CHILD ADOPTION IN OBUKPA RELIGION: PERCEPTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

REV. FR. DR. CHRISTIAN O. ELE, (Ph.D)
General Studies Division
Enugu State University of Science and Technology,
Agbani, Enugu State
Email: boomdrchris@gmail.com
Phone No: +2348063667566

Abstract
Obukpa Society places much premium on children. This idea links marriage with procreation inextricably and explains the woes of infertility within the framework of her perceptions. Obukpa sociology of the family sees consanguinity as foundational to its basic structure and sustainability; a cosmology which explained and given its credible force in her religious metaphysics. This paper discusses child adoption in Obukpa Religion from the perspectives of its perceptions and implications. One of the findings of this work is that the forces of Christian civilization, Western orientations and urbanization influences have not been able to make Obukpa indigenes drop their kinship care structure or fosterage and opt for the western style of child adoption. They see the western adoption scheme as deficient because it introduces strange blood into the family and kindred. The indigenous approach where the adoptees’ (modus loquendi) bio-social roots are known and respected serves in every detail the Obukpa yearning for family homogeneity. “Culture Area Approach” is the methodology employed in this study. This means that it focused on Obukpa cultural context as a homogenous fact with in the generalized Igbo culture and studies its perceptions and implications of child adoption from its religious belief system

Keywords: Child, Child adoption, Obukpa Religion, Perceptions and Implications.

Introduction
Child adoption which seems to be the solution to the crises of infertility or barrenness within marriage and outside of it across cultures and civilizations is seen with suspicion in Obukpa religious metaphysics. The phenomenon of globalization with its consequences of acculturation and cross-pollination of ideas, for instances, has not succeeded to be impactful at the instance of child adoption in Obukpa culture. The reasons are found within the traditional religious values of the people which are at variance with the supposed gains which western adoption styles advertise to them. In Obukpa, for instance, the sociology of the family is linked with the indigenous religion. In its context, consanguinity is foundational to indigenedhip, matrimony, property inheritance, gerontology, the sacredness of life and the dignity of the human person, the ala goddess (ani, al’) and the priesthood (attama ma) to mention but these. The proverbs such as “blood is thicker than water (nwanne k’ oyi makane oyi bu onye ozo),” emphasizes consanguinity while “obara adighi asi asi” says that blood reveals one’s true identity.

This study is informed by the challenges which adoption poses in Obukpa cultural milieux even with the presence of urbanization, Christianization and westernization. In the words of Nwaoga, C.T. (2013:705) “A lot of cultural and traditional questions need to be addressed before a child is finally brought home to the family.” Igbo culture and tradition are largely synonymous with Igbo religion. The findings of this paper reveal among other things that folk religion is one big factor that promotes the unacceptability of adoption in the area.

As Ele (2017:111) wrote, “Obukpa Religion is a specimen of African Traditional Religion. Obukpa as a people are Igbo by tribe whose native place is in Enugu State, South East Nigeria. They have one common ancestral progenitor Asadu Ideke Alumona with Nsukka, Okpuje and Eha-Alumona Towns as his brothers all in Nsukka Local Government Area. Hence, the Asadu Ideke Alumona suffixed to their names like Obukpa
Asadu Ideke Alumona as one example”. Adoption of babies is strange and the adoptees are strangers to their adoptive families since their blood is different.

In contemporary Nigerian society, adoption is prevalent. The original intention behind its practice of giving barren couples their own children has been bastardized variously. This is because the availability of babies to be adopted has gone commercial with other attendant practices that violate the dignity of the human person and the sacred values of human life. In Obukpa culture, babies are not for sale (nwa azugh n’iahia) and babies do not come from technology (uzu akpu nwa) because babies are God’s gifts (nwa bu onyinye Chukwu) Chinenye nwa, Chinyere, Theodora / Theodore, Adeodatus, Donatus) and therefore seen exclusively as Gods blessings (nwa bu Ngezichukwu, Benedictus, Benedicta) (Ele, C.O. 2016, 15).

