

## Synopsis of Religion and Child Abuse: The Nigerian Experience

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### Abstract

*Child abuse is a common practice in Nigeria which should be minimized if not eradicated. Abuse, injustice, oppression, battery incidence and wickedness are prevalence against religious norms that teach wholeness, peace, liberty, emancipation and justice. It is against this background that the paper reviews the various components of child abuse, within this understanding, to examine the influence of religion on child abuse in Nigeria. It then concludes with recommendations towards elimination of child abuse.*

### Introduction

Child abuse has received considerable attention within the last two decades. Perhaps because of severe economic depression, indeed it has received substantial attention worldwide. The United National, through its member's organization such as UNESCO (United Nation Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) has focused on this issue, recognizing the worst forms of such abuse.

Nigeria, being a religiously pluralistic state has it in record three main and prominent religions; African Traditional religion, Christianity and Islam, among the three. Two religious have played important roles in the development of millions of Nigerian citizens. However, it is instructive to note that some religionists have negatively harnessed religion to perpetuate all forms of social problems including child abuse.

Child abuse as a concept describes all sorts of injustice, abnormality and inhuman treatment given to the young feeble ones by the adult generation (Olok-Ake 2000) child abuse as a social problem is not a new historical phenomenon. Historical accounts of child abuse could also be found in the Biblical and Quranic stories of ancient period of Jews and Arabs. In the history of Pharaoh of Egypt, both the Quran and Bible reveal how king Pharaoh killed the male children of the community. King Pharaoh killed the male children in order to avert the fulfillment of the prophesy on the male ascension to throne. In the same vein, the antiquated Arabs are reported in the Qur'an to be in the practice of killing their female children before the coming of Islam, which was known as the period of ignorance (Jahiliyyah). The case of Joseph and his paternal brothers is another example of the age long practice of child abuse in human history (Hitti 1970).

Also Yakubu (1994), reports that in the traditional African societies, physical punishment of children, whipping, flogging and labouring were very common practices.

## Concept of Religion

As a concept, religion has come to occupy a centre stage in both our consciousness and in academic discourses. According to Peter (1998), religion is a system of symbols which act to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seems uniquely realistic.

Adeoye and Adeleke (2000) opined that religion contributes to the maintenance of order in the society. It does this by creating conditions for integration of the individual in the sense of personal adjusted and social integration in terms of its ability to provide legitimating for social arrangement.

Among the various roles that religion plays according to Ate (1993) are conditions for cohesion, shouldered self discipline, well-being and concluded by of culture and traditions. And religion restrains deviance and promotes loyalty. Religion should give and maintain the above services; if the particular religion fails to perform the aforementioned functions then such religion has failed as observed by Greeley (1989) in its functional value to the people and society as whole.

## Child Abuse

Child Abuse is the physical, sexual, emotional mistreatment, or neglect of child. In the United States, the centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Department of child maltreatment as any act or series of acts of commission or omission by a parent or other caregiver that results in harm, potential for harm or threat of harm to child. Dzurgba (1991) believed that child abuse can occur in a child's home, or in the organizations schools or communities that child interacts with.

Kalu (1996) opined that child abuse can be basically summarized as experience which constitutes acts developed or commissioned to inflict harm directly on a participating child to reduce chances of that child in developing potentials as a human being and in complete disregard to basic right and protection of a child.

Oloidi (2007) be moaned that child abuse is any kind of inhuman act that jeopardizes the physical. Psychological growth along with the futurity of the child either intentionally or unintentionally.

Child neglect may mean the denial of basic rights and need of the child, by parents, school, peers, government and cultural community occurring as acts of commission or omission (Oloko 1992).

## Religion and Child Abuse: Nigeria Experience

Religion has been as source of child abuse among some adherents in Nigeria. Although, while child abuse is discouraged in these religions, some religionists mischievously used religion to practice child abuse. Example abound. The Good Shepherd Orphanage in Lagos was reported to be engaged in illegal adoption of babies as well as sheltering young pregnant girls and selling off their babies at birth. Many of these sold cannot be traced and one cannot determine what became of them (Dave-Odigie 2008).

In certain regions of Nigeria, disease (such as HIV/AIDS, malaria etc) accidents, drunkenness mental health problems, the smoking of marijuana, divorce, infertility and other misfortunes are generally blamed on witchcraft.

