

## **A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF CHRISTOCENTRIC REACTION TO CHILDLESSNESS IN AFRO – TRADO – CULTURAL MARRIAGE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Africans place much premium on marriage and procreation as conditions for the establishment of family. As a result, the preservation and continuation of the family through procreation are of paramount importance to the Africans especially the Igbo race. Childlessness is seen as a terrible situation that goes with a grievous feeling of disappointment. African pre-colonial society condemned a childless marriage. As of then, African culture provided solutions to the unacceptable experience of childlessness. These Afro-cultural solutions included marrying additional women, secretly arranging for another man to impregnate the woman in her marital home with the consent of the sterile husband, levirate marriage and marrying of a 'female husband' to a childless widow. A survey of these Afro-cultural solutions reveals that much consideration was given to what could have been the known and unknown causes of the problem. Christianity with its claim of having solutions to all problems has condemned the traditional ways of addressing concretely the problem of childlessness in Igboland and proffered not- up- to - scratch means of dealing with the problem. The tension and pressure generated by this Christian inadequacy of handling the problem lead many childless couples to many detestable things. Thus, this paper critically questioned the Christocentric reaction to childlessness in Afro-trado-cultural marriages and also appraised the lasting values of Afro-cultural solutions to the problem. The paper recommends that Igbo Christians need to apply African solutions to the problem of childlessness with the supporting knowledge of the Bible in order to be authentic Africans and Christians at the same time.

**Keywords:** assessment, christocentric, reaction, childlessness, afro-trado-cultural and marriage.

## INTRODUCTION:

Marriage is a religious and social institution by which a family is established. A group of persons, consisting of parents and their children is the common and most familiar definition of a family. It is the smallest and the most important unit of a society. According to Okeke (2002), “We Africans and especially the Igbo people are people of the family. Our families mean a lot to us. We are defined, identified and accepted or rejected on the ground of our family” (p. 7). As a result therefore the preservation and continuation of the family through procreation is of paramount importance. The Igbo names Obiefuna (may my family on no account be lost), Amaechina (may my family compound never be overtaken by grass), Obiechina (may my family by no means become extinct) etc depict the grave importance of keeping the family alive through procreation, hence the need for marriage. Marriages are contracted with the sole aim of continuing the family name and tree through procreation. Male children are valued more in this regard because unlike the women, they bear the family name and maintain direct and active link with the family till death and even after.

Africans, now and before hold strongly to this belief and place much premium on procreation. Thus Mbiti (1970) describes failure to bear children as “one of the shattering problems in marriage” (p. 197). Childlessness is an extremely difficult reality to face. It sometimes leads to a complete breakdown of the marriage and in many cases in African societies it leads to marrying a second wife. Nwankwo (1989) has made the same observation as follows:

The main purpose of marriage in Igbo culture is to get children and lack of them is a curse, for, to die without a child is to descend into oblivion, forgotten both by the living and the death and a childless African is a waste. (p. 20).

These facts bring home the amount of attachment and value that Africans (Igbo) place on children. Childlessness therefore is regarded as a calamity and a woeful failure of a person’s mission on earth (Anozie, 1998). It goes hand in hand with deep sorrow and a grievous feeling of disappointment. African pre-colonial society condemned a childless marriage as unacceptable, unhappy, incomplete, non-consummated and in short ‘no marriage’ at all.

As dynamic and encompassing as the African culture was then, it provided solutions to this unacceptable experience of childlessness. Marrying additional women solved the problem sometimes. Permitting the spouse to stay in her father’s house for a period of time (to enable her get impregnated by another man), if the husband is suspected to be sterile, formed a kind of resolution. Secretly arranging for another man to impregnate the woman in her marital home with the consent of the suspected sterile husband was also part of the answer. Levirate marriage and ‘female husband’ experience all filled the yawning gap. A survey of the above Afro-cultural solutions to childlessness reveals that much consideration was given to what could have been the known and unknown causes of the problem. Marrying more women suggested the problem coming from the woman, permitting the woman to live for sometime at her parental home and arranging for another man to sleep with the woman in her matrimonial home point accusing fingers to the man. The rest blamed the mystical as the cause of childlessness.