This paper strives to discuss child adoption in Obukpa Religion from the perspectives of perceptions and implications. In the next section, we shall discuss the perception of child adoption in Obukpa Religion.

The Perceptions of Child Adoption in Obukpa Religion

In Obukpa traditional society, child adoption is unfamiliar and unknown to her religion. This is because based on its values, no child is for sale, no child is motherless/fatherless and no family can go without a child, strictly speaking. There is always a way out. As Ozioko (2005: 32 – 33) explains:

In the case of a man becoming sterile a procreational arrangement was made and kept very secret and would never be publicly flouted. This was on arrangement where the husband would remove the personal chi of the wife and also inform the oracles and ancestors to overlook the wife’s infidelity. The husband and the wife decided on the man, arranged and invited the man for the function of impregnating the wife – just to have his own children. In all the cases the parents of the wife must be informed and their consent obtained. The alternative was for the girl to elope and go back to her parents and chose a man herself for that purpose.

The former option is the most viable for the reasons that the man to function the pregnancy was often chosen from the husband’s nuclear or extended family. While the second recognizes the freedom and dignity yet its deficit is associated with getting pregnancy and birth of the fertilized child.

Obukpa culture provides that infertile couples or even those in single state of life outside of the Holy orders can have children under fosterage whose roots are known and whose genealogies are evidently linked with them either from paternal or maternal side. Either way, the foster parent must be related with the fostered child by blood. Omeire, C. O. (2016: 2 – 3) identifies the reasons for child adoption as broadly based into two: cultural and general. The way of life in Obukpa is on the side of fosterage but abhors child adoption.

In child adoption as seen in western schemes the adoptive parents claim ownership of someone’s child. According to Agbo (2014.86), “child adoption is the legal act of permanently placing a child with a parent or parents other than biological ones. In this case, the adopted child is permanently separated from his biological parents and becomes the legitimate child of his or her adopted parents with all the rights privileges and responsibilities that are attached to the relationship”

Child adoption is different from child fostering whereby the child is placed under the care of his/her relatives. This is usually informal within the kinship care structure. Again, even if fostering is outside of the child’s family, those who stand in loco parentis (in place of parents) with their legal, social and protective powers over the minors do not claim their ownership and neither are the fostered children cut off from their biological parents and roots. There are varieties of reasons why children are foster-parented. In Obukpa socio-cultural environment, for example, children are foster-parented because their parents are dead or because they are poor. It could also be to reduce or remove the trauma of a blood relation who has no child. In this wise, the children so fostered remain legitimately linked with their biological parents and homes as their proper descendants with full rights and responsibilities. They are free to go home in the “fullness of time” or in the wake of ugly situation and common provocations. In biblical culture, Moses was foster-parented in the family of Pharaoh (Exodus 2:8-10) and Jesus by Joseph the carpenter. Moses left to join his kith and kin (Exodus 2:11-25) and Jesus had to ask Joseph and Mary “shall I not be about my Father’s business? (Luke 2:49). Surely his Father’s business was not carpentry. Joseph was not the biological father of Jesus Christ. He was a foster father.
The status of foster children is characterized by freedom, knowledge of their roots and links with their biological homes. This belongingness within their bio-social family enhances their dignity and social welfare. Child fostering in Obukpa is unlike child adoption based on western styles where the historicity and facticity of origins are lost permanently. The adopted child in Obukpa traditional society is regarded as a bastard without bio-genesis at one instance and as a slave with a diminished socio-religious value in another. These perceptions may be harsh when placed side by side with other cultures and civilizations. But they are however, referent values in the constant social interactions in Obukpa culture.

