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A Theological Retrieval of Communal Parenting as a Moral Response to Baby Stealing and Childlessness in Nigeria

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by

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Description: This thesis proposes the practice of communal parenting in the Igbo culture as critical to strengthening the godparent/godchild bond by way of offering a moral response to baby stealing and childlessness in Nigeria. It examines how practices such as spiritual intercession, catastrophic fertility expenditure, extramarital conception, baby stealing, and baby factories are impacting Igbo Christian families. It exposes the Igbo beliefs about marriage and fertility; explores the meaning of Igbo marriage, marital fruitfulness, and progeny, as well as the Igbo tradition of co-parenting and how this practice has responded to childlessness. It highlights how the Igbo society's shift from "co-parenting"(e.g., relatives, friends, godparents, community) to "sole-parenting" (only the nuclear family) has isolated childless couples, thereby driving baby stealing and merchandizing. The work looks at rituals, baptism and spiritual kinship in the Roman Catholic tradition and how co-parenting can reinforce godparent/godchild relationship. It argues for a retrieval of co-parenting, already existent in the Igbo tradition, as a superstructure on which to build a stronger godparent/godchild bond as a way of providing a more adequate moral response to childlessness, which fuels baby stealing in our society.

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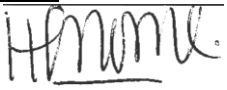

May 8, 2017

DEDICATION

Dedicated to Igbo, Nigerian, African childless wives and husbands, who struggle daily with self-identity, whose relationship with God is challenged often, and whose social status is constricted because of suffering childlessness.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My experience working with several men and women dealing with childlessness during my ten years of pastoral engagement inspired my interest in this thesis. During this time, I encountered wives and husbands who struggled with self-identity, crises of faith in God who should have supported them, and finding their place in a Church and society that greatly value children. With great courage, these couples try to understand what it means to live without a child in a society that does not fully welcome them, in a family where parents, siblings in-laws, aunts, uncles, and friends daily remind them, knowingly or not, of their status. To such men and women, I dedicate this work with the hope that their courageous battle to make sense of their identity, in relationship with God and the world, will be greatly enriched by this investigation. I would like to thank Dr. Kathryn Cox, my thesis director, who helped mold this research with insights and valuable edits and also provided space for me to explore my ideas. I am deeply honored and grateful to her for her help and accompaniment. Dr. Charles Bobertz, the adviser for the Master of Theology (ThM) program, also merits my thanks. Dr. Bobertz has provided me with strong and friendly mentorship. I am also grateful for my fellow students at Saint John's University School of Theology/Seminary (Collegeville), especially Michelle Stone, whose

critique of my topic helped me to further explore the issue in a deeper way. I appreciate David Wuolu, theology department librarian, whose joy and readiness with finding literature is phenomenal. Patricia Weishaar, director of students' services, provided important support that helped me throughout this research. This thesis would never have been completed without them. Finally, my parents, my brothers, my religious superior and brothers at the Redemptorist Society of Nigeria, and my closest friends were a steady stream of inspiration, encouragement, and support. Without them, I could not have accomplished this task.

INTRODUCTION

For centuries, cultures have devised methods of getting around infertility in marriage. One biblical solution was polygamy (cf. Gen. 16:2ff., Abraham and Hagar).[1] Modern secular culture, given recent breakthroughs in Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs), also addresses the problem of infertility within marriage. In my Igbo[2] culture of Nigeria, if a man died, it was the duty of his brother to have children with his widow in a practice known as *nkuchi.* But most recently in the Igbo society, some have devised morally questionable ways of dealing with infertility through baby stealing. This desperate act, baby stealing, identifies a society that places the highest premium on fertility. Along with the Roman Catholic Church's teaching that favors procreative intent, couples cannot help but agree that procreation ensures them authentic membership of the society and the Church. With the doors closed on many couples wanting to access ARTs, which are deemed unacceptable by *Donum Vitae* and *Dignitas Personae*—and given that the practices of *nkuchi*, polygamy, and baby stealing are not options for infertile couples—it will seem the only recourse couples in this situation have is to rely on prayer within the Church. The question then is whether resorting to spiritual intercession is an adequate response to the issue of infertility. Reality on the ground suggests that infertile couples need an active response that will complement prayer. Perhaps, within the bounds of the moral teaching of

[1] While I do not intend an exegesis of this passage because it is beyond the scope of this work, I do want to point out a few difficulties that weaken any claim to biblical support for communal response to childlessness. The fact that Abraham and Sarah threw Hagar and Ishmael out of the house after the birth of Isaac raises the issue of the worth of a woman. It also raises the question of justice. Were Hagar and Ishmael fairly treated? When society tries to resolve childlessness through a communal means such this one, who benefits and who loses? By drawing on this passage, I do want to show how couples could go outside the nuclear family (communal) to resolve infertility.

[2] The Igbo people are the indigenes of Southeastern Nigeria, West Africa. They can be found in states like Anambra, Imo, Enugu, Abia, Ebonyi, part of Delta, Cross-River, Rivers, and Akwa Ibom. Recent figures put the population of Igbo people at about 21 million. The majority of the Igbo people are Christians (about 80%), while there are a handful of traditional religious practitioners spread throughout Igboland. The Igbos are predominantly Roman Catholics.

the Church, more can and should be done. Can and should the practice of co-parenting be revived in the Nigerian Church context, and what would be the theological rationale for such a revival?

This thesis examines the impact of infertility on Igbo marriages. I will show how practices such as spiritual intercession, catastrophic fertility expenditure, extramarital conception, baby stealing, and baby factories are affecting Igbo Christian families. The analysis is followed by an outline of the Igbo beliefs about marriage and fertility. Here, I will explore the meaning of Igbo marriage, marital fruitfulness, and progeny. Next, I will look into the Igbo tradition of co-parenting to see what can be of value in addressing my topic. To do so, I will examine the Igbo family system and the Igbo notion of the child. I will also explore the Igbo co-parenting tradition to find out the basis for Igbo child-raising practices, as well as the communal response to childlessness. My concern here is to show how the "privatization" of children by many parents has led to the phenomenon of baby stealing in the Nigerian context. I argue that society's shift from "co-parenting" (e.g., relatives, friends, godparents, community) to "sole-parenting" (only the nuclear family) has isolated childless couples. The privatization of children further highlights the loss some people feel due to infertility and triggers the search to find children through illegal and immoral practices such as baby stealing. I will also critically engage the relationship between godparents and godchildren to unravel how this relationship may provide a response to childlessness and baby stealing in the Igbo context. To do this, I will explore the meaning of rituals and spiritual kinship and practice in the Roman Catholic tradition. In exploring the baptismal practice of naming godparents, I will try to link it with the co-parenting practice already present in the Igbo tradition. Given the theological kinship between co-parenting practice in the Igbo society and the spiritual kinship practice of the Church, what

could a renewed practice of co-parenting in the context of the Nigerian Church look like? What will a rich theology of co-parenting expressed in the baptismal liturgy look like? These are the questions addressed in this thesis. I argue that it will be necessary for the Church to theologically retrieve co-parenting, already existent in the Igbo tradition, through strengthening the godparent/godchild bond as a way of providing a more adequate moral response to childlessness, which fuels baby stealing in our society.

CHAPTER 1

THE EFFECTS OF INFERTILITY ON IGBO MARRIAGES

In this chapter, I will explore how some Igbo Christian families are responding to the presence of infertility in their marriages. To do this, I will look at the reality of infertility in their marriages and socio-cultural influences that put pressure on couples to seek fertility treatments or other solutions to childlessness. I will also describe the common paths they are using to overcome infertility and the effects these have on their marriages and society. I will show how practices such as spiritual intercession, catastrophic fertility expenditure, extramarital conception, baby stealing, and baby factories are affecting families.

1. Reality of Infertility among Igbo Families

Infertility is a growing crisis in the Igbo society. Many Igbo people probably know an aunt, uncle, friend, or neighbor who is struggling to achieve fertility. Knowledge of this kind does not often translate to full awareness of their struggles as they deal with infertility. There is insufficient awareness of infertility struggles because of the taboo around the topic of sex. Because baby making is linked to sex, married adults typically shy away from talking about it or, when they do, it is only in hushed tones. Another reason for the paucity of knowledge of the effects of infertility on married couples is the issue of virility. In a culture that celebrates fertility, discussing infertility powerfully reminds some couples of the loss of potency. In many respects, infertility is viewed as the loss of femininity or masculinity. An indication of the anxiety that infertile couples experience is manifested in the rate of visits to fertility clinics. Medical researchers note that “in most gynecological clinics in Sub-Saharan Africa, about 60% of

attendees were infertile cases."[1] According to experts, infertility affects 25 percent of couples in Nigeria. They also claim that 40 to 45 percent of gynecological consultations are related to infertility. A large number of cases pertain to couples who suffer secondary infertility caused by sexually transmitted infections and abortion-related factors that affected tubal infertility.[2]

Though the figure gives the percentage of couples seeking fertility, it also reveals people's deeply ingrained desire to achieve fertility. Notable Methodist Ghanaian theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye, married to a Nigerian, describes the attitude of society toward fertility by observing that "they never give up, and they would not say or even give a hint that life could be fulfilling without biological children."[3] Because of the fear of a life without a child, many African societies, particularly the Igbo society, generally consider infertility a "dreaded condition . . . as it results in many negative consequences. . . . These include marital instability, divorce and abandonment, abuse, stigmatization, accusations of witchcraft, loss of gender-identity and loss of social status."[4] The scapegoats of this struggle with infertility are often the women. This explains why women are usually desperate and relentless in trying to overcome infertility. While male infertility is often the cause of infertility, in infertility cases, women often bear the brunt due to male dominance, as well as the long-held assumption that fecundity is often primarily a thing of

[1] Adetokunbo O. Fabamwo and Oluwarotimi I. Akinola, "The Understanding and Acceptability of Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) Among Infertile Women in Urban Lagos, Nigeria," *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* 33 (2013): 71.

[2] Ibid., 72.

[3] Mercy Amba Oduyoye. "A Coming Home to Myself: The Childless Woman in the West African Space," in *Liberating Eschatology: Essays in Honor of Letty M. Russell*, ed. Margaret A. Farley and Serene Jones (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 109.

[4] Silke J. Dyer and Kerry Sherwood et al., "Catastrophic Payment for Assisted Reproduction Techniques with Conventional Ovarian Stimulation in the Public Health Sector of South Africa: Frequency and Coping Strategies," *Human Reproduction* 28, no 10 (2013): 2762.

the female half of the human species. In the Igbo society, it is the women who earnestly embark on the often-dangerous journey of baby seeking, induced often by socio-cultural pressures.

2. Socio-Cultural Impact of Infertility among Igbo Families

The Igbo culture views infertility as unimaginable, such that following marriage in-laws, parents, family, and friends wait for news of pregnancy and the first child. Thus,

> childless couples would often suffer from a combination of personal, interpersonal, social and religious expectations which brings a sense of failure to them. The social stigma, psycho-social pressures and other consequences often put intense pressure on marriages. In extreme cases, they are excluded from leadership and important social events; women are forced out of their marriages or ostracized by their immediate families.[5]

In the past, because the extended family system supported childless couples by sending to them children to live with them for short periods of time to warm their homes and an opportunity to parent, the pressure to procreate was not as intense. The childless couple would normally request from the parents to allow the child to come to live with them. Nowadays, due to the influence of Western culture, the extended family system has undergone some changes. Families and society bound together by strong kin ties are witnessing a shift to individualism. This tendency to think of and mind one's own nuclear family is characteristic of the new family system in the Igbo society. Experts have identified "globalization, urbanization, economic and political instability"[6] as some of the factors responsible for difficulty in sustaining the usual communal spirit that provided support to infertile couples. The emergence of the nuclear family system in the Igbo society is gradually defining the terms of relationship among the peoples. One of the areas badly

[5] Olanike A. Ojelabi, Pauline E. Osamor, and Bernard E. Owumi, "Policies and Practices of Child Adoption in Nigeria: A Review Paper," *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 6, no. 1 (2015): 78.

[6] Ibid., 80.

affected is the philosophy of child raising in Igboland. The philosophy that implores anyone who hears the cry of a child to hurry to his or her rescue or assistance because a child does not belong to one person is now fast disappearing. The emphasis of the Western nuclear family on monogamy has ensured that the concept of "father for the community" or "mother for the community" or "child for the community" is fading. Chike Ekeopara rightly observes that "the spirit of solidarity, which characterized life in the extended family, has given way to individual life and living. A situation where members of the extended family no longer have the right to discipline and control children of their blood brothers and sisters has helped to undermine the moral life and discipline of children in the society."[7] Formerly, children lived with aunts, uncles, godparents, or even family friends for several weeks, months, or years. These days, however, parents are no longer eager to release their children for this kind of adventure.

It is true that one reason for this may be that there appears to be more crime in the land today than in times gone by. Back when everyone, man or woman, felt a sense of responsibility toward every child, desperation for a child was almost absent. Today, however, due to what I call "hoarding" of a child, many couples who are infertile are confronted with the stark reality over their loss. This, apparently, may provoke jealousy in some couples. For example, a woman in a town in Nigeria reportedly assaulted her neighbor's baby because of jealousy. One may think that childless couples will generally look to adoption for a chance to have a baby. Even though some are interested in exploring this option, the majority of couples, due in part to social constraints, are reluctant to adopt children.

[7] Chike A. Ekeopara, "The Impact of the Extended Family System on Socio-Ethical Order in Igboland," *American Journal of Social Issues and Humanities* 2, no. 4 (2012): 266.

While there is a growing interest in adoption, it is worth noting that people are more interested in playing the role of guardians or foster parents than adopting a child; blood ties to children help the couple avoid insults from the neighbors. Couples I have encountered in my pastoral ministry mentioned infertility, gender completion, and desire for an heir to sustain lineage and inheritance as some of the reasons for their desire to adopt a child. Even though the practice of adopting is growing, there is still a huge cultural barrier. According to Ojelabi, Osamor and Owumi, "Formal child adoption has found its way into the Nigerian culture, although its introduction has not been fully accepted by a lot of people because of the nature of their culture. Therefore, the process of child adoption in Nigeria faces a number of ethnic issues and challenges."[8] They further observe complex ethno-religious behaviors, beliefs, and practices in the Igbo society that make it difficult for couples to adopt children outside of their relatives. Continuing, they note that "the prevailing cultural norms do not literally accept adopted children as born children of their adopter. They are rather treated as outcast and bastard, sometimes hated, disrespected and constantly reminded that they do not belong to the family."[9] Nwaoga Chinyere states that the "ingrained Eastern indigenous ideology of 'onyebiaraabia' meaning 'the stranger' which generates a caste system might have contributed to the poor acceptance of an adopted child."[10] The "stranger" is contrasted from the *nwa afo* (child of the womb). Child of the womb, here, means the child who was born by a "womb" from this community. The Igbo culture is

[8] Nwaoga T. Chinyere, "Socio-Religious Implications of Child Adoption in Igboland South Eastern Nigeria," *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 4, no. 13 (2013): 705–10, quoted by Ojelabi, Osamor, and Owumi, "Policies and Practices," 79.

