

CHILDLESSNESS IN THE THREE MAJOR RELIGIONS IN NIGERIA ISLAM, CHRISTIANITY AND A.T.R. WHY THE UPROAR

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Abstract

Childlessness, has been a topical issue in the world. In Nigeria today, it has caused problem in different families. This childlessness seen vividly in the three major religions we have in Nigeria. The researcher in this work tries to X-ray the three major religions we have in Nigeria. In it, he brought out the causes and even solutions of childlessness. In some, he proffered solution that will help to cushion the effect and bring the problem of childlessness to a lasting end. The researchers concluded by asserting that childlessness exist in the three major religions in Nigeria and that each religion has its own way of managing it. He made it very clear that no religion should claim 'Mr Know It All' in handling the issue of childlessness. He employed cultural approach for his findings.

Keywords: Childlessness, three major Religions: Christianity, Islam, A.T.R.

INTRODUCTION

Life is like a stage where a character- an actor or actress comes in, plays his or her role in a play, and gives way to other characters. Thus, every character is endowed with different kinds of gifts and as well each has a different capacity to act in different scenes in a play. A play most of the time has stages, scenes, and settings. Each has its compositions both in the actions and the make-up, which may comprise, sometimes; young characters, aged characters, or middle-aged characters. Where there is lack of a character to act in a particular stage of the scene, suitable for the character, then such play will not be complete and certainly will not make sense. This idea of play and characters in a play can be likened to stages of life where we are born, do our own part in the world and then grow old and die. And when there is no one else to continue where the aged and the dead ones stopped, then the world may not continue to exist and thus will certainly come to an abrupt end. It is possible, therefore, to say that if there is no more childbirth as people grow old and die, the world will soon come to an end. But this may not have been and will not be the intention of the creator and designer of the world. The creator of the world wills that the world exists continually, thus He charged man with the injunction to "go into the world and multiply and take charge of the world" (cf Gen. 3: 27). It is in this injunction that God, the creator of the universe established marriage and family life through which the population of the world may continue to grow. This article, thus, looks at

the prospects of marriage and challenges of childlessness in the three major religions in Nigeria- African Traditional Religion, Christianity, and Islamic religion.

CLARIFICATIONS OF TERMS

Marriage: marriage can be understood by different people from different perspectives depending on the purpose of marriage for the person defining marriage. According to McHale (1975, 17) "Marriage is fundamentally a mystery, defying valid definition. All we know is that implanted in our culture and in our very bloodstream is the yearning between a man and a woman to form a close, undying union." Marriage according to Oxford English Dictionary is "the ceremony or procedure by which two persons are made husband and wife." The Code of Canon Law clearly describes marriage as a covenant by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of their whole life and come together for the procreation and upbringing of children (cf Can 1055, §1). In ordinary parlance, marriage is a means by which two persons of the opposite sex come together officially: either traditionally or religiously to form a family through childbirth and child-rearing. Thus, family cannot be discussed without the inclusion of children as Henslin (1993, 430) rightly regards family as consisting of a husband, wife, and children. Generally, "Marriage is a natural institution created by God for man and

woman. It is universal in character and defines the mating relationship for the founding of a family... and rearing of children” (Eleanya 2001, 1).

Childlessness: one cannot talk about childlessness without marriage since children are basically meant to be produced by those in marriage. Childlessness, however, according to the Oxford English Dictionary is simply having no child or children or without offspring. Childlessness, therefore, refers to those who are married but have not given birth to children or had given birth to children but had none living. According to Basden (1966, 68), childlessness is understood as the greatest calamity that can befall a married woman.

THE PURPOSE OF MARRIAGE: AN OVERVIEW

In a general sense, the first step towards marriage comes into play especially in Nigerian when a man feels that he is old enough to form a family of his own and needs a female counterpart that would support him in achieving his aim. Also, when a man or woman thinks that he or she is old to have companion, he or she begins to think of marriage. Nevertheless, marriage generally is understood naturally as a union established primarily for the procreation and upbringing of children. Therefore, marriage is a heterogeneous union between man and woman. Thus, “often in a childless marriage, the couples are driven to feel that theirs is an unfulfilled marriage” (Mba 1980, 3). It is possible contemporarily that some societies may have their different views and purposes of marriage but it is worthy of note that naturally, marriage is originally understood as heterosexual union from which children are brought into life and as taken care of for the population and growth of the society. With this general view in mind:

“Abu Hurayrah observed: when the first dates of the season were brought to the Messenger of Allah (Peace and blessing of Allah be upon him), he would say: ‘O Allah! We ask your blessing on our city, and on our Mudd and saa measuring pots. Bless them plentifully.’ Then he would give the fruit to the youngest of the children present” (Hamid 2002, 52).