In Obukpa, child fostering is *the nwa* while child adoption is *igote na ire nwa*. The former is familial relationship while the latter is commercial enterprise. However, the risk involved in foster parentage in Obukpa is articulated in the sayings: (1) *ohe nwa onye ozo na-eheji eka* and (2) *Onye ozu zucha, onye nwe nwa nwe nwa*. Both sayings predict the ingratitude which the foster children and their biological parents or families can show at the end of *the nwa he, ehecherr nwa he* (the rearing of their own). However, when it goes with lake of appreciation, it is believed that *Chukwuabiam* (The Supreme Being) and *Al’ Obukpa* (Obukpa earth goddess) would reward the parents or families that fostered his or her children respectively.

The above negative possibilities of ingratitude notwithstanding, one can identify the positive values in the Obukpa kinship care structure as follows:

1) There is no baby factory in Obukpa community. One of the inherent gains of this understanding is that Obukpa has no baby farms both at Nkalagu Obukpa and Obukpa Ulo. In these baby farms, babies are sold as commodities for all sorts of dehumanizing reasons such as money-making, ritual purposes, child abuse and human trafficking. Obukpa religion abhors these evil practices.

2) Babies are not dumped as refuse in bins. Whether it is unwanted pregnancy or death of the mother, there are no motherless babies in Obukpa. Even though there is zero-tolerance for births outside marital union yet there is zero-tolerance to treat a baby like a thing. He/she is a person to be reared within the natal family context. If it were death, somebody in the family, maternal or paternal offers her breast milk for the baby and foster parents him or her. Neither shame, death nor poverty make Obukpa people to dump their babies as wastes to be picked up and reared by strange hands.

3) Children are not for sale. This emphasis includes commercial surrogacy which Obukpa does not support. Every stage of gestation is celebrated in Obukpa society. Children born without their mothers’ pregnancy seen and cherished or pregnancy without clear paternity is frowned at in Obukpa culture.

4) Obukpa culture does not approve gay marriages or same sex union. It celebrates heterogeneous marriages for procreation and continuity of the family line. In western culture, some people involved in same gender marriages opt for adoption of babies. According to Ugwu (1987:37), “In Obukpa, the child is the child of the kindred, not of the family. All the members of the kindred take delight in the birth of a child and also in the pregnancy of the mother ever before the child birth. pregnancy was held sacred and with awe.”

5) The human person is dignified from the values of theonomy (he/she belongs to God), hence the theophorous names such as *Chinwe* (God owns), *Chikere/Chike* (God is the creator) and autonomy (self possession), hence *onwe m* which underpins the human freedom. These cultural values of theonomy and autonomy in Obukpa religion are seen too in the universal magisterium of Pope John Paul II’s Christian Anthropology. In the next section, we shall focus on the implications of child adoption in Obukpa.

**Implications of Child Adoption in Obukpa Religion**

Based on the above perceptions of child adoption that sees it as abhorrent and unwelcome, the following implications are evident. They include:

a. **Religious Implication:**

In Obukpa Religion the adopted child cannot perform certain religious rites nor can the said child occupy some religious positions such as *Attama ma* (priest of a deity). In the celebration of funeral rites he/she is a “no body” in the eyes of the culture. He/she cannot bury the so called parents symbolized by pouring of sand into the grave during the actual burial and neither can he/she organize funeral rites for their adoptive parents at their demise. Funeral rites in Obukpa have intrinsic religious characteristic more than the
social dimensions celebrated in their outer expressions. The eschatological links according to the traditional religious belief system is another question. As people die to join their ancestors according to the family line, the adoptee is not known to the ancestors of the adoptive family and therefore can neither rest with them nor re-incarnate within the family. He/she, at death, becomes a wandering spirit in the spiritual world.

b. Political Consideration

In her political structure, Obukpa people practice gerontology, that is rulership by the Onyishi (the eldest) with the council of elders (umu okpara, Ndi Akpr arua). The adopted child does not occupy the position of the onyishi and therefore has a diminished status in the political structure. He cannot hold the arua (the scepter of authority) on behalf of his kindred (mkpuru) nor the chieftaincy title of Igwe for the community (oha obodo). He cannot hold the traditional titles of Eze in the Obukpa as their exclusive reserve or the Nkpozi, Asogwa and Ozioko in Ejuona Owerre, Obie, Nkalagu and Ogbagu quatres (eka ama). As an elder without traditional portfolio, he is denied other privileges attached to his age and grey hair. This implication prompts the investigations around paternity and bio-social roots in order to address the second class citizenship or slave status which one assumes in the face of these realities.