Before the advent of Christianity to Africa these reactions to the ugly experience of childlessness in form of solutions worked for the people. It gave no opportunity to trade blames. The primary concern and focus was to counter or counteract the intolerable. Third parties who could do mischief by exploiting the opportunity were seldom seen on the scene. Rejection of childlessness was highly successful before Christian religion came. Loose statistics in every Igbo community for instance show that there was no tolerable childless situation before the advent of Christian religion. The traditional religion expressly approved the above ways of addressing the problem of childlessness and as a result there was less tension and pressure on the concerned parties and their families as witnessed at the moment among the Igbo people.

Christianity with its claim of having solutions to all problems has condemned the traditional ways of addressing the problem of childlessness in Igbo land and proffered not up to scratch means of dealing with the problem. The tension and pressure generated by this Christian inadequacy of handling the problem has led many childless couples to many detestable things, hence the study.

Though the word Africa is used in this work, the scope is restricted essentially to Igboland as part of Africa and not the other parts. The first of the two assumptions of this work is that every couple is dependent on the sovereignty of God for conception and birth to take place and secondly that all Afro-cultural solutions to childlessness suggested in this work are to be applied after at least five years of marriage during which time all affordable and available orthodox medical tests and treatments had been sought and completed.

The term Christocentric here refers to ‘Christian religious way and manner of treating’ the issue under

discussion by the Roman Catholic brand of Christianity. The work is not interested in the semantics of strict theological delineation of the term. According to Josh (2008), Christocentric means to read or act with the understanding of the revelation of Jesus Christ. Many orthodox Christians do not look at the Roman Catholic liturgy and think that they share anything close to christocentric hermeneutical reality. This is not true for the Catholic liturgy and theologies are wholly christocentric. Everyone engages in theology in as far as the term has extended meanings of reasoning or logic about God. Everyone has reasoning about God even the atheist who rejects God who he has reasoned about. Roman Catholic Christians' reasoning about God is done through Christ Jesus. Christian peoples in different places at different times have different reasoning about God and we are free also to reason in Christ collectively or individually concerning childlessness in our Igbo-socio-cultural milieu.

### **CHRISTOCENTRIC REACTION TO CHILDLISSNESS:**

The official position of the Catholic Church is that childlessness is not enough to make a man marry more than one woman. The Catholic Church teaches that procreation is not the ultimate aim of marriage and that marriage is an exclusive union between a man and a woman. For the Church a man marrying only one woman is the true expression of a sacramental marriage. Many cultures (African, Jewish, Islamic and other world cultures) do not accept exclusiveness. Even some Catholic theologians frown at this. A Catholic theologian, Schillebeeckx (1965) for example writes that "nowhere in the New Testament is there any explicit command that marriage should be monogamous or any explicit commandment forbidding polygamy" (p. 284). Those pushed to be polygamous due to childlessness or any other reason for that matter, are punished by ecclesiastical exclusion from some sacraments and communion of the church.

Christian couples with the problem of childlessness receive different advisory solutions from the Church and fellow Christians. They include counsels to stay together always, pray together, fast, pray the rosary, attend adorations, visit chapels, contemplate child adoption, avoid bickering, staying off some habits such as drinking and smoking, etc. They are advisory not in the sense that they are not good pieces of counsel but not practical enough like the traditional solutions. In fairness to the above points they could to no determinable degree take care of some aspects of the emotional problems ensuing from childlessness or even sometimes make childbirth possible.

Some Catholic priests, brothers and sisters use herbs, and homeopathic methods to treat childless couples. Such Catholic healing homes litter many streets and parishes in Igboland. Very many despicable and unorthodox Christian and medical practices are performed in these homes. In the same vein some Catholic healers take advantage of the situation to have illicit carnal knowledge of some childless women. Some exploit the opportunity to fleece childless couples. Sometimes the substances taken by the couples help in aggravating the problem.

Close confidants of Catholic childless couples are the priests. On many occasions some of these childless women due to anxiety, worry and uneasiness, mistake the priests for their husbands and say or do many odd things. Of course many good priests have in the past given wise counsels and salvaged homes from breaking up while some had counseled unwisely and even cashed in on the opportunity to commit adultery with some of the women thereby breaking homes and pitching the women against their people. All said and done counseling from priests and keeping them as close confidants do not do much to practically solve the problem other than lull the couples into indocility.