Here a Muslim teacher stresses the importance of children in the blessing of Allah in the family and the society in general. In the same vein, in the Vatican II Council, a Church Document on the Laity in the Church states that the creator of all established marriage as the beginning and foundation of human society, and as such, the Christian couples are cooperators of salvation for each other, the children they brought into life and their relatives (cf Apostolicum Acuositatem, no 11).

THE VIEW OF CHILDLESSNESS IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

In the ordinary sense, the primary objective of every marriage in Africa is to have children for the continuation of life. Thus, an Igbo adage says, “Ife eji Anuta nwanyi bu amuta nwa”- the purpose of marriage between man and woman is for childbearing. Therefore, for the Africans, “Children are the greatest blessing and glory of marriage among our people ... Childlessness in marriage is a very great cross to an African couple” (Mba 1980, 3). Childlessness in a marriage of one man and one woman often leads to polygamous

marriage in Africa Traditional Religion. The reason is that no African man can afford to end his kinship and lineage and to lose his family inheritance to someone else which is an automatic termination of the family lineage. Also in African Traditional Religion, “Marriage entails motherhood ... Motherhood is the very great natural blessing and fulfillment of a woman derives achieves from marriage” (Mba 1980, 3). Thus, any woman who is childless in her marriage in an African setting is said to stand with one leg in her husband’s family because she can be either kicked out by the husband and then marries another woman who will be able to give him children or receives continuous mockery the family members and neighbours. Sometimes, if the man feels that he loves his wife so much, rather throwing his wife out of the house for childless sake, he goes for another woman which automatically makes the family a polygamous one. And it is obvious that no woman is happy sharing his man with another woman despite that in African Traditional culture marriage is originally, polygamous in nature due to wealth creation and other penitent religious and ritual reasons. In the African Traditional setting, the number of children one has determines or shows his wealth because the larger the number of children, the bigger the farmland and the rearing of animals. Igbo traditional setting for instance,

The primary objective of Igbo traditional marriage is to beget children ... For when the fruits of marriage (children) is got, then will the marriage be said to establish strong bonds between the individuals belonging to different families and clans ... For through marriage, the family is created and it is this family that will see to procreation of more and children who will be able to strengthen, preserve and transmit life force (Eleanya 2001, 31-32).

“Here we must note that for the people of Southeastern Nigeria marriage and childbirth are inseparable. Without children, marriage is incomplete”(Okpala 1985, 45). Even “unmarried persons of either sex in special cases are object of derision, and to be childless is the greatest calamity that can befall a woman” (Basden 1966, 213”. That is to say that in African notion “the first desire of married couples is that of children. Children are viewed as the consummation of marriage”(Onyeocha 1983, 36). In the same view Weinrich describing African marriage in Zimbabwe also observes that the main aim of marriage is to guarantee a continuous existence of the family and clans which is achieved through reproduction. In the words of Weinrich, “Since the traditional family had to be large in order to guarantee the material well-being of its members, of children, of the sick, the disabled and the old, and since this required continuity over time, every person had moral obligation to marry and to contribute to the social reproduction of his kinship group” (Weinrich 1982, 21). Describing the fate of a childless woman African traditional and cultural setting, John S. Mbiti writes:

In some African societies, marriage is not fully recognized or consummated until the wife has given birth. First pregnancy becomes, therefore, the seal of marriage, the sign of complete integration of the woman into her husband’s family and kinship circle. Unhappy is the woman who fails to get children for whatever qualities she might possess, her failure to bear children is worse than committing genocide (Mbiti 1969, 110).

It is worthy of note also that in the African understanding any man or woman who died childless cannot be buried inside the compound. If the man is married but died without having any child, then he has no share in the kinship of his family because he has nothing to be remembered for after he must have died. Despite the richness of an African man who is childless, the wealth is useless because a woman or man who died childless cannot be given befitting burial because he is not going to have a share or say in the community of the ancestors. In fact, in an African traditional setting any marriage that ended in childlessness is regarded as to have not existed.

CHILDLESSNESS IN CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

The discussion of marriage and childbearing in the Christian religion is usually based on the Christian Scripture- the Bible. Thus, our base for the talk about childlessness in Christianity will be basically on the Scriptural understanding. However, we will not forget the fact that Christianity is a kind of universal religion which tries to adapt to a cultural setting or background of wherever it finds itself. In the Christian understanding, God instituted marriage in Gen. 1: 27-28 when He created man and woman in His own image and likeness. "God blessed them, and ... said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth'..." to establish more the fact that God instituted marriage for procreation (childbearing) while God was allotting punishment to the disobedience of the serpent, the man, and the woman, "To the woman He said, 'I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain, you shall bring forth children..." (Gen. 3:16). In view of this, Christianity also see marriage institution as purposefully established by God for childbearing for the multiplication of and growth of the universe. That is why Okpala (1985, 1) rightly observed that "Just as we cannot correctly think of humanity in the absence of man and woman, in the same way, children cannot be thought of outside the relationship of man and woman in marriage." In the Christian perspective, marriage has many purposes of which is childbearing is one. It is true that God himself stated it is not good that the man should be alone and thus He made a companion for him as a helper (cf Gen. 2:18). That is to say, that marriage is not just for childbearing sake but for the purpose of companionship among the married couple. Yet in Vatican II Council Christianity established that