In other Nsukka areas, these diminished statuses are acquired not because their ancestors were bought as slave (ohutosu) qua tale only but due to migration without proper assimilation in their communities of settlement with which they share no common ancestral roots. In their original towns and villages they are bona fide citizens but in the second, they suffer grave deprivations in multiple shapes and grades.

c. Economic Factor

The adoptees have no rights to property inheritance such as land and economic trees. They do not share in the ownership of the communal land and other inheritance from their supposed families or kindred. As they do not participate in the funeral of the childless who in this case are their adopted parents, they do not have access to the properties they left behind.

d. Social Affiliations

The practice of child adoption is a social dislocation in the eyes of Obukpa culture. The social values of the family such as procreation, family continuity linked with consanguinity and property inheritance are absent. Obukpa people celebrate people in the family hence the names Igwebuike, Amaechina, Obodoechina, Mmaduagwuna, Eziechina, Obiechina but not from unknown sources nor from strange roots.

e. Legal Framework

Obukpa is in the Eastern part of Nigeria and in the present Enugu State. The civil government in Nigeria has the legal framework that guarantees the legitimacy of child adaption. This dates back to 20th may 1965 by the then government of eastern Nigeria. Other regions or later the state as it is now from the historical and political evolutionary trends of state creation, have laws that make child adaption a legitimate activity. (Onah, 2002:165)

However this legal justification has myriads of challenges as child adaption in Nigeria through illegal means and compromised arrangements are prevalent. One can see the evidence of the ugly data in national dailies, police crime records and in the social and electronic media decrying the menace of illegal adoptions in the country.

The discrepancy between the perceptions of origins in the North and South of Nigeria can explain the embrace or abhorrence of citizenship-indigenship debate. As the Northerners have no issues with migration and citizenship, the Southerners especially the Igbo emphasize ancestral roots and indigenship. This disposition affects the attitudes to child adoption and familyhood in many essential ways. According to Onah (2002:167-168) “The Igbo are highly sensitive to their genealogy. An individual who does not know his lineage would do anything possible to trace it before he could have rest of mind. Hence it was rare for a man to give out his child for adoption except in a situation where a family may adopt a blood relation like an orphan who is related to the family”. In that case it is fosterage or kinship care structure within the family whereby the child has links with ancestral feet and freedom.

In the eyes of the law, an adopted order is twofold. In the words of Onah (2002:167):

The legal effect of an adoption order is twofold: it severs all rights and obligations between the child and his natural parents. It also establishes
the legal relationship of the parents and the legitimate child between the adopter and the adopted. The child shall stand to the adopter as if he was born in lawful marriage. In a joint adoption by husband and wife, in respect of the custody, maintenance and education of the child, they occupy the position of natural parents. A number of acts are prohibited and punished if committed against the law in respect of adoption orders. Such prohibition includes marriage between the adopter and the adopted or between the son and daughter of the adopter. The violation of such a prohibition is punishable with five years imprisonment. Again it is illegal for an adopter or any person to receive any payment or reward in consideration for the adoption, unless with the leave of the court. The applicant and the child for adoption must reside in the same state for the relevant court to have jurisdiction to make such an order.

The Laws of Nigeria have to address the social ills associated with the adoption activities in the country. Child adoption is on the increase due to child dumping/abandonment, child abduction/theft, child farms (baby factories), child abuse and trafficking, effort to prevent abortion and the obnoxious cultural practices against the childless couples or couples with only the girl-child.

f. Christian Pastoral Practice

The Christian Pastoral practice of helping childless couples through initiating or mediating adoption has the support of the Canon law. The 1983 code says, “Children who have been adopted in accordance with civil law are considered the children of that person or those persons who have adopted them” (Canon 110). In order to uphold the legality and sanctity of adoption, marriage between persons related by adoption is a diriment impediment. The Code, in this vein, legislates thus: “Those who are legally related by reason of adoption cannot validly marry each other if their relationship is in direct line or in the second degree of the collateral line” (Canon 1094).

