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RESEARCH ARTICLE

CHIDLESSNESS IN MARRIAGE: A REVIEW OF THE CHALLENGES IT POSES TO CONTEMPORARY IGBOFAMILIES, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

One of the most desirable and honorable values of Igbo marriage system is life, “ndu” and child “nwa”. There is no doubt that marriage has a very significant place in human society. It not only brings two different individuals together in a union of love and companionship, it also brings two families and the extended family members together. Marriage ensures continuation of the human race by way of procreation. This paper ex-rays, among other things, one of the most remarkable values in contemporary African family; namely the gift of children: as the Igbo express in their language: that *Nwaka-ego* – a child is valued more than money or that *Nwadi-uto*- a child gives joy and happiness; etc. Sociological and phenomenological methods are adopted to show to what extent the problem of childlessness has affected the African family; especially that among the Igbo of southeast Nigeria. After discussing the concept of marriage in the African society through these tools of research, the paper questions the reason why some African couples could not be blessed with a child-bearing is since it is accepted as blessing from God. After exposing the causes of childlessness the paper goes on to discuss some challenges of childlessness in African contemporary family situation. The paper goes on to draw attention of the readers some ways and means of meeting some of these challenges; namely through new scientific developments, adoption, pastoral counseling and others. Our paper also reveals, among other things, that childlessness remains the prime cause of crisis and instability in many marriages in contemporary African society. It points out that childlessness on many occasions affects the love and happiness which couples ordinarily should enjoy in their union of matrimony.

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INTRODUCTION

Marriage, generally speaking, has a very significant place in human society. It not only brings two different individuals together in a communion of love and companionship, it also ensures continuation of human race by way of procreation. As Egbucha (2007:146) observed; “The position of marriage has been a crucial issue in every society because of its role as a medium of continuity.” In Igbo land, marriage is an important element in the socio-cultural life of the people. It is through it that continuity in the Igbo man’s family is ensured. Once one attains adulthood, marriage becomes an indispensable function he must carry out. Any sign of being reluctant towards it attracts much pressure from both one’s parents and other relatives. In a similar manner, children occupy a central position in every marriage in Igbo Culture. Among the wishes and prayers offered for any new couple, what is considered first and foremost is the issue of fertility of couples (Obi, 1970: Internet source).

When parents are blessing their children during their marriage ceremonies, they always give the issue of fertility a special mention. Based on this, any marriage that does not at least produce a child is seen as fruitless and perhaps a great misfortune. Igbo value and love for children is often expressed in some names they give their children, such as;

Nwakaego-	A child is more valued than money.
Nwadiuto-	A child gives joy and happiness.
Nwabugwu-	A child brings honour.
Amaechi-	Amaechi-My family lineage will not be closed.
Nkemakolam-	My own child will never be denied me.
Ahamefule-	My name will not be lost.

Childlessness for the Igbos implies that a man’s hope for continuity in his family lineage is in jeopardy. In other words, his name will be exterminated from the face of the earth. Bearing children is seen as the central role of a woman. Any woman that does not bear a child for the husband is regarded as having failed in her duty. She is treated with disrespect and the woman equally sees herself as ill fated and not favoured. In some cases, many causes are attributed to it, which does not favour the dignity of the woman in question.

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Marriage is highly celebrated in Igbo land. Every Igbo man with his wife always long for the day they will accompany their son to their in-laws or give their daughter's hand in marriage to another man. In doing this, they have high hopes of having a grand-child in few month's time. Hence one of the major points of investigations carried out on the potential bride before the actual marriage is whether her family has a history of infertility in their lineage. Again they consider the physique of the woman with regards to her ability to withstand pregnancy as well as being able to deliver a baby freely. These considerations center on child bearing and fertility. Thus bearing a child is regarded as the practical vindication of a woman's womanhood as well as a man's manhood. We deem this research paper significant because it is hoped that it will help to draw peoples' attention to the fact that success in marriage does not only depend on the number of children the couple can produce, but also that peaceful co-existence, love, friendship and good companionship are vital ingredients that make marriage successful.

Concept of Marriage in Igbo Culture: The Igbo are a sturdy sub-group of the Negro races of Africa who inhabit the southeastern region of modern-day Nigeria. Marriage occupies a very significant position in the socio-cultural life of the Igbo/people in Africa. This hinges on the fact that marriage enables two individuals (male and female) to come together and establish a new family. According to Onyechoa (2007:87) "The family is the basic unit of the society". Obi (1970: source from internet) describes marriage in Igbo society in this manner:

For the ordinary Igbo, Marriage is the lawful living together of man and woman of different families for the purpose of begetting children after some rites have been performed.

