

INFERTILITY IN MARRIAGE AND ITS IMPACT ON THE FAMILY:
JAMES ALACHI'S *YOUR PRECIOUS IHOTU*.

Desen Jonathan Mbachaga

Department of Theatre and Media Arts Federal University Oye
Ekiti, Nigeria

&

Apollos Ackson Akaa

Department of Theatre Arts Benue State University, Nigeria

Abstract

*Barrenness, unfruitfulness and infertility are all forms of sterility. This problem could be the fault of either of the two partners in a marriage union. It is a dangerous factor that unleashes destructive blows at marriages leading to collapse of the family unit. This paper seeks to look at the value of a woman adjudged to be sterile vis-a-vis the high premium placed on the possession of children, against the backdrop of traditional demands and expectations from the women folk. It is also against this background that the paper attempts to probe into James Alachi's use of the dramatic medium to expose the concomitant effects of infertility on the family unit using his play *Your Precious Ihotu*. The paper then concludes by admitting that though infertility is a misnomer, family members especially the male spouses should learn to exercise some level of patience and shun obsession and over indulgence in the quest for children.*

Keywords: Infertility, Marriage and Family.

Introduction

In most societies, the upbringing of a woman is geared towards making her a viable product for marriage and once married; the

social pressure to become pregnant is great. In modern society especially western societies, children are often described as “making a family” (Princhard (1991) in Gbenda 255). Married couples that are blessed with the gift of children are often seen as constituting a proper natural and complete family while the childless couple is seen as excluded from the joys of family life. This is an attitude that is shared nearly by all married couples all over the globe.

The traditional value for procreation has always been a major cause of many family upheavals. Infertility represent a potentially serious source of conflict, quarrels, dissention and other forms of maladjustment in many Nigeria homes regardless of their educational attainment and socio-economic status (Denga (1982) cited in Gbenda 256).

It is common within traditional African settings that the inability to make babies in a marriage is often blamed on the woman, as such the society exhibits some kind of bias against women which leads to a kind of stereotyping. This is often a cultural thing which has to do with values of a people that has been acquired overtime, and influenced by both internal and external factors. Stereotyping as defined by the Microsoft Encarta Electronic Encyclopedia cited in Ochefu is:

“...a preferred and unsubstantiated judgment or opinion about an individual or a group either favourable or unfavourable in nature. In modern usage, however, the term most often denotes an unfavourable or hostile attitude towards other people” (78).

Stereotype is thus a set of traits or general character typifying a group where each member is believed to operate within the same

social reality, vision and values. According to Preiswerk and Perrot (1978) “subtlety has no place in the field of stereotypes. What is right for the group is ipso facto, right for the individual and for all members of the group (173)”. The dominant element in stereotyping is the aspect of generalization, which places the woman always at the receiving end in many cases for issues that are obviously not their fault.

Thus, where a person or group is stereotyped and hence classified, prejudice is induced and results in some form of discrimination and hostility. This position is what informs the basis for most of what looks like stereotypical images of women in most African societies. These stereotypical impressions come with the attendant problems of prejudice and misrepresentations thus introducing a strain on the various levels of relationships between spouses, genders or the family unit. This is exactly what Alachi has captured in his play *Your Precious Ihotu*.

The Premium on Children: Empirical Review

The importance of the child in the family in the African traditional setting cannot be over emphasized. The African tradition places a lot of importance on the possession of children particularly male children. ‘Places’ is used above because this tradition has not changed much even in the face of the exploits of modernity in Africa. The advent of a new faith in Africa called Christianity has not even changed this impression as the Christian holy book, the Bible says in Gen. 1:28A “And God blessed them and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth...” (RSV). Where this divine injunction is not fulfilled it is attributed to some forces that are anti-God or satanic.

In most African societies, to die without a child is considered an abomination and a strange event in the life of mature males and females. Such a person is not just looked at with pity by neighbours, he or she is said to have been unlucky or one who has not enjoyed the favour of the gods (Nwachukwu-Agbada et al 427). In the cultural setting of most African communities, Nigeria inclusive, as a result of the lack of life assurance policies or a social security system put in place to cater for the aged, there is the need to have one's own children who would look after them in old age or celebrate them when they are no more. In Africa the prime responsibility of the woman to her husband is that of bearing children especially a male heir. The male is considered valuable because they have a permanent stake in the welfare of the homestead. In time past even the mothers preferred the boy - "to bury me when I die". This underscores the reasons for the high premium that is exceptionally placed on children. For instance, among the Yoruba's in Nigeria, children are equated with wealth and childless couples are pitied. Idu quoting Olusanya (1969) pointed out that "Yoruba men do not encourage their wives to use contraception because it is a sure way to promiscuity" (142). This account for the high fertility of the Yorubas which according to Idu, Adepoju (1977) rationalizes thus; "the high fertility behaviour of Yoruba peasants who view their limited horizon in terms of their farm size or trade is a logical response to the specific cultural and economic environment. Their expectations and aspirations are largely determined by the constraints of factors of production-mainly labour" (142). This situation also applies to the other major ethnic groups in Nigeria as Caldwell (1982;1987) in Idu corroborates that "high fertility in Nigeria context is rational

