# Childlessness in African Culture: A Challenge to Pentecostalism

**By**

**Rowland Olumati PhD**
Department of Religious and Cultural Studies,
Faculty of Humanities,
University of Port Harcourt, Choba, Nigeria.
Email: olumatirowland01@yahoo.com, +2348033399247

**Abstract**

*The work explores Childlessness in African Culture: A Challenge to Pentecostalism. For a marriage to be blissful in Africa, it is conceived to be the one with children. Children play heir-apparent roles in African inheritance culture. For a marital union to be without children, that marriage is considered shaky and full of anxiety. To this end, the research work explores majorly on the causes of childlessness in African marital life, even though so many conflicting views are held by different scholars about childlessness and marital statuses in Africa, the work unravels further that for a marriage to worth its salt, it must have children who will eventually take over from their parents at old age since Africans are primarily agrarians, these children in the family are used for farming productivity since western insurance companies have failed Africans. The work asserts that being childless in a marriage is unproductive, sterile or barren; it means not to be able to bear offspring. The work adopted phenomenological approach and recommends that African marital families should in addition to being reproductive, be able to be protective, since in all cultures, the family assumes the ultimate responsibility for the protection and upbringing of children.*

**Keywords: Childlessness, Sterility, African Culture, Pentecostalism and Family**

## Introduction

For a society to maintain itself, it must replace dying members. In this sense, the family contributes to human survival through its function of reproduction. To both Jews and Africans, children are gifts from God, and the crown and joy of marriage. They are a blessing. According to God's purpose for the creating of man and woman and the establishment of marriage, the procreation of children is considered as one major need for marriage and happiness in the home. The Jews cherished the idea of child-bearing very seriously like the Africans. Any marriage without offspring was considered failure and needed immediate remedy. This prompted Sarah to induce Abraham into polygamy, in order to raise a child for herself through her slave maid. This was similar to the African practice during the slave trade in the 16th to early 19th century. Any children born from such marriages became property of the owner of the slave. Names given to children in these two cultural settings reflect the value attached to children, for instance, Isaac means "God has made laughter for me", Samuel means, "I have asked him of the LORD", Olorunfemi means "God loves me", Afolabi means, "born with honour". One other factor which made procreation of children a necessity among the Jews was their tradition of worship and praise of God. One generation shall laud thy works to another, a generation goes and a generation comes (PS. 145:4; Eccl. 1:4).

According to Mace, no word in the Bible contains so much of God's goodness and human happiness as it found wrapped in the word "child". Allied to polygamy is the institution whereby a man is made to cater for the procreative needs of his brother widow or that of other close kinsmen. This was a common practice among both the Jews and the Africans. For instance, according to Genesis, 38:6ff, Judah married Tarmar for Er, his first son, who died without a child. Onan Er's brother was to raise an issue for Er, but

Onan cleverly dogged this custom and she waited for Shelah, the youngest brother of Er. Judah later on performed this duty, thus, preservation of generation was ensured.

Similarly among the Africans, the younger brother of the deceased husband normally assumed responsibility in procreating children after the demise of his brother. In some cases however, the elder brother may be asked to perform this duty if no younger brother is available or mature enough to shoulder the responsibility. Also, like Judah above, the father of any close relation of the deceased may, in rare cases be called upon to take over the widow. This custom shows that she was not only married to her husband but also to the family of the man.

But the question is, can a childless marriage survive? For the Jews, this would not constitute a danger. This was true in ancient times among the Africans, since another fertile male member of the family may perform the duty of the husband in this regard if the bareness was his fault. According to Orubuloye, the deliberate choice to remain childless in African for example, the Yoruba by married couples is low in the rural areas. I doubt much if there is any section at all of the country where married couple whether rural or urban, literate or illiterate, rich or poor have deliberately decided to remain childless or barren.

