

Socio - Religious Implications of Child Adoption in Igboland South Eastern Nigeria ¹

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Abstract

Child adoption is a challenging social process in Nigeria generally and more so in Igboland where the “bastards” syndrome is rife. The challenges range from individual, family and community socio-cultural behaviours towards inheritance to the complex ethno-religious behaviours. The study is a qualitative and explorative study to evaluate the concept of adoption, types of child adoption, reasons for child adoption, child adoption in Igboland and the socio religious implication of child adoption in Igboland. The Igbos’ have their own peculiar forms of customary behaviours, particular systems of social relationships and distinctive culture. The study is intended to evaluate how the socio-cultural and environmental (ethno-religious) factors affect the child adoptive process in Igboland. The consequences of such effects on the adopted child’s behaviour and perception of family and the society towards the adopted children. The research shows that the major reasons behind Igbos adoption are infertility and untimely death. It is discovered that adopted children are not fully accepted in Igbo society because of traditions, cultural norms and values. The paper encourages creation of awareness, enlightenment of the masses and enforcement of laws that protect adopted children in Igboland.

Keywords: Adoption, Cultural, Religious, Child, Implication

1. Introduction

In Nigeria, socio cultural and environmental factor do tremendously affect the process of adoption. In the nation, each ethnic group has a set of critical social orders of carrying out everyday activities and mode of living. There are also social inequalities in the distribution of scarce resources. The family structure and dynamics vary tremendously especially in power relations in the nuclear families all are part of the socio-behavioural perspectives which are driven by ethno-religious forces and they give rise to local attitudes and practices.

In terms of child adoption, the process is dependent on four major social perspectives namely, legal, religious, cultural and necessity. In any of the perspectives, adoption simply means getting a child who is not your biological child and giving him/her all the rights supposed for a biological child. In Nigeria, to adopt a child is not an easy thing. A lot of protocols (legal) are involved before a child can be adopted. A lot of cultural and traditional questions need to be addressed before a child is finally brought home to the family.

The social aspects of the process are varied. The adoptive parents will answer a lot of paper questions which include their financial status, religious status, their social life, the environment where they reside etc. The reason for all these is that Igbo tradition abhors so many things without respect to legal or religious imperatives. The location of Igboland is characterized by vast rural areas with inhabitants under the severe burdens of poverty, illiteracy and other socio-cultural deprivations.

In the role theory of Oppong and Abu (1985), a family’s role includes parental, occupational, conjugal, domestic, kin, community and individual roles. Among the Igbos these roles are shared between the males and the females. For the women their roles are energetic comprising of child bearing, child rearing and generation of scarce income (UNECA, 1989).

In the rural Igboland, the vast majority of the women work in agriculture, a tasking physical activity with very low income. In addition these women perform the domestic chores like collection of water, gathering of fire woods, food processing, cooking and ensuring the survival of the household. In Igboland, the primary function of marriage is for procreation, thus having children is a source of personal satisfaction and social status. Generally, in Igboland a woman’s status is measured in terms of her ability to procreate. The number of children a woman has in Igboland determines her stay in her husband’s house. Most often, a childless woman is always cajoled and made to suffer tremendously in the

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society. She hardly gets a share from the husband's property. Children guarantee a woman's respect and enhanced her status in the community.

According to Handwerker (1989), he asserted that child bearing was a singular important mechanism used by women to gain access to the resources on which their material welfare depended. Childlessness is therefore a matter of deep and intimate concern to the individual, family, society and ethnic group. Since marriage in Igboland is mainly for procreation, hardly can people marry for only companionship a childless woman can go to any length to get a child. It is also a known fact that most women in Nigerian and in Igboland can do anything to get a child because having a child gives her 90% rights to stay in her husband's house. No woman in Igboland will like to be called a barren woman. Barrenness is as a result of infertility. Infertility has led many married couples into desperation and they try everything humanly possible to get children. Today, a lot of assisted reproduction technologies are available to help childless couples; they include invitro fertilization, zygote intra fallopian transfer, Gamete intra fallopian transfer, sperm injection or Surrogacy and using gestational carriers. These modern assisted reproductive technologies are expensive and cannot be afforded by many people. The expensive nature of these technologies have made a greater percentage of women to visit prayer houses, herbalist churches in other to find solutions to their problems.(miracle babies) Finally, if nothing happens, they look for children to adopt as their last option.

