the present edo state of Nigeria. The Igbo language is the widely used language, however, some villages among them speak idoma and igala languages. With respect to religion, Enugu-ezike people are predominantly Christians though a good number of them practice Islamic religion and Africa Traditional Religion.

Participant Recruitment

The study involved 76 randomly selected participants for quantitative data and 16 purposively selected participants for the oral interview. The participants for the oral interview were mostly elders who are Christians and women who are Christians and are childless at the moment. The choice of elders was not only informed by the fact that they have experice on the issue under study, but are also better placed to know and communicate their tradition in relation with their Christian faith. The women were choosen because they are the most hit in the situation. One major criterion for selecting a participant was that one must be a Christian residing in the community under study. The participants for the oral interview comprises of 11 male and 5 female. Their ages ranged between 40 and 74 years.

S/N	Names of participants	Sex	Age	Educational qualification	Status	Religion	Location
1	David	M	47	WASSCE	Civil servant	Christianity	Enugu-Ezike
2	Scholastica	F	47	1st Degree	Teacher	Christianity	Enugu-Ezike
3	Kenneth	M	51	1st Degree	Trader	Christianity	Enugu-Ezike
4	Boniface	M	71	None	Farmer	Christianity	Enugu-Ezike
5	Ugochukwu	M	74	None	Farmer	Christianity	Enugu-Ezike

6	Okwuchukwu	M	62	FSLC	Farmer	Christianity	Enugu-Ezike
7	Matthew	M	64	FSLC	Trader	Christianity	Enugu-Ezike
8	Dubem	M	50	WASSCE	Trader	Christianity	Enugu-Ezike
9	Henry	M	40	1st Degree	Trader	Christianity	Enugu-Ezike
10	Chukwuma	M	44	1st Degree	Civil servant	Christianity	Enugu-Ezike
11	Chinyere	F	57	FSLC	Farmer	Christianity	Enugu-Ezike
12	Chinwe	F	49	WASSCE	Trader	Christianity	Enugu-Ezike
13	Gloria	F	43	1st Degree	Civil servant	Christianity	Enugu-Ezike
14	Emeka	M	70	None	Farmer	Christianity	Enugu-Ezike
15	Jane	F	52	WASSCE	Teacher	Christianity	Enugu-Ezike
16	Martins	M	45	1st Degree	Civil servant	Christianity	Enugu-Ezike

Data Collection

The primary technique for data collection was indepth interview. The interview questions were exhaustively addressed. Before each interview, information was given to the informants on how and why we wish to speak with them. They were also assured of confidentiality in handling their responses and also that their real names will not be used. This was very helpful as a lot of the informants were expressive and confident during the interview. The interview was conducted in both English and Igbo languages and each lasted between 40 – 57 minutes.

Data Analysis

The study deployed Colaizzi guide for data analysis as cited in Shosha (n.d) in the analysis of the generated data. This guide includes the following steps: 1. Each transcript should be read and re-read in order to obtain a general sense about the whole content. 2. For each transcript, significant statements that pertain to the phenomenon under study should be extracted. These statements must be recorded on a separate sheet noting their pages and lines numbers. 3. Meanings should be formulated from these significant statements. 4. The formulated meanings should be sorted into categories, clusters of themes, and themes. 5. The findings of the study should be integrated into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon under study. 6. The fundamental structure of the phenomenon should be described. 7. Finally, validation of the findings should be sought from the research participants to compare the researcher's descriptive results with their experiences.

Findings

Reasons for the rejection of child adoption

Participants expressed their feelings on the issues of child adoption. Infact when asked about the acceptance of child adoption in Enugu-Ezike, Martins replies: child adoption is not part of Enugu- ezike culture, we do not practice it here. According to Boniface;

> The issue you raised is a very serious matter in Enugu-Ezike community. Child adoption is not part of our culture; we do not adopt children because here in Enugu-ezike one cannot father another man's child

Adoption is nothing but buying and selling of children, Kenneth opined. "This simply means slavery, which our fore fathers have long abolished and people are gradually bringing it back in disguise…. there is no place for child adoption in Enugu- ezike."

On the attitude of Enugu-ezike towards child adoption, Chinwe, a female respondent narrated her ordeal:

> Due to my condition as a childless woman, I may decide to go for child adoption but my husband can never be in support. If I insist, I may be thrown out of my husband's house… In Enugu-ezike here, you do not think of child adoption at all….. My husband has plans of taking a second wife not minding his status as a Christian.

In the same vein, Mrs Gloria lamented, "child adoption is not an option in Enugu-Ezike. I am praying for God to bless me with my own child, because I know that my husband will look for an alternative if I do not bear a child.