Marriage and married love are by nature ordered to the procreation and education of children. Children are therefore the supreme gift of marriage and greatly contribute to the welfare of their parents. Therefore, marriage couples should understand and regard as their proper mission the transmission of human life and educating those to whom life has been transmitted (GS, 50).

For this reason, therefore, Peschke (1978, 443) observed that "The procreative aim of sexual love is... a fundamental end of marriage." In the same manner, the Catechism of the Catholic Church establishes that it is in the procreation of offspring that the Christian marriage finds its crowning glory (CCC, 1052). And according to the New Catechism of the Catholic Church of England, Canon Law sees as invalid, a marriage which excludes the right to fertile marital union. Stating clearly that Christianity is not happy with childlessness or barrenness, Peschke (1978, 444)

says; "Interpreting the creator's intention, the Scriptures rightly regard the propagation of mankind as an essential purpose of marriage." It is obvious that the blessing of God on the human couple in the 6th-day account of creation "... granted fertility to marriage for all ages. This marriage blessing of God is an expression of Israel's belief that children are a gift of God and that in God's original plan, marriage serves the purpose of spreading and expanding mankind" (Vollebregt 1965, 71). Presenting in a clearer picture the view of Christianity on childlessness in the marital life Palmer (1974, 35) said that:

Marriage begins as a community of two, but it is not meant to be solitude for two. Marriage may well begin with 'tea for two, but if love is open to life, the marriage community will expand to three or four or even more. ... like the love of the True God, married love is meant to break out of the fastness of a community of two and to create with God the larger community of the family.

In fact, "Childlessness among Christians today is an extremely difficult reality to face especially in Nigeria where so many forces militate against childless couples. First ... is their environment in which it is difficult for the couples to live and practice their religion. Second is the mothers-in-law, who are in most cases Christians themselves. They make life unbearable for their 'unfortunate' childless daughters-in-law" (Okpala 1985, 90). Even the neighbours who are also mostly Christians, cajole and humiliate childless couple, especially women. This makes them go extra mile sometimes even outside their Christian faith in search of the fruit of the womb. In Nigeria "Childlessness is felt to be a great personal tragedy and humiliation accompanied by the scornful pity of more fortunate folk. And for the parents themselves, it is difficult to put themselves in the shoe of childless ... the popular image condemns a childless marriage as an unhappy marriage" (Okpala 1985, 91). The above expression triggered Okpala (1985, 95) to cry out that "The condition of women in Christian childless families is always that of sadness." In is noteworthy, however, that Christianity as a universal religion has no particular cultural background, environment, or social tradition that is too dear than others but teaches the Gospel of Christ in cultural background and environment it finds itself. Thus, these cultural backgrounds pose a lot challenges to the teaching of Christians. In spite of the Christian teachings and its polite approach towards childlessness in marriage as a cultural problem, childlessness remains a challenge to the Christian marriages in Nigeria or wherever Christianity finds itself.

CHILDLESSNESS IN ISLAMIC RELIGION

Like every other religion, Islam is not an exception in battling with the culture of the environment on which it finds itself. However, as a religion, Islam has both political, social, cultural, and religious activities ran together as religion. So, like every other culture and religion, in Islam "The assumption is that all women ought to be mothers, and if they do not become mothers then they have not fulfilled their destined role" (Ammar 1996). "Marriage is described as half the faith in Islam and to have children is seen as a great blessing". (Husain 2009). With this in mind, Ammar (1996) observed that childless women are often oppressed in Islamic

communities because they are seen not having fulfilled their destined role of motherhood.

WHY THE UPROAR?

There is no effect without cause, the negative view of childlessness in marriage among the 3 religions in Nigeria, must have erupted based on some critical reasons however it is noteworthy as have been mentioned earlier that marriage and childbearing is entirely social and cultural issues. Religion only tries to harmonies society.

Thus, whatever affects the society affects the religion in the same society. The arguments and upheavals about childlessness arose for some social, religious, and cultural reasons, let us look briefly at some of those reasons.