Child adoption is the process whereby children deprived of a family get people they can call their own. Childless couples do not have to remain perpetually deprived of the joys of parenting Joyce (2013), noted that every child has a right to grow in a healthy environment and that is exactly what adoption endorses. In Igbo traditional society, adoption is a legal procedure that makes a child born by a woman to become the legal child of someone else. The process of child adoption involves three parties, the birth parents, the adoptee and the adoptive.

2. Concept of Adoption

Adoption, according to Wikipedia (2013) is a process whereby a person assumes the parenting for another and, in so doing, permanently transfers all rights and responsibilities, along with filiations, from the biological parent or parents. Unlike guardianship or other systems designed for the care of the young, adoption is intended to effect a permanent change in status of the child and as such requires societal recognition, either through legal or religious sanction. Historically, some societies have enacted specific laws governing adoption; where others have tried to achieve adoption through less formal means, notably via contracts that specified inheritance rights and parental responsibilities without an accompanying transfer of filiations. www.vitillifoorganies.com defines adoption as a means of taking by choice into a relationship, voluntarily a child of other parents as one's own child. Child adoption according to (The Free Dictionary Encyclopedia) means a two-step judicial process in conformance to state statutory provisions in which the legal obligations and rights of a child toward the biological parents are terminated and new rights and obligations are created between the child and the adoptive parents.

In Igbo land, adoption involves the creation of the parent-child relationship between individuals who are not naturally so related. The adopted child is given the rights, privileges, duties of a child and heir by the adoptive family. Like other countries, adoption in Igbo land is regulated by statutory laws. The statutory laws prescribe the conditions, manner, means, and consequences of child adoption in Igbo land. In addition, they specify the rights and responsibilities of all parties involved. In Answer.com, child adoption is to put forward as if it were your own, and be responsible or liable for an issue of another person. From the above, adoption simply is the practice by which an adult assumes the role of parent for a child whom he is not biologically connected to.

3. Types of Child Adoption

There are several types of child adoption in Igbo land which include:

- (1) Domestic Adoption: Domestic adoption is the adoption of a child who resides in the vicinity or country. For instance adopting a child who resides in the area where the adoptee parents also lives.
- (2) Foster-Care Adoption: Foster-care adoption is the adoption of children in state care whose reunification with their parents is not possible for their safety. Children whose safety is not guaranteed by their parents are kept in foster homes so that they will not be hurt by their parents. Usually, people can go and adopt such children to help them.
- (3) Trans-racial adoption: In trans-racial adoptions, children are placed with an adoptive family of another race. The adoptions may be through public and private agencies or be independent, though most trans-racial adoptions take place through the public child welfare system. The civil rights movement of the 1960s led to an

increase in trans-racial adoptions involving black children and white parents'. Nowadays, foreigners now comes to Igbo land to adopt children.

- (4) Open adoption: In this type of adoption, there is free flow of information between the biological parent's and the adoptee parent's.
- (5) Close adoption: Is the type of adoption that prevents all identifying information from being shown between the adoptive parents and the adoptee. Generally, in Igbo land close adoption is the type of adoption that is legal. This is because the adoptee parents do the necessary paper work which must be in line with the legal procedures. The adoptee parents will have no knowledge of the biological parents and the biological parents will not also have any knowledge of the adoptee parents. This arrangement is to avoid the biological parents from coming to claim paternity of the adopted child later in life. Meanwhile, the expensive nature of this type of adoption makes it unpopular for the middle class and poor's in the society.
- (6) Private Adoption: This is the type of adoption which is arranged through an individual usually a doctor, clergy, or attorney. Private adoptions is a risky type of adoption, it is gaining a lot of popularities in Nigeria especially in Igbo land. Recently in Igbo land, people now do private adoption as a business. Young girls are employed to be impregnated by boys or men to give birth to babies and get paid for doing that. After, which the babies are sold to childless couples at very costly prices. It is worthy to note here that some people even come to buy these babies and use them for rituals. This has been a serious social and moral problem in Nigeria more especially in Igbo land.