We have today many priests, brothers and sisters who serve as spiritual consultants to childless couples. These Catholic prophets and prophetesses in course of prophesying the cause of childlessness had accused some people especially mother in-laws of being behind the problem. Some charismatic groups, priests, brothers and sisters even undertake physical cum spiritual excavation jobs in the residential areas of the couples to unearth fetish charms suspected to be the cause of childlessness. Some destroy floors and parts of buildings in course of excavation and even reveal names of the perceived enemies. Without going into the details of the numerous problems caused by this spiritual braggadocio, it needs to be remarked that little or nothing is achieved by this to practically solve the problem of childlessness.

It should be sounded clearly here that the Catholic family (clergy, lay people, relations and friends) inadvertently make the childless couples hope against hope. They independently and collectively try to make the victims forget their genuine fear and anxiety instead of addressing them. The regularity of their visits and the sameness of their counsels month to month and year to year produce numbing effect on the mind to stimulate a practical action. Every now and then the priest, brother or sister visits or invites the

couples to present lists and litanies of couples who had children after forty, twenty or thirty years of marriage. Sermons, meetings and ordinary conversations cannot be concluded without listing Catholic men and women of faith that broke the jinx of childlessness after several years, unless if the gathering is not made up of couples that are childless.

Childless couples who have had the luck to gain freedom from the scorching incarceration of childlessness through remarrying or taking on other Afro-cultural ways soon realized that their Catholic faithful counterparts have been at best insincerely consoling them; at worst making them slower and less lively at taking action and never practically addressing the issue of childlessness. These liberated couples would be amazed at the expressions of their former Catholic counselors on childlessness. The latter would make comments such as “I thank God for your freedom from that old woman”, “you almost ruined your life with that senseless drunkard”, “what pushed you to marry that woman in the first place? Didn’t you know she had crossed child-bearing age?”, “that your wife was a prostitute and have had series of abortions while we were in school”, “the family of that man is impotent, the three elder brothers never had kids through the normal way”, “thank God you have saved your mother and your sisters’ lives, they were almost dieing of hypertension due to this problem”, “we were wondering if you were with your senses following her gawkily all these while to the priest’s house and to the church” etc.

The list of such comments is endless. Ask the former counselors why they counseled the way they did before and they would ask whether you “were feeding through the nose”. The long and short of their defence is that nobody says otherwise under such circumstances because of the supposed intimacy existing between husband and wife. The best way is always to play safe, for the man or woman who freely and willingly entered the contract marital mess should know the best time to clear the mess. Actually no man or woman in childless situation should be happy hearing that someone advised his or her partner to consider remarrying. Some would even describe such act as putting asunder what God has joined together. But what of if remarrying comes to be the truest alternative. Should genuine Afro-identity of procreation be sacrificed on the altar of ‘playing safe’ and hiding under glib biblio-theological referential canopy?

Another unsatisfactory handling of the issue of childlessness by the Catholic Church could be seen in the area of marriage nullifications. The clearest point to show this is where a childless couple willingly accepts before the tribunal vicar to divorce. The ecclesiastical bureaucratic bottlenecks put in place for nullification of marriage are simply excessive. In many places in the South East of Nigeria it goes in this order: issuance of forms, submission of forms, issuance of forms for witnesses, presentation of six witnesses for examination, payment of forty five thousand naira, issuance of summon and sending of same to the divorcing partner, return of the proof of delivery of the summon by a courier company to the judicial vicar, examination of the partner and trial of the case. Long queues are noticed in the tribunal and long hours, days, weeks and years are spent trying to complete the process. Partners who are willing to divorce could wait up to many years for judgment to come.

Where one of the partners is not ready for the divorce, nullification could wait interminably. In almost every case of nullification, separation had already taken place long ago. The sum of the years of childlessness, period of separation and years of nullification trial is just much for the most extra-obedient church person. This is needlessly adding to the pain and years of childlessness by the church. The church respects the free will of couples to marry and therefore eagerly and sometimes hastily wed them but would not swiftly facilitate the couple’s desire to nullify the marriage. The church could, as it does in many similar situations, cite several sections of the canon law and speak all the old school Latin clauses and phrases to support this attitude but the truth is that it is the rigid and ineffectual eccentric system it has that causes the demoralizing problem. This does not at all address concretely childlessness in Africa.

### **SUGGESTED AFRO-CHRISTOCENTRIC WAYS TO HANDLE CHILDLISSNESS:**

The task of this section borders on how we can handle practically the problem of childlessness in genuine African way without ceasing to be Christians. The technical term used to designate this kind of relationship between culture and the gospel is known as inculturation. It expresses the dynamic relationship between the Christian message and the traditional culture, Christian life and culture, gospel and culture. It takes various forms and varies from place to place according to context. All that matter is realistically bridging the gap between Christ and the people of a given culture.