It is not an exaggeration that childlessness rather than fear of indissolubility leads people to polygamy today. Childlessness has been one important factor for the dissolution of some marriages. Moreover, where only female children are born, this may lead to polygamy, and where there is no understanding, it may lead to divorce. Among the Africans, who are predominantly agrarian, economic factors surpassed love as the basis for a lot of marriages; hence, economic hardship and childlessness, where there is no love in such environments, may lead to a collapse of the marriage.

**Childlessness in African Culture**

Marriage and children are very intimately connected realities among the Africans. Children; not love or companionship are the main motivation fix marriage in Nigeria and in Africa in general. According to Basden:

> The marriage relation dominates all customs, and is the foundation of the whole social structure with the African; love is not so closely linked with sex as among western races... a woman is not regarded as fit for companionship with men, (Basden, 1960).

An Ikwerre man marries because he wants children. This is very true of the Ikwerre. The Ikwerre man will use the proverb *"kini nhna nyeruka n'otu nuotula –ite miniwiri*" (what does a man look for at the bottom of the soup plate if not fish). The result is that the more children a woman is capable to bear, the happier the man is. In most parts of Ikwerre land, the husband and relatives heap gifts on the fruitful mother at child birth. In some other parts of Ikwerre land, the husband performs a congratulatory ceremony called "Ogbu owu ukwu" for the wife after 10-12 successful deliveries. Ikwerre regard children as the greatest gift and blessing from God. This is why Irene Wali rightly pointed out that; "The Ikwerre have these names like "Wokamma" meaning that a "child is the greatest and from God" and "Chinyere" which means "gift from God" (Amadi, 2014). The importance of children in Ikwerre marriage can be seen from the case of childlessness. A marriage without children has lost its meaning and has completely failed. And with this in mind Amadi stated that:

> A childless woman is regarded as sort of monstrosity; indeed it is not unknown that when such a woman dies, in order to express the contempt in which she is held, her abdomen is slit across prior to her burial. She has failed to fulfil her function

> in life; and this mutilation of the corpse is the token of her failure; her name is blotted out forever, (Amadi, 2014).

In Ikwerre community, sterility is considered as serious punishment from God, for one offence or the other committed either by the man or the woman, or even their forefathers or parents. In the same way, a childless marriage is regarded as a useless affair. It is looked upon as a great disappointment and sooner or later leads into serious trouble. The Ikwerre name "Nwokamma" actually means that the reason why a woman marries is for the sake of producing children; otherwise, there will be no need for marriage. And this is why, when a man marries and fails to get issue from the woman, he marries another one until an offspring is produced and as many as he wants them in that family. But in a situation where the man is discovered to be impotent, what happens? Thus, in agreement with the wife, another man is provided to perform the sexual act on behalf of the legitimate husband. In some cases, the woman may be asked to take any man of her choice to perform the sexual act. With these, the purpose of the marriage is achieved according to Ikwerre culture and tradition.

But what exactly can make one remain childless or infertile in a marriage? And what can be its effect on married couples especially on Christian couples?

**Causes of Childlessness in Marriage**

The problem of being childless is not a recent development in human history and many factors are attributable to the causes of being childless in marriage. In the traditional African society and in some other cultures or societies, there are several explanations discernable as the main causes. One of such reasons is the attribution to the wrath of the evil spirits, gods or ancestral spirits. Children for Africans are precious gifts from the gods and ancestors and may be in recognition and appreciation of qualitative moral life. Underlying this is the belief that lack of children in marriage is as a result of one's misconduct which could either be visible or invisible.

Supporting the traditional African religious interpretation of infertility, Obinna writes:

> Either the man, the wife or one of their ancestors has sinned and in punishment the gods have sealed the wife's womb and rendered the husband sterile or impotent, (Obinna, 1986).