Motherless Babies’ Homes have been established to fight against abortion, dumping of babies or the baby factories syndrome, among other social vices. These reasons which are good and theological as they may be, it has been discovered that the system and its laws have been violated in such a grave manner that many converts, clergy men, religious organizations and churches have been put into deep and complicated troubles. The challenges in this context come largely from the illegality in the methods used, the immorality of the actions of those who approached the church for help in the adoption process and the inhuman and ungodly purposes for which a child was adopted. The church therefore has to step up vigilance in this regard in order to avoid further scars and scams that could tarnish her image irredeemably.

The Future of Adoption in Modern Obukpa

The future of adoption in modern Obukpa society is bleak because presently it is still a struggle. Today, the families in need of adopted children that adopt children would not be able to integrate their adoptees into the Obukpa contemporary society. The church has no problem with adoption done properly within the frameworks of the law and neither has the civil government any issues with adoption in that right.

However, down to the level of the family, kindred and town, child adoption is resisted with stiffness, unrecognized with ignominy and abhorred sourly and sorely. As aforementioned above, the case against child adoption stems from the fact that the families’ relationships in Obukpa is by blood and the blood of the adoptee is seen as strange within the family veins and arteries.

Obukpa indigenes who live outside the community may try with adoptions when neither the pregnancy is to seen nor the natural period of gestation is to be known but only the children supposed to have been born within the wedlock. The issues of cultural perceptions and implications will arise when information leaks that the children were adopted. However, in contemporary times, information is accessed freer than before.

Recommendations

In order to ensure that issues of child adoption is laid to rest in Obukpa and beyond, the following recommendations are proffered.
1. There is need to abolish the erroneous cultural observance that treats childless couples as “no-bodies”. Let them be integrated into the society with their rights and obligations in order to guarantee their joy.
2. Let the community see the male and female issues as equal without orchestrating gender discrimination against the girl child. Many go into child adoption to address gender issues especially the desperate need for the male.
3. Obukpa as a people are largely Catholic Christians. There is need to understand the human person from the perspective of catholic anthropology and theology instead of clinging to obsolete cultural values with anachronistic forces.
4. Communities who discriminate against Igbo migrants in Igbo land who settle among them because the latter have different remote ancestors or recent questionable/unknown paternity should re-think on their historical, Christian and anthropological values.
5. No one should be seen as a slave (ohu/osu) or a bastard nor one’s rights denied because of accidents of birth or ancient mistakes in any part of Igbo society and beyond.
6. The Nigerian legal framework and judicial system should fight against violation of child adoption laws so that crimes in this critical aspect of our national life should belong to history books.
7. Obukpa people should uphold the kinship care structure which gives room for enhancing the dignity of the human person.

Conclusion
This study x-rayed the perceptions and implications of child adoption in Obukpa religion. It is obviously indubitable that Obukpa people do not rejoice at child adoption yet they do not celebrate infertility and barrenness. The middle course therefore is recourse to the Chukwu abiama (God the Supreme Being) and the Creator (Eze chite oke) to give them children. As God sustains their population through their reproductive health, may they respect the dignity and serenity of childless couples so that they do not increase their frustrations. Whether or not Obukpa citizens will accept child adoption of western civilization and drop their indigenous style of kinship care structure or fosterage belongs to futuristic events. Meanwhile, there is resilience in fostering their cultural perceptions on the issue and conscious advancements of their “pure blood cultural practice” within their families and kindred. And because this cultural practice is rooted within their religious metaphysics, it enjoys sustainability.

REFERENCES