[9] Olanike A. Ojelabi, Pauline E. Osamor and Bernard E. Owumi, "Policies and Practices of Child Adoption in Nigeria: A Review Paper,"79.

[10] Nwaoga T. Chinyere, "Socio-Religious Implications of Child Adoption in Igboland South Eastern Nigeria," 705-10.

concerned about purity, and the care to ensure that children born into the community maintain a pure bloodline is a strong reason why adoption is not popular.

Aside from cultural barriers, couples also contend with social biases in considering adoption. Shame and a need to avoid ostracizing the child are largely responsible for why people will avoid adopting a child. Ojelabi, Osamor and Owumi observe that "social issues surrounding child adoption ranges from the numerous fears and misconceptions about adoption to the stigma associated with a child whose biological parents are unidentified. Possibility that many Nigerians assume an adopted child would be a child of such persons as drug addicts, criminal convicts, mental retarded, prostitutes and the likes cannot be ruled out."[11] There is a strong sense of lineage in the culture, such that when a child is misbehaving, people ask, "Whose son is he?" This may explain the Igbo fear for adopting a child whose lineage is outside the clan. Couples would rather avoid that awkward moment when someone tells a child to "go look for your father," since such remarks are an indirect attack on the couple's inability to bear a child of their own. At such moments of confronting infertility, couples turn to God for spiritual intervention, as they wonder if they are not in the good books of God.

3. Spiritual Impact of Infertility among Igbo Families

In the traditional Igbo society, fertility is synonymous with being in good standing with the gods. When a man fails to impregnate his wife, he begins to imagine that he has done something wrong in the eyes of the gods. This state of confusion is even more troubling for the

[11] Olanike A. Ojelabi, Pauline E. Osamor and Bernard E. Owumi, "Policies and Practices of Child Adoption in Nigeria: A Review Paper,"79**.**

woman. Being by nature gregarious, she is often confronted with the awkward position of having to explain to her fellow women what could have gone wrong with her womb or her husband's reproductive capacity. In order to avoid this situation, women patronize various churches, native healers, and spiritualists seeking spiritual help. In the Catholic churches, for instance, devotions are organized around the Mother of Perpetual Help or other saints, and many couples have achieved birth through these devotions after years of praying. The large number of women who attend these devotions and other fertility-seeking prayer sessions shows the popularity of this form of resolving infertility. The first explanation for why a large number of people seek spiritual recourse is that they possess deep faith. The second reason is that a majority of these couples do not have enough financial means to seek for more expensive fertility treatment. The third reason is an inadequate knowledge about the workings of the Artificial Reproductive Technologies (ARTs). In a study in Lagos, Nigeria, Fabamwo discovered that out of the 166 infertile women interviewed, 51.8% (86) knew about ART, while 48.2% (80) did not, and of all those who knew about ART, only 19.8% (17) had good knowledge.[12] The other reason why people may pray to get help from infertility is the clampdown on most artificial methods of reproduction by the Church in *Donum Vitae* and *Dignitas Personae*. According to research, Catholic couples tended to score high on the list of those who refuse to patronize ARTs based on their faith. "After enlightenment on what ART involves, a total of 29 women (10 Pentecostals; 34.5%, 5 Protestants; 17.2%, 9 Catholics; 31%, 5 Islam: 17.2%) would have nothing to do with it. The reasons stated were religious conviction."[13]

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[12] Fabamwo and Akinola, "The Understanding and Acceptability," 72.

[13] Ibid.

In seeking a spiritual solution to their infertility, some couples desperately engage in miracle-shopping, clergy-shopping, and ecclesial-shopping to ensure that their dream comes true. It is common to find couples departing one church for another when they feel they cannot achieve fertility. Several women have reported to me that they left the Catholic Church for other churches or prayer houses or native doctors to seek spiritual resolution of their infertility when they felt the Church could not offer them the help they needed. Some of these women later came back to reconcile with the Church after failing to achieve pregnancy from these other centers. Such desperation for a child has encouraged charlatans who pose as pastors, spiritualists, or native doctors. From sponsored television advertisements, to posters on walls, to billboards in front of "mushroom churches,"[14] pastors are promising deliverance from barrenness. These men and women take advantage of the fact that fertility is a deep desire for many married couples and, therefore, the charlatans try to exploit them. In the process, many women have been raped, swindled, and murdered by predatory "men of God" or "prayer warrior women." These so-called servants of God are often driven by greed and often take advantage of the crass ignorance of people. The more adventurous couples have also resorted to religious syncretism by consulting a native doctor (*dibia*) for fertility potions.

The *dibia* is typically a devotee of the religion of our ancestors. He or she is reputed to have the secrets of plucking medicinal leaves and barks and combining them for healing. It is believed that the gods usually choose them for this ministry. The confirmation of their selection is often by being possessed by the *Agwu* spirit. For example, in a house where a dying *dibia* has three male children, the *Agwu* can transfer to any of the children. One of the manifestations of

[14] A term used to describe proliferation of churches. These churches make use of abandoned warehouses, shop spaces, people's compounds, public spaces as well as family sitting rooms as places for their worship. Though the pastors who set up the churches claim a calling from God and this is true in some cases, however most people believe that majority of them who founded mushroom churches were driven by poverty.

this status is that the one chosen consistently fails in commerce and white-collar jobs until he or she realizes his or her vocation. Before the advent of Western medicine, these traditional healers were effective in treating diseases. The unique thing about their practice is their assumption that most illness is spiritual, hence their penchant for offering sacrifices to particular gods and using incantations in concocting potions and actual healing episodes. The traditional healing method continued to coexist with the Western medicine to a large extent. Currently, the *dibias* struggle with dwindling patronage, largely due to effectiveness of the Western medicine. Sadly, in the recent past, many native doctors are neither called to that vocation nor possess the requisite skills; rather, they are driven solely by greed and poverty. For example, in 2014, the news of a "native doctor"—who defrauded his client of millions of naira, killed her, buried her in a room in his house, and covered the grave with cement—riled the soul of our nation. Lest we hasten to conclude that such occurrence happens only in the shrine of a *dibia*, recall that a young woman recently died after a pastor gave her a potion to drink. While there are genuine pastors and traditional healers, the recurring instances of financial extortion, sexual exploitation, and murder appear to compound the problem of infertility for many couples; thereby putting them at the risk of sexual and financial exploitation. Research has found that "interventions in the traditional health sector rely on various ceremonies and remedies, again relying on patient payment or payments made in kind. The usual lack of cost regulations regarding infertility interventions puts patients at the additional risk of exploitation."[15] It is obvious that because of pressure from society, couples who are infertile tend to overspend on fertility treatment; hence it is important to look at the outcome of this practice on them and the society.

[15] Silke J. Dyer and Malika Patel, "The Economic Impact of Infertility on Women in Developing Countries—A Systematic Review," *Facts, Views and Visions in Obstetrics and Gynaecology* 4, no. 2 (2012): 103.

4. Economic Impact of Infertility among Igbo Families

The impact of catastrophic expenditure on fertility treatments can be devastating to many infertile marriages. The negative effects are felt not only by the newly married but also by the extended family who depends on them for some needs. Couples suffering from infertility spend a lot of money either in churches, at the native doctor, or at the gynecologist. In the Church, they offer money as a sacrifice to God for fertility. I remember the occasion where a woman had come to me while I was working at a parish. She donated two thousand naira (equivalent of five dollars) to the church in exchange for a prayer for fertility, for she had not conceived in fourteen years of marriage. Shortly before I left that church, she conceived and gave birth to a baby boy.

When they approach a native doctor for help, couples also offer money along with a chicken, a goat, or other items to appease a god as well as for the potion to cure infertility. Nevertheless, it is gynecological treatment that seems to eat up most of the expenditures on fertility among Igbo couples. While the wealthy few can spend their discretionary income on in vitro fertilization, the poorer majority spends their life savings on hormone treatment drugs. Because the husband and wife have to take the enhancement treatment for several months, some couples spend thousands of naira on these drugs. In some instances, they go borrowing if they run out of money to ensure they complete their fertility treatment. There have been cases where women who are out of jobs borrow money to treat amenorrhea (a condition that makes a woman's menstruation cease for months and then return). The fact that these women run out of money but are willing to go into debt in order to achieve fertility makes me wonder what this may portend for the economic stability of their marriages. It is true that in resource-challenged societies such as the one in which many Igbo marriages exist, while many couples are confined

to using low-cost fertility solutions, only the affluent can afford the more expensive procedures. Yet, if we consider the frequent little expenses made by low-income families, we can argue that poorer couples spend relatively more of their income on fertility. Hence, whether rich or poor, the common thread appears to be that couples spend on fertility not because they can afford it but because of the desire to have a child. What this means is that average couples are spending substantial portions of their income on fertility. The Nigeria Bureau of Statistics (NBS) gave the figure of Nigerians living below poverty as 60.9% (2010 figure). This represents about 100 million out of an estimated population of 170 million. What this implies is that the 25% infertile couples will also have a significant representation in the number of those who live below poverty.

Since there are neither loans from banks nor funds by the government to assist couples, the majority of the expenses are out of pocket. In this case, many couples are willing to engage in catastrophic spending. Defined as spending that forces households to reduce their consumption of other basic needs such as food and clothing,[16] catastrophic expenditure is common in infertile households, often resulting in the sale of assets such as houses, thereby incurring debts and poverty. Scholars observe that "while very few households sold assets, 42% borrowed money which in most cases incurred interest."[17] Further findings show that "households with the lowest socio-economic status face greatest probability of incurring catastrophic OPP on ART services; they are also most likely to have to use all their savings and reduce spending on food and other routine household expenditure items in order to cope with the cost. It follows that they

[16] Dyer and Patel, "The Economic Impact," 106.

[17] Ibid.

experience the highest levels of financial stress."[18] For instance, women in Rwanda have often spent an average of seventy-three US dollars on infertility treatment. For the majority, this amounts to twice to six times their monthly income.[19]

In the case of infertile Igbo couples, "patients seeking infertility treatment including drugs will pay N450,000 for both drugs and injections instead of about N1 million ordinarily required for the treatment."[20] This is about $1,000 dollars on average. The result of this is that catastrophic expenditure on fertility threatens the survival of many households. This discovery is further brought home by the behavior observed among South African couples, that "in order to cope with these IVF services, South African couples had reduced their expenditures on basic items such as food and clothing, depleted their savings, borrowed money and taken on extra work."[21] Given the fact that women and men go into debt in Nigeria in trying to achieve pregnancy, it is not surprising that many households also have reduced their expenditures on food, clothing, or even health. The insight from this practice is that traditional expectations force many couples, especially women, to seek fertility at all cost. In doing so, majority of the couples use a large chunk of their earnings in seeking fertility. The excessive expenditure on fertility does raise serious ethical questions for society. Besides ethical issues around equity, justice, and common good, this behavior raises the moral issue of survival for the couple. Given the huge

[18] Ibid., 107.

[19] Ibid.

[20] "Infertility: Hospital slashes Cost of Treatment," *Vanguard News Online*, September 12, 2013, accessed November 25, 2016, http://www.vanguardngr.com/2013/09/infertility-hospital-slashes-cost-of-treatment/.

[21] Marcia C. Inhorn and Pasquale Patrizio, "Infertility Around the Globe: New Thinking on Gender, Reproductive Technologies and Global Movements in the 21st Century," *Human Reproduction Update Advance Access* 21, no. 4 (2015): 412.

amount many couples spend in trying to have their own baby, it will not be out of place to raise the question of whether fertility is addictive. It is possible that the desire for a baby is comparable to drugs, gambling, or alcohol addiction. It is also possible that it is a kind of weakness or compulsion. Another area where couples experience hardship, and often exploitation, is in trying to adopt a baby through government processes.

5. Political Impact of Infertility among Igbo Families

As I mentioned above, adoption as a way for childless homes to have a baby is growing. The often-herculean process of adopting a child in Nigeria, however, makes it hard for many Igbo couples to take advantage of the opportunity it offers. The cumbersome nature of the adoption process is evident in the red tape and long, frustrating process couples go through at the hands of government welfare personnel in order to adopt a child. After surviving the tedious paperwork, adopters go through further complicated steps of applying to the courts. In a society where corruption mixes with business, even after completing these steps, some corrupt officials will still expect the couple to offer a bribe in order to speed along their file. In many cases, adopters may wait for more than seven years before approval is given. In many more cases, too many couples fail to get the baby after satisfying all the requirements. The fear of the possibility that wealthier baby seekers may offer a larger bribe to win the "bid" is always there. In Nigeria, the law states that a couple is eligible to adopt only one child. Corrupt officials are willing, however, to "sell" babies to the highest bidder to the detriment of the poor who cannot afford an expensive bribe. Thus, because demand for a baby is high and the system is inefficient, cumbersome, and corrupt, a lot of unofficial adoption centers have sprung up, encouraging baby trafficking: "Though there are laws against illegal adoption, most people are not aware of it

because of lack of information on it and because of this reason, unscrupulous people cash in on it to make quick money and manoeuvre things to their own favour."[22] This comes in the form of clandestine "baby factories," where pregnant teenage girls are kept and babies bought off them and sold to a willing buyer. Those who engage in illegal baby transactions claim that they are trying to make up for government inefficiency by helping many couples who suffer heartache to achieve parenthood. The irony, though, is that to legalize the status of an adoption, the racketeers always go to the government officials to get the necessary documentation. It is doubtful that these officials make the effort to ascertain the origin of these babies as long as money exchanges hands.

Multiple adoption laws existing in many parts of Nigeria is a factor in considering why many Igbo homes find it difficult when trying to adopt a child. The first child adoption act was enacted in Eastern (the majority Igbo-speaking ethnic group) Nigeria in 1965. Then followed the practice where every state created its own adoption regulations. In the predominantly Muslim northern states, the child adoption act is totally nonexistent, largely because the right of inheritance is based on womb relationship. The Quran declares that "those related by blood are more entitled to (inherit from) each other in the Book of Allah."[23] What this means is that "adoption does not change the relationship of a person: adoption does not end the blood relationship between the child and his real parents and siblings, nor does it create a real relationship between him and his adoptive parents and their children."[24] In 2003, the federal

[22] "Child Adoption in Nigeria," *Vanguard News Online*, July 29, 2011, accessed November 24, 2016, http://www.vanguardngr.com/2011/07/child-adoption-in-nigeria/.

[23] Quran 8:75.

[24] Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi, "Adoption in Islam," accessed May 4, 2017, https://www.al-islam.org/person/sayyid-muhammad-rizvi.

government issued a Child Protection Act to harmonize the process of adoption, yet many states still follow their own acts. The multiplicity of laws makes the process of adopting a child rather unpredictable. It makes it difficult to check the operation of illegal adoption practices. Olanike Ojelabi and other scholars capture the difficulty as follows:

> Besides, the rising incidence of illegal and unofficial child adoption may become difficult to control. This is because law enforcement officials would likely face the challenge of identifying and prosecuting actions that are contrary to the law, since there are varied child adoption laws operating across states. Worst still, the lack of clarity among Nigeria law enforcement and legal professionals, as to whether "baby factories" constitute human trafficking or merely violation of adoption rules, allow perpetrators to escape prosecution and continue in their illegal activities.[25]

For many childless couples, the story of trying to achieve pregnancy or adopt a child is often filled with drama in which they are for the most part the protagonists. Hence, the socio-cultural and spiritual, as well as economic and political hurdles, they have to surmount raise ethical questions that have implications for them and for society.

