

The Socio-Cultural Perception and Implications of Childlessness among Men and Women in an Urban Area, Southwest, Nigeria

Tolulope Monisola Ola

*Department of Sociology, University of Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria
E-mail: tolulopeola2003@yahoo.co.uk*

KEYWORDS Socio-cultural. Perception. Implications. Childlessness. Nigeria

ABSTRACT This study explores the social and cultural perception and implications of childlessness among men and women living in a diverse cultural urban community, Ekiti state, Nigeria. A total of 600 respondents comprising 175 men and 425 women were selected for interview using multi-stage random sampling technique. A triangulation method of data collection was used (questionnaire, focus-group discussion (FGD) and in-depth interview (IDI)). The statistical analysis was done at the univariate, bivariate and multivariate levels. The result of the study shows that both men and women perceive childlessness in women to be caused by evil spirits, ancestral curses and promiscuity while the cause of childlessness in men is perceived to be the result of psychosexual disorders. Childlessness in this community has severe health and social implications especially for women. Community education on the actual causes of childlessness which will dispel myths about the causes and ways of preventing infertility is recommended.

1. INTRODUCTION

Marriage, a universal phenomenon in Africa and for the Yorubas in particular is a union between a man and a woman, which brings together families, communities and ethnic groups (Ekong 1988). Though, a universal phenomenon, cultural differences abound in the formation of the family and the universal features are important. The system of marriage differs from people to people and what is considered as the importance varies from one place to the other. One of the general cultural beliefs in Yoruba marriage is that procreation is the basic aim of marriage. Marriage and procreation are inseparable.

Atere (1986) opined that the reward of marriage is expected much earlier than in the past because children are wanted for a number of reasons which are socio-cultural and economic. According to Ebigbola (2000), modernization has not weakened the deep-rooted tradition of having a child as soon as possible after marriage.

This study therefore reports on the socio-cultural context, perceptions and implications of childlessness among men and women from a diverse urban community in Ekiti State, Nigeria. It aimed to explore general perceptions and beliefs regarding childlessness on the family and community; to examine the extent to which development and influence of religious culture has affect marriage and childlessness; to determine if childlessness increases the incidence

of polygyny, concubinage and divorce; and to assess the accuracy and appropriate treatment of infertility.

Hypotheses were stated to test for a significance difference between some of the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of respondents and the perception of childlessness; and a significant relationship between the importance of children and the implications of childlessness. Chi-square was used to test these hypotheses.

2. METHODOLOGY

Ado Ekiti is the capital city of Ekiti State and the most urban and populous community in Ekiti State, Nigeria. It lies in the savannah and rainforest zones of the country within longitudes 4^o E and 5^o10N and has an estimated population of 149, 472 (based on the 1991 National Population Census figure) and a land area of 210 km². It is the head-quarters of Ado – Ekiti Local Government Area (L.G.A.) with 193 Enumeration Areas (EAS) (158 EAS in the urban area and 35 EAS in the rural area.). The inhabitants of Ado-Ekiti are mainly farmers, traders and artisans.

A total of 600 respondents were selected using a multi-stage random sampling technique. From the 158 EAS in the urban area, 7 EAS were simple randomly chosen while from the remaining 35 EAS in the rural area, 3 EAS were simple randomly chosen. From each of the 10 EAS, between 40

and 65 respondents were randomly selected based on the rural –urban criterion. The point needs to be made that the respondents were chosen from households, which were the basic unit of sampling adopted.

Three basic method of data collection (triangulation) was used in this study. These include the questionnaire, focus group discussion (FGD) and in-depth interview (IDI). The questionnaire comprises questions designed to elicit information from respondents. Ten FGD was conducted: 5 with women and 5 with men. A total of 50 women (age 29-63 years), and 35 men (age 30-65 years) participated in the discussions. This was organized by occupation and place of residence of the participants and in this way persons from a wide range of different socio-economic and educational strata were included. The analysis of the data was done using SPSS version 10.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Demographic and Socio-economic Characteristics of the Respondents

3.1.1 Distribution of Respondents by Sex

Females constituted majority of the respondents. Table 1 shows that 70.8% were females while the remaining 29.2% were males. This may be due to the fact that women are far more likely to report issues concerning their fertility than men.