1. Children are the Precious Gift of Marriage: generally, children is seen to be the main reason a man and woman comes together to become one, share things in common and form another family outside their own parents' family. "Marriage is seen to be fruitful only when at least one or two children are had by married couples"(Okpala 1985,52). And " according to the plan of God, marriage is the foundation of the wider community of the family, since the very institution of marriage and conjugal love is ordained to the procreation and education in whom it find its crowning" (odozor,1001,271). Therefore, "the possession of children is a fundamental necessity for a man seeking a life of fulfillment" (Okpala 1985,53). Even the Christian scripture gives credence to this.

In the first story of creation in the book of Genesis, man and woman are created in the divine image as the last of God's mighty works...God blessed them saying 'Be fertile and multiply: fill the earth...we understand that this command is given not individual couple as such but to the human race: it would nevertheless, seen to indicate a divine commission that should not be taken lightly (Dolan 1975, 104-105).

Since children are seen as special as gift of every marriage, no one would want to remain childless in his or her marriage.

2. Children as the Base to Stable Marriage: kingship in Nigeria is a traditional social phenomenon that every man would want to maintain..." every traditional man of any tribe in ...Nigeria has one innermost desire to fulfill and that is to keep the ancestral fire of lineage burning to see to the community of the ancestral lineage in order to do this one must have his own children" (Okpala 1985,53). It is in view of this that Odozor (2001, 21) states clearly that marriage is not just about the couple giving themselves to each other but has childbearing at its apex in, order to keep the family and the ancestral lineage going. "thus the couple while giving themselves to one another, give not just themselves but to the reality of children, who are a living reflection of their love, a permanent sign of conjugal unity and a living and inseparable synthesis of their being a father and a mother. It is obvious that one can only be called (traditional) religion aside father or mother when they

bear children. That means one can only be a father of or a mother of a child, for instance in the southeastern Nigerian " the number and category of children an Igbo or Ibibio woman has to determine her traditional status" (uchedu 1965,57).when a woman has giving birth to healthy male and female children for her husband, she may consider herself as having an accomplished her life task credibly well. What is that life task? Family posterity which is now assured by her children "(nwosa 1985,56). Any married couples that has born children is at least assured of stability in the marriage, that why every married couple crave for children.

3. Children are Assets: The crown of every marriage and the pride of every parent depend on their children. "For a traditional African man a good numbers of children mean wealth. A man who has them is counted fortunate, he is looked upon as a strong and powerful man in the society" (Okpala 1985,56). Basden writing about the Igbo people of Nigeria believes that "for the Ibos, children are priceless possessions and no man can have too many the more he has will he be respected and envied by the community" (Basden 1985,64). This is because the number of children a man has determines how large the farm will look like. That is why MacCormack (1970, 168) regarded children as economic assets. In an agreement with MacCormack's view Okpala (1985, 57-58) sates two ways in which children can be seen as economic assets to their parents:
 - i. When they serve as helper to their parents while still children.
 - ii. When they economically support their aged parents, who have become too feeble to work... children play a very big role in domestic works in many African countries... for the boys they accompany their elder to the farm, fetch water, and fetch firewood which parents in the normal circumstances buy with money." On the other hand, the "...girls take up their own share in the domestic work, they fetch water and firewood just like boys. They assist with the cooking of food. They take this duty completely over from mother as soon as they grow up to the age of twelve or thirteen... as soon as they grow up and marry their further help to parents will depend on their husbands" (Okapla 1985, 59-60). Every married couple would not want to wait too long to receive the blessing of children since once they grow, almost all the house chores will be directed to them and the parents will have relief thus, any married couple that did not bear any child also find it difficult to send other people's children on an errand.
4. Children give the Parents Assurance for old age Security: Old age is seen generally as blessing and a special privilege from God. Yet this old age can be really blessing when there are children to take care of the aged parents, otherwise, the old age becomes painful and a regret. "Old age is a thing that must really come, and there is no escape from it from some. A lot of things sum

up to constitute problems for one when he gets old... they are health care, food, and burial (especially in Nigeria)... a really old person cannot strictly speaking take care of himself health-wise or move about to find food for himself (or herself). When death actually comes at the end, he (or she) cannot be given a befitting burial by himself (or herself) or by others that are not his (or her) children or relation" (Okpala 1985, 64). John S. Mbiti confirmed this in his observation that "when the parents become old and weak it is the duty of the children, especially the heirs or son to look after the parents and the affairs of the family. Finally, when the parents die, it is the duty of their surviving children to bury them properly, to remember them, to look after their grave, and pour libation to them (Mbiti 1967, 109). That is why most countries of the world especially see their children as a guarantee for assurance in old age. Thus Uchendu (1965, 57) writes that "children are a great social insurance agency, a protection against dependence in old age". Little wonder many prefer spending their money on their children to heaping it in the bank or paying the monthly premium against old-age insurance. In fact, children do the work that serves the purpose of insurance establishment in terms of old-age care and even beyond insurance establishment. The summary of the whole truth about the crisis in childless marriage in Nigeria is captured in the popular Igbo adage that "nku onye kpara na okochi ka o na- anya n'udu mmiri" which means, the firewood one gathered in the dry season will serve him/her in the rainy season. The old age is the rainy season when one cannot do everything for himself or herself and the children whom you gave birth to at your young age becomes your firewood.