From the above definition, we can deduce the fact that marriage in Igbo culture is not just a case of a man and woman co-habiting, certain procedures are involved and some rituals and rites must be performed by those intending to get married. Obi also affirm that marriage is regarded as a great achievement in the life of a man and a woman since it enables them to immortalize their names by begetting children. Marriage is also regarded as a sacred institution in Igboland; it is divinely instituted. Attesting to this notion, Oforchukwu (2010:40) opines that the Igbo idea of marriage coincides with biblical notion of marriage as instituted by God in Genesis (1:28). For him the Igbo myth emphasizes the divine origin of marriage, just as the Christian institution strongly emphasizes on the injunction to increase and multiply as recorded in the bible. Based on this notion the Igbos believe that failure to marry amounts to disrespect to "Chukwu" and it is considered as a serious offence. (Oforchukwu; 2010:40). Mbiti (1969:133) equally observed that marriage is a necessary step one must take. Though he saw it from the point of view of a societal demand:

Marriage is a duty, a requirement from the corporate society and a rhythm of life in which everyone must participate... failure to get married under normal circumstances means that the person concerned has rejected society and society rejects him in return.

A man who reaches the age of marriage and fails to marry is always a concern to his family members, and community at

large. Sequel to this, according to Oforchukwu (2010: 40) there are certain things the man's family members could do to help him get a wife. They could contribute their resources to pay for the dowry especially when finance is the major issue. He further observes that ordinarily no reasonable man would like such a measure be meted to him. Hence those who reach the age of marriage in Igbo society always make effort to get married to avoid such embarrassment. Prominent in the notion of marriage in Igbo culture is the issue of procreation. The essence of marriage in the traditional Igbo society has been described by many scholars as the perpetuation of one's family lineage. For Onyechoa (2007:88) the matrimonial system is designed in such manner that it is possible for every male and female to get married and so participate in the process of perpetuating the human race through procreation. Burke (2010: source from internet) said that the desire for children has always been the motif for marriage. It is through it that one gets offspring and thus expresses and perpetuate oneself. Mbiti (1969:133) on his part opines that marriage and procreation are a unity; hence procreation brings to fulfillment the purpose of marriage. Again, he argues that the unity of marriage and procreation attempts to recapture at least in part the lost gift of immortality:

Biologically both husband and wife are reproduced in the children, thus perpetuating the chain of humanity.

The emphasis placed on offspring in marriage, also determines the nature of pre-marriage investigations about the intended marriage partners. Magasa (1998:120) articulated this point extensively in this way:

If any of the men in his family is known or rumored to be sexually inadequate in any way, he is most unlikely to be accepted for marriage. Fertility is the central requirement in marriage. A marriage proposal would not be even if there were cases of barrenness among the female members of the girls family. This brings doubt on the ability of the whole family to transit life.

Marriage in Igboland and Inter-Family/Communal Relationship: Igbo people believe that marriage does not only unite two individual; but it also unites families and communities. In the words of Egbucha (2007:147) marriage "is not a-one-man affair; it is described as a link between two families and to a large extent a link between two communities. It is on this note that Burke (2010: source from internet) states that:

The clan has always had an important say- frequently too important a say-in the acceptance of a marriage partner, precisely because marriage involves the welcoming of new member into the clan.

Recently Chris Manus has noted that Family among the Igbo "is comprised of a bigger group of people who are related to each other" (Manus 2017:56). Researchers like Manus strongly hold the view that the survival of the kinship structure in Igbo society is hinged on this custom of marriage. Magesa (1998:111) argues that what establishes community relationships is consanguinity which happens to be a very important relationship in the social structure. However, he affirms that consanguinal relationships which are realized through birth are made possible through marriage. This implies that marriage establishes strong bonds between two individuals

that come from different families and communities; and their coming together brings about the procreation of children. A wife in Igbo culture is considered not to belong to the husband alone; rather she belongs to the entire family and community at large. This is why during the period of the marriage rites, there is always a communal participation. Ibegbu (1982:27) throws more light on this when he observes that in Igbo marriage culture, there is always an individual that serves as an intermediary "Onye aka ebe". He is not only the link between the in-laws; he is as well involved in settling disputes if any, in the marriage. This family and communal involvement in marriage is believed to be helpful in the preservation of the union. According to Onyeocha (1983:42) "The communitarian aspects of marriage made it hard for the man arbitrarily to turn away his wife". In other words one has to consult his family and relatives before doing so, and in most cases they may help to save the marriage from collapsing. In resolving such issues, Burke (2010:source from internet) opines that the parents and elders in the man's family will speak to him and the wife's family will do the similar thing and at the end there might be an inter family or inter communal session or discussions in which the matter could be resolved.

The family and communal dimension of Igbo marriage, is also very much significant in the selection of marriage partner. The family is said to be very much involved in this regard. In fact, some scholars have observed that it is common in Igbo culture for parents to arrange marriages for their children. In his own observation Oforchukwu (2010:36) puts it this way:

The normal procedure is to allow the man to choose the girl he wishes to marry. In Igbo society, it is a privilege for parents to choose a wife for their son. Hypothetically, the son could reject his parent's choice: however most often the son accepts the parent's choice because he trusts the wise judgment of the parents.