because of high value placed on children who contribute to household economics very early in life” (142).

Among the Igbo's, women with the natural propensity to bear children are most times conferred with chieftaincy titles as a special recognition occasioned by the socio-cultural institutions which tend to encourage and recognize procreation. Essentially, people go into marriage in this part of the world for the biological reason of procreation Idu quoting Okore A. (1977) and Isiugo-Abanihe U.C.(1994) submits that; “in Igbo tradition a marriage literally consummated by the birth of male children has added respect and honour, strengthening of marital bonds, social security, emotional satisfaction and fulfillments and guarantee of befitting burials to parents” (142).

This issue of the quest and obsession for children has become phenomenal in all African societies despite the attendant socio-economic problems occasioned by the persistence of high fertility especially in third world countries, Fajobi (1987) asserts in Idu that;

Our traditional love and glory for large number of children created no economic and social problems in the days when it costs little or nothing to bring up children, having children today is certainly an expensive past time (139).

The disregard for the harsh economic conditions that is birthed by large number of children in families in parts of Nigeria as manifestation of the great value placed on children is the extreme fanfare that characterizes the arrival of a child into a family. This is sometimes reflected in the meanings to be read in the names given to such children. Quoting Emereuwaonu (1992) et al (1992), Idu posits that:

The Yoruba name “Omoboriowo” Esan “Omonnigho” and Igbo “Nwakaego” signify (a child is worth more than money or wealth). Also Igbo names or cosmology like Nwabueze (a child is better), Nwakonam (May I not lack a child), Igwebuike (multitude is strength), Nwokedi (there is a man) and Obiechina (let the ancestral root not be extracted) are value laden” (142).

Obviously, it is through sons that a woman achieves an ‘honoured’ status because the boy perpetuates the lineage and defends its patrimony. Among the Hausa of the Northern Nigeria, such socio-cultural practices like the universal and early age of marriage which is pegged at 14 years, the legitimatization of polygamy or allowance to marry up to four wives centres around the desire to have children.

Child bearing is given legitimacy through marriages, and “marriage as an institution is recognized globally as a matrimonial relationship and /or union of persons who most often are usually of the opposite sex” (Gowon 24). Otite and Ogionwo (1981) have given the meaning of marriage as a socially recognized union that is between a man and a woman to form a family. Rose also quotes Nwoye (1997) as saying;

Marriage is a sacred and permanent contract which is assured to be enacted when two people (usually a man and a woman) decide of their own accord and in the presence of at least two witnesses to exchange the formal consent to live a life of vocation of love and sharing for each other

for the purpose of promoting their natural growth and welfare as persons in their journey together through life” (133).

As a system, marriage is literally consummated by the birth of a child especially a male child, who is believed to continue the family line. Marriage also has been viewed by some as the joining of two families to increase wealth of the clan through offspring. The issue of the continuity of family lineage or ancestry can almost be hampered if there is infertility in a family especially the absence of male children hence Murdock (1992) in Doki sees the family as a social group where members are related by ancestry, marriage or adoption and live together, cooperate economically and care for the young (8).

The family is thus a universal system that functions as the organizer and stabilizer of societal values and order. It forms the basic foundation upon which the society rests. The structure and the unifying function of the family which can be seen as an umbilical cord that bilaterally links the interactional activities in a given society thus places it as the most crucial unit of all human organizations, hence its continuity and progress through procreation connotes harmony while its disruption leads to a number of social problems ranging from divorce, prostitution, betrayal, violence, etc.

The quest for male children has made some other societies to adopt obnoxious systems of marriages. For instance, in the play *Broken Calabash* by Tess Onwuemene, marriage as practiced in the Igbo-Idegbe system is such that allows the eldest daughter of the family to stay home and produce children for her father if there is no male in the lineage. This is however rejected by Ona the heroine

in the play as a wrong practice which must be abandoned. This highlights an example of the extreme undue value that is placed on the child especially the male child in most traditional societies.

