

## Exploring the Increasing Acceptance of Child Adoption among Families Resident in Lagos State

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### Abstract

*Adoption in sub-Saharan Africa had been a cultural shock before now. This was because in the past family cohesion was strong and was further strengthened by societal norms that denied adopted children of certain inheritance. Childless couples found parenting expressions in mentoring family relations like their own child. However, with influence of westernization the extended family system began to wane, giving birth to other parenting models like adoption. The study therefore, sought to explore the increasing acceptance of child adoption among families' resident in Lagos state. The study adopted a qualitative method, deploying in-depth interview guide among ten parents who adopted at least a child through the formal process. The respondents were selected using the snowball sampling technique. Key informant interview guide was deployed to three traditional rulers and an operator of motherless babies' home to enhance respondents' validation. The result shows an increasing acceptance of adoption among families' residence in Lagos state. This could be a good breakthrough for individuals on the long waiting list for conception who could have gone through physical and psychological trauma. In view of this, advocacy groups should enlighten the general public on this valuable alternative method of parenting.*

Keywords: *Child adoption, Childless, Family cohesion, Inheritance, Parenting, Societal norms.*

### Introduction

In some developing countries like Nigeria, a life time of childlessness is usually frowned at in most cultures. Marital unions are supposed to replace themselves through childbearing. Having children, therefore, brings joy and stability to the family and the community. This becomes more compelling given the fact that most developing countries do not have social security system, hence older people are totally dependent on their children.

Infertility, therefore, is of public health importance and fertility challenges in sub-Saharan Africa is three times more than other regions (WHO, 2010). Research findings had shown that 2%-10%

of couples with fertility challenges might remain childless for a live time despite different treatment options (Kalantar, Kazemi, Sheikhha, Afflatoonian & Kafilzadeh, 2007; Leridon, 2004). Childless couples in some African cultures face different forms of social stigma ranging from isolation, ostracism to divorce (Rutstein & Shah, 2005; Aina, 2007; Ameh, Kene, Onuh, Okohue, Umeorah & Anozie, 2007). This social stigma can predispose childless couples to loneliness, psychological and mental torture.

Adoption legislation in Nigeria started in Eastern part of the country and was known as the Eastern Nigeria Adoption Law 1965 and it became operational on the 20<sup>th</sup> of May 1965 (Chukwu, 2012) and this was followed by Lagos state in 1968 and subsequently other South-Western states (Iphey, 2007). It was not until 1989 and 1990 when the international bodies recognized the peculiar needs of children, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 20<sup>th</sup> of November 1989 and in July 1990, Organization of African Union (now African Union) Assembly of Heads of States and Governments adopted the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) (UNICEF, 2011). In the wake of all these legislations and treaties, it becomes important to access the factors encouraging increase acceptance of child adoption in Lagos state.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. What factors were responsible for resistance of adoption in the past?
2. What factors have led to increase demands of adoption?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Factors Responsible for Resistance of adoption in the past**

Child adoption in the past was hindered by lots of socio-cultural factors among which is religion. Islam sees assigning paternity of a child to another parent as unjust (Ladan, 2007). Christianity believes waiting on God (like Sarah and Hannah in the bible) till prayers are answered. Thus, child adoption might reflect disbelieve and lack of faith (Nwaoga, 2013). Other challenges surrounding adoption include perceived inability to love the adopted child, unknown parental background, fear of negative genetic composition like psychiatric illness, stigmatization for both the child and the adopted parents and disloyalty on learning his status as adopted child (Adewunmi, Etti, Tayo, Rabi, Akindele, Ottun, & Akinlusi, 2012; Eke, Obu, Chinawa, Adimora, & Obi, 2014). Other constraints include long waiting lists and compatibility tests which sometimes is too prolonged which encourages illegal adoption practices (Oladokun, Arulogun, Oladokun, Morhason-Bello, Bamgboye, Adewole, & Ojengbede, 2009; Aniebue & Aniebue, 2008; Alfred, Francis, & Andeshi, 2014). Despite the rigorous challenges, when the due process of child adoption is completed with the issuance of adoption order by a court of competent jurisdiction, the adoptee would become a full member of the adoptive family (Nwaogugu, 2004).

### **Factors fueling increase demand in adoption**

Adoption in Lagos state is governed by two laws, The Adoption Law of Lagos State Cap A5 Laws of Lagos State and the Child's Right Law of Lagos State 2007. Section 1(1) provides that

the Law shall apply to “adoption of certain juveniles under the age of 17years, who are abandoned, or whose parents and other relatives are unknown or cannot be traced after due enquiry certified by a juvenile court” (Iphey, 2007).