Iroegbu (2007:2) has almost the same view point with the above opinion; however he recognized the fact that in Igbo culture up till late 1970s, the socio-cultural background did not give much room for love relationships before marriage. If any friendship existed at all between a young man and a young girl, it was under the strict supervision and control of their parents. This is going by the reason that such friendship will be guided into a marriage relationship. For him, the family involvement in their children's relationships makes for acceptance, comfort and protection. In the light of these shades of opinion, it can be argued that in Igbo land, marriage partners are discovered, investigated and recommended; and this could not be possible without the involvement of the family members and to a large extent the members of one's community.

The Effects of Childlessness on Marriages: Childlessness according to Wikipedia is a condition of being without children. Two different kinds of childlessness could be identified; voluntary childlessness and involuntary childlessness. According to Wikipedia, in voluntary childlessness, a couple takes decision not to have children. In other words, they possess the physical, biological and mental capability to have children, but voluntarily opted for a childless marital life. Bulcroft and Teachman (2004:117) confirm this view, when they state that couples may from the beginning intend not to have children.

This is a practice found more in the western world. These authors further explain that some couples could even involve

in "sub fecundity" that is, delay of child bearing. According to them in some cases, child bearing could be delayed to the point where conception becomes less probable. In this research work, the major concern is involuntary childlessness. This could also be termed infertility in marriage. According to Wikipedia involuntary childlessness (or infertility) is when couples are unable to have children not by choice, but out of certain biological and physiological factors. Kenny (1967:703) described it as the "inability to effect conception after repeated acts that are normally suitable for generation". Pazhayampallil (2004:990) used the phrase "sterility in marriage" in describing childlessness in marriage. According to him, it is: "The inability to generate offspring: it is the case in which the marital act is normal but due to some inherent defect in organs of generation, the natural action does not affect generation." He is trying to suggest that childlessness is not a normal condition as far as marriage is concerned; hence there are some biological defects that bring about the condition. To corroborate this view, Bulcroft and Teachman (2004:119) said that "childlessness was viewed as an abnormal condition that could create significant psychological distress". Analysis from some medical experts has shown that the case of infertility in marriage could be confirmed after some periods of normal unprotected sexual intercourse, without pregnancy being effected. Esomonu (2007:160) gives some highlights on this issue:

It is estimated that about 60% of married couples having regular unprotected sexual intercourse would achieve pregnancy after 6 months of cohabitation and up to 90% achieve pregnancy at the end of 12 months. Infertility may therefore be diagnosed after 1 year of cohabitation and regular unprotected intercourse fail to produce a pregnancy.

Bulcroft and Teach man (2004:117) have this same view as they claim that, in most couples, conception will normally take place within a year of living together but added that for some other people, it could take several years, and significantly with some medical interventions. It is a noticeable fact that childlessness, goes with some negative effects. It has been pointed out that it creates anxiety and instability in marriages. According to Kenny (1967:703) childlessness is one of the most distressing problems that could be encountered in marriage. This is owing to the fact that marriage is seen as the medium through which offspring's are produced. Indeed children are the supreme gift of marriage and contribute greatly to the good of the parents themselves. God himself said: "it is not good that man should be alone" (Gen 2:18), and "from the beginning (he) made them male and female" (matt 19:4); wishing to associate them in a special way with his own creature, God blessed man and woman with the words: "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:28). Vatican II in its *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965: no 50, maintains that without trying to underestimate the other ends of marriage, it must be noted that true marital love is directed towards disposing husband and wife to cooperate to increase and enrich the community with offsprings. Since marriage is believed to be ordered towards procreation, then it becomes a big issue when children are not forthcoming in any marriage. This is the reason Esomonu (2007:157) affirms that "high numbers of marital problems have been linked to infertility". With some studies made on effects of childlessness on the individual couples concerned Bulcroft and Teachman (2004:117) identified that some couples despite being childless, have tried to make adjustments and manage highly rewarding marriage, while some others

experience more negative effects. Some of those negative effects they identified include; stigmatization, lack of companionship, feelings of incompleteness, loneliness, and missed experience.