6. Ethical Impact of Infertility among Igbo Families

In recent times, new methods of coping with a childless marriage have emerged. It is common these days to hear of babies being snatched from their mothers' breasts, breaking the hearts of so many mothers. Some babies are kidnapped from their hospital cradle, thereby ruining a hospital's reputation. The reason for desperation for a child may be traced to religious and cultural influences. In the Igbo society, the people's natural inclination for fertility has been

[25] Ojelabi, Osamor, and Owumi, "Policies and Practices," 80.

reinforced by biblical and ecclesial emphasis on fruitfulness. It should be noted that in bygone days, there were families who did not have children, yet there was not so much desperation as witnessed today. Families, friends, and acquaintances were willing to send their male or female child to live with a childless couple to "warm" the home or to "open" the womb of the wife. Today, infertile couples enjoy little or no such support. Part of the reason is that society seems to have lost its "innocence," so families fear for the safety of their children. But is unwillingness of families to support childless couples the reason for the upsurge in baby stealing? I think that even though this reason is significant, there is a subtler reason for the increase in baby stealing. Can the reason be traced to the "attitude" of those who have babies for those who do not have? For example, in the Igbo society, a woman who has no child will not be admitted into certain women's group in the community. In the case of the man, his words among his peers in a town hall meeting will carry some weight only if he has a child. Otherwise, someone at a gathering may ask him to shut up, as he cannot speak where "men" are talking.

Attitudes such as these have escalated presently so that the green eye of envy is invoked in many childless families. Suffering a personal identity crisis, these couples are ready to go to any length to have their own babies. When American theologian Maura Ryan describes what a childless person goes through "as a kind of dying," she seems to explain perfectly the root cause of desperation for babies. She captures the range of an infertile person's emotions as disappointment, loss of a future role, a relationship, and a self. Linking childlessness to personal and spiritual crises, she observes that it is "precisely when infertility is acknowledged as a question to one's understanding of oneself and one's place in the universe that the pain and

disappointment of infertility can become an opportunity for personal and spiritual growth."[26] Driven by a deep-seated desire to prove one's identity and virility, childless couples in the Igbo society are enmeshed in the web of baby merchandizing. Today, childless couples are ready to patronize baby factories. These factories are hideous homes where poverty-stricken pregnant teenagers are enslaved against their wishes and their babies preyed upon with emotional scars inflicted on them thereafter. Some of these teenage girls run to these baby factories while fleeing from their disappointed parents after becoming pregnant before marriage. Some of these young women are ready to part with their babies in exchange for a paltry sum because they come from hostile homes. In some instances, babies are stolen from maternity homes by baby thieves. These babies are subsequently sold by baby snatching cartels for between N400,000 to N500,000; and some young mothers desperate for cash will sell for as low as N90,000**.**

Apart from baby stealing, couples find themselves engaging in other behaviors that have ethical implications. In the quest for a baby, some women engage in extramarital conception. In this case, the woman engages in extramarital affairs. If there is a baby between her and this other man, paternity of such baby is kept from the husband. For such a woman, the burden of constantly living a lie and the fear of discovery can be enormous. It is not always the case that the woman takes the decision to go outside of her marriage in search of a child. There is the occasion when the husband encourages his wife to do so, especially if the reason for infertility is traceable to the man. Some women may carry out this arrangement, while others will refuse based on moral grounds. In some instances, the conflict caused by disagreement in the proposition leads to the end of the marriage. In other cases, though, the man goes out to look for

[26] Maura A. Ryan, "Faith and Infertility," in *On Moral Medicine: Theological Perspectives in Medical Ethics*, ed. Therese Lysaught, Joseph Kotva Jr., Stephen Lammers, and Allen Verhey, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 866.

babies when the woman is responsible for the infertility. These men marry secretly and keep a second home. The discovery of such family by the wife is often a source of agony and fighting between them, which also trickles down to the three families. These ways of trying to achieve pregnancy persistently gnaw at the moral fabric of the society such that the line that separates what is ethical from unethical, moral from immoral, is blurred. A combination of poverty and the difficulty of adoption from the government greatly contribute to the establishment of baby factories and their survival. The willingness of couples to prize having a baby over marital faithfulness is also feeding underground extramarital conception practices.

So far, I have described how Igbo couples are trying to resolve infertility through spiritual intercession, catastrophic fertility expenditure, extramarital conception, baby stealing, as well as how these methods are affecting them positively and negatively. In the next chapter, I will discuss the Igbo beliefs about marriage and fertility to help us in understanding the theology behind some of the choices couples are making in trying to overcome infertility.

CHAPTER 2

IGBO BELIEFS AROUND MARRIAGE AND FERTILITY

In this chapter, I will explore the meaning of marriage in the Igbo context. I will analyze the meaning of marital fruitfulness and discuss their belief in progeny. I will show how a fertility-centered marriage, as well as a strong desire to extend the lineage, drives the Igbo to seek various ways to resolve childlessness.

1. Meaning of Igbo Marriage

Just as a child is sacred in the minds of the Igbo, marriage is a sacred engagement, which should not be treated lightly. It is so important that the contracting of marriage is done by the elders and never left to the groom alone. The Igbo regard marriage as "so sacred an institution that it is not a matter for the youths or for one person, but a communal affair where elders play prominent roles. An Igbo adage says: '*Nwata anaghi aga na nwanyi nani ya*;' this means that 'a young man cannot validly contract marriage alone.'"[1] One possible explanation for this arrangement is that, due to their age, the elders are believed to be closer to their graves and therefore closer to the ancestors. They take the position of spokespersons at marriage ceremonies and invoke the ancestors. In addition, *Ani*, the fertility god, is invoked on behalf of the couple; the elders, who have achieved fertility during the course of their lives, do this invocation. To underscore the importance of marriage, it is believed that marriage is contracted not just by the individuals involved but also between families and communities. Essentially, "among the Igbo, marriage is a communal affair. It creates a bond not just between the bride and groom, but also

[1] Augustus C. Izekwe, *The Future of Christian Marriage among the Igbo Vis-à-vis Childlessness: A Canonical Cum Pastoral Study of Canon 1055 Par. 1* (Berlin: Logos Verlag, 2015), 9.

solidarity of relationship between their families and communities."[2] In the marriage situation, transmission of life is the most important achievement, and ability to procreate determines a spouse's personhood. Indeed, Shorter and Onyancha note:

> Transmission of life was one of the most important values, if not the most important value of society. An individual was simply not alive, if he/she was not engaged in transmitting life to another human being. Procreation was an essential aspect of being alive and personhood was the attribute of living, reproductive people.[3]

This emphasis on procreation has put pressure on Igbo Christian marriages such that childless couples are under a heavy burden to procreate. Added to this, the fact that childless couples struggle to fit into certain Christian groups and feast days dedicated to motherhood or fatherhood further highlights the plight of childless families. American theologian Maura Ryan captures the reality of the neglect that childless couples can suffer, perhaps inadvertently, even within the Church. She laments, "I have attended countless liturgical celebrations on Mother's Day, Christmas, and the Feast of the Holy Family in my own Roman Catholic community. I cannot recall a single time in which, during these key celebrations of parenthood and rededication of family life, the pain of *longing for* parenthood was acknowledged liturgically alongside the joy and struggles of its realization."[4] It is, therefore, marriage and raising of children that are the essential elements that confer the title of "father and mother" to a man and woman in the context of marriage. Those who do not yet have children of their own do not yet

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[2] Izekwe, *The Future*, 10.

[3] Alyward Shorter and Edwin Onyancha, *Street Children in Africa: A Nairobi Case Study* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications, 1999), 27, as quoted in Augustus C. Izekwe, *The Future of Christian Marriage among the Igbo Vis-à-vis Childlessness: A Canonical Cum Pastoral Study of Canon 1055 Par. 1* (Berlin: Logos Verlag, 2015), 50.

[4] Maura A. Ryan, "Faith and Infertility," in *On Moral Medicine: Theological Perspectives in Medical Ethics*, ed. Therese Lysaught, Joseph Kotva Jr., Stephen Lammers, and Allen Verhey, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 867.

find meaning in life. Biological reproduction, therefore, is the fulcrum around which Igbo marriage naturally revolves. Hence, marital fruitfulness becomes a necessary component of Igbo marriage.

2. Marital Fruitfulness

To appreciate the Igbo notion of fruitfulness, it is necessary to examine the religious orientation of l'Homme noir. Jacob Olupona accurately observes that "African spiritual experience is one in which the 'divine' or the 'sacred' realm interpenetrates into the daily experience of the human person so much that religion, culture, and the society are imperatively interrelated."[5] In this understanding, there is an absence of dichotomy between the spirit world and the world of human existence as present in the Platonic-Christian tradition. The Igbo separates neither the spirit from the flesh, the mind from the body, nor the spirit world from the earthly world, or sex from pleasure. Such mind-set believes that the spirits of the gods infuse human beings, water, sun, moon, vegetation with life, making them fruitful. To be fruitful is to be favored by the gods, and to be unfruitful is to be unfavorable to them. If there is drought or bareness, sacrifices are offered to appease the *Ani* goddess to restore fertility.[6] Therefore, a woman yet to conceive will ask *Ani* for a child. These days it is not rare to see women and childless couples going to churches and shrines to offer prayer and sacrifices so that they may get a chance to conceive. It is hard for people in this culture to contemplate barrenness, because they have been told that everything should be virile. The society celebrates fertility. It is so influential

[5] Jacob K. Olupona, ed. *African Spirituality: Forms, Meanings, and Expressions*, World Spirituality (New York: Crossroad, 2000), xvii.

[6] The idea that sin prevented fruitfulness is also present in Jewish religious beliefs. For example, in Genesis 20:17, childlessness is considered to be the result of sin and/or divine displeasure. The Jews would offer *chatat* (atonement) sacrifices to restore fertility in this circumstance.

that it determines the fate of a marriage. According to Alexander Abasili, "Marriage and procreation are intertwined and inseparable. It is almost always presumed that readiness for marriage is readiness for procreation; to get married is an opportunity to contribute freely, through procreation, to the survival of the lineage and society at large."[7] The culture also expects women to be fruitful, and they will normally carry the blame for inability to conceive, while men are exonerated. This attitude suggests that fertility is dependent on the woman. How did society get to this conclusion? It is hard to get the answer to this question. Like many ancient societies, the Igbo people misunderstood the contribution of the male to achieving pregnancy. They think that the man can never be the reason for the absence of fertility in a marriage. The stories of Tamar in the book of Genesis as well as Ruth in the book of Ruth, however, prove that male infertility is possible.[8] It seems, though, that because the woman carries the visible sign of fertility (pregnancy), she must be the culprit if the couple is not able to conceive.

As a result of this mind-set, women and men suffer because society views barrenness as unnatural. In the Igbo culture, marital sex is used for procreation, not necessarily for pleasure. For this reason, voluntary childlessness is unthinkable. This explains why **s**ome people, or perhaps the society, unconsciously, discriminate against a childless couple. This treatment places them "outside" what Francis Moloney calls the "chosen people of God."[9] Like the story of the woman with the flow of blood in the gospel, who was cast out of her community (Mark 5), the

[7] Alexander I. Abasili, "Seeing Tamar through the Prism of an African Woman: A Contextual Reading of Genesis 38," *Old Testament Essays* 24, no. 3 (2011): 555.

[8] The stories of Tamar (Gen 38) and Ruth (Ruth 1) suggest that their first husbands were unable to father children since both women were left childless when their husbands died, but they then went on to bear children with other men.

[9] Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 107.

Igbo childless woman or man finds himself or herself unable to integrate fully into the community. It is worth ruminating on why the Igbo society easily embraces the celibate life but finds it difficult to accept a fruitless marriage. The conundrum seems to come from two influences. The first is the Igbo love of procreation. The second is the Igbo contact with Catholicism. In the fourth century, there emerged in the Christian community an outlook that assumed a married Christian was an incomplete disciple. Jerome, who might have been influenced by the Manichean disdain for marriage, was a champion of this. He "occasionally suggested that Christian marriage was something less than fully Christian, that married Christians were somehow tainted by sexual activity and deserved a reward vastly inferior to that merited by consecrated virgins and other celibate Christians."[10] On the other hand, this movement exalted the celibate man or woman. These people, because they held up celibacy over and above marriage, did not see that sexual activity for the sake of making a baby is equally honorable. The plausible reason why the Igbo will see nothing wrong in a celibate life may be due to this Christian heritage.

The other reason why the Igbo will welcome celibate persons but marginalize the childless has a basis in their belief that everything ought to be fruitful. Certainly, the Igbo predilection for fertility does not have roots in Christianity; nevertheless, this vision finds a support in the teaching of the monk Jovinian, who defended the worth of marriage and procreation against the onslaught of Jerome. He held that married Christians share equal status with celibate Christians before God. "Jovinian argued that "faithful married Christians and committed celibates were equally pleasing to God and that all would receive an equal reward in

[10] David G. Hunter, "Sex, Sin and Salvation: What Augustine Really Said," *National Institute for the Renewal of the Priesthood*, accessed July 2, 2016, www.jknirp.com/aug3.htm.

heaven. hristians."[11] By doing so, he reaffirms the goodness of sexuality and procreation, which is in line with the Igbo belief on marriage and fertility.

The Igbo honor sexuality and procreation. They reward fertility. For women like my mother, who gave birth to ten children (all boys, for that matter!), the society celebrated by slaughtering *ewu ukwu* (fertility goat) in their honor. Translated, *ewu* means the "goat" while *ukwu* stands for the "waist" or "fertility." Presumption of fertility is so strong that even as a celibate male, I felt awkward on several occasions when people had asked me the question: "How are your children?" It is also present in daily prayers and wishes for the unmarried woman or the newly married. Cherished prayers for the newly married from family and friends are as follows: "You shall give birth to male and female"; "May God grant you many children"; "In nine months we shall gather again to celebrate the birth of your baby." Such prayers are also offered for every young woman of marriageable age. Finding myself in the middle of a busy market in the summer of 2006, I heard a woman praying for a young girl in these words: *Igatu, igamu. Igamuta nwoke, muta nwanyi*, meaning that the young woman will conceive and deliver safely and give birth to a boy and a girl. In Igbo marriage, after the *Igba Nkwu* (marriage ceremony), the groom is expected to take the bride home immediately after the marriage feast is over. In a very popular song titled "Ada" (first daughter), celebrated singer Flavor N'abania captures the expectation of the people as the bride is taken to her new home by her groom:

> Mummy bye bye; Daddy bye bye;
> In nine months' time, we will come visiting;
> With a boy and girl, *ana-akpo ejima* [called twins]
> Ada Ada iyo . . . ooo.

