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Women in limbo: Life course consequences of infertility in a Nigerian community

MARIDA HOLLOS¹ and BRUCE WHITEHOUSE²

¹ Department of Anthropology, Brown University, Providence, RI, USA

² Department of Anthropology, Lehigh University, Bethlehem, PA, USA

Abstract

Infertility is a devastating problem around the world, particularly in the high fertility context of sub-Saharan Africa. Regardless of its medical origins, infertility causes African women personal grief and economic deprivation. This research was conducted among the Ijo who are organized into exogamous patrilineal descent groups. Women who marry into a patrilineage are perceived as bearers of sons who will eventually take their place in the lineage's genealogy. Women only figure in the lineage structure as mothers. In addition to extensive ethnographic research in this community, the paper is based on a combination of surveys of 246 women and interviews of 25 fertile and 25 infertile women. Women who have never given birth were characterized as “useless”. Some managed to accumulate wealth or attained education but most feared a marginal old age. Respect was given to women who have had even one child, even if that child died. The biological process of gestation confers an adult status on women allowing them to undergo initiation and to function as mature individuals. In the life course the most prominent periods of suffering are the transition from the stages of *ereso* (girl) to *erera* (mature woman), and in the period of old age.

Keywords

Infertility; ethnographic case study; kinship

Introduction

Social science scholarship increasingly recognizes infertility as a devastating problem for women around the world, particularly in the high fertility context of sub-Saharan Africa (e.g. Boerma & Mgalla, 2001; Hollos & Larsen, 2008). Regardless of its medical causes, infertility causes African women personal grief and frustration, social stigma, and often serious economic deprivation.

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Correspondence: Marida Hollos, Department of Anthropology, Brown University, Providence, RI 02912, USA.
marida_hollos@brown.edu.

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Our research builds on demographic and anthropological research showing how social and economic contexts influence local meanings of fertility and infertility. Much of this literature is situated in the broader anthropological discourse on reproduction (e.g. Ginsburg & Rapp, 1995). There is ample documentation that women primarily bear the social consequences of infertility, especially in sub-Saharan Africa (Inhorn & van Balen, 2002). As Inhorn (1994, 1996) has shown for Egypt, women receive the major blame for reproductive mishaps. In some communities, infertile women are treated as outcasts and their bodies are buried on the outskirts of the town (Ademola, 1982; Ebin, 1982). Survey respondents in Nigeria generally agreed that “a woman who has not given birth to a child may as well never have been born” (Cornwall, 2001). Even highly educated Cameroonian women so conflate honor and respectability with fertility that women who remain childless by age 20 are routinely brought to ritual specialists for infertility treatments, regardless of whether they have been intentionally managing their fertility to avoid pregnancy (Johnson-Hanks, 2006:249). Fertility is crucial to women's progression through life stages and thus their identity as mature persons; a childless woman may be unable to attain full adult womanhood (Suggs, 1987; Hollos et al., 2009). For a woman in the Upper Zambezi, “childlessness is a tragedy that she cannot escape biologically nor socially because it threatens the continuity of her lineage” (Silva, 2009).

Research setting and methodology

Amakiri is located in Nigeria's southern Niger Delta. Its approximately 7,000 residents belong to the Ijo ethnic group, organized into exogamous patrilineal descent groups (Hollos & Leis, 1989). Women who marry into a patrilineage are perceived as bearers of sons who will be founders of a lineage. Bride wealth payments compensate these women's elders for the loss of the women's labor and childbearing capacities, assuring that any children they bear will belong to the Amakiri lineage. Women therefore figure in the lineage structure only as mothers. The men whose children they bear become ancestors and take their place in the lineage's genealogy. Behaviors including residence, inheritance, and participation in family councils are based on the patrilineage. Amakiri's economic base is horticulture, with a number of secondary occupations. The two primary economic activities, farming and fishing, as well as trading are done almost exclusively by women. Men hold most secondary and tertiary occupations. Because of men's low cash intake for daily needs, households depend largely on women's activities.