Causes of Infertility

Infertility in human is an un-reproductive state in which a man or woman is not able to procreate or reproduce. Infertility can be both in men and women, for instance in the cases of chromosomally abnormal individuals where the body cannot form viable sperms or eggs. Some diseases such as mumps in sexually mature men or tuberculosis in women may cause sterility. Sterility can be differentiated from infertility. While sterility is a permanent state of unreproductiveness, infertility could be a temporal inability to reproduce; this can be corrected if proper medical diagnosis is carried out. Infertility in women is of two categories; primary infertility which is when a woman is unable to conceive a child and the secondary infertility is when a woman who has had one or more pregnancies is suddenly unable to conceive.

Infertility in a marriage can be caused by the man when the sperm is prone to defects or at other times some sperms lack a full complement of DNA and some sperms cannot swim on a straight line. Another reason for infertility in males could be due to infection, particularly mumps during childhood which destroys the testicles or may be due to diseases like gonorrhoea which is also capable of destroying the testicles and obstructs the production of sperms (Kehinde and Durojaiye, 1992) cited in Gbenda 259).

In the women, the commonest cause of infertility is the blockage of the fallopian tubes. Often times, a woman's fallopian tubes are

blocked by either the effects of pelvic infections of sexually transmitted diseases affecting tissues leading out to the uterus, a condition called demestriosis could be responsible for this. In addition to the above likely explanations of infertility, environmental and dietary causes can alter human fertility also. Alcohol according to Shakespeare in *Gbenda* (259) has the effect of increasing the desire but diminishing the performance.

To fully appreciate and understand the far reaching implications of infertility on the family, it is instructive to look at the synopsis of the play *Your Precious Ihotu* by James Alachi.

Play Synopsis

The play *Your Precious Ihotu* is a farcical comedy that treats the problem of childlessness, among other social problems, resulting from an unsatisfied and unfulfilled married couple, Agada and Aladi. Through the character of Ojo, who uses calabashes of varying sizes to feign pregnancy for her obsessed boyfriend Agada, the playwright carefully orchestrates the hypocritical idea through Ada, Ojo's school mate and friend. Agada Agbo having been married for six and half years still battles with the problem of childlessness. Thus in a desperate search for a child, comes across Ojo, who sensing his obsession for a child capitalizes on it and exploits him through a pretended pregnancy. When Ojo announces that she is carrying Agada's baby, Agada lavished presents and cash on her 'like Sokoto wind and Port-Harcourt rain' in appreciation for apparently being an instrument through whom God has chosen to answer his fervent and earnest prayers for a child. Events however takes a dramatic twist when Aladi, Agada's wife arrives home from school and notices traces of a female stranger and very soon comes

face to face with the mother of Agada's '*Precious Ihotu*'. In the heat of the moment, Uroko, the houseboy gets hold of the helm of Ojo's wrapper and pulls it off in a swift move and the calabashes crashes unto the floor leaving Agada gaping open mouthed in amazement, staring into the oblivion as if hypnotized as Ojo presents him with his '*Precious Ihotu*'.

Contextual Analysis

Any writer, I suppose, feels that the world into which he was born is nothing less than a conspiracy against the cultivation of his talent – which attitude certainly has a great deal to support it. On the other hand, it is only because the world looks on his talent with such a frightening indifference that the artist is compelled to make his talent important (James Baldwin, 1964; Cited in Ker 3).

It is thus not surprising that the playwright, James Alachi has compellingly used his talent as a dramatist and playwright to comment on the social monster called infertility which stands as a colossus to destroy the homes of impatient and intolerant couples. This he achieves through the dramatization of the conflicts in Agada's family resulting from this social phenomenon.

The play opens with an encounter between Agada and Ojo, the two focal characters. Their meeting is as timely as it is part of the series of concerted efforts by Agada who has desperately been looking for a child outside matrimony. This atmosphere of desperation is established by the houseboy, Uroko:

Uroko: The only tin be sey, **madam no fit born pikin** for Oga and Oga de craze for pikin bad bad... (*Your Precious Ihotu* 88).

To achieve this desperate ambition, Agada has been increasingly unfaithfully to his wife as the houseboy confirms:

Uroko: Even the girls *Oga de* bring come house ever day, non of *dem* get belly (*Your Precious* 89).