This adoption law therefore, makes some challenging provisions, constraining some women to possibly consider surrogacy. In surrogacy, there is an agreement for a third-party female to carry pregnancy on behalf of another couple, delivers and hands over the baby to the parents (Umeora, Emma-Echiegu & Chukwuneke, 2014.). This had brought joy to many post-menopausal women, younger women with intractable fertility challenges and other health issues that could be worsened with pregnancy (Zawawi, 2012). However, in Nigeria, research findings have shown that religious leaders – Christian and Muslim alike- disapprove surrogacy as a form of procreation (Ajayi & Dibosa-Osador, 2011) and the Catholic church is virtually against all the forms of assisted conception (Zoloth & Henning, 2010). Therefore, some childless couples preferred trying continuously until they achieve pregnancy; however, the cost and length of time embedded in the management of infertility could be overwhelming to the couples (Giwa-Osagie, 2002; Shahin, 2007; Vayena, Peterson, Adamson, & Nygren, 2009). More so, the success rate of modern technology for assisted reproduction despite being expensive is rather low (Giwa-Osagie, 2002).

These fertility challenges open up acceptance of other options like child adoption. Demographic characteristics that enhance child adoption include maternal age above 35, absence of living children, secondary and tertiary education and income of the household while other factors like prolong infertility and those with correct knowledge of child adoption are more likely to adopt a child (Ezugwu et al., 2002; Oladokun et al., 2009; Nwobodo & Isah, 2011; Omosun &

Kofworola, 2011; Adewunmi et al., 2012). These factors no doubt are enhanced by the influence of the media which creates linkages across cultures providing platform that cushions cultural shocks. Statistics from Ministry of Youth and Social Development in Lagos state (table 1) indicates increasing number of babies released for adoption from 2012 to 2014.

**Table. 1 Adoption in Lagos State, Nigeria**

	<b>New application received</b>	<b>Local application</b>	<b>International application</b>	<b>Relative adoption</b>	<b>Number of babies released for adoption</b>	<b>Number of cases legalized for adoption</b>
2012	502	425	21	6	47	79
2013	521	445	16	2	52	91
2014				3	97	87

SOURCE: Ministry of Youth and Social Development, 2016.

## **METHODOLOGY**

**Research Design:** The study employed cross-sectional qualitative design and in-depth interview guide (for the participants) and key informant interview guide (for the key informants) were deployed.

**Research setting:** The research was conducted in Lagos state. The State is located on the South–Western part of Nigeria, on the narrow plain of the Bight of Benin, approximating longitude 20 42’E and 32 2’E respectively, and between latitude 60 22’N and 60 2’N. The borders include Ogun state on the north and east, bounded by Republic of Benin on the west and Atlantic Ocean on the southern border.

**Participants:** The participants were couples or adults who had successfully adopted at least a child formally from Lagos state. Ten of them were identified by employing a Snowball sampling

technique. Three traditional rulers and an operator of a motherless babies' home were also selected to validate the participants responses.

**Instruments:** In-depth interview guide was used to interview the participants. However, Key informant interview guide was employed to interview the traditional rulers and the motherless babies home operator.

**Procedure:** The snowball sampling technique was used to recruit the participants. This is because the sensitivity and confidentiality of the subject requires a chain-referral-sampling of a hidden population. It is a non-probabilistic sampling method that uses a few cases to help encourage other cases to take part in the study. Snowball is useful in situation as this that people are not willing to reveal their identities (Hejaz, 2006). Here, meeting the first group of samples would probably give the link to other samples. This continued until the right sample size is achieved.

### **Ethical Consideration**

Informed consent was sought from participants and obtained before administering the in-depth interview. Participation was voluntary and information obtained was anonymous and confidential.

### **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

Responses from the participants could be classified under a general theme of 'The changing Family Structure'. This underscores the dynamism of our contemporary family in the developing world. The sub-themes from the respondents can be classified as:

1. There is a drive towards nuclear family prominence
2. This has led to a weakening of the extended family system

3. However, there is still remnants of cultural impediments interfering with childless couples establishing their own nuclear family through child adoption.

### **A drive towards nuclear family prominence**

Nuclear families are gaining grounds now. Extended families now welcome child adoption for their childless relations, possibly to avoid them making requests for the release of their own children. This can be due to several reasons as captured in this respondent:

*Family cohesion has actually decreased when compared to years back. In the past, you could stay with your younger relations and they would see you as their mother; and that could help reduce the pressure of childlessness. Now, everybody is on their own. People are apprehensive allowing their children to stay outside their direct care. There are so many stories of child abuse and child trafficking. For the very few that released their children, technology could not help matters as little misunderstandings are quickly communicated to their parents who will demand that you bring their children back. With all these challenges, childless people had taken their fate into their hand by embracing adoption. (Single parent of an adopted child, 56years, tertiary education).*

In the face of this nuclear family prominence, childless couples or adults could relieve their loneliness by embracing child adoption as captured in this single mother statement:

*It is not easy in our society to live without a child. Once you are of age, the society remind you constantly about your childlessness in many ways – through their greetings, their prayers etc. When you got home, you face a life of loneliness again. But thank God for my adopted child, at least I am not lonely, somebody calls me mummy from her heart, and that is heartwarming for me. My extended family accepted her as one of their own.*

