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# Public Attitudes and the Negative Feminization of Childlessness in West Africa

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## ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the African woman's struggles in a childless marriage. Therefore, a thorough analysis of public opinion shows that childlessness is negatively feminized in West Africa. Then, West African women are pointed out in the case of a fruitless marriage. They are blamed for this procreation problem. As childbearing is a sustainable reason why African people get married, sterility brings many consequences on a couple's life and even on the society.

This paper also shows the consequences of childlessness on West African couples and on the society.

**Keywords:** *Marriage, Childlessness, West African Women, Childless Marriage*

## **INTRODUCTION**

African couples' identities, social status, and sense of fulfillment in their communities are frequently shaped by their procreation and childbearing experiences, which are truly existential concerns. Not only is having children a personal expectation in many African civilizations, but it is also a fundamental cultural duty that entwines marriage, adulthood, and legacy.

For African people, having children is more important than many other factors when it comes to marriage. The primary targets of this pressure are women, in addition to the fact that every childless marriage has a very low probability of surviving. According to many African scholars, women are typically blamed for childlessness in traditional societies. When a man marries a second woman without first obtaining medical evidence of her infertility, it becomes clear. In some cases, males are forced by suspicion to divorce women or demand a refund of their wedding price due to the lack of children. Not only is it a humiliation for women, but it is also a problem of gender inequality that requires theological study and attention in order to offer recommendations and guidance on how to lessen or do away with certain behaviors that encourage women's subordination.

The purpose of this article is to research how important childbearing is in West African Culture and highlight its consequences on couples.

### **Methodology**

This article deals with Public Attitudes and the Negative Feminization of Childlessness in West Africa. Qualitative methodology is used to study the selected novels for the analysis. The qualitative nature of this article makes it exploratory and facilitates its understanding. It also affords the researcher the tools to explore the effects of socio-cultural influences on the female marital condition and how the women characters navigate their ways in such male-structured worlds. The reading of African-based books, articles, newspapers and other relevant media will be its sources

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research is situated within the Feminist Literary Theory which evolves as a reaction to women's domination, marginalization, oppression, and humiliation in a patriarchal society.

### **Infertility as Women's Problem**

The challenges faced by infertile women are related to their origin or the culture to which they belong. But in many African societies, infertile women are subjected to mistreatment. Being infertile is a difficult experience. Among the challenges they face, here are some that these women have to deal with: shame, stigmatization, rejection etc. For a large part of their lives, infertile women are ostracized by society. Initially a private concern, infertility becomes a taboo subject with serious and complex repercussions. A widespread belief is that the infertile woman could have had casual sex and had an abortion, which would have damaged her reproductive organs and made her infertile. Barren women are sometimes prevented from carrying or keeping other women's babies and are told that they have no experience in caring for a child. They are not allowed to carry babies on the grounds that they may kill other people's children in the same way that they killed their own in the womb. Even in some churches, barren women are not allowed to teach in Sunday school due to the fact that they have no experience in communicating with children. In some societies, when a barren woman dies, her body is thrown into the forest and is therefore not buried in the earth because it is believed that she may harm the fertility of the earth.

In addition, it may be difficult to avoid community members' questions and interactions when one is pregnant or a mother due to their prominence. Living with their in-laws and trying to establish their status within the household is sometimes further reinforced by becoming a mother.

For many women who reside in virilocal housing, family pressure is constant and direct. According to Fernandes, et al. (2006), "Motherhood is constructed as a woman's crowning glory, the pinnacle of achievement: what we are all destined for and ultimately the only means of true fulfilment." (Fernandes, et al. 2006: 701-712). The conflation of womanhood and motherhood, as well as the female body and female identity, creates a sense of failed purpose or body that translates to a failed identity for those women who can't bear children. According to Inhorn, being infertile results in a complicated experience of stigma, especially in underprivileged areas where the woman is stigmatized or disempowered due to her "barrenness, femaleness, and poverty" (Nahar and Richters, 2011: 335). Since the in-laws of the barren woman can claim the dowry paid to marry her on the assumption that she would have children, being barren further complicates matters for many women in African civilizations. (Dierickx et al., 2018: 8). In the case that the bride price is already received, the infertile woman and her family may have financial trouble and returning it will place them in a humiliating predicament. After failing to become pregnant, the woman is frequently subjected to social shame from her family and the larger community. She may be denied opportunities for advancement in society or shunned to the point of divorce, exile, financial isolation, or charges of witchcraft (Hollo et al., 2009: 2068).