4. Child Adoption in Igboland

The Igbo community is a group of people that live in the South Eastern part of Nigeria. Igbo land is located in south eastern part of Nigeria. The states in Igbo land are Abia, Imo, Enugu, Anambra and Ebonyi State. Okenwa asserts that:

Igbo are great people with great culture and custom. The republican lifestyle of the Igbos' leaves them as a strong people who value personal liberty and choices. Sometimes described by critics as generally difficult to rule or control based on this principle of rooted republicanism the Igbos are fiercely independent and economically indomitable. Naturally imbued with deep convictions and conquering enterprising spirit the Igbos are very proud of their heritage dating back centuries.

In Igboland, prior to the colonial era, child adoption has never been a part of Igbo culture. The Igbo's appreciate their culture and hold it in high esteem. This is like E.B. Taylor's definition of culture in Okpala (2013) that culture is a complex totality of Man's acquisition of knowledge, morals, beliefs, arts, customs and technology which are geared and transmitted from generation to generation. Nowadays, civilization and its effect on the society have made most modern cultures have found their ways into many places including Igboland. Globalizations with the help of social networks have done a lot to break cultural boundaries. Part of the culture that evolved includes adoption. Child adoption has found its way into Igbo land although its introduction has not been widely accepted by a lot of people because of the nature of Igbo culture. The culture of the Igbo people is such that before a man gets married the two families involved will take time to ask questions in other find out the background of the would be wife ensuring that no mistake is done marrying somebody who has a genetic disease or problems like; epilepsy, madness, infertility etc. In Igbo contemporary society, people do not compromise when it comes to marriage. Thus any family that has history of the above mentioned diseases hardly gets married not to talk of adopting a child from such families. Thus, adopting an unknown child in Igboland is generally not acceptable.

5. Reasons for Adoption in Igbolands

In Igbo traditional society, infertility is the major reason for adopting a child. Infertility is a state or inability to produce or give birth to a child. According to Anderson (2012) intoned that the increase in the rate of adoptions in Nigeria/Igboland today can be best explained by the increasing cases of infertility among married couples and the pressure by the society. During the olden days, infertility among married couples was not as rampant as it is nowadays, Raphael Amalu agreed that hardly can a married woman be infertile, when it occurs it is always rare. He noted that the cause of infertility these days as a result of the life style of the Igbo people which has led to misplacement of Igbo cultural values. In those days young girls go into marriage as virgins but now the reverse is the case. In addition to the above reasons for adoption are :

- (1) Untimely death is one of the reasons for adoption in Igbo land. The Igbo society is a patri-lineal society. When a man dies early without having an heir a child can be adopted in that family for continuity.

- (2) Adoption serves as alternative option for infertility in marriage: In Igbo land where infertility and barrenness seem to blur the hope of having children in the family, it provides succor to the couples. Daphae in Anderson (2012), asserted that adoption can be most rewarding for both couples. Anderson (2012) accepted that it is really wonderful and amazing for one to open her heart and home to a child that did not come from your womb. Foremost evidence shows that mostly when faced with infertility, many couples buy the idea of adoption because it saves the child and even the adoptive parents from physical or emotional trauma.
- (3) For family expansion and gender selection: In Igbo traditional society, statistics show that some couples have several children of the same gender and do not want to take chances of having another. In that case, they chose to adopt to complete their families and guarantee the sex of their babies. Again, according to U.S. department of health and human services, a survey of more than half of all several adoptive parents said they chose to adopt to expand their families. Around 20 percent stated they wanted a sibling for their child (Anderson, 2012). But in Igbo land some people adopt to make up for the sex of a child which they lack. Mainly, male children are adopted so that the male child will take over from the adopted parents to continue the family lineage.
- (4) Family Situation: Adoption of this kind provides remedy to some family situations like inability of parents to cater for their children. In Igbo land, it is very common for grandparents, uncles, aunts and relations to "adopt" and raise children whose parents fall within this category or whose parent(s) are dead.
- (5) Igbos are known for their magnanimity and hospitality, adoption has strengthened this more because those parents adopt not because they had no children, but for the fact that they wanted to show love and extend it to the needy.
- (6) To take a title. In Igboland, title taking is a prestige which is accorded mainly to those who are rich and wealthy. Part of the requirement before one can be given a title is that the person must have children especially a male child who will take after him. Usually, people go to adopt male children in order to meet up with this requirement.