Table 1: Respondents distribution by sex

<i>Gender</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
Male	175	29.2
Female	425	70.8
Total	600	100.0

Source: Field survey, 2003

3.1.2 Age Distribution of Respondents

As revealed in Table 2, majority of the female and male respondents were between 21-40 years of age where reproduction is at the peak. It can also be observed that the greatest percentage of respondents who were knowledgeable about the socio-cultural perception and implications of childlessness falls between 20-50 years.

Table 2: Age distribution of respondents

<i>Age range (years)</i>	<i>Male</i>		<i>Female</i>	
	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
Below 20	4	2.3	41	9.6
21 – 30	41	23.4	137	32.2
31 – 40	77	44.0	192	45.2
41 – 50	26	15.0	29	6.8
51 – 60	18	10.2	16	3.8
Above 60	9	5.1	10	2.4
Total	175	100.0	425	100.0

Source: Field survey, 2003

3.1.3 Respondents, Level of Education

As illustrated in Table 3, a high percentage of the respondents had formal education with 85.7% among male respondents and 78.1% among female respondents. It is also observed that the majority of the female respondents with formal education had attained the tertiary level (30.8%) and male respondents (49.7%). The level of educational attainment has been found to influence the perception of fertility and fertility behaviour especially that of women. Thus, among these respondents, significant changes in socio-cultural belief system and perceptions about children is pertinent

Table 3: Respondents' level of education

<i>Level of education</i>	<i>Male</i>		<i>Female</i>	
	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
Quranic only	13	7.4	11	2.6
Did not attend school	12	6.9	82	19.3
Primary education	14	8.0	96	22.6
Secondary education	49	28.0	105	24.7
Tertiary education	89	49.7	131	30.8
Total	175	100.0	425	100.0

Source: Field survey, 2003.

3.1.4 Respondents' Religious Affiliation

Majority of the male respondents (54.8%) and female respondents (61.6%) are Christians, while the remaining 36.0 percent and 30.1 percent of the male and female respondents are Muslims (Table 4). It was also observed that the remaining male and female respondents, 6.9% and 2.8% reported that they were traditional religionists and the remaining 2.3 % and 5.5 % did not state their religion.

Table 4: Respondents' religion affiliation.

Religious Affiliation	Male		Female	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Christianity	96	54.8	262	61.6
Islam	63	36.0	128	30.1
Traditional	12	6.9	12	2.8
Neutral	4	2.3	23	5.5
Total	175	100.0	425	100.0

Source: Field survey, 2003

3.1.5 Respondents' Marital Status

Table 5 shows that majority of the male and female respondents (59.4% and 59.0%) were married. The remaining 40.3% of the male respondents and 41.0% of the female respondents were not in a stable marital unions from this analysis, it can be inferred that stable marital unions for both men and women can greatly enhance fertility. Women find themselves out of marriage unions for a number of reasons ranging from childlessness, incompatibility to issues relating to sex and fertility preferences.

Table 5: Respondents' marital status

Marital Status	Male		Female	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Married	104	59.4	251	59.0
Widower / widowed	39	22.4	56	13.1
Divorced	17	9.4	41	25.9
Separated	12	6.8	41	25.9
Sexual partner	3	1.7	8	1.9
Total	175	100.0	425	100.0

Source: Field survey, 2003

3.1.6 Importance of Children to Respondents

Respondents were asked how important children are to their marriage. The responses of the male and female respondents are presented as Figures 1 and 2. 55% and 86.1% of the male and female respondents reported that children are indispensable to their marriage 36.0 percent of the male and 9.6 percent of the females reported that children are quite important. However, 5.2 percent of males and 2.2 percent of females