5. Children are the signs of Fruitful Marriage in the eyes of the Society: In most African societies especially in Nigeria, a marriage is judged as fruitful by the number of children they produced. This is because in Igbo traditional understanding a popular adage which is also a name given to children says nwa ka ego- child is greater than wealth. In fact, it is believed that "onye nwere mmadu ka onye nwere -ego." He who has children is greater or richer than he who has money. "In the society, marriage is not fully recognized or consummated until the wife has given birth. Only by given birth to a child is a woman counted as having a fruitful marriage before the neighborhood"(Okpala 1985, 70-71). Okpala (1985) also revealed that the importance attached to children by the society made it possible that pregnancy as a sign of fruitfulness is seen as a glorious gift of marriage from God and so pregnant woman are treated specially by the relative and neighbors and even the whole society. On the other hand, any woman who has stayed long in marriage without a child is viewed by the neighbours as worthless and the woman always dies in herself each time she is rebuked or mocked by relatives or neighbours. Muonye (1969, 103) reports that a woman

who was mocked by a fellow woman due to childlessness reacted by running into her room crying bitterly saying: "God why not given me just one, even if its birth would mean my own death?... let me die immediately it is delivered let me die even while it is coming out provided it lives. But please do not leave me in my present state." It is therefore obvious why "Africans as whole view children as the supreme purpose of marriage. This is because to have children is to acquire a social and economic status in the society"

(Uchendu 1965, 57). This suffices to say that in Nigeria as it is "fruitful marriage means nothing therefore in the absence of children" (Okpala 1985,72).

1. Children are the Hope and Assurance for Kingship and Ancestral Continuity: Both in the Islamic religion, Christian and African Traditional Religion, children give the family hope that their ancestral lineage will not go extinction. To be childless implies the closure of one family names and lineage. But children are an assurance of family continuity.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF CHILDLISSNESS IN NIGERIA

Childlessness in Nigeria in spite of one's religion raises a lot of dust in a marriage whether in Christianity, Islam, or African Traditional Religion, after all the different religions are practiced by the people who view marriage and childbearing almost from the same lens. The implications of childlessness in traditional Nigerian societies can be either social or psychological or both. It can be social from the society to the couple and psychological with the couple themselves. Viewed from the social implication as has been stated earlier, it is worthy of note that in Nigeria marriage and childbearing are two inseparable activities. And as noted by Onyeocha (1983,36) that marriage in Nigeria is incomplete without children because the first desire of every marriage couple is that of children and as such children are viewed as the consummation of marriage. In society "childless marriage, therefore, is regarded as unfortunate, a pity, calamity of the worst type and a failure in life. A barren woman is always in the state of humiliation before her grades. In fact, every couple knows only too well the disgrace and infamy that are attached to unfortunate conditions or state of childless marriage among the people" (Okpala 1985,44). One of the people belief and thinking most of the time that barren women are also responsible for their situation, "childless woman, therefore, suffered, much both socially and psychologically before her neighbors "(Okpala 1985,12) Okoro (2020,2) narrating the social implication of childlessness in connection with the ordeal of the Nigerian woman in the novel 'Efuru' written by Flora Nwapa writes,

In this novel Efuru a beautiful Igbo woman suffers greatly during her first and second marriages because of childlessness, thus placing a huge question mark on her femininity. Efuru is respectful and highly respected not only because of her comeliness but also because for her hardworking nature. She is respected also for her kind heartedness and how gracefully she conducts herself.

However, despite her resourcefulness and beauty, and bliss she enjoys within the first year of her second marriage her inability to conceive nullifies everything.... Despites that Efurū and Gilbert have a happy marriage, there is a huge setback within the marriage. No children have been born. And the community considers the marriage to be unproductive.

