



Child Adoption and the Birth of One's Biological Child: Exploration of the Cultural Belief in Rural Communities in Igbo Land, Nigeria

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Abstract

The study investigated the socio-cultural notion in some parts of Igbo land to the effect that adopting a child paves the way for the birth of the person's biological child. Rural communities in Imo State were used as case study. The survey method was adopted for the research design. Questionnaire, in depth interview and focus group discussion were the instruments utilized in gathering primary data for the study. The result of the study indicates that majority of the respondents affirmed that child adoption paves way for the arrival of a couple's biological child. Based on the findings, the study recommends that infertile couples should be encouraged to adopt children. It further recommends that couples who are medically fit and yet have delay in bearing children should be encouraged to relax and be less anxious about the situation.

Keywords: Adoption, Belief, Biological, Child, Cultural

1. Introduction

Child adoption is a legal process through which a couple begets a child who is not the product of their sexual intimacy. Child adoption is different from purchasing infants from "baby factories" which may operate under the guise of maternities, hospitals, unregistered orphanages, or non-governmental organizations. Child adoption becomes validated only when the adoptive parents have taken possession of adoption order issued by a family court or any other court of competent jurisdiction. Adoption order is preceded by the adoptive parents being issued a foster order. The foster order is issued after the magistrate or judge has interrogated the prospective adoptive parents and is satisfied that they possess the character and means to cater for the best interest and welfare of the child. The adoptive parents are thus allowed to take the responsibility of the child from the custodian home and foster/care for the baby. The Child Development Officer of the relevant ministry is expected to visit the child in his foster home and submit report to the court. Such report will assist the magistrate or judge in determining whether or not to issue the adoption order. The adoption order legally extricates the biosocial linkage between a child and the natural parents and transfers same to the adoptive parents. In other words, once adoption order is issued the biological parents cease to have any legal claim over the child. Consequently, the adoptive parents become the child's parents in perpetuity. The adopted child is entitled to all rights and privileges pertaining to biological children, including inheritance from the adoptive parents.



As Ele (2018) points out that child adoption is prevalent in contemporary Nigerian society. This is contrary to the situation in the past where most cultures in Nigeria, the Igbo inclusive, detested child adoption (Ezugwu, *et al*, 2002, Nwaoga, 2013). In recent times child adoption is becoming normal in Igbo land (Omeire *et al*, 2017). The acceptance of child adoption in Igbo land may not be unconnected with love for children by the Igbo. As Isiugo-Abanihe (2003) points out, the Igbo culture places much premium on children, particularly male children. This profound affection for children is reflected in the Igbo saying “ebe obuna nwa esina bia ya biri” (irrespective of where a baby comes from let the child live). Is there any relationship between adopting a child and the adoptive parents having their own biological child or children shortly afterwards? That is the focus of this study.

Culture is a powerful force. It shapes the worldview and behaviour of an individual, a group or society. It is the compass with which an individual navigates through the vicissitudes of life. Culture is the integrated mode of a people’s way of life, customs and knowledge. According to Haviland (1993) culture is the common denominator that makes the actions of an individual intelligible to the group he belongs. It encompasses ideas, customs, language, symbols, rituals and beliefs of a people. Swidler (1986) views culture as a tool kit with which the people may draw from to solve different problems or explain certain phenomena. As Arinze (1982) indicates” every people has its peculiar customs, and traditions... In short every people has its own culture. The Igbo people are no exception, they have their distinctive language, way of life, traditional moral code, religious beliefs and practices and general philosophy of life”. Are there socio-cultural notions of the Igbo people that relate to child adoption? With reference to rural communities in Imo State, the study sought to investigate the cultural belief that child adoption paves the way for the arrival of a couple’s biological child, particularly for those having fertility challenges.

2. Literature

Some Cultural Features of the Communities Studied

The following were the rural communities studied in Imo State based on the three senatorial zones.

Table 1: Rural Communities in Imo State

Senatorial Zone	Communities
Owerri	(i) Umuosu, Naze (ii) Umuofor, Amaimo (iii) Umuezuoke, Oforola.
Okigwe	(i) Umuchukwu, Umuagu (ii) Umuopara-Owerre, Ikperere (iii) Amazi, Umunakanu Owerre.
Orlu	(i) Umuezeaga, Akokwa (ii) Umuanya, Amaigbo (iii)Uzoezi, Eziabo.