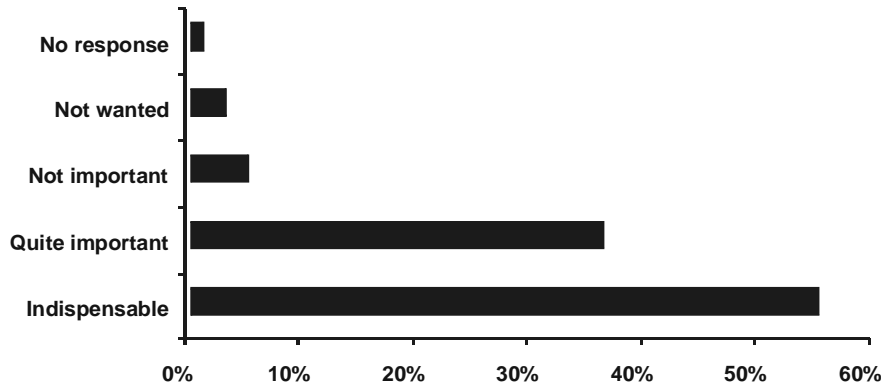


Fig. 1. Distribution of male respondents according to the importance of children in a marriage

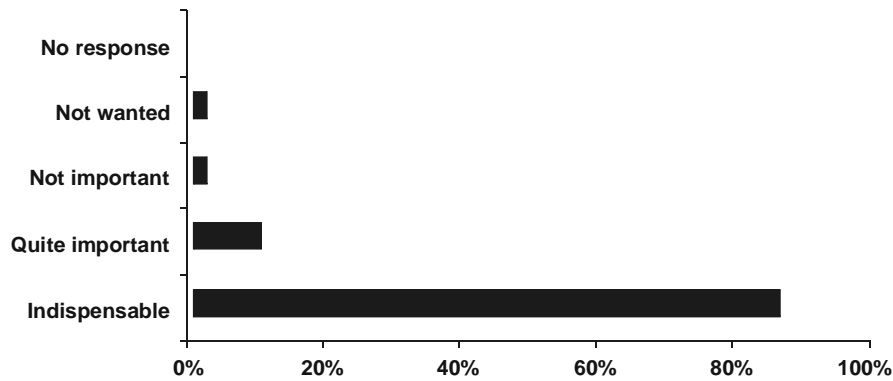


Fig. 2. Distribution of female respondents according to the importance of children in a marriage

reported that children are not important to a marriage and not wanted respectively. Nevertheless, majority of the respondents believed that children are indispensable. The implication of this finding is that in the socio-cultural context of the Yorubas children are seen as wealth according to Ekong (1988), wealth not in the static sense of the immovable property but in the sense that they play specific economic and social roles. They contribute to family well-being, provide old age support for parents, ensure the continuity of the family name and constitute an important basis of status for a couple in the society. Within this socio-cultural context, childlessness is undesirable.

3.1.6 Socio-cultural Perceptions and Implications of Childlessness by the Respondents

Data presented in Table 6 shows that the socio – cultural perceptions and implications of childlessness differs greatly between the urban and rural respondents. Cultural beliefs come in various forms and the cumulative effect of these beliefs is a set of taboos and norms whose counteracting effect results in the perception and implication of childlessness (Larsen 2000). The analysis and findings below indicate the perception

of childlessness in sub-Saharan Africa and the adverse effect of this on women who takes the blame for a couples' childlessness. The findings agree with that of (Leke et al. 1993; Alemnji and Thomas 1997; Larsen 2000; Dyer et al. 2002). The consequences of childlessness are more profound in women as compared to men (Inhorn 1994). It is generally believed that men cannot be infertile so far as he can sustain an erection. Fertility and potency are often thought to be synonymous. According to Orubuloye (1996), if a man cannot father a child, a male member of the family can always assist him in doing so. This is done in the western countries and it is called surrogate motherhood or fatherhood as the case may be. Having child is clearly more important than loyalty to one's spouse, which is evidenced by the common practice of divorce because of childlessness. The findings are in keeping with other qualitative and quantitative studies which indicate an overwhelmingly negative implication of the inability to procreate (Sabatelli et al. 1988; Kemmann et al. 1998)

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Childlessness has serious adverse effect on couples especially the woman and this is due to

Table 6: Distribution of respondents' perception and implications of childlessness according to place of residence.