The speech above implies that Agada referred to here as 'Oga' has become a womanizer with the hope that peradventure one of his numerous concubines might take in for him. This unfaithfulness is brought about by the persisting barrenness of his wife or so it seems. Uroko in the same soliloquy confirms the bone of contention between Agada and Aladi:

Uroko: Na only woman *palava*, if not Oga ma good like madam. If madam fit born him precious *pikin* for am now, every tin go fine... (88).

The cause of the barrenness in this home is not particularly known as Uroko does not point exactly at whom the vector is:

Uroko: But how we go know if na madam him fault (89).

In African traditions, men are always quick to apportion blames to women when cases of infertility or barrenness are rife. But he goes further to historicize on the fertility status of his Oga:

Uroko: Afterall, I come hear say non of Oga senior brothers get pikin. Na only the woman among dem get eleven children... (89).

This speech ordinarily vindicates the woman in this situation and calls for a serious reassessment of the real crux of the issue. However, the stereotyping of women in African societies does not allow for this critical reassessment, as culturally there is always a preconceived prejudice which creates a bias against women where there is the problem of childlessness in a home. Agada confirms this stereotypical attitude thus:

Agada: For six years, six solid years after I got married to my wife, I labored in vain to get a child. Just when I thought hope was lost, Ojo came from nowhere and now she is pregnant for me... Three, yes, three months old in Ojo's womb (97).

This confirms what Uroko had said earlier that:

Uroko: If not, six years now, madam dey wit Oga, pikin no fit come... (89).

This reaffirms the masculine ideology and belief that when there is barrenness, it comes from the woman. The rather long barren situation becomes worrisome for a couple especially for the man in

a traditional setting that places high premium on children especially the male child. To further authenticate Agada's impatience, Callen (1993) as cited in Gbenda avers that:

“the length of time required for a normal woman having unprotected sex to become pregnant as; after one month of sexual relation, 25 percent will be pregnant, after six months, 63 percent will be pregnant, after nine months, 75 percent will be pregnant, after twelve months 80 percent will be pregnant and after eighteen months 90 percent will be pregnant (259).

Thus after this rather prolonged wait for a child, Agada becomes desperate and is all out to get a child by any means, if not for anything to prove to the world that he is not a 'woman', in other words not infertile. Hear him;

Agada:...I will show Ako and Ejah the stuff I am made of. They dared call me a woman... (97).

His obsession is clearly captured in his conversation with Ojo when he says:

Agada:.....if things go well, I will ask you to marry me, I have been desperately looking for a wife to give me a child. I will call that child be it a male or female, *Ihotu*, for I will love the child very much.

I long for the woman and I long for the day my Precious Ihotu will be born...(87).

This vividly brings out the anxiety and obsession in a man who desperately needed to have a child he can call his own. The level of anxiety Agada has reached can be imagined to have reached a dimension, which most often can be dangerous. Reviewing literature on anxiety, Leke (2004) points out that a person's level of arousal is shaped by such needs as hunger, thirst, boredom, social approval and the need to achieve. When the drive for one's needs is high, the individual becomes anxious. Anxiety is therefore a product of conflict between the individual's self and the individual's environment (Gbenda 258). The environment here includes the home and the cultural expectations of the society. Anxious persons therefore respond to situations in manners that are often out of proportion to reality. When obsession sets in, if a man is not careful he becomes a prey to his emotions as Agada confesses:

Agada: please don't be annoyed. Forgive me, like you have just said, I am just being a prey of my emotions... (88).

Such obsession if not curtailed bifurcates into other vices such as dishonesty, unfaithfulness, betrayals and submission to undue pressures; these are capable of eroding a harmonious relationship in a family unit. Ojo on her part capitalizes on Agada's desperateness to extort and drain him of his resources. She admits to her friend. Ada:

Ojo: A child, he is desperately looking for a child. Man or woman and he would name him/her Ihotu (91).

Uroko (96) also says “just like my Oga. He go fit give anything to anybody wey tellam say, he don get belle for am”.

Ojo’s recourse to such phases like ‘you are always acting’, ‘theater is in my blood’, ‘I like acting on stage’, ‘it seem this was a play’, and ‘I am acting out this role’ are both ironical and sarcastic, as she was only capitalizing on Agada’s obsession to exploit the situation to her favour. With the assurances she had gathered from her conversation with Agada, Ojo tells Ada:

Ojo: That man I told you of the other day is crazy by the head. He has a zip over all his pockets. He is very rich, you can see the money flowing everywhere...but he has never given me more than ₦500 (90).