The cultural identity of any human being is the basic structure of existence. World view and nature of perception operate within the crucible of culture. If this cultural basic structure is dislocated or substituted

by a foreign culture, the individual is exposed to an inauthentic existence (Anozie, 1998). It is even worse when such a cultural alienation derives from religion. Such an individual ends up doing things simply because others do or because they are ordered or instructed hence, the urgent need for inculturation in the area of childlessness in Africa. No childless Christian couple in Igboland is truly happy about their situation in spite of all the Christian steps taken towards the amelioration of the condition. Really they have been dislocated. They and their immediate families know and appreciate better than others the reality of the inauthentic and ridiculous life they have been exposed to. The ache, anger and agony are immeasurable.

The main obstacle hindering inculturation in Africa is unwillingness on the part of the Roman Catholic Church to support and approve meaningful efforts at it (Anozie, 1998). This unwillingness is guarded jealously by some Bishops and this could be seen in the latter's bitter and unfriendly reaction towards some priests who seem to understand the urgency and seriousness of inculturation. Many Bishops and priests alike simply do not have positive interest in the authentic incarnation of the Christian faith experience in African cultural forms.

Polygamy in form of polygyny is an African culture that practically addresses childlessness. Thus, Parrinder (1974) says, "If a man has many wives and one is barren, it is likely the others will have children for him just to remedy the immediate concern of childlessness" (p. 61). Polygyny serves the purpose of immortality. The Africans believe that the more wives a man has the more children he is likely to have, and these children will keep the family going. Polygyny also prevents infidelity in marriage. Where a man has many wives, he will be preoccupied in maintaining them to the extent that he may not have any time left for him to have any marital affairs outside his wives.

Igbo culture, like other cultures, carries within itself some elements of the divine. Some Christians seem to lack the accommodating humility to recognize this factor in polygamy. Faith is a gift of God that demands a human response. Although faith is not to be equated with culture, it needs a friendly culture in order to be expressly meaningful. Going for more than one wife in order to assuage the grave pain of childlessness as an Afro-cultural practice could elicit stronger faith in Christ by concerned couples than the faithless and reckless other remedies orchestrated by anxiety. Committing adultery by women, patronizing witch doctors, pretending to be pregnant and hiding for about one year to reappear with a stolen child are some of the things being childless causes in our Christian society today when honorable African ways exist for solving the problem.

Having a child through a second wife in the family certainly can reduce anxiety in the man and the woman and can increase their genuine faith in Jesus Christ. Genuine and sincere Bible-believing Christians subscribe to varying theological systems as reflected in the Bible itself. Old Testament expressly approves of polygamy. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon and a host of others who occupy central positions in christocentric religion were all polygamists. At any level of Christianity and Christianization these names and what they symbolize physically and spiritually cannot be disregarded. Of course no brand of Christianity and theology can be complete without highlighting God's faithfulness to these biblical personalities. It is impossible to articulate an adequate Christian faith without reference to the Old Testament (Ugwueye, 2004). Christians who have received Jesus Christ in faith and profess him ought not to be denied sacrament or rejected in any way based on their marital status. Christian unity is not uniformity of marital system or ideology. We seek a unity of love despite diversity of opinion, understanding and theological explanations (Fowler, 1999).

Problems can exist in both polygamous and monogamous families; but problems are there to be solved. It is to be recognized that many polygamous families have immense faith and prosperity too. The Church should therefore admit them (man and wives) to full participation of the church's sacraments. The general presupposition in the Church is that polygamy is inherently sinful and that those who contract polygamous marriage live in sin. Furthermore the Church assumes that one cannot sincerely love Christ and be a polygamist at the same time. The reasoning of the church on polygamy leads to the conclusion that a murderer and a thief can take part in the Lord's Supper as long as each is wedded to one wife (Larbi, 1994). It is public knowledge that better number of monogamous men in every Catholic Church, just like other churches in Nigeria, have multiple sex partners outside their homes. Some women too indulge in extra marital affairs. It is more Christian for a woman to become the second or third wife of a respected member of the Church than to commit adultery and fornication.

Marrying many women as solution to childlessness is only workable when the problem is certain not to be sterility on the part of the man because no number of wives could cure sterility. Where the man is sterile the concerned couple seeks out a trusted male relative or friend who would secretly be impregnating the wife.