6. Socio-Religious Implication of Child Adoption In Igboland

Social Implication: The following are the social implications of child adoption in Igbo land:

1. Osu Caste System: Osu caste system is where some people are restricted to certain events and things in the Igbo land. According to Uzoma (in kwenu.com) Osu is defined as a cult slave, a living sacrifice, untouchable, an owner's cult, a slave of the deity, a sacred and holy being. The beliefs that these people's ancestors were dedicated to the gods, and are no longer part of the community. These people are treated as lepers. They are restricted from marrying (Dialas) free born because they are not in the class. A child adopted into an Igbo community is sometimes treated as an outcaste mainly because the child's background is not known. The adopted child finds it difficult to interact freely because of the fear of been intimidated. In Igbo land, the so-called 'Osu' do not eat together with non-Osu; they do not intermarry and share certain festivals together. In this, the social life of a child cannot be overlooked, because, it helps to integrate the child into the society. It helps to inculcate the core issues of one's community into him and make him aware of them. With the above factors, it might constitute a major problem in the life of the adopted child in the Igbo Community.
2. Character Change/Life Style: In Nigeria and Igbo land, over 49% of hoodlums in the motor park became such as a result of the type of adoptive parents they had. Instead of sending them to school when they were young, they send them to go and make money for them and as a result, they join bad gangs and become touts and their life style therefore changes to bad. Likewise the girls, from investigation 55% of girls in Igbo land tend to lose their virginity at a very tender age. This is so because majority of them are being adopted into unfamiliar families and their adopted parents take advantage of them to do all sort of things, examples assaulting them sexually, beating them, using them as house maids, sex workers sending them to the streets to hawk and sometimes for ritual purposes. Worst still, is the neglect/ abuses experienced by these adopted children through their adoptees simply because the couples might have regained their fertility after the adoption and later have been blessed by children. Instead of such individuals being grateful to God, they resort to laying abuses on the adopted children.
3. Denial of Inheritance of the Adopted Child: The Igbos values legitimacy as evidence to paternal lineage which shows through generation to generation. The typical Igbo family is patrilineal. The implication of this is that the supreme authority that empowers entitlement to resources flows from the 'father figure' which is hereditary but

restricted to only legitimate and truly biological sons of the father of the family. The bottom line is that in Igbo society, most people do not have regard for any child adopted by any family, and such adopted child is often regarded as 'bastard' and as such will not have right of inheritance. Adopted sons and daughters have no say in the village assembly and this is contrasting the freedom of expression. Example in some parts of Nsukka in Enugu State, an adopted child has no right to speak in the gathering of his kindred or he gets a penalty. More so, in Enugu Ezike all in Enugu state adoption is seriously being frowned at. This is because their tradition does not permit bastard. There is no place for a child whose father is not from Enugu Ezike. Socially, this implies that the Igbo society frowns at child adoption. This explains why an adopted child cannot occupy a traditional leadership position in Igbo society. Sometimes such adopted child is treated by members of his/her immediate family with hatred and disrespect and often the child is reminded that he/she does not belong to the family. That he/she lacks information of his/her parenthood and by implication lacks the "burden of proof" to justify her entitlement to any of his/her 'parent inheritance'.

7. Religious Implication of Child Adoption in Igboland

Talking about the religious status of an adopted child, one has to take cognizance of the religion in practice within the particular society in context. In the contemporary Igbo society, the Christian religion seems to be the predominant religion in practice. Hence, in the Christian religion, a child is viewed as precious and all children equally loved in the sight of God. Judging from this, the Christian religion does not encourage any kind of bias towards an adopted child. It believes that an adopted child should be treated equally as a biological child, hence, all rights and privileges to be given to a biological child, should also be given to an adopted child.