If the elders do not want their son to end up without an heir, they decide to give him another wife, the poor barren woman can be very unlucky. Everyone starts to despise her and she ends up being the laughing stock of all. She is no longer welcome in certain debates. Even if the spouse can sometimes be barren, sterility is invariably linked to women. In situations where the man is barren, his family members will discuss the issue in private and try to resolve it in secret. In the African paradigm, a man is never considered barren. Unlike indecent, it is unfair to protect a barren man.

As with leprosy, infertile women receive degrading treatment. Making ensuring the bride lady feels unwelcome and useless, the in-laws won't disguise their displeasure. In the absence of offspring, a bride lady will become an outsider, regardless of her abilities in other areas. She's going to be informed in riddles all the time that she is childless and that nothing she achieves will be appreciated going forward. Singing hymns about how sorry she is for her son or how much she longs for a grandchild makes things worse. An in-law daughter may become weary of this. Her worth starts to diminish and she starts to feel insecure.

Cultural expectations are huge and can cause many consequences on the couple's stability.

## **Consequences of Infertility on Couples**

### **Polygamy, Its historical roots and Consequences.**

The Hebrew Bible's book of Genesis depicts the origins of polygamy by telling the tale of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, three people who were involved in a plural union. Population increases and fertility concerns have fueled numerous polygamous behaviors.

A number of the most notable people in Scripture had many wives. Lamech was the earliest polygamist. Genesis 4:19 states that he "married two women." Sarah, Hagar, and Keturah were the three wives of Abraham. David, Solomon, and Jacob all had several wives.

Among the outstanding men of faith in the Old Testament, Solomon owned 300 concubines and 700 wives.

According to Wikipedia, Polygamy (from Late Greek *πολυγαμία* *polygamía*), is defined as "state of marriage to many spouses". It is the practice of marrying multiple spouses. When a man is married to more than one wife at the same time, it is called polygyny. When a woman is married to more than one husband at the same time, it is called polyandry.

In sociobiology and zoology, researchers use *polygamy* in a broad sense to mean any form of multiple mating.

African people are frequently linked to the phenomenon of polygamy. In practically every African society, polygamy is regarded as a legitimate and acceptable marriage arrangement; in fact, monogamy has historically been connected to lower socioeconomic classes. The more wives a man has, the more children he is likely to have, and the more offspring he has, the more probable the family is to live forever, according to proponents of polygamy. This demonstrates how certain Africans (men in particular) hold the practice in such high respect. There are differences in the theological perspectives of different Christian faiths about polygamy.

The practice of polygamy is not exclusive to Africans. The word's Greek origins allow it to be used in a wider sense to refer to any simultaneous multiple marriage unions for one person, such as female polyandry and male polygyny. (Yamani, 2008: 11). The term "polygamy" refers to the situation in which a man has more than one woman, including the religious, legal, and customary aspects of these unions.

The concept is defined as a culturally decided, socially accepted, and legally recognized kind of permanent marriage in which a man has multiple wives at the same time (Gaskiyane, 2000: 97). In this situation, the societal norms of the parties involved dictate whether the marriage is acceptable. Although many interpretations may be deduced depending on the context, (Kahiga, 2007:120) notes that polygamy is essentially defined as a marriage in which there are multiple wives.

In support of his claim that polygamy is as old as human civilization, Shahzad (2009) lists David and Solomon as just two of numerous examples. While it is challenging to determine whether polygamy is on the rise or falling, it is nevertheless a prominent and pervasive practice (Okorie, 1995:1).