The Causes of Childlessness: Some authors in the medical field and bio-ethics have identified some factors that could contribute to childlessness among couples. According to Kenny (1967: 703), initially, it was believed that the wife was the sole or at least the principal cause of childlessness in marriage. However, it has been discovered that the cause of infertility could be found in either the husband or the wife or even due to conditions that are attributable to both of them. To corroborate this view, Greenhill (1976: 694) stated that infertility or childlessness in couples could be as a result of an abnormality in the male or in the female or by a combination of relative minor disturbance in both partners. Esomonu (2007: 160) also maintains the same view with the above mentioned authors, but he further differentiated the nature of infertility in terms of primary infertility and secondary infertility. For him, primary infertility is when no pregnancies have even resulted from the marriage while the secondary one is when pregnancies have resulted but ended up in abortion or ectopic pregnancy. Esomonu (2007: 160) further listed some factors that could cause infertility in marriage. The factors identified are male factors; which have to do with low sperm count, abnormal sperm production, and sexual dysfunctions like impotence. Other factors listed by the author are ovulation factors, uterine factors and tubal factors, which are problems related to women. Pazhayampallil (2004: 990) gives a more detail explanation on these biological factors that bring about infertility in both male and female. On the side of women, he listed three factors as follows:

- The blockage of the woman's fallopian tube. This prevents the ovum from coming down into the womb.
- The thickening of the woman's womb. It makes it impossible for the fertilized eggs to embed itself and grow.
- Infections and damage of reproductive organs or hormonal deficiencies and anti bodies that kill sperm.

On the part of men, the causes of infertility are listed as follows:

- Blockage of the sperm tube, as a result of illness or accident and this makes it impossible for the sperm to pass along the tube.
- The semen may not contain any sperm or there may be infections that affect the testes.

Another notable factor that can bring about infertility or childlessness is sterilization. According to Greenhill (1976: 705), it is a man made infertility, a process by which an individual is being rendered incapable of reproducing offspring. It involves interfering with the human reproductive system by way of surgical invasion, irradiation with X-rays and sometimes by the use of drugs. (Pazhagampallil, 2004:1363). There are four different kinds of sterilization identified by Greenhill (1976: 705), and mostly depends on the purpose; it is eugenic when its use is intended to prevent procreation by those who are affected with deficiencies regarded as hereditary; punitive when used by the state as punishment for crime; contraceptive if voluntarily used as a means of permanent birth control and therapeutic if used to

preserve health and life. On his own part, Pazhayampallil, goes on to make two broad classifications of sterilization. Direct sterilization is done for the purpose of destroying and suppressing the generative functions of the reproductive organs (2004: 1364-1365). In other words, this serves as a contraceptive. Indirect sterilization serves as a therapeutic measure. This according to him, involves the removal or suppression of a part of generative systems that has been infected or has become serious harmful to other parts of the body. For this author, such could be the removal of the woman's womb or the man's testicles that are cancerous.

Punishments from the gods: The gods (Deities) occupy very significant position in the religious and cultural lives of the Igbo. Metuh (1999:90) described them as the messengers and representative of God who is the Supreme Being that resides in far way heaven. The gods "are thought to reside in different natural phenomena" (Metuh, 1999:90). "Ala" the earth goddess is among such deities identified as powerful and which have much prominence on Igbo traditional society. According to Metuh (1999:94-95) "Ala" is the goddess of fertility, she is believed to be the giver of fertility to humans, animals and crops. This earth deity, Metuh continued, is the custodian of customs and traditions (Omenala), hence crimes like adultery and incest are regarded as taboos (Nso Ala) which are direct crimes against the earth goddess. Okafor (2015:6) indicates that when a woman goes against the rule of the gods or trespassed into an area forbidden of her, the gods may punish her by preventing her from having children.

Adultery: Adultery is regarded as both a social and moral crime which can attract some supernatural punishments on the offenders. Describing how it is seen in Igbo culture, Metuh (1999:142) states thus:

Adultery is condemned whether it is committed by a man or a woman, though the law is more severe on women. This is probably because prostitution destroys fertility in women and infertility threatens the existence of the community.

The crime of adultery is also believed to attract the wrath of the family's ancestors. According to Okafor (2015:6) the family ancestors may render a woman who commits adultery childless because it is regarded as a grievous offence that is detrimental to the stability of the family. Adultery is a crime in Igbo society that could lead to immediate termination of marriage if discovered, but when not discovered Okafor, (2015:6) noted that the ancestors who sees in secret will act by rendering the woman childless. The only condition that will make such woman free is for her to confess. On this, Metuh (1999:142) opines that Igbo tradition holds a woman must confess her hidden sins of adultery or else she will continue to experience difficulty in having children.

Curses: According to Wikipedia, a curse is an expressed wish that some form of adversity or misfortune will befall on somebody or some persons or place or object. Curse is believed to have some causative force in the result and to reverse or remove it, will require some elaborate sacrifices. In the Igbo world view, it is believed that some people are childless because of curses placed on them by their parents or elders. Okafor (2015:7) observe that this could arise when a boy's wish prevail over that of the parents or elders on the choice of a marriage partner. According to him, when the young man goes against the choice of his parents, they may

place a curse of childlessness on the couple to express their disapproval of the marriage. Again the parents of a young woman could place a temporarily curse on their daughter only to be lifted upon the payment of the unpaid dowry. (Okafor 2015:7).