Perception / Implications of childlessness	Rural		Urban	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
A childless man comes to the world in vain	178 (82.8%)	37 (17.2%)	165 (42.9%)	220 (57.1%)
A childless woman comes to the world in vain	197 (88.8%)	18 (11.2%)	171 (44.4%)	214 (55.6%)
If your wife is childless as a man will you take a second wife or as a woman will you marry a second wife for him?	197 (92%)	18 (8%)	252 (65.5%)	133 (34.5%)
A childless couple has no one to perpetuate the family name	137 (64%)	178 (36%)	226 (58.7%)	159 (41.3%)
A childless couple has no one to inherit their property, ruler ship and position	15 (71.6%)	461 (28.4%)	17 (58.7%)	213 (55.3%)
A childless couple will have no one to give them old age security	175 (81.4%)	40 (18.6%)	131 (34%)	254 (66%)
A childless couple has no hope for a befitting burial	198 (93%)	17 (7%)	127 (33%)	254 (67%)
Do you think adoption is a way of resolving childlessness?	51 (23.7%)	164 (76.3%)	246 (63.9%)	139 (36.1%)
If your wife is childless, will you divorce her?	183 (85.1%)	32 (14.9%)	72 (18.7%)	313 (81.3%)
If your wife is childless, will you have concubines outside?	111 (51.6%)	164 (48.4%)	71 (18.4%)	314 (81.6%)

Source: Field Survey, 2003.

the perception and societal beliefs regarding childlessness. The findings of this study have confirmed this. Some sustainable intervention measures are therefore necessary. It is clear that infertility in a woman increases the chances that her human rights will be violated even when the aetiology of the problem is not directly attributed to her. In view of these, women's health advocate and the Government at various levels should endeavour to provide adequate preventive and counseling service to improve the reproductive health and rights of women in Nigeria.

There is dire need for providing adequate and accurate information at the community level to correct the misconception and myths about childlessness.

REFERENCES

- Alemnji GA, Thomas KD 1997. Socio-biological status of Nigerian males with primary and secondary infertility. *East Africa Medicine Journal*, 74: 519 – 522.
- Atere JO 1986. *The Impact of Education on Mate Selection Process: A Case Study of Ondo State University Students*. Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria: Ondo State University, Department of Sociology.
- Dyer SJ, Abrahams N, Hoffman M, Vander Spuy Z 2002. Men leave me as I cannot have children; women's experiences with involuntary Childlessness. *Human Reproduction*, 17(6): 1663-1668.
- Ebigbola JA 2000. *National Population Policy; A Viable Option to Human Development*. Ibadan: African Bookbuilders.
- Ekong EE 2003. *Rural Sociology - An Introduction and Analysis of Rural Nigeria*. Dove Educational Publishers, Uyo, Nigeria.
- Inhorn MC 1994. Interpreting Infertility: Medical Anthropological Perspectives. *Social Science and Medicine*, 39(4): 459-461.
- Kemmann E, Cheron C, Bachmann G 1998. Good Luck rites in contemporary infertility. *Journal of Reproductive Medical*, 43: 196 – 198.
- Larsen U 2000. Primary and Secondary infertility in Sub – Saharan African. *International Journal Epidemiology*, 29: 285 – 291.
- Leke RJT, Oduma JA, Bassot MS, Bacha AM, Grigor KM 1993. Regional and Geographical Variations in Infertility; Effects of Environmental, Cultural and Socio-Economic factors. *Environment Health Perspective*, 101(Supplement 2): 73 – 80
- Orubuloye IO 1995. The Social, Cultural and Economic roots of African reproductive regimes pathways to fertility transition. *An Inaugural lecture delivered at the Ondo State University, Ado-Ekiti*.
- Sabatelli RM, Meth RL, Gava SM 1988. Factors mediating the adjustment to involuntary childlessness. *Family Relations*, 37: 338-343.