[11] Ibid.

Hence, th**e** excessive emphasis on fertility is a source of stress for many marriages. For the woman, infertility confers her with no social status; the man often suffers from a sense of feeling incomplete as a man. The couple is condemned to that condition, which caused Rachel to lament, "Give me children or I die" (Gen 30:1). In many cases, lack of a child has led to return of the dowry by the husband's people. In those marriages that did not lead to divorce, polygamy becomes an option, where the man takes another woman for a wife. Deep beneath the persistent desire to bear a child is the fear of dying without leaving an heir.

3. Progeny

The extension of the bloodline is important to the Igbo. The society does not conceive of another world apart from the one they inhabit. Though the Igbo believe in the existence of gods and spirits and ancestors, their abodes are within the sphere of human existence. The fact that ancestors reincarnate in the newborn highlights the Igbo belief in the eternity of the earthly life. "That is to say that the mystical in African religion does not remove the human being from the earth; on the contrary, it allows him to live there again and again on indefinite basis."[12] Therefore, marriage and begetting of children are revered because of their capacity to ensure that the family "name" is not wiped out. The wish that their names should not be excised from the face of the earth is shown in such Igbo names as Amaechi, which is a prayer that one's homestead should not be taken over by rats and rodents due to lack of an heir. Emmanuel Obuna observes that, among the Igbo, "children are the uniting link in the rhythm of life guaranteeing

[12] Olupona, *African Spirituality*, 21.

the continuation of the family from one generation to the next."[13] Succession becomes the preoccupation of every family. Men and women react to succession differently. For the woman, her one desire is to be married and to have children who will perpetuate her memory in the family of her marriage. She is also aware that if she did not have a child, her social status as well as her sense of person is at risk.

Ikenga Metuh states that "motherhood is a much sought after status in most African societies. It is the dream and self fulfilment of every African young woman. A woman who cannot or has not given birth is a social misfit. If she has never conceived she is openly ridiculed and told that she is not a woman."[14] The Igbo society is no less different. Here, women who have female children still feel incomplete without a male child. This is because a woman without a male child has nothing to show that she is married to the husband's family. In other words, she requires the male child to ensure that her memory is alive in her family of marriage. For example, a young wife who had a baby girl from her marriage was reluctant to build a house with her marital family until she had a baby boy. Thus, for the woman, the male child (female children marry out) is important because of his role in sustaining his mother's legacy in the family. In this light, a woman without a male child often suffers the same fate as a childless woman.

According to Emmanuel C. Uwalaka, extended family and society pressure make life difficult for such a childless woman who often is at risk of losing her husband to a "fruitful" woman. If she is "lucky," she might be spared the trauma of divorce, yet she must put up with

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[13] Emmanuel Obuna, *African Priests and Celibacy* (Ibadan: Ambassador Books, 1986), 29, quoted in Abasili, "Seeing Tamar," 558.

[14] Emefie I. Metuh, *Comparative Studies of African Religions* (Enugu: Snaap, 1999), 188, quoted in Abasili, "Seeing Tamar," 561–62.

the indignity of sharing her husband with another woman in polygamous marriage.[15] There are a few men who will not attempt extramarital conception, but generally, the societal pressure can be enormous. The disadvantaged position that childless women endure, in fact, makes them dread the thought of being without a child; hence, they try very hard to escape the "curse" of barrenness. These days many women who are Catholic and barren will engage in prayer and devotions for divine help. It is common also to find many who go outside of the Church in search of babies in some prayer houses and miracle centers near and far. If she is a devotee of the traditional religion—and sometimes a Christian—she may consult the native doctors for a solution to her childlessness. Increasingly, many women are beginning to consult fertility experts for help. Where is the man in all of this? How does he deal with barrenness and the possibility of suffering loss of progeny?

Due to society's exoneration of the husband from infertility as well as the male ego, the man reluctantly participates in the quest for a solution. He often is not as persevering in seeking a solution as the woman. His lack of eagerness should not, however, be seen as stoic acceptance of childlessness. A feeling of incompleteness often breaks him. This feeling is likened to the same brokenness that moved Elizabeth to conclude that her childlessness was a disgrace and caused her to rejoice at the birth of her son John.[16] Therefore, for the Igbo man, to die without a child, especially a male child, is a calamity. To die with no child is "tantamount to a descent into oblivion, to be forgotten by both the living and the dead. This is because such a person has left

[15] Emmanuel C. Uwalaka, *Towards Sustainable Happy Marriage: A Functional Approach* (Owerri: Danstaring, 2008), 47.

[16] John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, Sacra Pagina 2 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 180.

no heir to pour libation for him."[17] Leaving no heir behind, he is not admitted into the prestigious status of the ancestors (*Ichie*) at his death. Determined to prevent their progeny from contamination by an infertile ancestor, the burial rites ensure that men who died without a male child are not allowed to reincarnate. As Mercy Oduyoye puts it, "Burial rituals for childless persons are enacted in such a way that is supposed to ensure that they are not reincarnated. Some would not call on childless ancestors in libation or name children after them."[18] Pouring libation to an impotent ancestor is construed as inviting the extinction of the race. This is why every Igbo man wishes that he not be among the pantheon of the barren, as reflected in such Igbo names as Ahamefuna (my name shall not be lost) and Ikemefuna (my lineage will not disappear).[19]

Men who experience childlessness are often susceptible to subtle pressure from the society and relations, such that they are often reminded of the implications of dying childless or without any male child. Either to avoid what society views as a tragedy, they divorce their wives to marry another "fruitful" woman or they retain both women in polygamous union. In a male-dominated society like the Igbo, women usually take most of the blame for childlessness even though the man may be responsible. With better research into the causes of infertility, it is now known that men often are the ones not able to achieve fertility. For example, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), poor ejaculation, and low sperm count are infertility factors that are common to men. Regarding the sex of the baby, it is common scientific knowledge that male chromosomes

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[17] Abasili, "Seeing Tamar," 567.

[18] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "A Coming Home to Myself: The Childless Woman in the West African Space," in *Liberating Eschatology: Essays in Honor of Letty M. Russell*, ed. Margaret A. Farley and Serene Jones (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 113.

[19] Abasili, "Seeing Tamar," 567.

determine if the child is to be a boy. The overwhelming desire for an heir forces many good Catholic husbands to jettison their faith, and the one-man-one-wife policy of the Church, in favor of polygamy or extramarital copulation.

One will think that given the Igbo desire for children, adoption should be an option for a couple. This is not the case. There is a general lack of interest in adopting a child because the men fear being accused by the clan of importing an illegitimate child to succeed them. Alexander Abasili observes that "child adoption is unfortunately not yet well appreciated in Igbo culture (and most African traditions) because for some people it implies the importation of a 'foreigner' into the lineage. It is always a reluctant resort, which normally exposes the adopted child to ridicule later in life."[20] This is the reason why couples who want to adopt do so in secret: the woman feigns pregnancy for nine months before adoption, or she disappears from the family for nine months, only coming back when the baby is adopted. The lack of interest in adoption raises the question of the status of orphans in the Igbo society. The concept of keeping children in orphanages is a practice that came with Western colonization. Prior to that period, there was the practice of communal parenting, whereby extended families took care of the orphans. Where there were no relatives, a generous family took the responsibility to raise the child. It is not that the Igbo dislike the orphan. The truth is that most people believe that everyone can and should be fruitful. To prove this truth as well as maintain a "pure" bloodline, families seek varied communal ways to resolve infertility.

[20] Abasili, "Seeing Tamar," 568.

CHAPTER 3

RETRIEVING CO-PARENTING

Chapter 3 explores the idea of co-parenting embedded in the Igbo family practices. I will look at how they raise children as well as deal with childlessness. This will help us to appreciate what informs such reproductive choices as spiritual intercession, catastrophic fertility expenditure, extramarital conception, and baby stealing as a way of responding to infertility. I will argue that communality is a common feature of the Igbo response to child raising and childlessness.

1. Igbo Family System

Extended family practice defines the Igbo family system. The practice of communal parenting is deeply rooted in the understanding of how God relates to human beings. The idea that God works through the community is evident. The community provides the environment through which God nourishes individuals. "The extended family refers to that patrilineal social structure or unit, which has a man, his brothers, sisters and their immediate families and who can trace their origin by blood to a common ancestor or progenitor."[1] Extended family as a social system has the character of enduring relationships from one generation to the next. The Igbo society uses extended family to maintain social and ethical order by deploying norms and values. Chike Ekeopara reveals this fact when he writes that extended family "has the power and

[1] Chike A. Ekeopara, "The Impact of the Extended Family System on Socio-Ethical Order in Igboland," *American Journal of Social Issues and Humanities* 2, no. 4 (2012): 262.

authority to exert influence in the attitudes, behavior and conduct of individual members of its unit. Its influence covers the area of social relationships, interaction and morality."[2]

The family, including the extended family, is the beginning of group identity for the individual in society. It tries to educate, teach, and model for its members the *omenala*, the customs and tradition of the society in a process known as socialization. While nuclear families exist, extended families provide the environment to interact beyond the nuclear unit. Through it, children begin to learn simple cultural norms and values, dos and don'ts, the ethical principles and moral expectation of society.[3] One of the biggest strengths of the extended family is the security it offers to its members. In moments of crisis, for example, some people may seek refuge in the village and in the family of their mother until the crisis is over. Ekeoprara rightly captures this practice when he declares, "In *Things Fall Apart,* when Okonkwo committed accidental murder of a kinsman, and was banished from his own community, he ran to his mother's village, where he had immunity, to take refuge."[4]

It is normal to feel protected and supported in this system even beyond one's nuclear family. In my growing-up years in my town, I observed that each time I was fleeing from being whipped for wrongdoing and managed to run into the house and into the arms of a relative or neighbor, I would save myself from the whip. The tradition forbade my pursuer from trying to forcibly extract me from the protection of my rescuer. On the other hand, the one in whose arms I sought protection was expected not to hand me over to my pursuer without first looking into and settling whatever issues caused the conflict. Community support is also present in the case

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[2] Ekeopara, "The Impact," 262.

[3] Ibid., 263.

[4] Ibid., 264.

of bereavement. When a woman loses her husband, groups of women regularly take turns to be with her, helping her to do basic chores and assisting her in other matters until after the burial. Besides the women, the extended family endeavors to raise money as well as items needed for the burial.

This communal approach to ameliorating traumatic moments is invaluable to the sufferer, for it goes a long way in reducing the psychological trauma of the mourning person. Consequently, "the extended family system helps to build a bond of fellowship, solidarity, love, unity and progress among its members. Based on the communalistic nature of life in pre-colonial Igbo societies, a strong bond of solidarity prevailed among all the component units of the extended family."[5] This solidarity is reflected in the popular Igbo saying *anya na agba mmiri, imi esoro ya* (when the eye cries, the nose also cry). According to this philosophy, whatever a member is experiencing, richness or poverty, honor or disgrace, plenty or lack, the other members also experience the same. In the extended family arrangement, there is a strict definition of status and roles, which enables everyone to assume their appropriate roles to one another. For instance, if you are a mother, you are expected to play a mother's role to all children, whose status is children and who in turn are to play the role of children. Chieka Ifemesia observes, "Kinship ties defined the status and roles of every person in the society and determined the behaviours of members towards themselves and the outside world."[6] In this type of atmosphere, role-playing creates a deep sense of communal spirit where members feel moved by others' predicament and where everyone assists the other to bear the burdens of life. This

[5] Ekeopara, "The Impact," 264.

[6] Chieka Ifemesia, *Traditional Humane Living among the Igbo: An Historical Perspective* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Press, 1979), 40, quoted in Ekeopara, "The Impact," 265.

communal spirit seems to be fading away and being replaced with Western-style nuclear family system.

Nowadays, because of the Igbo contact with Western civilization, the extended family system has undergone some changes. Families and society bound together by strong kinship ties are witnessing a shift to individualism. This tendency to think of and mind one's own nuclear family is characteristic of the new family system in the Igbo society. The emergence of the nuclear family system is gradually defining the terms of relationship among the peoples. One of the areas badly affected is child raising and support for childless marriages. The philosophy that the person who hears the cry of a child should hurry to his or her rescue or assistance is quickly disappearing. This philosophy, which sees every child as belonging to all, is fading rapidly. The emphasis of the Western nuclear family on monogamy ensured that the concept of "father for the community" or "child for the community" is dying. Ekeopara rightly observes that "the spirit of solidarity, which characterized life in the extended family, has given way to individual life and living. A situation where members of the extended family no longer have the right to discipline and control children of their blood brothers and sisters has helped to undermine the moral life and discipline of children in the society."[7] In traditional society, children lived with their aunts, uncles, godparents, or even family friends for several weeks, months, or years. In some cases, these children were deliberately sent to live with these adults to fill up the "gap" created by their inability to conceive. These days, however, parents are no longer eager to release their children for this kind of visit. It is true that parents fear for the safety of their children due to incidences of

[7] Ekeopara, "The Impact," 266.

kidnapping and human rituals;[8] everyone agrees, though, that it is impossible to survive without the human community.

In the last twenty years, as the family system slowly moved from extended family structure to nuclear, raising a child also moved from being a community effort to a private enterprise. Mercy Amba Oduyoye characterizes the situation thus, "The nuclear family is taking over, making the factor of childlessness even more critical."[9] This shift as well as the fear for the safety of the child has resulted in "baby hoarding"—the attitude of shielding one's child from being placed in the care of other adults. Alienated from responsibility toward the children around them, couples in childless marriages feel pressured to look for a child to call their own. Lacking the opportunity to engage in parenting children in the community, many childless couples come face to face with the reality of their loss. This may create baby jealousy in some couples. For example, a woman in Nigeria reportedly assaulted her neighbor's baby for this reason. In extreme cases, some couples will go as far as stealing others' babies. Lest we imply that baby stealing is a result of envy induced by lack of fertility, let us recall that childless couples have always existed in our society, yet there was little or no snatching of babies in the older generation. I believe that the spike in robbing families of their babies is a result of the breakdown of a communal way of raising children. The erosion of communal parenting has increased the shame of living without a chance to parent. It appears that one of the ways to correct this crisis is

[8] Olusesan Ayodeji Makinde, Olalekan Olaleye, Olufunmbi Olukemi Makinde, Svetlana S. Huntley, and Brandon Brown, "Baby Factories in Nigeria: Starting the Discussion Toward a National Prevention Policy," *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 18, no. 1 (2017): 102. In this article, the authors observe that the need to continue to meet the demands of the organ market also fuels the breeding of children to harvest their organs. I would add that this harvesting can be either for medical reasons or for a money ritual for the purposes of getting rich and famous.

[9] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "A Coming Home to Myself: The Childless Woman in the West African Space," in *Liberating Eschatology: Essays in Honor of Letty M. Russell*, ed. Margaret A. Farley and Serene Jones (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 111.

to rediscover the extended family system through Pope Francis's call for a renewal of the family structure. In *Amoris Laetitia*, he states that the spirituality of the sacrament of marriage has a deeply social character. He focuses on an extended view of family as opposed to a nuclear view. He views family as made up of a wider network of relationship that includes aunts and uncles, cousins, relatives of relatives, and friends.[10] Underlying this call is an understanding that the community exists for the good of the individual. This notion underpins Igbo theology of the child.