Because marriage is not an individual event not just the family members of the married couple but the community at large has concerns about marriage and its fruitfulness. Thus, "even if the husband accepts their childlessness the community mounts pressure by showing its aversion to an unproductive union" (Okoro 2020, 2). The reaction of the family members and the neighbours most of the time pushes the childless couple into all sort of attempts in order to remedy the ugly situation with its social imports. In its psychological import, childlessness keeps married couples, especially those who do not understand each other and are controlled by the reactions of the family members and the society in perpetual penury. So, "besides this great shame and disgrace that go with barrenness, woman of childless marriage were made to feel jealous in gatherings and more often were pushed to realize their conditions that is more of pity and commiseration. These placed them in a daily mood of worry and anger" (Okpala 1985, 13). This moody state and anger keeps the woman psychologically imbalance. "The is always tensed up, depressed and psychologically ever sick. Some even so off their senses" (Okpala 1985,74). Basden explains explicitly the psychologically trauma the childless couples pass through within themselves as he writes that. "A childless marriage is a source of grievous disappointment and sooner or later, leads to serious trouble between man and wife, neither knows which of the two is to blame for the misfortune; hence each accuses the other" (Basden 1966, 226). This brings about constant quarrel and disagreements as to who to blame about their childlessness. It puts the couples in a terrible confusion and suspicious of themselves... the man will think that his wife is responsible for their not getting issues and the woman will feel that her husband is responsible ... when it comes to this stage the woman is then exposed to the danger of handing herself over to other men just to prove the husband wrong and in the same manner the man is tempted to looking for other girls outside his marriage in order to prove his innocence (cf. Okpala 1985, 73).

"As the thought of the people against childlessness went in this direction with it psychological import of shame and disgrace couple of childless marriages did not fold their hands on such an 'unfortunate state'. Their effort not to remain childless till death led to many evils. Most of the approaches they made to remedy the childlessness came to clash or conflict with the creators' established order of marriage. Besides some of their attempts with ritual practices, some of their approaches toed the line of adultery, open concubinage, divorce, and levirate duty practices" (Okpala 1985, 13-14).

One may wonder why people should involve themselves in all sorts of ritual practices and actions because of children. But it is only a childless couple in this part of the world knows the plight of childlessness and understands what the future will look like living without child. Most of the time the childless couples may seem not

to be blamed because the external pressures from both parents, kinsmen, extended family, and the neighbours can push the couples to certain action just to conquer or overcome the pressure and humiliation that is attached to it. These actions nevertheless are always in search for solutions or remedies to their childless problem. Some of those solutions will be discussed below.

REMEDIES TO CHILDLESSNESS IN NIGERIA

Marriage and childbearing as have been said earlier can be viewed more from a cultural and social perspective than religious understanding. However, we cannot ignore the fact that marriage and childbearing is cultural social fact that is coated with religious meanings. Thus, every religion faces the milieu of any society it finds itself. Religion tries to proffer solutions to whatever challenges it encounters in a particular environment. Seeking for solutions to childlessness in Nigeria in connection with the major three existing religions will not be entirely religious conquest. Remedies must be sort both scientifically culturally and religiously. The suggestion for solution will scientifically sort because man has gone be young the age of ignorance, culturally because environmental factors is completely unavoidable in the human existence, and religiously because despite his age of enlightenment and reasoning man can hardly do without religion since there are things that are beyond scientific inquiries. Let us begin with the scientific approach to solution for childlessness in the three major religious in Nigeria.

SCIENTIFIC SOLUTION

Despite the fact that women suffer mostly the disgrace, shame, and humiliation of childlessness in marriage, women in this part of the world- Nigeria are not helping matters. Majority of them do not care about the medical and health issues that are associated with childlessness in their quest to get married. Although this may be as a result of the cultural challenges associated with a woman getting married at a ripe age in Nigeria. However, there is a popular Igbo adage that says " mmddu agahi eji maka na oko na ako ya, kopuo anu ahu" meaning that one cannot just peel his or her flesh because he or she has body scratch. Before the advent of scientific apparatus used in medical checkups, childlessness is usually blamed on the side of women alone even in the Jewish understanding- the background from which the Christian Scripture has be written which also has great influence on Islamic religion and at the same time has serious resemblance with African Traditional Religion especially in this part of Africa- Nigeria. The reason is that prior to the scientific age "...people believed that barrenness or sterility was as a result of one's sexual sin" (Okpala 1985,12). also (if Lev. 20:20-21) but today science has made it clear that childlessness can be as a result of some genetic factors and some health challenges which can only be discovered or dictated with scientific apparatus. For example, before one gets into marriage, there is need for medical laboratory tests for genotype, blood group and Rhesus factor match to know whether the intended husband and wife will match each other. Many people do not know that Rhesus factor has kept many marriages childless due to its ignorance to the couple. In fact, this is the health issue

many people do not know about and even medical practitioners do not bother to tell people about it. But, what is this Rhesus factor? Rhesus factor according to Schwartz (2020) is an inherit protein found on the surface of red blood cells. But about 15% of the white population and 7% of the African population lack the Rhesus factor (Rh factor). These people are said to be Rhesus negatives. When a woman has no Rhesus factor, that is Rhesus negatives, she is at risk of producing a baby with Rhesus disease (Rh disease). Although according to Schwartz (2020) the health of an Rh-negative person is not affected in any way. However, an Rh-negative woman is at risk of having a baby with rhesus disease (Rh disease) if:

She conceives a baby with an Rh-positive father.