When asked about the factors that discourage people of Enugu-Ezike from adopting a child, Matthew said,

> If you adopt a child in Enugu-Ezike, the child will suffer in the hands of the people of the community……. The child will have no friend, the child will feel too bad in his/her life time.

Collaborating the thoughts of Mathew, Mr. Boniface narrated his experience concerning her daughter, who got pregnant outside wedlock. He stated,

> ….. there was a case of my own daughter getting pregnant out of wedlock, when she gave birth in my house and refused to take the child to the rightful father, after sometime the child became sick…… but once the child got to the biological father's house, the sickness disappeared and the child became healthy again.

According to Dubem, "there is no point going outside to bring in a person whose genetic composition is unknown to you, while there are many children within the extended family looking for help. In my community here, we do not accept an unknown blood as part of us at all." "Not knowing the background of the child that is being adopted is a problem, because a child whose mother is a prostitute or a thief will have the tendencies of exhibiting same" Chukwuma asserted.

Henry, however seems to have contrary view about child adoption in Enugu-ezike. He argued, "Yes, we adopt from our extended families not outside the family; the child will know his biological parents and will continue to bear his name. "Blood is thicker than water, so it is the feeling of not being your blood that discourages people from adopting children" David concluded.

Scholastica and Jane postulated that they do not accept adoption because

> "It is lack of faith in God to go for adoption… The bible promised us that there will be no barren woman in the land. Couples should wait on the Lord with faith…. Do not be too quick. Jane argued that "It is not biblical to adopt a child , remember the story of Ishmeal and Isaac in the bible, Ishmael was the eldest son of Abraham but God chose Isaac as the heir because Ishmeal did not come from Sarah.

Chinwe pointed that it is stigmatization that discourages people from adopting a child. Boniface elaborated this when he says that even if you insist in Enugu-Ezike and go for adoption, the child will face series of troubles ranging from stigmatization, inheritance problem, not nearing the throne of the Onyishi and sometimes death.

The impact of Christianity on Enugu-Ezike culture

Christianity has little or no impact on people attitude towards child adoption in Enugu-Ezike. According to Dubem, as far as Enugu-Ezike is concerned, Christianity and culture of the people are two separate entity. They have nothing in common as long as adoption of another man child is concern. No matter how Christians an enugu-ezike indigene is, the culture of his people takes preminence over the teaching of his faith. Henry reported of a well known man in the church, who after several years of marriage with no child went for a second wife contrary to his Christian belief instead of going for child adoption. Thus Boniface, Kenneth and Ugochukwu agreed that there is no significant impact of Christianity on the culture of Enugu-ezike people, especially as it concerns child adoption. The reason for this is discussed below:

Implication of the rejection of child adoption

This is one of the most difficult question for them to answer. Many took their time to think before answering this particular question. However, most of the respondents saw no negative implication in the rejection of child adoption. For instance, Okwuchukwu and Ugochukwu respective said, "there is no implication." The only implication is "there will be no form of new hereditary disorder or strange behavior in the family" argues Emeka..

However, Chinwe observed that with the rejection of child adoption in Enugu-Ezike, ladies who get pregnant out of wedlock, resort to abortion, and this has caused the untimely deaths of many, while others who cannot risk abortion, sell off their children after birth. Gloria lamented that the rejection of child adoption by her community is worrisome. According to her, "Infertile couples who would have gotten consolation from adopting babies will be denied that happiness…. And sometimes these women will continue taking drugs that will aid their fertility and most times end up in complications e.g kidney failure." In addition, Scholastica reported her experience of her husband taking another wife because she could not bear children. According to her, "Even though the practice of taking a second wife is against our Christian faith, I prefer it to child adoption."

Discussion

This study interrogated the contradiction of Igbo values for children and the rejection of child adoption in Enugu Ezike. The study found that the people of Enugu-Ezike value children greatly but are not ready to accept an adopted child as part of the family. This rejection of the adopted child is attributed to a strong cultural belief in kinship care structure which has become indestructible by western civilization and urbanization. Struckenbruik (2013) said that people find it difficult to resist the informal type of adoption that they are used to. This finding corresponds with the findings of Bharadwaj (2002),who said that, adoption remains an undesirable option in India, because it is a visible admission of infertility that cannot be subsumed.

Amu gi nwa onye ozo, (no fathering another man's child) is a well-known culture of the Enugu-ezike people. These people believe strongly that any child who is not the biological offspring of an Enugu- ezike man cannot be accepted as such no matter the situation. Nwoga (2013) said that "In Enugu-ezike, there is no recognition for a child whose father is not from Enugu-Ezike (p. 709). If a lady is impregnated outside marriage by an Enugu Ezike man, the child must sooner or later go back to the father, as he or she (child) will not be accepted in Enugu-ezike community. This is why some men from Nsukka zone whose wives cannot bear children and who know the tradition of *amu gi nwa onye ozo* in Enugu- Ezike employ ladies from Enugu-ezike as surrogates. They get them pregnant and pay them off when they deliver the baby because they cannot take the baby as their own. Rejection of adopted children and adoption in Enugu-Ezike is in their culture and difficult to abolish.