Like most communities in Igbo land, the communities in the areas covered by this study observe such cultural events as new yam festival which is traditionally called “Iri Ji”. Also like other Igbo communities women in these rural communities observe the yearly August



Meeting. At such meetings that hold in the month of August, married women meet and discuss matters of interest to women and how to improve the community. Like in many other Igbo communities the age grade system is active in the communities covered by this study. As Ndukwe (2015) points out, the age grade is also known as age set or peer group. According to Otite and Ogionwo (2001) age grade is a group of people whose ages are almost the same. In Igbo land the age grades go by different names such as Ekwueme (Performer), Nkume (Rock, symbolizing strength), Obinwanna (Brotherhood), Igwebuikwe (Strength in unity) etc. It is composed of people within a given age bracket (usually five years). The association plays crucial role in unifying members and contributing to peace and progress in the community. As Akpu and Kalu (2019) indicate the functions of the age grades in Igbo land include: enforcement of ancestral wishes, developing communal initiatives, balancing community dynamics, advocating for best practices, management of projects, assurance of social control and resolution of conflicts.

As it relates to the communities covered by the study, in Naze community, the people observe an annual ceremony referred to as “Akiri Oje”. This is a celebration that marks the safe return of the traditional priest after one month sojourn or retreat in the bush. It is only after the “Akiri Oje” ceremony that bush cutting and other farming activities can commence. The Naze people do not eat three leaf yam (*dioscorea dumetorum*) which they locally refer to as “una”. They also neither kill nor eat the meat of a type of animal locally called “edi abali” (African wild dog). The people of Umuofor do not eat white snail which they locally refer to as “ejuocha”. They don’t also eat the meat of viper, a type of snake which is locally called “ajuala”. In Umuofor the death of elders and warriors with traditional titles are elaborately celebrated. Such burial ceremonies usually feature some local gun salutes, traditional dances, appearance of masquerades and beheading of a dog with a single machete cut by a warrior. This is locally referred to as “iwa nkita anya”. The people of Oforola observe a cultural celebration they call “Ihe Uzo”. In this ceremony the people gather, with the traditional ruler presiding, to thank God for successfully protecting them through bush cutting, clearing, crop planting and a bounteous harvest. Oforola people do not eat three leaf yam, locally called “una” and African wild dog which they call “edi abali”.

A major cultural celebration by the people of Ikperejere is the “Iwa Akwa” ceremony. This elaborated cultural ceremony marks the traditional rite of passage from adolescence into adulthood of males and females. An Ikperejere indigene who has not performed this rite is regarded as immature, irrespective of the person’s age and social status.. The people of Ikperejere do not eat three leaf yam and wild monkey which is locally called “enwe”. The people of Umunakanu Owerre also observe the cultural “Iwa Akwa” which signifies induction or initiation into adulthood. Another traditional activity in this community is known as “Ibo Ama”. This involves clearing of the road leading to the market. At the end of the road clearing the people will congregate at the market square where food will be served and cultural dancers will perform. “Ibo Ama” is a cultural environmental sanitation



exercise. The people of Umuagu also observe the transition from childhood to adulthood which is locally referred to as “Iwa Akwa” ceremony. Another cultural festival that takes place annually in Umuagu is known as “Ekpe”. This involves performance by masquerades at the village square and is associated with fanfare and jubilation by many people, especially the youths.

In Umuezeaga Akokwa, the Masquerade or “Nmanwu” festival is also celebrated annually. This ceremony entails performance by masquerades from different villages in the community at Orié market square. The purpose of the “Nmanwu” or Masquerade festival is to appreciate the gods for the sustenance of life, unity, peace and progress of the community. In Umuezeaga the python which is locally called “Eke” is regarded as a totem. It must not be killed or eaten by anyone in the community. In Amaigbo different communities have their own cultural celebrations. For example in Ubah village “Alija” is celebrated. In Umuanya village it is “Okorosha” while Umudike community engages in annual traditional wrestling contest. A common thread in these cultural celebrations is jubilation. The people of Amaigbo do not eat a certain bird locally called “Okwa” hence the Igbo expression “Amaigbo aso okwa” (Amaigbo that forbids the eating of “okwa”).

Theoretical Framework

The cultural relativism theory provides the theoretical anchor for this study. Franz Boaz (1858-1941) is acclaimed the father of cultural relativism, though the term “cultural relativism” was coined in 1924 by Alain Locke. Other proponents of cultural relativism include Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict and James Rachels (Omeire, 2019). As Ferrante (2003) points out, cultural relativism has two connotations. The first dimension is that a foreign culture should not be judged by the standards of a home culture. The second meaning is that a people’s way of life must be analyzed in its cultural context, taking cognizance of the society’s values, beliefs, history, geography and environmental peculiarities. Similarly Henslin (2003) points out that cultural relativism entails not judging a culture, but trying to understand it on its own terms. According to Ballantine and Roberts (2011) cultural relativism demands putting aside a person’s cultural and personal beliefs and prejudices in order to understand another group or society from the perspective of members of that group. Geertz (1995) cautions leaders and policy makers against making judgments and decisions concerning people of a certain cultural milieu without proper understanding of the cultural imperatives of such people. Behrangi (1994) and Berreby (1995) also advocate that cultural appreciation must precede policy enunciation in order to ensure the success of any programme.