Mbiti (1975) puts it this way “if the problem lies with the husband, then a close relative or friend is asked or allowed to sleep with the wife in order that she may bear children for the family” (p. 108). One may sit in the comfort of his house with his children and describe this act as adultery but the moment he is willing to understand childlessness as the greatest of all tragedies and humiliations, he would think otherwise. Childless couples if still sterile after treatment can consider this alternative. A man is not less a Christian if he resolves with his God to adopt the above measure. One does not need to consult the priest or anyone else, as our people erroneously do, before embarking on this life saving venture. A Christian’s incipient theological disposition at this critical time is enough to defend him against all odds. It is not only what the priest or the Church as an institution or tradition does or says that constitute Christianity; an African Christian’s own act as far as it does not negate the laid down principles is part and parcel of it. One is first of all an African before one becomes a Christian and cannot be prevented from being an African by anything. Levirate marriage is yet another African solution to childlessness. The culture permits a woman whose husband died childless to bear children posthumously for the man through a chosen relative. In Igboland and some African cultures, a lineage is never allowed to perish. The customary law has made provision among the Igbo whereby if a man dies without issues, his brother or at least a member of the family can marry the widow of the deceased member. Kirwen (1975) describes this type of marriage as “a temporary adjustment in a continuing marriage in which a brother-in-law substitutes for the deceased legal husband which means that a levirate union does not entail a new marriage” (p. 9). Thus, in African Igbo traditional society, marriage is not just between a man and a woman; it is a family affair such that a woman addresses her husband’s kinsmen as *ndi dim* meaning ‘my husbands’ (Umeanolue, 2012). This is in the light that marriage is not only a union of a man and a woman, but also a union of families and communities as the case may be. This made for a smooth transition before the advent of Christianity in Igboland, when levirate marriage was a generally accepted custom.

Marriage with ‘female husband’ also constitutes a solution to the issue of childlessness. The culture permits a woman whose husband had died without an issue to marry another woman for the sole purpose of procreation. The female husband could have reached the age of menopause or did not have a male child during her husband’s life time and would wish to make up for the lost grounds by marrying a young girl.

Through these kinds of marriage the Igbo people found solutions to the torturous pain and hazards of childlessness. A practical step towards Christianizing them definitely would start with the African Christians writhing under the embarrassing pain of childlessness. The Roman Catholic Church in Africa as an institution has to understand that no matter how sophisticated or religious one may be, one’s worldview keeps on having enormous influence on one. This is why Africans (be they Christians or otherwise) are chastised by childlessness. It is the duty of the Church to set out modalities on how these Afro-christocentric measures should be applied to lessen the ever increasing tension and pressure on childless couples and their families.

Lest we forget, adoption is not an African way of solving the problem of childlessness though it sometimes satisfies some shallow yearning for children. In many cases the adopted child remains a live constant reminder of the pain of childlessness to the family. As we all know, it is a Christian measure that has come to stay and African culture in its characteristic magnanimous and accommodating manner is gradually accepting it. It is time Christianity accommodated other African measures for childlessness too.

## CONCLUSION:

African/Igboland is blessed with elastic culture that has institutionalized workable provisions for dealing with the dilemma of childlessness. It is not important to pay a doctor or a midwife to steal a child from the labour room because one is childless. It is not honourable either for men and women to be adulterous in the name of ‘testing themselves’ outside marriage because one is childless. One is not supposed to be turned into a wreck or shadow of oneself for the reason that one is childless. One ought not to fall prey to every ‘spiritual hocus-pocus, open sesame, hey presto and abracadabra’ because one is childless. one does not need to fall prey to fake spiritual businessmen for “Christocentric preaching has relapsed to pecuniacentrism” (Obielosi, 2012).

Christian religion has to a very large extent greatly hindered our Christian childless couples from thinking like Africans. What the Church has done by its institutional pronouncements and law in this regard is not as serious as the impact on the African mindset. The situation of childless marriage in Africa demands better approach than “the priest said”, “my bishop said”, “the synod of this said”, “the conference of bishops said,

the canon law said” or “the Christians around will say” approach. Those concerned Christians must turn christocentric by reading and interpreting the Bible for the solution to this pressing issue. They are free in Christ to individually use the supporting knowledge of the Old Testament and many other passages in the New Testament to apply African solutions to the problem so that they can be at the same time authentic Africans and truly Christians.

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