2. Igbo Notion of the Child

The name *Chinenye Nwa* (God gives a child) captures what a child means for the Igbo. Deeply religious in nature, the Igbo value a child so much because they consider it a blessing from God for the whole community. The lack of a child seems to cause deep pain to the couples, much like Hannah felt in 1 Samuel 1:3-10; this lack is also, to some extent, a source of worry to the family, friends, and neighbors. The entire happiness of a couple's life depends on having a child. The birth of a child is a joy to the entire Igbo community, in the same manner that a baptized child is a gift to the faith community. A popular adage says that *otu onye adighi alu nwanyi* (one person does not marry a wife). In other words, since marriage involves the community, any child born to a union becomes the responsibility of the entire community. In marriage and child raising the entire community—the living, the dead, and those yet to be born—come together to focus on giving life. Thus, "marriage is a focus of existence . . . the point where all the members of a given community meet, the departed, the living and those yet unborn. All dimensions of time meet here and the whole drama of history is repeated, renewed and

[10] Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, chap. 5.

revitalized. . . . Therefore it is a duty, a requirement from the corporate society, and a rhythm of life in which everyone must participate."[11] The birth of a child is a cause for celebration within the community. There is a feeling of ownership toward the newborn child, manifested in the very sentiment that "our" child is born. There is also ingrained in the mind of any child born into a town the feeling of belonging to the community. Growing up in my little town of Amagu, Nigeria, I can recall more than fifty women and men other than my own parents whom I called and still call *mma* (mother), *nne* (big mother), and *papa* (daddy) or *dede* (big daddy). This captures the classical Igbo co-parenting practice, which thrives on the vision that a child belongs to the community.

3. Igbo Co-Parenting Practices

i. Basis for Igbo Child-Raising Practices

Among the Igbo, the interaction between the living, the ancestors, and the unborn is often viewed as a sacred drama. "In most African societies, it is thought that the newborn of both sexes, while being the result of fertilization of woman by man, carry within them (in forms defined by each individual society) an ancestor."[12] The fact that the ancestors interact with the unborn and the living, in the community, ensures a single religious bond. In this unity, the distinction between religion and community is absent. They are the same. One who offends the moral sensibility of the community is said to have committed *aru* (taboo), which literally translates "pollution." In many instances, the rules governing *aru* is "purity" based, much like

[11] Augustus C. Izekwe, *The Future of Christian Marriage among the Igbo Vis-à-vis Childlessness: A Canonical Cum Pastoral Study of Canon 1055 Par. 1* (Berlin: Logos Verlag, 2015), 10.

[12] Jacob K. Olupona, ed., *African Spirituality: Forms, Meanings and Expressions*, World Spirituality (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 21.

the Jewish law that places a menstruating woman under *niddah* (isolation).[13] The Igbo dread the shame that a child who commits *aru* brings to the family, and the community forces adults to engage in collective parenting. *Aru* symbolizes decay, and the Igbo abhor decay because it works against *ndu* (life). Obeying the religious creeds and practices of the community ensures life. The society tries to inculcate in the child these creeds and practices to avoid shame. Therefore, through the community children learn ethical behavior. According to Augustus Izekwe, "To be without religion amounts to a self-banning from the entire society. Religion instilled, influenced and affected their daily activities."[14] Hence, a child's ethical behavior is often assessed from the standpoint of the family or community he or she came from. For instance, when a child behaves badly within his own community, people ask: "What family does he come from?" On the other hand, when he behaves badly outside of his community, people ask: "What community is he from?" Implied in these questions is the understanding that a child belongs to the community, whose duty is to pass on to the child proper ethical behaviors. The communal disposition of the Igbo toward the individual is comparable to what Plato urged his Greek society many centuries ago. In the *Republic*, "Plato's Socrates explains to Glaucon and Adeimantus—ironically, Plato's brothers—that all the guardians of his city-in-speech will see and treat one another as brother, sister, father, mother, son, or daughter."[15] It is also similar to Jesus' communal attitude to dealing with strangers. For instance, in restoring the hemorrhaging woman to her community as he called her "daughter" (Mark 5:34), Jesus seems to point to the inextricable relationship

[13] In Leviticus 15:31 it is believed that "the build-up of impurity in the community defiles the sanctuary situated within it even without direct contact.

[14] Izekwe, *The Future of Christian Marriage*, 13.

[15] Bernard G. Prusak, *Parental Obligations and Bioethics: The Duties of a Creator* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 103.

between a child and its community. Carol Newsom, Sharon Ringe, and Jacqueline Lapsley observe the significance of being called "daughter." They write, "By calling her 'Daughter,' he [Jesus] also signals her reincorporation into the community, from which she had become isolated due to her illness."[16] Thus, for the Igbo society, often, the family or community is indicted if a child's behavior is wrong. With this mind-set, relatives, friends, and neighbors often feel obligated to nurture a child but will feel like they will let down the community if the child misbehaves.

ii. Igbo Communal Response to Child Raising

In Igbo parental practice, children are raised not only by biological parents but also by aunts, uncles, grandparents, neighbors, and distant relations. The duty of overseeing the training of a child is a community affair. Hence, the Igbo theology of parenthood is encapsulated in the saying that *otu onye adighi enwo nwa* (it takes a village to raise a child). This explains why, in some cases, couples who are childless bring children of relatives or friends to live with them for some years. In some instances, neighbors and the community also get involved in providing a home for some children, even if it is for a short period. There can be no disputing the fact that a child primarily belongs to his biological parents; nevertheless, it is equally true to argue that he or she also belongs to the community. For instance, even in the Western world, which is often seen as highly individualistic, communities also take pride in the honorable behaviors of their members, while they will similarly feel embarrassed by the dishonorable actions of any one of their own. In this type of society, where privacy and autonomy are stressed, the law often

[16] Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, eds., *Women's Bible Commentary*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 483.

imposes punishment on crimes to send the message that one is a member of that community and that what one does affects the rest of the members.

Yet some do not agree that the community has any right to be involved in the raising or disciplining of a child. In Dallas, Texas, United States, after four security guards reportedly whipped some kids who broke in to a mall, the mother of those kids argued that the guards had no right to whip her children. After marches and rallies were held in protest, the four guards were arrested. The guards held their ground, however, insisting that they dished out the punishment rather than see the boys get police records. They added, "It takes a village to raise a child." The grand jury refused to indict the four men. The mother of the kids felt that justice was not served. She said that if she were called upon, she would have punished her sons in her own way.[17]

Hugh LaFollette has a contrary view. He argues that the state has a right to remove a child from abusive parents, since parents have only a conditional right to their child, dependent on somehow proving, in advance, that one would make a fit parent.[18] His position further sheds light on the necessity for communal responsibility toward a child. While LaFollette makes the argument for the state to intervene in the case of neglect of a child, the Igbo society does not wait for abuse to happen before taking up this responsibility. Though the circumstance may be different, LaFollette's position does strengthen the Igbo belief in communal responsibility toward a child. Both LaFollette and the Igbo will agree that, if the parents of the Dallas kids were not able to discipline their children who could be causing injury to people, the community has the right to step in to correct the problem. It follows that because an entire community is

[17] Sherri Winston, "Can This 'Village' Afford Vigilante?" *Sun Sentinel*, July 5, 1995, accessed April 3, 2017, http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1995-07-05/lifestyle/9507030185_1_boys-islam-members-punishment.

[18] Hugh LaFollette, "Licensing Parents," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 9, no. 2 (1980): 187, quoted in Prusak, *Parental Obligations and Bioethics*, 101.

impacted by the behavior of an individual, human beings are compelled to recognize the importance of community concerning a child's development. For those parents who think that they can bring up their children without input from others within the community, it is hard to imagine how such children can entirely avoid the influences of teachers, clergy, neighbors, and associations outside of family control. The risk of raising a child without community support is that while we concentrate on our own children, our society inevitably shows a "collective indifference to other people's children."[19] It is hard to imagine the negative consequence of such neglect to a community.

More recently in Igbo society, parents are leaning toward tending to their own children while at the same time avoiding getting involved in the affairs of other children. This is understandable, owing to their genuine concern for the safety of their children. These days, stories abound of children who have been abused by foster parents or guardians who use them for child labor or prostitution. In some instances, the foster parent or guardian has been accused of using the child for a ritual. For instance, residents of the Igbo city of Owerri were "treated to a morbid spectacle as the police command paraded four suspects and the decomposing head of an 18-year old Chinwe Doris Perpetua Obieri, who was murdered for ritual purposes."[20] In spite of a parent's fear of this type of happening, it is doubtless that children belong to the community in a special and real way and could never possibly live without this context. It is therefore not too hard to see that both parents and community have a claim to a child. While parents may have biological claim to a child, the Igbo community does seem to have a moral claim. This is the

[19] Viviana A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), xiii, as cited in Prusak, *Parental Obligations and Bioethics*, 103–4.

[20] Chidi Nkwoapara, "18 Year Old Girl Beheaded for Ritual in Imo, Nigeria," *Vanguard*, October 28, 2009, accessed June 1, 2017, http://newsrescue.com/18-year-old-girl-beheaded-for-rituals-in-imo-nigeria/#ixzz4Xi9YQpRC.

reason why the Igbo community is outraged when a child commits a taboo. The outrage may be born out of the thinking that it does not make sense for the adult to stand by and watch a child misbehave simply because they do not share a biological relationship. It follows, then, that parenthood should not be defined only by biological link. To narrow parenting to biological connection portends the risk of moral atrophy within the community in matters of raising children.

In considering what nature reveals to us about raising children, many, especially in Western societies, have argued that letting other adults be "parent" to children who are not their own will distort the growth of the child and will also not allow the biological parents to impart the formation and skills they want for their children. Letting others parent another person's child, for them, will constitute an "invasive oversight and correction [that] would likely transform the terms of the relationship."[21] While this is a valid concern, it assumes that only biological parents in contrast to social parents (nonbiological) can successfully model a good life for the child. Besides, we know that other adults within society often have and do take care of orphans in the absence of the biological parents. Again, it is necessary to also acknowledge that there have been instances where children raised by social parents have turned out better off than those raised by biological parents. This notwithstanding, it will be most desirable that the biological parents and the social parents cooperate in the upbringing of the child for the good of society.

Even though the Igbo society seems to be drifting toward parents-only raising of the child, the evidence I have encountered so far support the call for community involvement in the upbringing of the child. When I listen to some of my friends in societies that have lost community involvement in the training of a child, I notice that a common feeling of loss seems

[21] Prusak, *Parental Obligations and Bioethics*, 101–2.

to prevail; hence, the Igbo cannot afford to shirk from this noble collective vocation. The idea that raising children is a responsibility of the community is supported by the fact that amid growing individualism in Western societies, some important voices still recognize the necessity of communal effort in this regard. Bernard Prusak notes: "I have had too little to say against the tendency of parents, at least in so-called first-world countries like the United States, to 'devote themselves to doing their best for their own children, rather than to also concern themselves with the needs of others, in particular, other children."[22] In contrast, taking responsibility for the ethical behavior of children other than one's own is a long-held Igbo understanding of what parenting should be.

While parents are invaluable in the life of a child, it is also true that, in bringing up a child, aunts, uncles, godparents, teachers, priests, neighbors, and friends play equally valuable roles. This is so because a normal tendency of a species is to support its own survival. This instinct may provide evidence for communal parenting. It is not in the best interest of the society to have only biological parents raise their children. The care and help provided by the community ensures that humanity survives through difficult times with hope. A good number of orphans in the Igbo society are cared for and, in some cases, suckled by a mother other than their biological mother. Just as orphans do not have biological parents, not all parents can have their own children. For these parents, it cannot be true that because they lacked their own biological children they cannot or should not therefore take on the role of parents to other children. Co-parenting is good for the community, for it essentially ensures that children are cared for in the absence of biological parents. Hence, the support that community gives to the individual (including the childless adults) ensures the thriving of human life. In the situation where, for

[22] Prusak, *Parental Obligations and Bioethics*, 102.

instance, children are strictly forbidden to be parented by others, the child who loses his or her parents—through death, illness, or other circumstances—is at risk of isolation. Related to this, a society that shuns childless members of its community is losing an important segment of nurturers. When the community cares for its adult population, particularly the childless couples, it helps the community to continue parenting and withstand shocks in the community should there be death, incapacity, or absence of the biological parents. In an interesting follow-up on Lisa Sowle Cahill's work, Ted Peters explores the importance of other ways of being parent besides biological connection, thereby adumbrating the fact of social parenting. He asks similar questions to Cahill regarding whether, given the reality of homosexual unions, single-parent families, and blended families, biological connection is necessary for family or parental love and commitment. He agrees with Cahill that the "biological relationship should, ideally, be the foundation of the social family; but, recognizing the imperfections that cause us to fall short of the ideal, she affirms adoption and similar non-biological family ties."[23]

In as much as biological parents play an invaluable role in the life of a child, it is equally important to look at the key role social parents play in the upbringing of a child. Children attend schools from elementary school through college where they meet other adults who model acceptable human conduct. It seems that an average child spends more time with other parents or adults than with the biological parents. For example, five days of the week are spent in class; the weekend is often spent in Church and at other social engagements where adults other than a child's own parents look after him or her.

[23] Ted Peters, *For the Love of Children: Genetic Technology and the Future of the Family* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 171.

Discounting the notion that parenthood is strictly biological, Charis Thompson tries to show through the use of ARTs that society can assign parenthood. Thompson argues that "recent legal cases involving contested parentage have played a part in moving contemporary U.S. conceptions of parentage from something that is socially fixed and biologically natural toward something that is more voluntaristic and enforceable through contracts expressing procreational intent."[24] This certainly points to the fact that parenthood may be more of a social construct than a biological reality, or, to put it in another way, social parents play equally, if not more, valuable roles as the legal parents.

While some parents in the Igbo society insist on raising their children for various reasons, not least of which is the safety of their children, what I find to be most effective is the huge impact of communal parenting embedded in that Igbo saying *otu onye adighi azu nwa* (one person does not raise a child). This is true because every child is born into a context, and insistence on raising the child only in the nuclear family limits the child's context and development. Further highlighting the role of society in a child's upbringing, Bernhard Jussen engages in extensive discussion on biological and social reproduction. He found that, in many societies, those who transmit civil and kinship status are considered the "real" parents. His conclusion is that parenthood seems to be a cultural construct. An instance of this is in the treatment of illegitimate children where law is considered over biology. He writes, "Scholars have abandoned their privileging of the legal texts, their fixation on descent and alliance and structuralist methodologies, in favor of an analysis of kinship as practice."[25] To support his

[24] Charis Thompson, *Making Parents: The Ontological Choreography of Reproductive Technologies* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 146.