According to Kahiga (2007:120), although polygamy was formally recognized in Africa, it has since evolved into anonymous polygamy, where partners or concubines live in secret in various places. Because any partner is free to remarry after a divorce, Kahiga contends that the Western cycle of divorce and remarriage amounts to serial polygamy. According to him, it is widely believed that when white people arrived in Africa, they joined forces with the church to try to prevent polygamy. According to Hillman, Calvin maintained that monogamy was required by natural law, despite the fact that some Reformers believed polygamy to be legal (Hillman, 1975:182). As stated by Maillu, "The colonial church in particular, has been fighting against the tradition on the basis that it is incompatible with the Bible" (Maillu 1988:1). The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania's Bishop Josiah Kibira acknowledged the challenges posed by polygamy and advocated for theological study, but the Anglican church in West Africa permitted the baptism of polygamists' wives, while the same church in South Africa and elsewhere refused to admit them even to the catechumenate without the bishop's approval. These differing opinions may have been reflected in this, but African scholars and missionaries have presented a number of opposing arguments. While the regional conference in Nairobi in 1967 encouraged the Roman Catholic bishops to review the prospect of adopting a new policy regarding polygamy, the Liberian Lutheran church chose to allow polygamists and their wives to baptism and Holy Communion (Hillman 1975:35). According to Okonkwo, "there is no question that the most obvious of these features is the toleration and even approval, accorded

to polygamy, if we seek to identify the main distinguishing feature of African customary marriage as compared with European marriage." (Okonkwo: 2003:15.

Okonkwo might be right, but it would be wrong to generalize and imply that all Africans are polygamists, especially in the modern period given the socioeconomic climate and the criticism from some Christian denominations. One person who caused controversy was Bishop Colenso, a Methodist missionary from England who worked in the 1800s. His famous text, *"Remarks on the proper treatment of cases of polygamy, as found already existing in converts from heathenism,"* (1855) showed his tolerance of polygamy.

According to Phiri (2006: 6), levirate and polygamous marriages can be linked to the fact that the biblical narratives were composed, narrated, and understood in a society that was controlled by men. A more recent example is the marriage of South African President Jacob Zuma to his fourth wife in 2012. Karimi provided the following account of this affair: In a customary ceremony on Friday, Zuma, 70, married Bongi Ngema in the town of Inkandla. (2012). This is the polygamous president's sixth marriage in all. Although polygamy is legal in South Africa, it is becoming less common among the continent's youth, however some communities continue to practice it.

### **Polygamy Consequences on African Families**

The practice of having many marriages at the same time, known as polygamy, is a contentious topic because of its complicated effects on both individuals and families. Polygamous marriages can have serious repercussions, impacting women's and children's mental health and creating legal issues in some jurisdictions.

In Africa, weddings happen frequently, at a young age, and frequently for the aim of having children rather than out of love (Dyer, 2007: 70). As Dyer, having children really serves as a sign of the pair's validity as a married couple. (Dyer 2007: 75). Therefore, not being able to have children can frequently result in unstable marriages, which might include extramarital affairs, polygamy, or divorce.

Polygamy has many impacts on the spouses. Contrary to their monogamous counterparts, women in polygamous relationships have been found to have much higher levels of anxiety, sadness, and low self-esteem. Women in polygamous relationships exhibited higher levels of interpersonal sensitivity, somatization, obsessive-compulsive behaviors, and psychological distress in general. Particularly, the "first wife syndrome" emphasizes that when a husband takes several wives, the first wife frequently experiences the biggest emotional upheaval, including feelings of desertion and jealousy.

The spouse faces pressure from his parents, other family members, and friends to wed a second bride when the first marriage is infertile, with the goal of bearing children who would carry on the family and clan tradition. Some choose to return home to live with their parents, if they are still alive, if the second wife neglects the first wife after she gives child. How easily women are chastised for being barren is unsettling. In our African society, women are actually eager to take the blame for disaster. Following that, the elders move swiftly to decide what to do. Usually, this means that the daughter-in-law will be sent back to her parents.