The Challenges of Childlessness in Marriage in Contemporary Igbo Society

Women as the Major Victims of Childlessness in Igbo Society: Childlessness in marriage is an issue that involves both husband and wife, but the patriarchal mentality in the African culture, of which Igbo is included, has made it more of a woman's problem. This mentality justifies the outcry of some feminist theorists as highlighted by Cross (2015: internet source) that the position of men and women in the society are not only different but are also unequal; which implies that women are often oppressed, subordinated and abused. What encourages patriarchy according to Macaronis (2008:278) is sexism, which is the belief or assumption that one sex naturally has superiority over the other. This assumption goes beyond mere individual attitude, it is rather in-built in the institutions of the society especially in the African culture. Commenting on the manner it has affected the society in general, Robertson (1982:320) argues that:

Even our language like many others reflects male dominance...for example we often speak of 'man' and 'mankind' when we really mean human being and humanity.

Women are often seen as men's property and this assumption puts them into unfavorable conditions in order to please men. A childless woman is made to be under serious pressure and tension to satisfy the societal expectations that it is her duty to bear children for her husband even when the process of begetting children does not lie on her alone. Mbiti (1969:1107) gives a clear picture of what the Igbo society feels about this issue. In his words; Unhappy is the woman who fails to get children for which ever other qualities she might possess her failure to bear children is worse than committing genocide, she has become the dead end of human life not only for the genealogy line but also for her Self.

In the Igbo people, the inability of any married woman to bear a child is always seen as an unfavorable situation; the woman is regarded as "onye chi ojoo" - one who is misfortune. There is no much mention about the man's place in this. This is an indication that men carry fewer burdens as far as childlessness is concerned. The only burden the man has to bear is that of not having an heir, while the woman bears the pains of not having a child as well as the trauma that results from verbal attacks from both the husband (in some occasions) and from other members of the family. The wider society sees her more as a failure than the man. Women are made to be the objects of mockery and disdain when it comes to childlessness. This is why childlessness in marriage is mostly attributed to the woman's barrenness than to the man's infertility. Even when it has been discovered medically that the cause may not be from the woman, yet according to Obi D. (2001:23) it does not excuse the woman before the society. Even when the husband decides to raise children with another wife, the childless women will continue to bear the scar which is not possible to erase. There is a belief in Igbo societies that the position of a woman remains shaky and unpredictable in her husband's

house until she is able to bear a child. Nobody sees her as a responsible house wife within the family and among the kinsmen. According to Cornelius Onwunara, (60 years), if a woman gives birth for the first time especially a male child, there is always a popular saying that "Chukwuebunyenyaoche"(God has given her a sit). "She can now have a say in the family". When this is not the case, she is always treated as a stranger and she would never feel at home. This implies that what gives a woman confidence to answer a wife in her husband's house is the birth of a child. If not she will continue to answer a wife in anticipation. This is what Obi (1970) has in mind when he made this observation:

The fate of a sterile woman is very hard one indeed not uncommonly she is made the object of conversation and ridicule by some of her female neighbours. If an occasion for Quarrel arises; she gets the most painful telling off.

Childlessness and Divorce in African Society: Divorce is a serious challenge to marital union and infact a serious matter as far as Igbo culture is concerned. Mba (1996:38) while explaining the nature of divorce from the legal and civil point of view says that every civil society uses divorce to deal with situations where a marriage fails and the partners cannot tolerate life together. It is a legal provision through which the bond of valid marriage is severed. Mbiti (1977:145) describes it as "a delicate accident in marital relationship". It is a delicate accident in the sense that marriage has a process and when the process is properly and validly followed it ought not to be dissolved. Again the nature of marriage as a link between two families makes divorce a serious anomaly in Africa society. This is in consonant with what Onyeocha (1983:42) observed that the communitarian nature of marriage made it very hard for a man to arbitrarily send away his wife. This is because consultations must be made among family members before such a step is taken.

From the Christian point of view, the indissolubility character of marriage is very much emphasized. According to Mba (1996:38) the contract or covenant of marriage cannot be dissolved at will not even with the consent of the contracting parties. This idea is contained in Paul's admonitions to the Corinthian Christians. For the married I have something to say and this is not from me but from the lord: a wife must not Leave her husband or if she does leave him, she Must either remain unmarried or else make it up With her husband nor must a husband send his wife away. (1Cor.7:10-11)

This admonition is believed to be a follow up from the injunction of Jesus Christ "what God has joined together let no man put asunder"(Matt:19:6). This is the reason couples during the exchange of marital vows, promise each other to remain committed to the marriage for better or for worse until death do them part. The culture of Igbo as a people has never considered divorce as an option for childlessness. The culture only allows a man to go for another wife if the first wife could not bear him children while still retaining the first wife. In fact when it comes to divorce, the people of Igb especially within the pre-colonial era discouraged it. According to Agulanna (2008-34), the culture of Africa does not encourage people to marry anyone who has once been married and divorced; because such an individual is looked upon as a problem. It goes with a stigma.