[25] Bernhard Jussen, *Spiritual Kinship as Social Practice: Godparenthood and Adoption in the Early Middle Ages*, trans. Pamela Selwyn (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2000), 29.

position, he states that "among the Eskimos [Inuit], 'genuine' kin are defined by residence, not biology."[26] It is therefore necessary to conclude that in matters of raising children, the Igbo practice of co-parenting is well supported by scholars and by the example of the Inuit. This brings us to the question of the Igbo attitude to childlessness. Do the Igbo show communal attention to childless couples?

iii. Igbo Communal Response to Childlessness

While some Igbo couples may seek to resolve childlessness by polygamy, divorce, spiritual intercession, catastrophic fertility expenditure, extramarital conception, and baby stealing, it is the support offered by the community that I want to discuss. Inheriting a deceased brother's wife, known as *nkuchi*, was practiced in the Igbo society. Besides protecting the widow and ensuring that the brother's property remains within the family, it also made it possible for the living brother to continue to sustain his brother's lineage by procreating with his wife. This is like Levirate marriage among the Jews.[27] In Levirate marriage, a man marries the wife of his late brother who had no child, for reproduction. The practice of *nkuchi* seems to support the notion among the Igbos that *otu onye anaghi alu nwanyi*, meaning that marriage does not just happen between two individuals. In other words, a woman who marries a man is married with the entire family. This may explain why there is no new marriage ceremony in *nkuchi*. The brother of the deceased or sometimes a man from the clan simply assumes the duties of husband. There are some variations to the practice of *nkuchi*. For instance, there are situations where a man will

[26] Ibid., 18.

[27] Cf. Genesis 38. The passage focuses on Judah and his family. When Onan refused to deposit his seed into Tamar as law required him to do for his late brother, Er, Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute and slept with Judah, with whom she bore Perez and Zerah.

inherit the dead father's wife. This normally happens if the wife is young and both man and woman agree to this arrangement. There is no coercion. Though men and women understand that this is the custom, there is freedom to choose. This is not to deny that there are instances of coercion on the part of some men. In other instances, some fathers marry a wife for their son who suddenly died without marrying. In this circumstance, the father plays the role of husband to the deceased son's wife. Yet another variation of *nkuchi* happens when a family that does not have an heir encourages one of their daughters not to get married but to remain in the parents' home in order to raise children and maintain the family line. This happens when the family does not have male children or has lost them through death. In this case, the woman is free to engage any man of her choosing in sexual relationship with the understanding that the children of that union belong to the woman's family. Here, she stands in the position of her brother, hoping to deliver a male child that will maintain her family lineage.

Another communal attempt at resolving infertility is "same-gender" marriage. In Igbo culture when a woman's husband dies leaving her with no children, she is allowed by the community to marry another woman and bring her home. Both the "woman-husband" and "woman-wife" would agree to have a man from the community or neighboring community to be in a sexual relationship with the "woman-wife" to have the desired children for the "woman-husband." The children born in this sexual union belong to the "woman-husband" and not to the man who impregnated the woman. It should be noted that this type of sexual union is normally regarded as a taboo in the Igbo society; however, in the case of helping infertile women achieve motherhood, the culture is willing to devise a different norm for making decisions. Relaxing the moral rules, some argue, to allow a woman to marry another woman for the sake of procreation is like same-sex marriage. While I agree that both may be similar in title, they are different in

intent. While sexual union between the women seems to be totally absent in the Igbo marital structure, two people of the same sex who are engaged in a sexual relationship often contract same-sex marriage. The tendency to relax moral rules to help a childless couple was explained very well by Mercy Oduyoye thus: "Men I have known as colleagues and friends would say to me, joking of course, 'If our brother is the problem we stand ready to help.' . . . These men were not licentious, promiscuous persons, ready to take advantage of desperate women. They too were socialized by a culture that requires them to 'hide the brother's shame.'"[28] For their part, some women, in trying to "hide their sisters shame," may encourage adopting a baby or engaging in extramarital conception, in which case the woman imputes the resulting pregnancy on her husband. Nevertheless, Oduyoye calls for a return to the African communal parenthood as a way of giving a sense of belonging to childless marriages. "In spite of the cultural expectations among my own people that every woman, whether or not she has 'womb-children,' must be ready to assume a mothering role to children of other women of the family, there is usually frantic activity on the part of all to ensure that each member of the family, woman or man, joins in actually reproducing the human race."[29] Mercy Oduyoye, herself childless, represents the typical communal response to infertility. Finding herself unable to conceive, she wished that her husband could get a baby from elsewhere. She said: "I confess to wishing at one time that Dupe would in this case be a traditionalist—that is, that he would seek another mother for his children."[30] Despite her vulnerability and the moral consequence, she was open to her husband fathering a child outside of marriage, it seems. Oduyoye's willingness to engage another woman

[28] Oduyoye, "A Coming Home," 114.

[29] Ibid., 111.

[30] Oduyoye, "A Coming Home," 114.

in the community to resolve infertility is similar to Sarah engaging Hagar to bear Ishmael. I notice that both Sarah and Oduyoye were influenced by culturally approved methods to solve their desperation. Oduyoye indicates, however, that she and her husband did not to go in the direction of Sarah and Abraham. She writes, "As it happened, even my father's counseling for legal adoption was rejected by Dupe. 'Do you lack children to look after?' Dupe asked me. I had no lack of demands on my mothering instincts, and I shared the duties, joys, and sorrows of this form of parenting with Dupe."[31] Therefore, Mercy and Dupe modeled another communal response to infertility rather than a form of surrogacy.

Another significant aspect of the Igbo culture that supports the childless couple, especially the woman, can be found in the maternal or paternal family support. In most instances, women who were mistreated because of childlessness were often well received by their mother's family and received help from maternal relatives.[32] Another significant source of support for childless couples can be groups of women within a community. One such group is the *kekonakona* society, which "helps alleviate this pain . . . , a support group for barren women that facilitates these women's participation in community life."[33] Though the *kekonakona* exists in the neighboring, non-Igbo town of Lopon, I have no doubt that such groups do exist in some Igbo communities. In addition to associations that cater to the childless, polygamy also presents the context for barren women to exercise parenting. In this instance, co-wives are encouraged to

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[31] Ibid.

[32] Ulla Larsen, Marida Hollos, Oka Obono and Bruce Whitehouse, "Suffering Infertility: The Impact of Infertility on Women's Life Experiences in Two Nigerian Communities," *Journal of Biosocial Science* 42, no. 6 (2010): 797.

[33] Marida Hollos and Bruce Whitehouse, "Definitions and the Experience of Fertility Problems: Infertile and Sub-Fertile Women, Childless Mothers, and Honorary Mothers in Two Southern Nigerian Communities," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (2014), 11. On August 8, 2016, I accessed the online publication that was published in PMC on March 15, 2015.

help raise each other's children. In addition, if there is a childless wife among them, she too is encouraged to play the role of mother to all the children in the family.[34] The desire to accommodate her in the role of parenting points to the Igbo understanding of parenting as a communal effort regardless of whether a woman has her own child.

Not minding that the practice of fostering is no longer as common as it used to be up until the 1990s, many Igbo adults still recognize their potential roles as parents to other children. While there are instances of childless couples fostering children of their friends, in most cases fostering of a sister's son or a brother's daughter is more common. In this arrangement, there is a deliberate intention to help alleviate the trauma of childlessness by "donating" a child who will warm the house as well as offer the foster parents the opportunity to parent. Marida Hollos captures how this practice works as follows:

> It is virtually impossible for one person to fetch water and firewood, cook meals, wash clothes and keep house, thus children are usually recruited for all menial tasks. Even in a polygynous compound or in their father's home, childless women, and, to a lesser extent subfertile women, have a serious disadvantage in performing these daily tasks. Their recourse is to foster in relatives' children, whom they agree to raise and school in return for help with daily chores. This arrangement would appear to be advantageous for all parties concerned: The childless woman receives not only help but the love and loyalty of a younger person, and the children receive the care and attention of a devoted adult.[35]

While this practice helps to alleviate in the short term the suffering of infertility in the childless couple, it usually does not last. Often the biological parents of the child eventually come for them. In the event that the parents take the child back, the foster couple reverts to their earlier situation of living without a child.

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[34] Larsen, Hollos, Obono, and Whitehouse, "Suffering Infertility," 797.

[35] Hollos and Whitehouse, "Definitions and the Experience," 9.

Although some may argue that the high expectation of children from married couples in Igbo society portrays it as less supportive of childless marriages, it is important to know that, in general, families, friends, and neighbors try to help couples experiencing infertility to surmount it. The Igbo culture never really abandons the barren nor completely views infertility as an individual problem. If they view marriage as communal, as well as children as belonging to the community, they must equally view lack of children as affecting the community. Therefore, the effort to support the barren in achieving fertility or alleviating trauma is a strong indication of a communal effort at resolving infertility. Even when the couple is childless, it is obvious that the community, beginning with the family and extending to the clan, join hands to try to resolve the issue. This is possible because of a sense of co-parenting present in the culture and the strong clan bond that exists among the people. From the foregoing, it is clear that there exists among the Igbo an all-hands-on-deck attitude toward achieving fruitfulness. In other words, if raising a child requires a communal effort, it follows that responding to infertility is not only the responsibility of the couple.

CHAPTER 4

RETRIEVING THE GODPARENT/GODCHILD BOND

In this chapter, I will look at the role Christian rituals play in conferring a special relationship between individuals who become godparents and godchildren. In particular, I will turn to the ecclesial tradition to learn what the Church believes when it teaches that baptism confers a spiritual kinship between godparents and godchildren. I will show the relationship between the Igbo practice of co-parenting embedded in the theology of *otu onye adighi enwo nwa* (it takes a village to raise a child) and the Christian conferring of kinship through baptism. I will argue for a retrieval of communal parenting by restoring the bond that exists between a godchild and his or her godparents as a means of responding to the problem of baby stealing and childlessness among Christian couples in the Igbo society.

1. Meaning of Rituals

Even though ritual is historically associated with the Church and religious rites, scholars have now discovered that life itself is a ritual. In this ritual called life, the human body plays a central role. It is the "original means of experiencing and changing the world."[1] It means that in experiencing the world, the body is not passive but active. It means that the ritualized nature affects the human impulses, emotions, behavior, and culture. In a 1997 study, Talal Asad states that anthropologists were mistaken in regarding the body as noncultural, "despite significant evidence that the body, impulses and all, is culturally developed by the embodied person and his

[1] Kimberly Hope Belcher, *Efficacious Engagement: Sacramental Participation in the Trinitarian Mystery* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 48.

or her community."[2] Rituals influence the way we do things, talk, or see the world. Rituals are expressed in signs and symbols. Symbols usually make real that which they signify. "Symbols differ from signs because they have multiple meanings, carry covert as well as overt messages and evoke feelings."[3] Catherine Bell states: "Symbols are often said to be sacred signs, but it is more accurate to call them signs of the sacred or signs of sacred realities."[4] They point to something that is uniquely meaningful or sacred to a group or a person. The sacredness of what is pointed at is connected with the symbol.[5] Because the symbols expressed in rituals have the power to bind people, it is in the character of "all rituals [to] have this exemplary, model-displaying character; in a sense, they might be said to 'create' society."[6]

There are many types of rituals, but I want to focus on transition ritual, which is relevant to my study. This ritual celebrates important turning points in an individual's life. "Sometimes called life-cycle rituals, many of them occur when people leave a stage of life with one social standing and set of relationships and enter into another stage with a different standing and set of relationships, for example, the movement from childhood to adulthood or the movement from being single to being married."[7] In my culture, for instance, young men are initiated into the *mmawu* (masquerade) cult by making them cross a blazing fire (so we were told) in the middle of the night, showing to them the secret masquerade leaves, and teaching them esoteric *mmawu*

[2] Ibid., 47.

[3] Joseph Martos, *The Sacraments: An Interdisciplinary and Interactive Study* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 88.

[4] Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 155–59 as quoted in Martos, *The Sacraments*, 88.

[5] Bell, *Ritual*, 155–59.

[6] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 113–14.

[7] Martos, *The Sacraments*, 68.

language. The ritual initiates young men into manhood, for whoever fails to pass through the fire is a weakling and therefore rejected from the group.

Rituals have several characteristics, but I will concentrate on tradition and formalism for their relevance to my topic. Rituals usually have a tradition. Traditionalism means "a perceived link to the past that invests a ritual with historical weight and importance."[8] There exist in my culture the tradition of handing on the *ofo*, which is a wood carving that is a symbol of authority. The eldest male in the family held the *ofo*. After his death, the new eldest male receives the *ofo* in a ritual. The other element of ritual is formality. This "deliberate, formal behavior draws attention to what is being done, provides a heightened sense of seriousness, and is more difficult to interrupt."[9] Formality is a characteristic of the Catholic sacraments because they are written, their words are to be memorized or read from a book, and their actions are determined by the instructions in the rite, which is the scripted form of the ritual.[10]

Ritual formality produces ritual sensibility, which is the attitudes that appear to predominate in a ritual celebration.[11] "They might therefore be thought of as modes of awareness or modes of consciousness that can be found in individuals and groups during a ritual performance."[12] The two relevant ritual sensibilities I will consider are ritualization and liturgy. Ritualization may be understood as the biological basis of ritual. It is associated with the studies of animal behavior. It means "stylized, repeated gestures and postures of animals." This is

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[8] Martos, *The Sacraments*, 84.

[9] Ibid., 83.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid., 91.

[12] Ibid.

observable when animals mate or try to defend themselves.[13] Human beings often engage in ritualization. For instance, brushing one's teeth and switching off the light are usually all human rituals. For the most part, these rituals are carried out unconsciously and automatically. Psychologists call such action ritualistic "when it is done repeatedly without any need to do so."[14] The other aspect of ritual sensibility is the liturgy. According to Joseph Martos, "Liturgy is a ritual activity that fosters spiritual experiences or religious experiences, that can trigger hierophanies or peak experiences . . . that can lead to encounter with the transcendent Other, however it is conceived or imagined."[15] For Martos, the encounter produces a different experience. It changes the person who experiences it. In other words, it seems that ritual through its symbols brings people to what is called the liminal experience—the experience of tasting another relationship while performing rituals that signify that relationship. The interesting thing about ritual is that performing it brings to reality what we believe. For instance, "Where for 'visitors' religious performances can, in the nature of the case, only be presentations of a particular religious perspective, and thus aesthetically appreciated or scientifically dissected, for participants they are in addition enactments, materializations, realizations of it—not only models of what they believe, but also models for the believing of it. In these plastic dramas men attain their faith as they portray it."[16]

If it is true that the performance of a ritual is a realization of the reality it signifies, then we can say that the sacraments of the Church call into reality that which they signify. In other

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[13] Martos, *The Sacraments*, 92.

[14] Ibid., 92.

[15] Ibid., 97.