She may experience depression in addition to other issues if she does not receive the required help. The entire town starting to gossip about her and call her "barren" is another thing that damages her psychologically. She will be laughed at by everyone in the neighborhood, especially when she walks past gatherings of geriatric ladies who engage in gossip. She becomes into the laughingstock of the community and starts to withdraw from society. Fearing that their newborns may be taken by the so-called "barren," fertile women will become protective of their offspring. It is troubling to observe how ladies treat infertile women with contempt rather than encouragement.

Partners may experience loneliness, discontent, and jealousy as a result of polygamy. Perceived unfair treatment by the husband frequently makes these emotional pressures worse.

Although women may build alliances with other wives or turn to their religious beliefs to deal with these difficulties, the underlying problems frequently still exist.

In some Nigerian regions, having children is a fundamental part of life and is culturally required. Being a biological parent is a social duty that is inextricably linked to religion, a sense of personal fulfillment, and the necessity of a stable family unit, with a preference for male children. The results of this study demonstrate that these child-centered beliefs considerably increase the total burden of infertility on childless couples pursuing biological motherhood, irrespective of the religion or social status of the couple.

Both men and women from the immediate family and the entire society contribute to the suffering endured by childless men and women, as suggested by the overall pictures that emerge from the texts. Characters like Yegide Adebayo in *Stay With Me* (2017), Iya Tope, Iya Segi, and Iya Femi in Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010) refute the stereotype that they are worthless and barren. They engage in extramarital affairs that lead to pregnancies, proving that they are fertile and that their inability to have children is a result of their failure to meet social expectations of being wives and mothers. Many of the remarks made regarding childless men and women in African countries are examples of bias and misunderstandings, as demonstrated by Adichie, Shoneyin, and Adebayo.

The representation of childless males demonstrates how society has valued virility so highly that men who experience infertility and impotence live in perpetual denial out of dread of being mocked. Social expectations have affected both men and women in childless relationships. They make every effort to meet social expectations, even if it means sacrificing their dignity. Patriarchal standards prevent male infertility from being made public, as seen by the portrayals of Baba Segi in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010) and Akin in *Stay With Me* (2017). According to Baba Segi in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010), since their wives have children through extramarital encounters, infertile men might not be aware that they are infertile. Both men and women without children are perceived in society in large part because of traditional views on childlessness. A society's perception of impotence and barrenness is shaped by them. The problem of blame can be resolved by identifying the reason for a marriage's childlessness thanks to medical developments. The writers' goal is to change people's mindsets to reject oppression and redefine masculinity and femininity by bringing forth a new social consciousness and awareness.

## **Divorce**

Divorce is the legal dissolution of a marriage. A male divorced is called *divorcé*, while a female divorced is called *divorcée*. Marriage, on the other hand, is the formal union of a man and a woman, generally recognized by law, by which they become husband and wife (Concise Oxford English Dictionary, 11th edition, 2009). Divorce is the dissolution of a marriage by judgment of a court or by accepted custom. It may also be called a total separation (Collins English Dictionary, 2011). It is also a legal way of ending a marriage (Macmillan School Dictionary, 2011).

Infertility is a major problem in many African societies, where it is closely linked to social standards and cultural expectations on marriage and having children. Given how highly these communities value children, being unable to conceive can have serious social consequences, including divorce.

Amongst the marital issues leading women to divorce, barrenness holds an important place. Some barren women personally resort to divorce but others are forced to divorce by their neighborhood or by their parents or even by their husband relatives. The last case is what Amaka has faced in *One Is Enough* (1981).

After six years of marriage with Obiora, Amaka couldn't bear a child. In fact, Obiora's mother is tired in waiting for a grandson, so she couldn't tolerate this situation. She thought that

Amaka was the source of the unhappiness of her son. She finally took a rash decision to send Amaka out and marry to his son, a girl who has already two children from him. Moreover, Obiora has not realized great things and Amaka is accused to be responsible of all this.