To avert the impeding wrath necessitated by ones misdemeanor, Africans offer expiatory sacrifices so as to placate the offended gods and ancestors. Moreover, in the extended world, in the modern age of science and technology, the causes of infertility are traceable to some medical malfunctioning of the human organs, to some psychological problems and as resultants of some other physical factors. Richard Higginson argues that, "anxiety, guilt or depression can make their way into the lives of a couple and impair their ability to perform the sexual act, (Higginson, 1988). For a man, anxiety can lead to a failure in ejaculation or to premature ejaculation, while depression on the woman's part can affect her ability to ovulate or have menstrual periods. When it is assumed that stress is the primary cause of infertility, childless couples are advised to relax, go on weekends and take warm showers before retiring. But Martha Stout, contends that:

> Since there is very little scientific evidence that psychological factors influence fertility, the advice to relax is irrelevant and counter productive… while tension is doubtful cause of infertility, the reverse is certainly true, (Stout, 1990).

She finally contends that the feelings of stress and frustration are the end result of being infertile and not really the cause. But T.L.T. Lewis and G.V.P. Chamberlain write unanimously about the psychological factors that:

> Anxiety and tension are common in modern life and seem to be responsible for infertility in some individuals. These

> psychological factors are manifest through changes in the neuroendocrine control of ovulation, (Lewis, 1990).

The greater percentage of the physical factors is more likely to lie in some malfunctioning of the woman's body than that of the man. However, it is important to state clearly here that infertility is not a one spouse affair. It is not merely a "woman's issue" rather, it concerns both spouses. Both must bear the burden together. To this opinion, M. Stout states clearly that:

> Infertility is not primarily a female problem. There is a male problem in forty percent of infertility cases; in forty percent, there is a female problem; and in the remaining cases, there is a combination of difficulties. Regardless of where the medical cause lies, infertility is not the problem of the husband or the wife. It belongs to both, and both must pull together, (Stout, 1990).

The most frequent causes of infertility in men are the absence of sperm or the inadequacy in number of sperm, its swimming ability (motility) or the structure (morphology). And on this Lewis comments that:

> Male fertility depends on the production of adequate numbers of healthy spermatozoa by the seminiferous tubules, and their subsequent delivery into the upper vagina, from where a small proportion of them will penetrate the cervical mucus, travel through the uterus and then to theampulary portion of the fallopian tubes where fertilization normally takes place, (Lewis, 1990).

Other causes of infertility in man include sperm blockage which may result from an infection or a congenital defect, the resultant effects of undescended testicles, adult mumps, hormonal deficiencies, serious accident or injury affecting the reproductive organs, heat, etc. Heat could

be from internal or external sources. It is said to be from internal source when it is caused by a viral infection and it is said to be from an external source when it is as a result of working around hot ovens or wearing tight jockey shorts which could interfere with the maturation of the sperm.

On the side of the woman, there is a greater variety of things that can go wrong although more effective remedies are available. The most common of their problems is irregular ovulation or anovulation, that is, failure of the ovulation to occur. The absence or the infrequency of the periods usually makes this a cause of infertility. Others include, uterine tumour, endometriosis (the growth of the uterine lining- the endometrium not only in its normal place but also in other parts of the woman's reproductive organs such as the ovaries or fallopian tubes), malformation or an extreme malpositioning of the uterus, that is, the change of shape of the uterus, cervical infection or cervical hostility (a condition in which the cervical mucus is unreceptive to spermatozoa, either preventing the progressive advance or actually killing them. This may be due to infection or to the presence of sperm anti-bodies), tubal blockage, etc.

There are also other factors which are termed miscellaneous causes. These include diet, alcohol, drugs and some other medications, obesity, radiation, environmental pollutants, etc. The cause of infertility remains a mystery in a good percentage of cases and couples for whom no diagnosis is possible are often called the "normal infertile". Nevertheless, Mba C. opines that:

> It may not be impossible that childlessness can be the will of God for a particular couple. In this case, it is part of the mystery of Salvation. Only devoted Christians who have strong faith can see God's hand in the matter and will be able to withstand the trails that will result from public opinion, the

desire to maintain self image and other considerations, (Mba, 1986).