2. The baby inherits the fathers Rh-positive blood types.

Another modern scientific solution to childlessness is the use of medical technology called Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART). According to Okoro (2020, 51) “ART is an aid to the human procreation process” which “includes all techniques involving the direct manipulation of human eggs, sperm and embryos outside the body” (Best 2012, 325). In his positive view of the Assisted Reproductive Technology, Okoro (2020) is of the view that In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) is one of the ARTs that has brought relief to the childless couples since it helps the couples to have their own children which can be in or out of the womb of the woman but with the eggs and sperm produced by them. These medical technologies have helped in the reduction of childlessness thus, making marriages stable. In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) according to Rae (2011, 26) involves the “procedures in which eggs matured through the use of fertility medications are laparoscopically removed from the woman and mixed with sperm from a man, and the resulting embryo(s) is/are placed into the woman’s uterus through the cervix.” However, despite its positive results ART has raised a lot of ethical questions.

Cultural or Traditional Approach to the Remedies to Childlessness

Before the advent of scientific medical technologies, there has been cultural means of solving the problem of childlessness in Nigeria. “This means that every culture and people have their own local ways to solve their particular problems” (Okoro 2020, 62). “The first among these traditional institutions for procuring children is polygamy” (Okpala 1985, 78).

Polygamy: In the view of Okpala (1985, 78) “Polygamy is one of the means a lot of people in Igbo and Ibibio land feel they can resort to in order to solve the problem and dilemma childlessness puts them into in their marriages. However, this method of solution to childlessness is not actually particular to the Igbo and Ibibio people alone but a sort of generally accepted African cultural and traditional remedy for childlessness. Mbiti (1969, 143) confirms that:

It is instilled in the minds of African peoples that a big family earns it’s head great respect in the eyes of the community. Often it is the rich families that are made up of polygamous marriages. If

the first has no children or only daughters, it follows almost without exception that her husband will add another wife, partly to remedy the immediate concern of childlessness, and partly to remove the shame and anxiety of apparent unproductivity.

But the problem of this traditional solution is that it generally and obviously lays the blame of childlessness on women alone. But if we to follow the first remedy suggested in earlier, it can be observed that childlessness may be as a result of genetic issue. That is to say, it is possible that a woman who married a man with an incompatible Rhesus factor and did not give birth can remarry to another man who is compatible with her and give birth to as many children as possible.

Woman marriage: Woman marriage is a situation especially Igbo land where a woman who has no child and the husband has died, marries another woman officially to maintain the lineage of her husband and to remove the shame of childlessness in her marriage.

A woman, therefore, who is barren, can go on her own to marry a young girl ... Any child got through that process is for the prosperity and continuity of the family. ... the female husband generally employs the service of an Iko ‘lover’ for her bride to raise up children in her home ... and the children are adopted by the female husband because of the dowry she paid to the parents of the girl (Okpala 1985, 82).

The main purpose or reason for the ownership of the children of the girl is that the female husband has done the necessary payments on her head (dowry precisely) because “The marriage payments are means of establishing rights over the bride and any child born thereafter. It puts the seal on the contract ... it constitutes the marriage” (Uchendu 1965, 50).

Christian Approach to the Remedies to Childlessness

In the Christian teaching, marriage is not actually viewed only for the purpose of childbearing rather for companionship and the sharing of marital love. The two main solutions proffered by Christianity for childlessness are perseverance in faith, accepting it the will of God, and adoption as the last resort.

Perseverance: In Christianity, it is advised that childless couples should not kill themselves because of not having children because what matters in life is living a holy life before and after their marriage and they can live a holy life and even go to heaven without children. That is to say, “Married love between husband and wife is a special form of personal friendship in which they generously share everything. It is exclusive of the third person till death. It excludes infidelity even when there are difficulties, childlessness in marriage included” (Okpala 1985, 102-103). This follows from Francis Cardinal Arinze’s condemnation of external marital sex or affair in childless marriage in the search for children. In one of his pastoral letters, he said, “The custom in parts of our country which permitted the husband in such a marriage to seek a child from another woman or the wife from another man is wrong and is to be condemned. It is against chastity because it is an

exercise of the genital faculty outside marriage” (Arinze 1983, 299).

Bishop Godfrey Mary Paul Okoye who understands the plight of the childless couples in Nigerian society felt for them and so penned down his fatherly advice to them and advises that Christians should encourage one another. In his advice, he said that

We will not forget to encourage couples who find themselves childless in their marriage. Our people want children. It is therefore great sorrow to them to find themselves childless. In our society this carries with it a kind of stigma ... but there again is a case for heroism in marriage. It demands a great faith to preserve fidelity, not to succumb to the continual prodding of relatives to marry another. It also demands heroic faith and rectitude in such a case not to fall back on the service of ‘donor’ or resort to any unlawful means (Okoye 1972, 32).