Cultural relativism has been criticized as being too permissive and unabashedly accepting customs that are either injurious to people or in breach of human rights. Rebutting the above criticism, Kendall et al (2007:81) maintain that even while studying societies where obnoxious of practices such as killing of twins and cannibalism that exist, scholars should “still try to understand those practices in the social and cultural contexts in which they occur so that abuse of human rights can be challenged”. It could thus be stated that while



seeking to understand other peoples way of life, cultural relativists are not impervious to human rights violations. Cultural relativism theory is relevant to this study. This is because the cultural notion that adopting a child paves the way for the birthing of a couple's biological child(ren) appears to be rife among the Igbos. The cultural relativism theory advocates that every cultural belief should be examined in its cultural context. The cultural notion regarding child adoption and the arrival of a new baby is being examined to see how pervasive it is in rural communities in Imo State.

3. Methodology

The survey method was adopted for this study. It was conducted in rural communities in the three senatorial zones of Imo State, South Eastern Nigeria, namely, Owerri, Okigwe and Orlu. A total of nine rural communities took part in the study. In each of the senatorial zones, three Local Government Areas (LGA) was chosen and from each of these LGAs three rural communities were selected. The LGAs and rural communities which participated from each of the senatorial zones are as follows: Owerri senatorial zone, Owerri West LGA (Umuezuoke, Oforola) Owerri North (Umuosu, Naze) and Ikeduru LGA (Umuofor, Amaimo). In Okigwe senatorial zone, the following LGAs and communities participated in the study, Obowo LGA (Umuchukwu, Umuagu), Ihitte Uboma LGA (Umuopara-Owerre, Ikperejere) and Ehime Mbano LGA (Amazi, Umunakanu-Owerre). The LGAs and rural communities from Orlu senatorial zone are, Nwangele LGA (Umuanya, Amaigbo), Nkwerre LGA (Uzoezi, Eziabo) and Ideato North LGA (Umuezeaga, Akokwa).

The population of the study area was 13,739. Using the Yaro Yamani formular a sample size of 389 was used. The respondents were adult males and females of various occupations, educational attainments and their ages that ranged from 18-70. The respondents were selected using simple random sampling technique. The primary data for this study was obtained from questionnaire, in depth interviews (IDI) and focus group discussion (FGD). Content analysis was used in analyzing the data obtained through FGD and IDI. The data sourced from questionnaire was analyzed using mean, percentage and standard deviation.

4. Results

Respondents Opinion on Whether Adoption Paves the way for the Arrival of Biological Child.

Below is the outcome of respondents' position on child adoption accelerating the arrival of a couple's biological child.



Table 2: Distribution of Respondents’ Opinion on Whether Child Adoption Paves Way for the Arrival of One’s Own Biological Child

Zones	SA	%	A	%	D	%	SD	%	Total	(%)	Mean	S.D
Owerri	14	15.2	42	45.7	29	31.5	7	7.6	92	23.7	2.7	13.51
Okigwe	41	27.3	63	42.0	37	24.7	9	6.0	150	38.6	2.9	19.17
Orlu	36	24.5	60	40.8	33	22.4	17	11.6	147	37.8	2.7	15.28
	91	23.29	165	42.5	99	25.5	34	8.7	389		2.77	46.618

Source: Authors Computation

As shown in Table 2, about 15.2% of the respondents from Owerri zone strongly agreed with the traditional notion that child adoption paves way for the arrival of a person’s own biological child while about 45.7% just agreed on the notion. Conversely, about 31.5% disagreed while about 7.6% strongly disagreed. On the aggregate, about 60.9% of the respondents from Owerri zone agreed that adopting a child paves the way for the arrival of one’s own biological child, while about 39.1 % disagreed. The mean score from Owerri zone is 2.68 while the standard deviation is 13.51

In Okigwe zone, about 27.3% of the respondents strongly agreed while about 42.0% merely agreed that child adoption paves the way for the arrival of one’s own biological child. On the other hand, about 24.7% disagreed while about 6.0% strongly disagreed. Put together, about 69.3 % of the respondents from this zone indicated that adopting a child facilitates the coming of a person’s own biological child while about 30.7 % disagreed. The mean score from this zone is 2.9 and the standard deviation is 19.17.