[16] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 113–14.

words, sacraments as rituals have the power to effect a bond between the recipients. It is this authority that creates a unique and real relationship between two individuals. This is especially true considering the ties wrought by baptism between a godparent and godchild. Today, some people deny or overlook the value derived from godparent/godchild interaction; yet, it is obvious that many such interactions produce beneficial results. A personal experience will suffice here. I recall as child going to spend summer holidays with my godparents. I was barely ten years old at the time. I remember vividly how my godfather, Ignatius Nzeagwasim, was very fond of me. He and his wife (my godmother) did not have a child, though they had been married for more than five years. I remember the care and devotion I received from my godmother. She made sure I bathed. She cooked for me and laid me to bed. My young intellect at that time did not fully comprehend what impact my presence in the family made for them; however, in retrospect, it would not be far from the truth to conclude that, given how my godfather doted on me and how my godmother cared for me, my presence in their midst made a significant difference. It would not be out of place to also say that the more we engaged in the ritual of spending summer holidays together, the more they appreciated their parental role toward me and the more I appreciate my role as their godchild. When we consider the "filial" relationship that generally exists between a godchild and his or her godparent, we will not fail to see how the sacrament of baptism establishes kinship bonds between them.

As a form of ritual, baptism makes it possible for a godparent and godchild to enjoy such a family relationship. Traditionally, baptism does two things: it washes away sins, and it ushers one into the new community of believers. The Church has held these two understandings of baptism across the centuries, expressed by the images of passing from death to life and new

birth, as well as adoption by water and the Holy Spirit.[17] The latter derives from the baptism of Jesus. In the ritual, the gospel recorded that "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:9-11). Understood as a new life, the one who is baptized enters into a new way of living with the guidance of the godparent. Hence, the godparent and the baptized enjoy a special kind of kinship. Baptism, therefore, marks a person's entry into a new group and the discovery of a new type of relationship; it constitutes a passage and a sort of rebirth. In Christian understanding, baptism confers a spiritual kinship between the godparent and the godchild, which is no less real than a biological relationship. Although some may object that the relationship baptism confers cannot be placed on the same level as the bond that biology ensures, I think that such position ignores the "reality-making" power of ritual. It also fails to acknowledge that social or spiritual kinship has been a valuable source of communal parenting for many societies.

2. Meaning of Spiritual Kinship in the Church

Historically, sponsorship conferred a kin-like relationship between godparents and godchildren as well as the two families. Baptism, which establishes this bond, since the sixth century has been seen as a special kind of spiritual birth comparable to a natural birth, though of a higher nature. Thus, it is believed that every baptismal event creates a web of relationships among those who are part of the sacrament. The sponsors, whether the *le parrain ou la marraine* (godfather or godmother), become co-father or co-mother with the parents of the baptized. The

[17] Maxwell E. Johnson, *Images of Baptism* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2001), 33–34.

priest who confers the baptism takes the title of "spiritual father," while the baptized become spiritual siblings with children of the sponsor. Joseph Lynch captures the intricate relationship involved:

> The relationships created by baptismal sponsorship in Frankish society had four distinct manifestations. . . . First, the bishop or priest who baptized a person became his "spiritual father," a role that must sharply be distinguished from that of "godfather." Second, sponsorship created a vertical relationship between the sponsor and the baptized that was comparable to that of a parent and a child and may be designated as *paternitas*, or godparenthood. Third, sponsorship created a horizontal relationship between the sponsor and the natural parents of the baptized, which was designated in sources from the late sixth century onwards as *compaternitas*, meaning coparenthood. Fourth, the natural and spiritual children of the same person became "spiritual siblings" to one another.[18]

Given the peripheral role many spiritual parents play in the lives of their godchildren, it is pertinent to ask whether and to what extent a godparent can and should have an obligation toward their godchild. I will here turn to the tradition of the Church to find an answer to this question. "We first meet a rudimentary application of blood kinship terms to godparenthood terms in the fourth century."[19] It is worth noting that in as much as the sponsor was traditionally seen as one who guaranteed the child's faith with God, the relationship between the godchild and the godparent gradually grew in stature, even in many cases considered of more value than the natural relationship, such that the godparent became known as co-parents (*parents de co*). The significance of this bond is summarized in this way:

> The godparental bond was modeled on the natural bond of parent and child. Like that relationship, it was unequal, with the godparent superior to the godchild in age, dignity, and responsibility. It was expected to be a nurturing relationship. . . . There were differences between natural and spiritual kinship which gave the latter a sort of moral

[18] Joseph H. Lynch, *Godparents and Kinship in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 164–65.

[19] Michael Mitterauer, *Why Europe? The Medieval Origins of Its Special Path*, trans. Gerald Chapple (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 71.

> superiority. Even though natural kinship was important and frequently idealized, it was the source of much litigation and violence, primarily over property.[20]

Today, notwithstanding that, many parents may favor the practice of having sole responsibility for the raising of their children without recourse to other adults; I argue that this should not be the case. That the Christian tradition recognizes a real and nurturing bond between a godparent and a godchild suggests that other adults in the society can and should nurture children other than their own. In support of this position, there have been instances where godparents instead of the natural parents took care of the godchild. For example,

> Caesarius attempted to build on this social reality for pastoral ends, encouraging sponsors to share with natural parents in the religious nurture of their common child. . . . Ideally, each adult would behave with the same concern toward both his natural and spiritual children; each child would be encouraged, instructed, watched and, if necessary, punished by both natural and spiritual parents. In other words, sponsorship would broaden the circle of people upon whom fell the task of socializing the young into the religious and secular roles.[21]

Concerning my proposal for a communal parenthood, the above seems to provide evidence of such joint effort in the Church, made possible by baptism. We must admit, then, that sponsorship in the church was a good example of community building with regard to a child's upbringing. Besides welding one family to the other, it creates a condition for community relationships, which promotes the welfare of children. To underscore how the church understood the kind of bond that exists between the two families, it is to be observed that such relationship was seen as real and significant. Mark Dizon notes that this kind of relationship existed among the inhabitants of the Caraballo mountains of the Philippines: "Boundaries between kinship and

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[20] Joseph H. Lynch, *Christianizing Kinship: Ritual Sponsorship in Anglo-Saxon England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 189–90.

[21] Lynch, *Godparents and Kinship*, 157.

friendship were blurred; kinship branched out through networks of relatives and friends."[22] This is why the bond between spiritual siblings forbids the marriage between them.

Such relationship is kin-like to such an extent that in exceptional circumstances, such as the premature death of the parents, godparents might provide parental care or intervene in support of the godchildren in a variety of ways. Unfortunately, many godparents have relinquished this duty. Even though our understanding of the bond between a godparent and godchild appears foggier with each passing day, it does not diminish the theological insight of Middle Ages Christians, which enabled them to recognize a real bond in spiritual kinship. According to Chantal Collard, "The original links that have multiplied at one time were comparable to ritual fraternities and provided the opportunity to expand family solidarity by establishing other alliances than those generated by the natural filiation."[23] In other words, ritual relationship provided a real opportunity for family bonding between the families involved.

To deny a real relationship between a godparent and *filleul* (godchild) is to deny a real relationship between God and his creatures, since, like the baptismal relationship, we only relate with God in a spiritual way. Just as early Christians were willing to lay down their lives for their faith in God, in the same manner, the bond between spiritual kinship was so strong that it was often a matter of life and death. For example, it was reported that "in about 613 King Lothar II (d. 629) killed his cousin Theuderic II and captured the latter's three young sons. The two older

[22] Mark Dizon, "Social and Spiritual Kinship in Early-Eighteenth-Century Missions on the Caraballo Mountains," *Philippine Studies* 59, no. 3 (2011): 367–98.

[23] Chantal Collard, review of *Parrains, marraines: La parenté spirituelle en Europe* [Godmothers, Godfathers: Spiritual Kinship in Europe] by Agnes Fine, *L'Homme* 35, no. 135 (1995): "La formule canonique des mythes," 170–71, accessed April 5, 2017. http://www.persee.fr/doc/hom_0439-4216_1995_num_35_135_369975. "Les liens de compérage qui se sont multipliés à une certaine époque étaient comparables à des fraternités rituelles et fournissaient l'occasion d'élargir les solidarités familiales en établissant d'autres alliances que celles engendrées par la filiaton naturelle." English translation is my own.

boys were executed at Lothar's command, but the youngest, Meroeus, who was six or seven years old, was his captor's godson. Lothar spared the child's life and secretly sent him into exile because of the 'love' (*amor*) he felt for the child, which was due to the baptismal tie between them."[24] Such a story provides an insight into the heart of a godparent toward his or her godchild. It will also help us to appreciate what sort of sentiment a childless couple might have toward their godchild.

3. Baptismal Kinship as a Response to Childlessness

Given the fact that the medieval church saw the relationship between a godchild and his or her godparent as a real one having equal importance with that of natural parents, how can the church rediscover the essence of that relationship in order to respond to the problem of baby stealing among the Igbo Christians of Nigeria? To look at this question it is necessary to establish what is common to both traditions. If we understand parenting as any type of relationship that involves nurturing, regardless of biological tie, then we can begin to appreciate the similarities between the Igbo practice of co-parenting and the Christian tradition of godchild/godparent. While the Igbo see the child as primarily belonging to the community, the Church through baptism views the child as belonging to the Church community, and such child comes under the care of her or his godparent as well as other members of the ecclesial community. Hence, standing on the foundation that the Church supports community as well as real relationship between a godchild and the godparent, we propose a recovery of community through the bond of baptism in other to respond to the challenges of baby stealing that results from childlessness in Igbo Christian marriages.

[24] Lynch, *Godparents and Kinship*, 157.

It is relevant here to ask, since the practice of foster parenting, which is comparable to godparenting, exists in the Igbo tradition, how might it be possible to incorporate into the baptismal program a period of, for example, five years whereby the godparents (especially childless couples) take their godchild into their home as part of the parental nurturing? For some parents, this suggestion may be difficult. I recall raising this question during a class session, and my classmate, Michelle Stone,[25] a mother of five children, vehemently opposed the five-year proposal. Nevertheless, she was willing to accept a two-year period. In other cases, another friend, Emeka,[26] was willing to release his child for only a few months. In yet another example, another student emphatically said: "My family is just me and my husband, period!" These gut reactions quickly expose the challenge that a five-year live-in program faces among parents. It was, on the other hand, consoling to know that the general attitude toward this proposal is that parents are willing to release their children to their godparents, perhaps not for five years, but maybe for several times during the school holidays. This attitude exposes the attachment parents have toward their children. As a celibate male, I admit that I might never fully appreciate how deep is the bond between a parent and their child to understand how searing any separation can be. In my discussions with these friends, though, each time I reminded them about their own death and whether they would be willing to let the godparents of their children take charge of them, they went silent—and then resignedly muttered, "Why not?"

If a child is important to a family, what are we to do with those who have lost their children? On December 10, 2005, Andy and Grace Ilabor—well beyond childbearing age—lost

[25] Michelle gave me the oral permission to use her name and story on February 18, 2017, at Emmaus Hall, Saint John's University School of Theology, Collegeville, Minnesota.

[26] This name has been changed to honor this friend's request for privacy.

their three children in a plane crash. Moreover, what happens if both parents die, leaving the children behind? Most likely, other adults in society will nurture the children to maturity. Regardless of how discomforting the idea of releasing one's child to a godparent for five years seems to a parent, death seem a powerful reminder that a child is a gift, not just to the parents, but also to the community. The demise of the parents of a child awakens everyone to the fact that godparents and the community have a stake in raising the child.

Letting go of one's child can be hard, we must acknowledge; nevertheless, we should also consider the benefit to the community if parents were willing to foster the bond between their child and his or her godparent. Given that Igbo families give out their children to live with childless families, I believe that making it possible for godchildren to live with their godparents during the adolescent stage of their lives will help to fill up the parenting gap in the families of childless couples. Given how busy modern parents can be, it is reasonable to allow them with the godparents to fix a suitable time when such live-in situation is possible. In urging this line of action, I want to point out that baby stealing seems to be on the rise today because parents are reluctant to allow other adults to participate as a community in training their children. The production and the selling of babies in Nigeria has reached a height where some state governments have decided to use extra-judicial methods to tackle the problem, such as the pulling down houses and destroying other properties of those who engage in the business.[27]

Although baby stealing could occur for other reasons, such as human ritual sacrifices to become rich and famous,[28] as well as human trafficking for the purpose of performing domestic

[27] Charles Alfred, Akwara Azalahu Francis, and Andeshi, Christopher Ale, "Dialectics of the Incubation of 'Baby Factories' in Nigeria," *International Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies* 2, no. 1 (2014): 87.

[28] There is a general belief in the Igbo society that heartless individuals desperate for wealth or power may buy babies. Such babies are taken to the occult world where they are sacrificed for wealth and fame.

chores, in this study, I have isolated childlessness, exacerbated by parents hoarding their babies as a powerful factor that fuels baby stealing. The question becomes whether restoring the bond between godparent and godchild by giving them the platform to interact would reduce or eliminate baby stealing. While not guaranteeing that this proposal could solve the problem of baby stealing, I believe it would reduce the pressure on childless couples and would stem the tide of desperation for a child, which precipitates the urge to buy babies from baby snatchers. In order to make such a program effective it is important to set it within the framework of the baptismal program. This entails going back into the Church's tradition to retrieve the practice that encourages enduring relationships between godparents and godchildren. This relationship was nourished in the context of parenting and teaching of the faith. Between the fourth and sixth centuries, there began a practice whereby

> the duties of sponsorship did not end at the completion of baptism. In the years that followed, godparents were expected to take an interest in the growing child's spiritual and material welfare. The bond was kept alive by gifts, visits, and acts of kindness, and without them it apparently did not reach its potential as a source of social solidarity. Children were expected to treat their godparents with respect and affection. In turn, the godparents had an enduring obligation to their spiritual offspring, one whose religious content was emphasized by such prelates as Caesarius of Arles, who warned them to teach their godchildren the Creed and the Lord's Prayer, to encourage them to do good, and to rebuke them when they sinned.[29]

The above is similar to what I would like to see embedded within a new baptismal program that incorporates a five-year encounter between the godparent and godchild. I will allow, however, that it is up to the two families to determine whether the five years will be consecutively or series of months or a couple of years amounting to five years. At this point, as long as the five-year period is maintained, the method both the godparents and the family of the

[29] Lynch, *Godparents and Kinship*, 335.

godchild agree on is immaterial. The other question that quickly pops up is at what stage of a child's life this should happen. I propose eight years old until about eighteen years old. I think that within this range the child is not too young to live outside the home and not too old to make the godparent feel like they are no longer nurturing a child but an adult.

Again, some might express the reservation that this age is a crucial stage for parents to impart critical skills and knowledge to the children and that it would not be wise to disrupt it by sending out a child to his or her godparents. This argument assumes that other adults in the society lack values or skills that are equally vital in raising of children. This should not be the case, because some scholars have argued that it is healthy for children to learn under different conditions, as they could easily learn in a new situation what they could not learn in a previous condition. Kimberly Belcher highlights this fact in this way: "During the learning process, abilities may be exhibited under certain conditions and not exhibited under others, so a ritual process, with authorizing structures that facilitate the activity and prescribe under particular conditions, may be necessary for the development of certain skills."[30] In order that the godparent/godchild time together may serve its purpose, it must be set in the context of a ritual. In other words, the Church can develop a Christian ritual that will guide the godparent/godchild interaction. The program may comprise the ritual of sending off and receiving back between the two families. It may involve reading Bible stories and lives of the saints as well as prayer and acts of charity. This ritual moment, along with basic parenting, offers the godchild a diverse and rich experience. Take the example of Adah, who at the age of twelve could wash neither her clothes nor the dishes, but when she travelled to Lagos to live with her aunt, she quickly learned how to perform both chores under the guidance of the new family.