It is at this point that the playwright through Ada orchestrates the device to milk the unsuspecting obsessed and desperate child-seeker. As Ojo tells her friend Ada:

Ojo...after doing my best in the bid to squeeze some cash out of him, all he talks of is when I will give him his Precious Ihotu. That aspect of him is more than play acting. It is obsession (91).

The playwright at this point exposes the mischievous attitudes and reasoning of the present day girl as Ada sells out the following mischievous master plan:

Ada:... All we have to do is to get five calabashes of different sizes. From very small to very big. The smallest when used on your stomach is three months

pregnancy, the next is four and so on...
(92).

This plot eventually succeeds as Agada accepts wholeheartedly and completely this falsehood. Uroko who is aware of this plot sympathizes with his master without however leaking the plot to him. In his sympathy he says:

Uroko:...poor master, and see how he de
spend for the girl like Sokoto wind (100).

Elsewhere he compares his unsuspecting master's spendthrift attitude on Ojo as "...he dey buy things for her like 'Port Harcourt rain' (103).

Unfruitfulness in the family pushes Agada neck deep into betraying his wife and perpetuating falsehood when he told Ojo that he is a bachelor.

Agada:... Ojo, I am quite a harmless bachelor. Feel free
with me (85).

But when eventually events came to a head and Ojo came face to face with reality she insists "Agada told me he is a bachelor..." (105). In the presence of Aladi, Agada not looking back resolutely reaffirms his position that he has found the mother of his child, so the 'barren' Aladi has to accept to play the second fiddle:

Agada: Aladi has lived with me for
years...yet she could not get pregnant.
You are going to be the mother of my
Precious Ihotu, and the mother of my
Precious Ihotu is always the queen of
the house. Aladi, sorry it is a condition
you have to accept (105).

This is how marriages and homes that have gone through difficult years of moulding can be destroyed in a short while because of

barrenness. Pathetically, this is the plight of most barren women in Nigeria and indeed African society in general. They face open degradation for unexplainable circumstances that are not under their control, such as the powers to make babies or children, because of cultural stereotyping. The playwright lays bare the nonsensical, illogical and unnecessary quest for children that is devoid of rationality and objectivity, through the dramatic presentation of Agada's shattered dreams as he discovers that his Precious Ihotu is but a calabash.

Conclusion

The obvious summary and conclusion to derive from the paper is that infertility in marriages is capable of disrupting the harmonious survival of the family unit. The paper took a cursory look at the general societal impression of infertility in the family and the attendant cultural stereotypical classification and plight of women who are adjudged to be barren. The high premiums placed on children were also empirically reviewed with emphasis on the Nigerian society representing the African traditional setting. We further looked at the cause- and- effect of infertility on the family drawing particular lessons from *Your Precious Ihotu*. The paper then concludes by stressing the need for more caution on the part of couples to show restraints and exercise considerable level of patience and tolerance in their quest for children in marriages.

Works Cited

- Alachi, James. *Your Precious Ihotu*. Makurdi. Abogom Press. 2002
- Gbenda, B.L. *Fertility Anxiety Among Married Couples in Benue State*. In *The Journal of family Development* 2 (2004): 255-265.

- Doki, Gowon A. *Cultural Stereotypes and the Marriage Institution in Central Nigeria: The Tiv-Igede Example in the Global Age*: Makurdi Journal of Arts and Culture: *Aspect of Benue Culture* 7, Gowon A Doki (Ed) (2009) 24-34.
- Idu, Ogbe, O. *Fertility Intentions and the Value of Children in Nigeria*: Review of Gender Studies in Nigeria 2 (2003) 138-157.
- Ker, David I. *Literature and Society in Africa*. Ibadan: Spectrum Book, 2004.
- Murdock K. *Themes in Social Studies Education in Nigeria*. Oweri: Whyte and Whyte Publishers. 1992.
- Nwachukwu-Agbada et al. *Exam Focus in Literature in English 2011-2015 for WAEC (WASSCE) and NECO (SSCE)*. Ibadan: University Press 2011.
- Ikyo, Rose M. and Tarpael Esther U. *Urbanization and Marriage Institution in Nigeria: Problems and Prospects*. In The Journal of Counselling and Development 2 (2009) 130-140.
- Otite O. and Ogionwo N. *An Introduction to Sociological Studies*. Ibadan: Hernemann Educational Books 1981.
- Ochefu Y. *Historical Perspective of Cultural Stereotypes and its Implications For National Integration* J. O. Bisong (Ed) Obudu: 2000
- Prieswerk R. and Perrot D. *Ethnocentrism and History: Africa, Asia and Indian America in Western Textbooks*. Lagos: Nok Publishers. 1978.