*The media had done so much in revealing the weakness of our culture towards child adoption. I got a lot of strength seeing how it was done over there and there was no stopping me afterwards. (Mother of adopted child, 48years, Single, Tertiary education).*

Relieving loneliness is heartwarming, however, acceptance of adopted child across extended family is a huge success in child adoption practice as narrated by a widow whose adopted daughter had grown up

*For a long period of time I battled infertility in the hands of many practitioners. Too many investigations were carried out. Side comments were usually passed at me, on the road, at hospitals etc. Adoption was the last thing in my mind because of what the society would say. However, after speaking with my doctor and some of my family members, I realized it could be a way out and I started making enquiries. I eventually applied and after some thorough background checks I eventually had my precious daughter that is a bundle of joy to me now. She is grown up and well-integrated with the extended family; and I told her everything and we still have mother and child relationship. Please, do not mind what the society would say, go ahead and have your happiness. (Mother of a grown up adopted child, 64years, widowed tertiary education).*

### **A weakening of the extended family system**

The gaining of prominence by nuclear family system is also witnessing a weakening of the extended family system. One of the factors attributed to this trend is abandonment by younger relations after being trained by their foster parents. This was corroborated by 65-year old man who adopted two children. He has this to say:

*Those that helped and trained their family members hoping that in their old age they would remember them (like me) found out that those children abandoned them*



*afterwards. They would still concentrate on their biological parents that contributed nothing to their upbringing. So, people had learnt their lessons of child adoption rather than training family members. Most times they prefer children that their family cannot be traced to avoid being abandoned too. After all, what do you need children for other than companionship and taking care of you in your old age and continuing your family lineage?*

### **Remnants of cultural impediments**

Despite the respondents' acknowledgement of improvements in the area of extended family acceptance of child adoption, still some remnants of cultural impediments obstruct the ease of child adoption. Key informant interview with a traditional ruler revealed this.

*As a custodian of culture, my view will capture the belief, and fears of my people. Child adoption is still at its infancy in our society due to cultural challenges. A lot of superstitious belief still abound, some see infertile people as paying the price for their wickedness and possibly sin of the past. In some cultures, adopted children should not have the full rights and privileges available in the society. So, adoption should therefore, be carried out with utmost secrecy to avoid stigmatization. However, with education people feel more relaxed now to even ask where they can apply for child adoption. The traditional institutions should do a lot of advocacy to make child adoption more acceptable (Traditional ruler in Lagos, 65years, tertiary education).*

Another key informant interview with an operator of motherless babies home corroborated secrecy surrounding child adoption but maintained that education and exposure are helping people to come forward for child adoption as stated below:

*The prospective parents are usually impatient and very secretive. I think this is so because in our society it is almost a taboo not to have a child. Some of them hide to enter the facility, they just don't want to leave any traces. The number of requests is increasing and there is no way we can match the demand. I think people are loosening up and being in charge of their own lives. The requests come from both local and foreign counterparts. Unlike in the past when you almost beg people to come for adoption. I believe people are more educated now, have travelled often and to them there is no big deal adopting a child despite cultural hindrances.*

Child adoption is gradually gaining grounds in our society. There is increasing extended family acceptance and increasing number of requests. However, all the respondents were educated people with tertiary education. It might be that the legal and procedural technicalities have forced the less educated people to embrace illegal adoption as narrated a mother of an adopted child.

*The legal means of adoption is rather cumbersome. Long waiting period, different background checks, some try different states at the same time yet no success. This is why illegal adoption called "baby factory" is booming. Our culture could be rather restrictive and sometimes retrogressive. We need a cultural revolution for some of these cultural drawbacks to fade away. I was so happy that my husband supported me all the way. (Married and mother of adopted child, 51 years, tertiary education).*

## **CONCLUSION**

The nuclear family is fast gaining grounds in the society. A system where only parents and children stay under the same roof. The extended family system that incorporated other family members has started waning. Some attributed factors to decline of extended family system bordered on child abuse, child trafficking and abandonment of their foster parents. Therefore, the old system of childless couples or adults fostering their relations is on the decline. This leaves them with the option of child adoption. Child adoption however, comes with its challenges mainly denial of rights and privileges in the society and stigmatization. Despite the cultural impediments, educated people had demonstrated boldness in ameliorating their fertility challenges through child adoption and it is increasingly becoming an alternative form of parenting in our society. The adopted children had also started enjoying extended family acceptance. This is a big breakthrough in child adoption practice in Lagos state.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. The drive towards nuclear family prominence is a good one, however, government should minimize the bureaucracy surrounding child adoption processes so that childless couples and interested adults could establish their own nuclear family through child adoption.
2. Declining extended family system is an instruction to the institutions catering for the welfare of old people (like the old peoples' home) to strengthen their base to avoid aged people living their lives on the streets later in life.
3. Remnants of cultural impediments to child adoption could be reduced through advocacy with the traditional institutions and enforcement of legislations protecting child adoption.

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