Biblically, Matthew 18:5 quotes "And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me". Hosea 14:3, "For in you the orphan finds mercy." Psalm 68:5-6 "A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families. James 1:27 "Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. Deuteronomy 24:19 "When you are gathering, your harvest in the field leave behind a bundle of grain, do not go back and get it. Leave it there for foreigners, orphans, and widows so that the Lord your God can bless everything you do". Romans 8:14-16 "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.

Christianity from onset of its arrival has challenged indigenous perceptions, ideologies and norms. The Christian doctrine of 'no Jew, no gentiles' is contrasting the indigenous ideology of "onyebiaraabia" i.e. the stranger or the new comer or the refugee. In the present contemporary Igbo society the perceptions of this thought shapes opinions and the ideology of certain anti-human co-existential philosophy of 'son of the soil syndrome' – the indigene-stranger dichotomy. This perception contradicts the Christian maxim of 'all are one in Christ' and thereby creating a crisis of ideology in the contemporary Igbo societal quest for religion cohesion and brotherhood that transcends the blood of consanguinity.

Situations whereby the adoptive parents are Roman Catholics and the biological parents are Pentecostal believers, the child will finally become a Pentecostal member despite the promises made to the biological parents by the adoptive parents to make sure that the child continues in his own faith. Sometimes this religious implication can have a negative effect on the adoptee. For instance, if his former faith has this belief that one can only be healed by faith, one therefore, should not take pills when he is sick, you will find out that when such child is been adopted and his adoptive parents has a different belief such child will no longer be given the room to continue with such belief whether he likes it or not. Religiously, it changes his view about life that is if his former faith says "thou shall not kill" the moment his adoptive parents were to be non-Christians, he will be made to believe that one should kill in order to please whichever god they worship. Finally, the traditional Igbo society forbids child even though that Christianity accepted.

8. Recommendations

Child adoption is supposed to give couples parental control of a child. It is also supposed to be an alternative for couples who have no issue of their own the ability to have a child of theirs. Unfortunately, the idea has been mis-interpreted. From the idea given in the paper the following are the recommendations.

1. The government, Non-governmental organisations, community based health education programmes should create awareness and educate the societies on the importance and benefits of adoption to infertile couples.
2. The hospitals, government's agencies that handle the process of adoption should be properly trained to keep proper records and maintain confidentiality of the adoptees and the child to be adopted, with this the adoptees

- will be confident and rest assured of the child they are adopting.
3. Adoptees should also ensure that an adopted child automatically and legally becomes their own child, they should take proper care of the child the way same they will take care of their own biological child.
 4. Government should give strict modalities and monitor any adopted child to make sure that the adopted parents are taking good care of the children in their custody.
 5. A child who is not wanted by the parents, should be taken to the motherless babies home so that those who are in need of children can adopt them and give them a home. If eventually the biological parents come for him later in life, government legislative law should be used against them.
 6. The church and Non-governmental organizations should always preach on the importance of child adoption and the benefit of taking care of the adopted children.
 7. Adopted children in Igbo land should be accorded all the benefits like; inheritance, title ship or every right meant for a free born.
 8. Medical professionals should keep to the ethics of their profession by being truthful about child adoption, with this, the adoptees will be confident about the child he/she is adopting.
 9. Government, NGOs and missionaries should build modern facilities for the homeless, orphans and less privilege. This will go a long way in keeping them off the streets and road. Such facilities should be extended also to the rural areas.

9. Conclusion

From the foregoing, one could see the challenges of child adoption in Igbo cultural heritage. Though globalization has brought lots of changes into Igbo culture thereby making some families beneficial of child adoption, homeless and motherless children are also given a home. Some hopeless children who were denied of parental care were adopted by families and were given hope. It is of utmost necessity that the benefit of child adoption cannot be over emphasized. Therefore, there is the need to disabuse the wrong ideology of Igbo man over adoption. It is good that investing in a human being is the greatest investment one should embark on. From every possible indication, the need for orientation on child adoption and the values inherent in it cannot be played down on. Taking care of our fellow human being through child adoption is another way of helping each other and becoming a steward of our fellow humans and thus respecting the call of God in the book Genesis.

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