As far as Pokuwaa, the main character in Asare Konadu's *A Woman In Her Prime* (1967) is concerned, she has faced the same situation and was compelled to divorce her first two husbands Kofi Daafo and Kwadu Fosu. Pokuwaa had been fond of the latter. But as there was no child, her mother used to come and says: "You see, my child, you should have children. You are my only daughter, and unless you have a child our lives will end miserably" (Konadu, 1967:19). Her mother, in no uncertain terms, wanted her to divorce Kwadu Fosu: "You have been married to Kwadu Fosu for nearly three years. There is no sign of a child. Will you still stick to him"? But Pokuwaa tried to resist in vain:

"But mother, we cannot force a child. We we'll leave it to God. Besides it is not easy to walk up to a man and tell him, "I have divorced you, go! I can only do that if he actually does me wrong" Konadu, 1967:19.

With her nagging intrusion, Pokuwaa's mother finally succeeded in forcing her to divorce Kwadu Fosu. It was then that she had married Kwadwo Fordwuo, who grew to love her charm, her sympathy and her sweet conversation.

Since having children is the main purpose for being married, many infertile couples end up divorcing. It should be highlighted, nevertheless, that while their former spouses remarry and continue to be childless in their second marriages, some divorced women get married again and begin having children. The issue in this case is with the man, yet society consistently assigns the blame to the woman (Panti and Sununu, 2014: 7-1).

But the divorce is not without consequences. Let focus on some effects of divorce. The first difficulty faced by divorced women is that their unlucky to re-marry. In the Ghanaian, Nigerian and other countries across the Africa continent, women are expected to marry men who are older than them. This makes it difficult for divorced woman to find new partners since these women are normally above the age of thirty-five. Also, Christians believe that a divorced woman cannot get married until her divorced husband dies. Hence, as long as the divorced husband lives, she is bounded by the law to remain single, if she re-marries while her divorced husband is still living, she will be called an adulterous (Romans 7: 2-3).

The children's situation is another consequence of divorce. After a divorce, the children are the most at risk. Since the family, which is the main socializing agent, no longer exists, raising children becomes challenging. Children from shattered parents are typically found among prostitutes, armed robbers, and other social outcasts. When children move between both parents' homes, the situation gets worse since one parent always thinks the child is with the other parent, even when they are actually somewhere else.

Additionally, divorce has a detrimental impact on society. Children from broken households are more likely to drop out of school and end up on the streets. In order to help a parent or younger siblings, children from divorced marriages frequently quit school and work as hawkers. These kids develop skills like stealing, cheating, defrauding, and even bullying individuals from the streets. People in the community feel threatened by the presence of these street children, which makes them uneasy.

The question now is to know whether it is reasonable for a barren woman to resort to divorce as the solution to her barrenness.

It amounts to saying that divorce is not automatically the solution to barrenness. For example, a woman who is suffering from a sexually transmissible disease such a gonorrhoea, soft chancre or syphilis and who has not been completely cured from the disease can become barren and will not bear a child if she spends her time going from one husband to another. Therefore, traditional medicine and modern medicine should be closely associated so as to

overcome diseases, especially the sexually transmissible ones which could lead women to divorce.

## CONCLUSION

In West Africa, there is a pervasive and extremely negative perception of childlessness because public opinions tend to associate a woman's identity and cultural status with her capacity to give birth. Childless women are viewed as incomplete or less important by this highly gendered attitude, which has a substantial impact on their psychosocial wellness and adds to feelings of emotional anguish, loneliness, and stigma. The problem is widespread and detrimental in West African countries since such views uphold patriarchal standards and continue to marginalize women who are unable or unwilling to become mothers.

Women are still severely subjugated as a result of infertility in the majority of rural areas. Their husbands, other women, their in-laws, and society as a whole all stigmatize and exclude them. Empathy continues to be one of the key instruments in the process of comprehending other human difficulties, according to certain practitioners of practical theology and other humanitarian disciplines. Empathy enables caretakers to understand, put themselves in other people's shoes, and travel with them to a successful conclusion.

Empathy should always be a major factor, particularly when it comes to matters concerning the welfare of women in African nations. Additionally, when oppressive systems are implemented to annoy women, empathy can be a useful tool in addressing these unsettling practices. In order to contribute to the formation and shaping of human consciousness and women's emancipation, an environment where women's experiences can be addressed should be established.

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