In Orlu zone, about 24.5% of the respondents strongly agreed while about 40.8% just agreed. Conversely, about 22.4% disagreed while about 11.6% strongly disagreed. In all, about 65.2% of the respondents from this zone concurred with the traditional notion that adopting a child paves the way for the arrival of one’s own biological child while about 34.8% disagreed. The mean score from this zone is 2.7 and the standard deviation is 15.28.

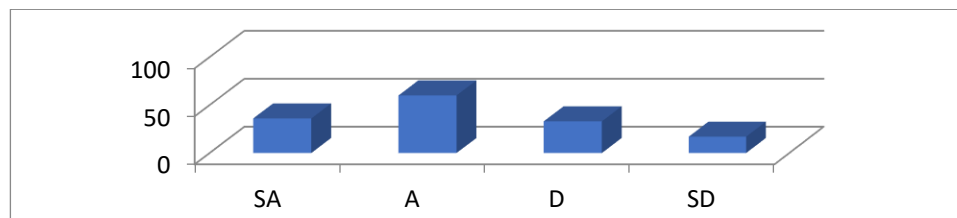


Fig. 1: Distribution of Respondents’ Opinion on Whether Child Adoption Paves Way for the Arrival of Biological Child

Discussion

The study revealed that the cultural belief of adopting a child paves way for the arrival of a person’s own biological child is very strong and widespread. Majority of the respondents in each of the three senatorial zones in Imo state agreed with the above traditional notion. It



might be necessary to ask what could be the rationale for this socio-cultural belief of associating child adoption with the birth of a biological child for the adopter, who might have desired to have one in the past without success. Could the matter of adoption paving the way for the arrival of one's biological child be likened to what Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923) in his 1916 work *Sociological* refers to as "residue and derivation". As Sirohi (2012) points out, Pareto explained that people behave based on non logical sentiments (residues) and formulate reasons for their actions later (derivations). Is it the case with couples who give birth after adopting a child justify or rationalize the advent of the biological child by attributing it to the child they adopted?

On the surface, it appears that there is no logical or scientific link in the notion that an adopted child can open the way for a biological child to arrive. However, upon deeper examination, a correlation might be established. It has been established that stress and anxiety can hinder or delay conception (Kalat, 2005). In Igbo land where children are highly valued and the chief purpose of marriage is procreation, delay in the arrival of children after marriage could trigger anxiety on the part of the affected couple. In the event that such couple decides to adopt, the coming into the house of the child might serve as a sort of soothing balm. The "new" parents may become more relaxed and less edgy. In the atmosphere of serenity in the home engendered largely by the coming of the adopted child, the likelihood of conception by the adoptive mother becomes enhanced. Hence, the need for calmness and less agitation cannot be over emphasized in couples that experience delay in child birth.

The above extrapolation of the adopted child engendering relaxation and serenity in the home front might be the basis for the cultural belief that child adoption paves way for the arrival of one's own biological child. This traditional notion is not a mere abstract concept, rather it has empirical validation. During the focus group discussion in Oforola (Owerri zone), Umuagu (Okigwe zone) and Eziabor (Orlu Zone), some of the respondents pointed to known cases of people with fertility challenge who had biological children after they adopted. Similar corroborative responses were obtained during in depth interviews in Umuezeaga (Orlu), Umunakanu (Okigwe) and Naze (Owerri). The cultural notion as highlighted above has the implication of encouraging infertile couples to adopt children. This is with the expectation that it will serve as harbinger for the adoptive parents having their own biological children.

A corresponding implication is for the government to properly regulate orphanage homes and ensure that their operations are in line with carefully articulated guidelines. This becomes necessary so that those who desire to adopt will follow the legal process and utilize the services of approved orphanages.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study explored a socio-cultural belief that appears to be associated with child adoption in Igbo land. Specifically, it investigated the notion that adopting a child accelerates the



arrival of the biological child of the adoptive parents who desire such. The study sought to find out if this notion is an isolated viewpoint or a belief held by most people in the various communities. The findings showed that most of the people in rural communities affirmed that child adoption paves the way for the arrival of the biological child or children of the adoptive parents who desire such children. Some of the respondents pointed to known infertile couples who had children after adoption to validate the veracity of the cultural belief. This result has implications, particularly for couples that are having difficulty in child bearing. It also has policy implication for government to ensure that orphanages are properly regulated.

Based on its findings, the study recommends that couples with fertility challenges should be encouraged to consider adopting a child. Couples who are medically fit and yet have delay in bearing children should be encouraged to relax and be less anxious about the situation. The government should ensure that only orphanages that meet regulatory guidelines are granted approval to operate.

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