The devil's children are identified by powerful religious leaders at extremist churches where Christianity and traditional beliefs have combined to produce a deep rooted belief in and fear of witchcraft. The priest spread the message that child-witches bring destruction, disease and death to their families.

The religious leaders therefore offer help to the families whose children are named as witches but at a price the church run exorcism or deliverance. Many are held in Churches often on chains and deprived of food until they confess to bring a witch.

In Northern Nigeria, the al-majiris system in which children in Quranic schools are left to roam the street to beg for alms is regarded as child labour or child abuse, since they are to bring back home their proceeds to their Quranic teachers.

Kisekka (1987) observed that the mallam often move from city to city and when they die or if the beggars whom the children help die, the children reportedly become delinquent, street dwellers if male and prostitute if female.

### **Causes of Child Abuse**

Child abuse is a complex phenomenon with multiple causes. Understanding the causes of abuse is crucial to addressing the problem of child abuse. The following factors are responsible for child abuse in Nigeria.

- Children resulting from unintended pregnancies are more likely to be abused or neglected.
- Poverty: majority of the parents are poor they could not afford to maintain or take good care of their children, this is why we see some teenagers male and female being taken away outside the country serving as labourers, prostitute risking their lives to all types of dangerous diseases associated with illegal and premature sex.
- Unemployment and financial difficulties are associated with increased rates of child abuse.
- Broken homes: The divorce of a child's parents and the broken home environments are contributory factors in the problems of child abuse and neglect due to diminished parental care. Some stepmothers are cruel to the children of the estranged or former wife and would not hesitate to abuse such children.
- Neglect by busy Parents: The children may become neglected or abused because the parents claim to be too busy to find and spare time with the child and supervise him. Ebigbo (2002) argued that it occurs most commonly in homes in which all material needs and more have been provided. The ever busy parents discover too late that the children have found alternative pursuits often involving crimes and drugs.
- Mental disordered/imbalance: Psychiatric or mental illness, disorder or imbalance is one of the causes of child battering. It is generally believed that child battering could be caused by psychiatric illness, frustration, imbalanced psychological disposition immaturity, impulsiveness, egocentricity, hypersensitivity and poorly controlled aggression under high expectation, addiction to drugs including alcohol etc.

Other causative agents are:

Maltreatment, Desertion, Ejection, Refund of bride price, sexual incompatibility, intimidation child custody, Religious differences, child marriage, seduction, unmarried mothers, Juvenile delinquency and Extra-marital relationship resulting in pregnancy.

## Effects of Child Abuse

The effects of child abuse in Nigeria like other third world nations are devastating and outrageous. It is social problems that afflict all societies. From medical angle, it causes physical damage and injuries.

Daudu (2008) believed that the effects may be emotional, physical, psychological as well as social child abuse by parents could result in the loss of self esteem and personality disorder on the part of the child. The child could feel insecure, hated and indifferent to life.

A child may also have constant strong feelings of guilt and rejection. A female child, who is given out to early marriage, may be made to drop out of school or totally denied her right to education.

A child that is neglected may grow up to become a thing readily available for use by selfish adults thereby becoming a nuisance to the society and an embarrassment to the parents.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper examined the place of religion in promoting child abuse in Nigeria, therefore on this premise it is apposite to make the following recommendations towards effective control of child abuse.

The religious bodies should create a social welfare department with a committee to oversee the welfare projects for child development. Religious organizations in the country should embark on more social welfare services to alleviate poverty and prevent child abuse in the society. Both the church and the Mosque are duty bound to raise awareness on the problem of child abuse. Preaching against child abuse in the congregations by the religious leaders would go a long way to assist both the parents and the children.

Organizing House to house campaign against child abuse: as some religious people do go from house to house to preach the gospel and win souls for God, they can extend the same gesture to the spreading of information against child abuse in likely manner.

Counseling of parents on how to use their child by the religious leaders would go a long way through counseling collectively or on one on one basis, this is important in order to correct some parents who always handle their children carelessly and engage in abusing them unknowingly.

Nigerian government should take every appropriate measure to ensure that the state legislation provide an adequate framework for effective legal measures against all forms of child abuse.

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