Due to the contemporary trends, where polygamy is considered by most people in Africa as becoming outdated, some people

have now taken divorce as a solution to childlessness. This is often in a case where a man refuses to take the idea of adopting a child. Childlessness brings about constant quarrels and diminishes the love couples have for each other. In some situations a woman will be forced to pack out on her own when she could no longer bear the disdainful attitudes towards her.

As a matter of fact, nobody has come out in Africa to claim that the culture allows any man to divorce his wife on the ground of childlessness. The issue of divorce is always regarded as deviation in African culture. Then in as much a marriage is widely seen in the area as a legitimate means to procreation, it could not be totally erased that some people opt for divorce when the marriage is considered unproductive from the point of view of procreation. Furthermore, as it was earlier noted, the rate of divorce was very low within the traditional Igbo society. Divorce at that time was mostly prompted by bad characters of any of the spouse especially women. When it comes to sterility, the man can easily go for another wife. Divorce is more of a modern problem. According to Oforchukwu (2010:45), even within the general Igbo traditional context, there were very minute cases of divorce, it is largely a modern phenomenon, which seems to be more common than polygamy these days.

There are some pains that go with divorce. First of all, divorce is a stigma in Igbo culture, whether it results from childlessness or from any other reasons. Nobody will find it easy to marry someone who has been married and divorced. Divorce also goes with some emotional and psychological effects. Hordon (2004) cited in Oforchukwu (2010:73) rightly observed this when he said that when couples are divorced, they may be crushed by sense of shame, hatred and fear. It leads them into living unfulfilling life styles like alcoholism and sexual promiscuity. Women who mostly suffer from the effects are exposed to difficult life, lacking financial and emotional support and are forced to depend on the support from family members or relations.

Polygamy and Childlessness: As far as Igbo culture and traditions are concerned, polygamy is a widely accepted form of marriage. Polygamy within this context has to do with a situation where a man has more than one wife at the same time. As a system of marriage, it was very common and widely recognized within the traditional Igbo society. Apart from the desire for much children, the practice of polygamy in Igbo as observed by Ezeji (2012:13) was also prompted by economic and prestigious needs. In other words, a man's ability to take care of many wives and many children places him on a very high position in the society as far as social status is concerned. Again, it was a common belief in Igbo society that polygamy brings about many children and many children guarantees enough labour force for one's farm. According to Aligwekwe (1991:39) when a man has many children in Igbo society, there will be much labour force to cultivate his yam farm and which eventually improves his financial income. Recently, polygamy in Igbo society is no longer seen as a sign of wealth. This is because such form of marriage is in conflict with Christian teachings on marriage. Christianity which is a dominant religion in the area upholds the principle of "unity" in marriage. This unity according to Burke (2005:45) emphasizes a marriage which involves one man and one woman and it excludes all forms of polygamy or polyandry which is against divine law.

Also lack of resources to maintain a large house hold and the introduction of family planning are the other reasons for the

decline of polygamy in Igbo community. For some individuals, being followers of the Christian religion does not prevent them from polygamy as long as childlessness is involved. They are ready, to bear any sanction placed upon them by the church as long as they are able to have a child at the long run. On a personal pastoral experience, the researcher has encountered on many occasions ,some parishioners who admitted that they were ready to forfeit the reception of Holy Communion, as long as they will get what they desired when they marry another wife. This people will not even appreciate the idea of adoption as they insist on having a child that will carry their own blood. Within the contemporary Igbo society polygamy as a form of marriage have some negative impacts. It has in most cases, affected the love that existed between a man and his wife. This is in line with what Peschke (2004:506) observed when he said that polygamy is contrary to the ends of marriage since it disturbs the union of love between a man and a woman. Polygamy also lowers the dignity of a woman. This is because when a man goes for a second wife purely on the ground that the first wife did not give him any child. The second woman was married not based on love but as a tool to have children. Marriage is supposed to be a love relationship, but according to Burke(2010) in polygamous system, the marriage with the first wife is though not dissolved, but the unity which exists between one man and one woman is affected since a third party has come into the marriage. Again some men who enter into polygamy due to childlessness expose themselves to ridicule especially when the cause of the childlessness is from them. In order to cover up when this occurs, they encourage their wives to meet other men who will impregnate them. While the man will publicly claim being responsible for the pregnancy.

MEETING THE CHALLENGES

Solidarity and Empathy to the Childless Couples: In most cases, couples who experience childlessness easily become isolated from the society. Their sad condition thus, needs to be acknowledged by other members of the community. According to Obi Des [2001:158], recently the condition of the childless couples has become a source of worry for the church. Highlighting more on the solidarity being shown to these individuals, he states:

In other words, the church recognizes childlessness or infertility as a big problem or as an obstacle to peoples' practice of faith. The effect of the problem has not been taken seriously in the past. It is only recently that the Church's documents, teachings or exhortations specifically for the encouragement of the childless couples has become obvious thanks to Vatican II and Pope VI from whose time and reign we see a few words of encouragement in teachings of the Church delivered directly to the childless couples.