Some people believe that an adopted child could be a child of a prostitute, drug addict, mental retarded, criminal convicts and the likes (Olanike et al, 2015). They have fear that if such a child is adopted, there is a tendency that the child will exhibit the same character. According to Nachinab et al (2018), familiarity with a child's parent reduces the risk of adopting a child with unknown inherited diseases and bad behaviour. The reason for these fears could be ascribed to the strong belief in blood relationship by the Igbo people.

Stigmatization is another problem that scares people away from adopting a child. The stigma of adoption refers to the biased judgmental attitudes towards adoption and adoption-related concerns (Baden, 2016). The attitude people show towards adopted children discourages other childless couples from adopting a child (Agbo, 2014). This perception has made people treat adoption and adopted children with disdern. They are treated as second class citizens, stigmatized and denied their inheritance right.

The findings of this study buttressed Nwoga (2013) position that adopted children are regarded as bastards and as such have no right of inheritance. For instance in Enugu- Ezike community, children who are not connected to them patriachally or by marriage are not regarded as a member of the family. The reason for this may be the value placed on legitimacy in Igboland. Nwoga (2013) posits heredity in Igboland is limited to only the lawful and truly birth sons of the father of the family. Again, the culture of *iju ese* (asking a question) before getting married to ascertain any genetic character of a lineage must have influenced the people. This because there is no one to ask questions about the family of the child they want to adopt. This simply makes people reluctant to adopt children. Bell (2019) says that adoption is a social problem that is respected, yet stigmatized.

Child adoption is seen as an act of lack of faith in God. For the scripture has promised that none shall be barren in the land (Exodus 23:26). Therefore, childless couple exercise patience and wait for God to do as he has promised. This theme is in agreement with the findings in Nachinab et al (2018) which posits that with God all things are possible, and one will have to keep waiting until God answers the prayer for a child. Adopting a child was seen as lack of patience on the side of the adoptee by some Christians. They often cite the case of Abraham, emphasizing strongly on God's disapproval of Abraham's adoption of Eliazar (Gen. 15:4). For them, one should wait, and keep trusting on God for a child. This is contray to the view of Nwoga (2013) who says that the Christian maxim that 'all are one in Christ' greatly shapes

societal thoughts towards accepting adopted children. Also Firmin et al (2017), said that a christian who adopts can be seen as imitating Christ.

The study also found that Christianity has little or no impact on the culture of Enugu-Ezike people especially as it affects child adoption. This is attributed to the fact that majority of Enugu- Ezike people are born Christians and not converted to Christianity. According to Uwaegbute (2019), people who are born into the Christian faith seem to have lesser degree of commitment to Christianity than those who are converted to Christianity. They basically use Christianity as a social identity and not as a way of life. The Igbo Christians are strongly attached to their culture (Njoku & Uzukwu 2014; Onwu 2006; Ugwu 2014). Typically, Enugu-Ezike Christians are highly attached to their culture despite their acceptance of the Christian faith. It was also discovered that Enugu-ezike people believe so much in being part of their community. Thus, even as Christians, the people actively participate and propagate culture.

There are a lot of implications of the rejection of child adoption in Enugu Ezike community. These ranges from social to psychological problems. It increase in abortion, adandonment of new born babies among others. Increase in abortion rate due to rejection of child lead to high death rate, especially where people, for instance, do not accept premarital pregnancies, those who get pregnant outside wedlock will not have any option other than going for abortion or worst still give birth to the child, and throw it in a waste bin or pit toilet.

More so, couples who are unable to bear children will be denied their happiness; they will have no child to care for them when they are old or to give them joy because in Igbo land names like, *Nwakego, Nwabugo, Nwamaka, Nwabuihe* are used to describe the importance of children in the society. It may also lead to psychological trauma for the couples who are denied children and to the children who have been rejected and who now lack a home to call his/her own. Couples in this situation may resort to taking drugs to aid fertility, which most times end up in health complications. Some may even end up taking their own lives out of depression. Men out of pressure may resort to taking second wives which is considered contrary to the Christian beliefs and practice.

Conclusion

Child adoption is rejected in Enugu-Ezike community. This rejection of child adoption in Enugu-Ezike is built on the social norm: "We don't father another man's child". This has a serious implication on the social inclusiveness of Christian faith. Owing to the resilience of African culture, Christian doctrine has not been able to influence the attitude of the people towards child adoption.the church, therefore has a lot of work to do to sensitize the people on the value of child adoption.

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