Although, IVF is primarily chosen as an alternative in cases where the husband's sperm count and motility are normal and the wife has blocked fallopian tube, but, it is not strictly confined to this alone. It is further employed in cases of endometriosis, in cases of the presence of hostile cervical mucus, in cases of low sperm count and in the idiopathic infertility or the "normal infertility"- a case where the cause of a couple's infertility remains a mystery and conception fails despite having organs which appear perfectly sound.

In IVF, four major steps are taken and they include: "the retrieval of the egg(s) through the means of Laparoscopy; precise timing of the retrieval during the menstrual cycle; fertilization of the egg (s) in a sterile dish; and placement of the fertilized egg (s) into the uterus. The last step is the most difficult to accomplish successfully" (Stout, 1990). However, the IVF technique is not without criticisms and controversies.

**Childlessness in Christian Marriage**

Being childless in a marriage means to be unproductive; sterile or barren. It means not to be able to bear offspring. Our understanding of child bearing in marriage as Christians should be quite different from other people's conception of child bearing in marriage especially the Ikwerre and 'Igbo'. Despite the fact that most of us have embraced Christianity, still like our fore-fathers, our understanding of marriage and procreation remains the same. We still have the mentality that procreation and marriage are always inseparable, and that our sacramental marriage and our Christian belief have only succeeded in abolishing to some extent the degree of derision meted out to childless women. So Christian marriage for Christian couples according to S. Okechukwu; "Is still synonymous with procreation" (Okechukwu, 2003).

Most people today are afraid to commit themselves in Christian marriage in terms of stability and fruitfulness. Most of them delay their marriage, waiting for their wife to get pregnant before they contract a sacramental marriage. And S. Okechukwu on this rightly stated that:

> The over emphasis placed on bearing children in marriage forces many intending couples to co-habit until pregnancies are evident before they can submit themselves to sacramental marriage, (Okechukwu, 2003).

However, the Ikwerre, my own ethnic group, has their own mentality of childlessness in marriage.

**Conclusion**

To sum up, it is the humble wish of this work to say that my contact and interactions with some of the families having problems of sterility during my research work experiences and cases I witnessed in some communities that make up Ikwerre ethnic nationality, motivated me to put a write-up based on one of the debasing factors or elements in the joys and happiness which accrue from the marriage institution.

Generally speaking, espousal love, the love that married persons commit to one another is a very particular kind of commitment. It differs from the love of friends for one another or from the love of parents for children and children for parent and Spouses commit themselves to all those things which by their very nature, tend to bring two people to total union of mind and will and heart. This means, that they are committed to talking with each other, communicating with each other as deeply as they can all of their lives in an effort to arrive at perfect understanding of one another. "And if they live with each other long enough, and share experiences-happy, tragic, challenging comic-they will eventually grow into a harmony of heart, into certain sympathy even on the emotional level that helps them to be totally one", (Knight, 1979).

Having said this, we now consider the place of childlessness and suffering in relation to the spouses so affected. This life is so short and with only few moments of real happiness in it, which are not permanent. These moments of happiness are punctuated with many moments of painful mysteries. Suffering too, for Christians have a place in the suffering of Christ. Childless couples should be advised to see their suffering as one with Christ in his passion, although, he was innocent but he suffered so much for salvation. "Suffering is part of God's plan of salvation, in that, it makes us more aware of life and of what constitutes life", (Burke, 1996).

This, kind of suffering is a giving one and so in being out of wanting; it fills one with care and concern for others. A childless couple is a Godly self-giving couple and their situation if well accepted with dedication to God's will and service to men. Theirs will be God-centred home. Relatives and well wishers should know that obedience is better than sacrifice, they should strive to obey God's injunctions in marriage: "what God has joined together, man should not put asunder" (ef. Md. 19:6). Therefore, Christians should stand up to theft call to be 'born-again', through constant profession of their faith, even on the midst of suffering and confusion.

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