The childless couples desire to be loved; they equally wish to be accepted and be shown some solidarity in their conditions. This may not often be the case in the Igbo society due to some conceptions people have regarding childlessness. The childless in most occasions suffer stigmatization and disdained attitudes from their families and the society at large. According to Ayenkeye [2013:98] even when in some occasions some people in the society try to show some sympathy, with good intention, they may unconsciously end up asking the couples embarrassing questions or give some suggestions that go

contrary to the couples principles. In this regard, the Church has to step up and be a major source of hope and consolation to those couples. Pastors of souls need to familiarize themselves with some of the pastoral and ethical issues which some childless couples may face, issues like; divorce, polygamy, adoption, In-vitro-fertilization and some other social and moral challenges that go with childlessness. The couples need to be aided in taking some vital decisions concerning their situation. According to Wheeler [2000: internet source] these complex issues that arise out of childlessness need prayerful and theological considerations. In the light of being in solidarity with couples that have serious marital issues like childlessness, Pope Francis, while in a celebration with married couples ranging from twenty-five to sixty years[25-60yrs] in Vatican chapel on June fifth 2004, gave them these words of encouragement:

Married life must be perseverate... perseverance in good times and in bad times, when there are problems; problems with children, economic problems, problems here and there but love perseveres, presses on always trying to work things out to save the family.

In this perspective, the Roman Pontiff was advocating that even when there are difficulties in their marriages; difficulties like childlessness, let love for each other takes the upper hand. Family members and friends of the childless couples equally should educate themselves on how to approach this issue. They are to be trustworthy brothers, sisters and friends to the couples. The amount of love and prayerful concern shown to these couples undergoing the hard experience of childlessness will enable them to build a relationship of trust with other members of the society, even when children are not forthcoming.

Medical Approach to Childlessness: Early medical attention given to childless couples could go a long way to achieve results in the treatment of infertility. It is appropriate for couples who have co-habited for at least one year without a resulting pregnancy to seek medical attention together for proper investigation. According to Esomonu (2007:164) "Early recourse to medical care, counseling and psychotherapy will help to heal the tremendous ills of infertility". He further warned that couples should be careful not to rely so much on some fraudsters who require them to perform unnecessary rituals to the incubus and succubus and the queen of the coast. This is what often waste their time as they move from one spiritual house to the other, and when they start to seek medical attention it could be too late. There are some medical problems that could bring about infertility either in the man or the woman or even in both of them. Hence Esomonu (2007:164) opines that when the possible causes of infertility are dictated, appropriate treatments are given and in some cases such treatments could be surgical, medical or assisted reproductive techniques. Apart from the orthodox means of treating infertility, traditional medicine has also been proven to be effective in the treatment of infertility. Some local herbs and roots have been used effectively by the traditional medicine practitioners in some cases of infertility both in men and in women. In another dimension, some couples who are childless have been subjected to assisted reproductive techniques. This normally comes up when an exhaustive evaluation of infertility has taken place. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, Ultimate Reference Suit (2011), a good number of patients who go through assisted reproduction,

are women who suffer from blocked or absent fallopian tube. Others may be a situation where the male partner has a low sperm count or couples whose infertility is unexplained. These assisted reproductive techniques could be discussed under In vitro fertilization and artificial insemination.

Adoption as a Viable Option: Adoption is mostly the last option for couples who are unable to beget children. It usually comes when all medical approaches have been applied and they fail. According to Nwaoga (2013:169), it "simply means getting a child who is not your biological child and giving him or her all the rights supposed for a biological child". For Roland (1961:51) it is an act where a man or a woman acknowledges a person who is of different blood as his or her child with legal rights and duties of a true child. These definitions imply that adoption must follow a legal process that gives the child a permanent membership of the adoptive family and by implication he or she also gets the qualification for inheritance in the adoptive family. Again through this legal process there is an established parent-child relationship between the individuals involved, though not naturally related. In this regard, the rights and responsibilities of the biological parents over the child are hereby transferred to the adoptive parents. This is what Burke (2004:26) has in mind when he explains that adoption is a legal process by which a child's legal rights and duties towards the natural parents are terminated and with similar rights and duties directed towards the adoptive parents. The adoptive parents in this regard become socially and legally recognized as the child's parents.