In one of his pastoral letters, Francis Cardinal Arinze advised the Christians to understand that childlessness does not mean usually that the couples have problem rather sometimes for the glory of God. He urges that when “Sometimes some people marry but have no children even after consulting many doctors. They should bear their cross in patience and love. ... Let childless couples take to heart the words of Pope John Paul II to Nigerian families at Onitsha on the 13th Feb 1982” (Arinze 1983, 299). However, any Nigerian Christian who cannot accept his or her fate of childlessness as the will of God is advised to go for adoption as the last resort.

Adoption: This is the last encouragement or advice that Christianity gives to her childless couples. Adoption has also been approved by the Nigerian government as legal. “The Eastern Regional Government was the first to enact legislation on adoption on 20 May 1965, known as the Eastern Nigerian Adoption Law CAP 1965; other regions followed suit with minor differences” (Onah 2002, 165). Some scholars have also observed that adoption in a sense has been basically an alternative measure for the childless Christians and solace to many childless couples and most illegitimate children. As Nwaoga (2013,708) puts it “adoption serves as alternative for infertility in marriage.” In his own positive view, Onah (2002, 168) shows the benefit of the adopted child, the natural parents, and the adopting parents. For him; “In the first place, both of them legitimise the otherwise illegitimate child and make him relevant in society. Second, it saves the natural parents the parental responsibilities of the “unwanted” child. Third, the psychological satisfaction of the adopter is invaluable. The childless couple gets a child.” One can still argue that adoption in the sense we have it here is alien to African and Nigerian culture in particular, yet it is unarguably obvious according to Okoro (2020, 67) “... that adoption has eased some tensions of infertility ...” in most of our present-day childless marriages. It has also become a widely known thing that “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” (Nwaoga 2013, 708).

According to Okpala (1985, 132) “...Bishop Okoye advised childless couples that after all human and licit means like seeing

the doctors have been tried and failed, Christian couples, with the grace of God have to accept their situation as God’s will. He next advised them to adopt children so as to provide an outlet for parental instincts.” In Christianity adoption is the best option or solution to childlessness in Christian marriages so that they can live their marital life in fidelity and chastity as indicated by the commandment of God, for “The observance of chastity in marriage is important as indicated by the sixth commandment of God” (Okpala 1985, 102). No matter how advantageous adoption is Onah (2002) points out its danger and moral question one of which is its degeneration into child trafficking as a result of excessive love of money.

CONCLUSION

Childlessness in Nigeria is a very big challenge to families and it is an extremely difficult reality to face due to the many forces against childless couples: from the family members, neighbours, the society at large, and even sometimes from close friends who should have been consolers.

In African culture, Nigeria inclusive, our people want children who will continue their lineage and keep their kinship going. No one would want his own family to go extinct. Thus, childless couples go the extra mile to make sure they have children. And as Schillebeeckx (1976, 338). observed; “Any theology of marriage must consider two fundamental points: it must acknowledge with reservation that marriage fully belongs to the world, that it is human reality, it must also affirm unconditionally that this very reality, not some extrinsic elements of it has been integrated into the history of salvation.” Marriage in this sense is a reality that man cannot avoid. And for the continuity of marriage reality, there is need for childbirth. No matter how we may try to shy away from it, childlessness is in reality a challenge which no barren couple can without difficulty exist without, except by the grace of God.

However, it is most importantly worthy of note that childlessness is not usually as a cause of the sin of the woman or the man or as a result of the bad life lived by the woman as people often think. It is to be understood that childlessness can be caused by not only sickness or ailments but also incompatibility between a man’s and a woman’s blood group and the Rhesus factor which can also be prevented if proper care is taken or if it is discovered earlier. “A simple blood test can reveal if you have Rh-negative blood. Every woman should be tested early in pregnancy or prior to pregnancy to find out” (Schwartz, 2020). Therefore, if a woman becomes pregnant before the actual marriage, the blood test should not be neglected: there is a need for the blood test in the early pregnancy so that if there is the Rh-negative, preventive measures may be used to avoid it. So when it is found that there exists Rh-negative Schwartz (2020), advises that the Rh-negative woman should receive an injection of Rh immunoglobulin (RhIG) within 72 hours of delivery in order to prevent sensitization in Rh-negative woman. And because some pregnant women become sensitized before delivery, a RhIG injection is given within the 28th week of pregnancy as well. This RhIG treatment Schwartz insists that must be repeated with each pregnancy, miscarriage, abortion, and blood transfusion with Rh-positive blood

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