[30] Belcher, *Efficacious Engagement*, 89.

Given, then that children could and have turned out well under other adults who are not their parents, it seems plausible to assume that they are likely to do well should they be allowed to live with their godparents. Hence, if parents consider other adults good enough to be godparents to their children, they should also have the confidence that they would impart the right skills and knowledge to these children. The objection may arise that training a child under multiple parents, as my proposal suggests, can disrupt their psychological development. This concern, while genuine, fails to consider the importance of variety in the growth and development of a child. While there may be some children in Igbo families who have anxiety at the thought of living outside their home, a clear majority of them are often excited at the prospect of living away from their nuclear family. I have had nieces who filled a glass with tears so that they would be allowed to go spend some time with grandma. Some became recalcitrant at home because they were not allowed to spend the holiday with an uncle or aunt in the city. The human drive to explore other circumstances seems the primary motivation for these children.

In a study done in Zambia, the strong desire of children to go on holiday is highlighted to confirm the innate human need to experience places other than the environment in which one lives. For these children, holidays "appeared to center on visiting relatives and, in particular, closely related kin, such as maternal or paternal aunts/uncles (n=35, 49%), grandparents (n=21, 30%), older siblings (n=5, 7%), or mothers/fathers (n=4, 6%). Only six children (8%) were reported to visit more distantly related kin."[31]

Besides this primal motivation, the fact that my proposal takes place in the context of a baptismal ritual can allay any misgivings about the workability of the program. Since we can

[31] Jean Hunleth, Rebekah Jacob, Steven Cole, Virginia Bond, and Aimee James, "School Holidays: Examining Childhood, Gender Norms, and Kinship in Children's Shorter-Term Residential Mobility in Urban Zambia," *Children's Geographies* 13, no. 5 (2015): 507.

agree on the power of rituals to mold children and form society, developing a ritual around my proposal may take care of any concern about a child's psychological development. Belcher carefully examines the role of rituals in the formation of a community. If we consider what happens at baptism, we will agree with her when she argues that infants engaging in ritual processes that support their developing capacities in ways meaningful to the community are likely to be fully engaged with those activities because they enjoy them. "Infants, then, can be subjects of culturally determined ritual processes; in fact, these processes enable them to acquire later cultural skills such as language."[32] From what we know about child formation, good rituals, rather than distorting the psychological development of a child, mold it for the good of the child and the society. Actually, the live-in experience will afford both the godparent and the godchild the opportunity to engage in living out the significance of the relationship that baptism has conferred on them.

Beyond concerns for the psychological development of the child, our interest should be to find if this proposal can be implemented in the Igbo culture. In other words, can the live-in program work among the Igbo Christians? Based on the experience of community living in the Igbo society, I believe that adopting a practice that allows godparents and godchildren to live together is possible. I have no doubt that if this program is deployed in the context of a baptismal or liturgical ritual, it is more likely to yield the desired outcome. Another strong reason for why I am convinced about the success of the proposal is the deep spiritual sensitivity of the Igbo, the hierarchical nature of their social relationships, and their natural disposition toward customs and

[32] Belcher, *Efficacious Engagement*, 91.

practices, known as *omenala*.[33] For anthropologist Mary Douglas, this type of society is "more prone to express their religious ideas in ritual and to respond to the symbolism of such ritual. The reasons for this are apparently psychological in as much as in static, stratified societies people tend to accept things the way they are in both the natural and supernatural orders."[34]

The other relevant argument for adopting a five-year live-in period for godchildren with their godparents after baptism, and why I think it is likely to succeed in the Igbo culture, comes from Erik Erikson's insight on generativity as the primary concern of most adults. Joseph Martos has provided an excellent summary of this insight. He agrees with Erikson that the primary task of the adult years is generativity which encompasses both biological creativity and social accomplishment. He believes that Erikson had envisaged adult participation in ritual as a means of accomplishing this generative task of passing on one's personal and cultural achievements to others.[35] Therefore, given that most adults want to nurture a child, it would make sense, for the good of childless couples and for the common good, for the church to implement the five-year godchild live-in experience with his or her godparent (especially childless godparents) as a way to fulfill this psychological need and also reduce the pressure on couples to have their own baby; this will also reduce the occurrence of morally questionable practices that couples desperate for children engage in to meet societal norms. Erikson's insight about adult desire to nurture a child is corroborated by Patrick Eshuchi Mukholi and his colleagues. They observe that "the idea of godparents when people are baptized or confirmed in some churches . . . [is] comparable to the

[33] *Omenala* is the tradition of the clan established by the forebears. These traditions are believed to have their roots in the traditional religion, hence their power to elicit obedience in the indigenes.

[34] Martos, *The Sacraments*, 14.

[35] Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), 106, quoted in Martos, *The Sacraments*, 26.

kin who traditionally trained people for life."[36] In other words, they recognize that it is the norm in many African communities for the adults within a kin group to participate in the upbringing of a child. I will support this point with the example of Nelo, who was married with two boys and a girl and wanted to adopt another child. When asked why she wanted to do so, she simply replied that she felt the urge to nurture another baby. A similar desire to nurture other children is also present in households that have suffered the loss of their children.

[36] Patrick E. Mukholi, Mary K. Omollo, and Uzo Asiachi Nanjero, "Abaluyia Marriage and the Christian Church," *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 19, no. 2(2000): 194.

CONCLUSION

Societies are increasingly coming together to confront problems common to humanity. One such issue that is quickly taking center stage as a common problem worth our attention—because of its far-reaching economic, social, and moral consequences—is the challenge of childless marriages. Lack of children in some Christian homes is prompting us to take another look at children and parenting. In the Igbo Nigerian context, a shift from traditional co-parenting to "sole" parenting is slowly isolating childless couples and further highlighting their loss. It has triggered in them a lifelong search for a baby, in the process impoverishing homes and inducing couples into illegal and immoral ways of parenthood—stealing babies. Therefore, it is necessary for the Church, as both a supportive community and a sacrament of redemption, to accept and implement any program that is sure to promote the psychological and spiritual health of its members as well as to promote the common good. While my study did not clearly spell out the shape of the proposed godparent/godchild life together, I believe it points to the godparent/godchild relationship as a real bond worth exploring in response to childless marriages among the Igbos. I would be glad to see further questions raised and studies done, especially in whether there should be a formal program to guide the live-in experience.

This study also touched on catastrophic fertility spending by childless couples and how this is affecting the overall health of the family. I would like to see further research into the possibility of the Church setting up a fertility fund to help childless couples. Since infertility is recognized as a major public health problem, and given that the Church has a network of hospitals that in many cases offer charitable health services, it should be willing to subsidize fertility enhancement treatments for childless couples in order to help reduce the financial burden of imposed by seeking for fruitfulness. While making this suggestion, I recognize that the issue

of assisted reproduction is a sensitive one for the Church. In calling for a fertility fund, I am mindful of the fact that the Church is against medical intervention that either does not promote life or disrupts the unitive and procreative dimensions of the marital act. Nevertheless, the Church upholds other procedures that enhance procreation. It is for these interventions that the Church approves that I call for a fund. Fortunately, the majority of those who seek fertility in the Igbo society will choose fertility enhancement rather than the more sophisticated procedures. Some may argue that by providing fertility funding the Church would be encouraging the reckless behavior of persistently seeking a child with attendant excessive expenditure without attention to the common good. For instance, Maura Ryan wonders how we could balance the human need for reproduction with socio-economic and cultural costs it brings along. She holds that reproduction is not a private matter but rather a communal issue because choices about it involve social cost and consequences. Hence, she urges caution in adopting the attitude that believes one must have a baby at all cost without seeing how the action is just and equitable in the light of other areas of life. She writes, "The right to seek advanced infertility services or to be assisted in pursuing treatment will not be defensible if it can only be honored at the expense of the survival needs of some individuals or groups, or by maintaining an order of privilege that advantages some individuals and groups by disadvantaging others."[1] This concern, while relevant, given how important advancement of the common good[2] is to the Church, fails to critically look at the possibility that such intervention is also capable of promoting human solidarity as well as the common good.

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[1] Maura A. Ryan, *Ethics and Economics of Assisted Reproduction: The Cost of Longing* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2001), 133.

[2] John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, encyclical, April 11, 1963, 53. In this encyclical, Pope John XXIII does make an important point that individuals and groups must make their specific contributions to the common welfare.

Although the danger of hurting the common good is always present in deploying any action that would seem to encourage excessive pursuit of fertility, I do think that the alternative, whereby marriages are destroyed because of infertility-induced poverty, seems daunting for Church and society. In fact, helping couples resolve infertility certainly enhances the common good. In urging the Church to try setting up a fund for fertility treatment, I would point to the example of many countries and nongovernmental organizations that have taken the lead in this regard. Such countries and organizations view infertility as a social problem that requires a concerted effort; hence, countries like Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates have made ART accessible. "In 2005, Turkey began fully funding two IVF cycles for all Turkish citizens."[3] For their part, "Friends of Low-Cost IVF . . . a US-based charity dedicated to alleviating the suffering caused by infertility in resource-poor settings,"[4] started their own global effort. While not advocating for the Church to begin funding IVF, it is important for the Church to understand that there is a global movement that is offering a communal solution to this problem. The Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (CDF) has indicated that some treatments for infertility are acceptable. CDF states that "techniques which act *as an aid to the conjugal act and its fertility* are permitted."[5] It elaborates that "techniques aimed at removing obstacles to natural fertilization, as for example, hormonal treatments for infertility, surgery for endometriosis, unblocking of fallopian tubes or their surgical repair, are licit. All these techniques may be considered *authentic treatments* because, once the problem causing the

[3] Marcia C. Inhorn and Pasquale Patrizio, "Infertility Around the Globe: New Thinking on Gender, Reproductive Technologies and Global Movements in the 21st Century," *Human Reproduction Update Advance Access* 21, no. 4 (2015): 419.

[4] Karin Hammarberg and Maggie Kirkman, "Infertility in Resource-Constrained Settings: Moving Towards Amelioration," *Reproductive Biomedicine Online* 26, no. 2 (2013): 192.

[5] *Dignitatis Personae, 12.*

infertility has been resolved, the married couple is able to engage in conjugal acts resulting in procreation, without the physician's action directly interfering in that act itself."[6] Some funding for these treatments would be helpful.

While it is true that infertility is not a new problem, and that it is not possible to be successful at resolving all cases, especially through some funding program, it is important for the Church to lead the way. In the Igbo society now, the government and other private groups are not supporting infertile couples to defray cost of treatment. The insurance industry does not have the capacity to cover for such expenditure. I believe that if the Church could give more attention to the infertile and assist them with funds to help them in settling their fertility enhancement costs, the government and private sector might be motivated to take a cue. In a resource-challenged Igbo society, where many households are struggling financially, it would not help the situation to allow excessive expenditure on fertility treatment to further impoverish them. The 25 percent of infertile couples in Nigeria is significant enough to warrant the Church's response. For the sake of common good, the Church must support the infertile members of its community. If the Church fails to do something about the infertile couples, it could be dealing with members who are suffering because of infertility and further rendered poor by catastrophic expenditure on fertility treatments. It is understood that a family that suffers poverty because of infertility spending may be prone to moral and economic stress as well as emotional crises. This is a danger for society. Such danger was made real for me a few years ago when some baby thieves broke into a friend's maternity ward, stole a baby, and sold him to a childless couple. The parents of the baby were devastated. The police stepped in and arrested the doctor, who apparently was innocent but now has to live with a shadow cast on the credibility of his medical practice.

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[6] *Dignitatis Personae*, 13.

To forestall the ethical breakdown of society, this study finds it necessary to propose that the Church consider retrieving co-parenting from the Igbo culture to help childless couples to have a sense of parenthood as well as to stem the moral issue of baby stealing. Why is the response of the Church important? The Church's attention to the proposal is important for two reasons. One is that the Church can advocate for change in the society. The second reason is that infertile couples look to the Church for solutions to their problems. Two experiences illustrate this point. First, in the first year of my being assigned to a new parish in one the cities in Nigeria, a woman came to my office. She had an envelope containing ten US dollars in her hand. She gave the envelope to me. She said the money was her way of sowing "seed" of fruitfulness. Sowing such seed for fruitfulness is a common act of faith in the Nigerian Church. She told me she had not been able to conceive in her twelve years of marriage. Afterward, I prayed with her for fruitfulness. Throughout that year, she did not conceive. I kept seeing her in the Church and wondered if our prayer of faith did not work. The second year passed and she did not conceive. During my last year in the parish, she conceived and gave birth to a baby boy. Second, a woman who had been very involved in church activities suddenly disappeared for almost a year. She later came back to reconcile with God. She told me she had left the Church to go to other denominations to find a solution to her inability to conceive. The two women had something in common: they were disturbed by their inability to conceive and were desperate for a solution. What can the Church offer them as a solution? Traditionally, the Church has offered prayers and novenas for these couples, which I think has proven efficacious for many. Besides asking for divine intervention to restore their fertility, the Church needs to be aware that these couple are spending many of their savings on seeking fertility, thereby endangering the well-being of their

families. How can the Church assist them beyond prayers to manage their infertility in such a way that it would not also be a source of financial burden to them?

In proposing that the Church should take advantage of communal parenting existent in the Igbo community, I have in mind adopting a communal approach to responding to the problem of childlessness and baby stealing. The Church has always seen itself as a community; hence I believe responding to infertility in a communal way will truly portray the Church as such. It is true that for many infertile couples, the desire to conceive can be overwhelming, forcing them into risky expenditures in trying to resolve infertility. Their anxiety is quite understandable if we consider that their condition is made worse by a society that desperately wants babies. On a fundamental level, in trying to show some understanding of why couples are forced into a lifelong quest for fertility, we should bear in mind that engaging in this practice exposes the child to the danger of being a commodity. To such couples, even though painful, I think that the advice of *Donum Vitae* is instructive: having a baby is not a right, and every couple must see a child as a gift and not a commodity. Having said that, I think that merely reminding couples that having a baby is not a right does not solve the problem. What I believe can help is for the Church to reform her liturgy (liturgy being a powerful tool that can mold lives) to reflect a community that embodies the ideals of communal parenting, both in language and in practice. One such solution I propose is introducing into our baptismal program the practice whereby a godparent, resting on the authority of their special relationship with the child and on the fact of an Igbo society that accepts co-parenting, would have the godchild live with them for at least five years during the period running from eight years until eighteen years. My proposal will indeed help the godparents and godchild to live out their Christian call within the context of an

African Church that thrives on the model of the family and that lives by the philosophy of "one for all, all for one."

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