Adoption has been identified by Nwaoga (2013:170) as open, close and private. In an open adoption, there is a free flow of information and communication between the biological parents of the child and the adoptive parents as well as with the child. This often takes place after some agreements have been reached considering the manner and time of the communications. Adoption is close when the identities of the adoptive parents are not disclosed to the biological parents and vice-versa. This is mostly the kind of adoption that is practiced in Igbo land and in other parts of Igbo land. So when the adoptive parents have done the necessary and legal paper work, they are not to have knowledge about the biological parents of the child. This is done to prevent the situation where the biological parents may be tempted to come back for the child. This kind of adoption is becoming rigorous and expensive nowadays and it has become very difficult for people with low income to afford. This is why some people have resorted to private adoption. Private adoption is often a secret arrangement between the adoptive parents and the biological parents of the child or with agents who serve as middle men. These agents could be medical doctors, midwives, or some fake pastors who do it under the coverage of religion. This kind of adoption is always risk because it lacks legal backings. Nwoga further observed that recently in Igbo land people have started indulging more in this kind of adoption and worse still some have indulge in it as a pure business. This is a case where some teenage girls are contracted to get pregnant and they get paid after delivery while they leave the child for the agent who will sell the child to desperate childless couples. In Africa, just like in many parts of Igbo land, childlessness often leads to adoption. Adoption then serves as a viable option in childlessness in marriage. Anderson (2012) cited in Nwaoga (2013:171) maintains that adoption could be most beneficial to couples who are childless. It indeed provide succor to the childless couples and in most occasions it also

saves the child being adopted from physical and emotional harm bearing in mind that most children adopted are those termed “unwanted” by their biological mothers. As earlier noted, the legality of Child’s adoption is very necessary for the good of the child and the adoptive parents. According to Allison (2009:22) “Adoption is not a legal act unless confirmed by the proper procedure in a court record”. Corroborating this view, Nwaoga (2013:168) opines that to adopt a child in Nigeria takes a lot of legal protocols and even involves a lot of traditional, cultural and social questions that need to be addressed before a child is finally adopted. Thus the adoptive parents have to provide answers with regard to their financial status, social status, as well as the environment where the adopted child will be brought up. Judging from this fact, not every person that goes for adoption could be allowed to adopt a child. There are some considerations and this approach could vary from state to state. For instance, Allison,(2009:24) citing a report from the US department of state (2006) observed that in Abia ,AkwaIbom, Cross River, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo and Rivers states an adoptive parent must be at least twenty five years of age and be at least twenty one years older than the child to be adopted. When it involves married couples, at least one of them must meet up with the required age. The rule also makes it mandatory for married couples to adopt jointly. When it involves a single parent, he or she is not allowed to adopt a child of the opposite sex except in an extraordinary situation. There are some socio- cultural factors that affect child adoption. In the first place, according to Nwaoga (2013:170) in Igbo land before colonialism, child adoption was never part of the people’s culture. Adoption rather is a practice that came with colonialism. This makes it difficult to be well accepted by some people. For instance, in some Igbo community, some people refuse to have a child that they do not know his or her root. This is to avoid adopting a child with a criminal blood, or with a history of insanity or epilepsy and other deadly diseases running in the biological family. Also some are afraid of adopting a child who is an “Osu” bearing in mind of the fact that Osu caste system is a big issue in many parts of Igbo land.

Legitimacy of every child is of a paramount importance. This has made some people not to have regard for adopted persons in the family or community. This kind of scenario was in focus when Nwaoga (2013:172) cited an example with some parts of Nsukka where adopted persons are not allowed to speak in public gatherings. In spite of all these challenges, there are wider views that adoption is very much beneficial. It gives couples who are childless a sense of belonging since through it they can have children they could call their own. Equally adoption makes homeless and motherless children to experience parental care and love and this saves them from some physical and emotional harm and trauma.

Conclusion

This study reveals that childlessness causes crisis and instability in many marriages in contemporary Igbo society. Childlessness in many occasion had affected the love and happiness which couples ordinarily should enjoy. It was also discovered that in Igbo land, women bear the pains and burden of childlessness more than men, to the extent that a woman’s place in her husband’s house remains shaky and unpredictable until she bears a child.

Another important finding in this research work is that early medical diagnosis and treatments could go a long way to help

in solving the problem of childlessness. Some people in Igbo land have gotten their infertility treated and this was done by both orthodox medicine and traditional medicine. Finally adoption is discovered to be a viable option in the case of childlessness. This adoption is normally considered when every other medical step has been taken and it was discovered to have failed. However adoption in contemporary society is facing some challenges like the rigorous process it takes coupled with the fact that some people are reluctant to accept a child they do not know his or her biological roots. From this paper, many people will come to realize that cases of childlessness is on the increase and sequel to this illegal adoption has become rampant. In other words a lot of childless couples are finding it difficult to go through the right channels and normal process for the adoption of babies. Through our research, people are meant to understand that in as much as procreation is so much desired by every couple; it is yet not the only mark of a successful marriage. When husband and wife are able to exhibit love and commitment to each other even in the face of difficulties like childlessness, they are equally showing good example of a successful marital union. Love is presented as essential ingredient for fulfilled marital life.

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