In addition to extensive ethnographic and demographic research in this community, we applied a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods focused specifically on the issue of infertility between 2005 and 2007. We surveyed 246 infertile women in Amakiri. In-depth interviews with a sub-sample of approximately 25 infertile and 25 fertile women in the summers of 2005 and 2006 allowed us to access information they possessed but may not have been able to articulate explicitly. Below we present the salient areas of a woman's life as they emerged from interviews and discuss the effects of various categories of infertility or inadequate fertility chronologically from young womanhood to old age.

This study was approved by Brown University's Research Protection Office and by the University of Ibadan's Institutional Research Board.

Findings

Attaining womanhood

The Ijo recognize a number of named stages in the life cycle. Individuals advance from one stage to another through a combination of physiological and mental development and certain additional criteria, depending on the particular stage. Young women enter the stage of *ereso* around the age of 13, usually marked by the onset of their menses. Their progression to the next stage of *erera* depends on being married and giving birth to a child. A woman customarily undergoes a clitoridectomy in the seventh month of her first pregnancy. Women circumcised each year used to perform a special dance, known as the *seigbein*, during the town's annual spring festival which marked their entry into the *erera* stage. Although most women no longer participate in this dance, circumcision is still considered important. Women who have not given birth and are consequently uncircumcised cannot attend women's association meetings, reserved for *erera*, and until recently could not even be buried in town land. This severely disadvantages childless women who thus remain in limbo between the two stages. They eventually grow too old to be *ereso* but cannot be considered *erera*, given that they did not fulfill the major criterion of mature womanhood, giving birth to a child. In recent years, more and more girls have had their circumcision done *prior* to becoming pregnant, which solves the problem of their burial but not of their progression to the next stage.

This is an area where women with one or two children, even if they are considered sub-fertile, have advantages over childless women. Even one child gives them entry into the *erera* stage, regardless of whether that child survives into adulthood. Similarly, women called “childless mothers” (see Whitehouse & Hollos, 2014), who gave birth at least once but whose child died, have the same advantage.

Marital relations and divorce

The vast majority of interview subjects were married according to a long, elaborate process consisting of cash payments and libations by the groom's family to the bride's. At one point, the bride moved into the groom's compound and acted as an apprentice cook to his mother, preparing to take over once she had a child and became a mature woman. As time passed and no pregnancy followed, relations with the husband and his relatives soured. The consequence of difficult marital relations is often divorce or permanent separation. The relationship histories of childless or sub-fertile women and of childless mothers alike consist of frequent separations and remarriages; a wife often leaves after facing her husband's mistreatment, his family's ostracism and co-wives' taunts, or because the husband sends her away as “useless.” This pattern holds equally true for childless women, childless mothers and sub-fertile women, especially those with only daughters. Childless mothers fared no better, and after the death of their children were treated like the other childless women by their husbands.

Migration

Being in limbo in Ijo society, childless women almost inevitably leave the community, most frequently to become petty traders in large urban centers, later returning to Amakiri in their

old age. Trading is done primarily to accumulate funds to afford costly infertility treatments. Emigration is practiced to a lesser extent by sub-fertile women, who often leave the community although with a different goal in mind. Because of this tendency to migrate, most younger, childless and sub-fertile women are absent from the community and it is from the stories of the older women who have returned that these life paths are revealed. While we lack data to quantify out migration either by infertile women or others, it is fairly certain that fertile married women migrate out of the community only rarely and usually with their husbands.

Another reason for leaving the community is for education. This, we found, was a major reason for sub-fertile women to migrate. Several of the younger childless and sub-fertile women attended a nearby teachers' college after they were married.

Economic activities

Most women in Amakiri are traders and farmers with little primary education. Some, however, have gone as far as secondary school or teacher's training and a few even have university degrees. We found that childless and sub-fertile women are more likely to be in this group, although many no longer reside in the community.

While agricultural land in Amakiri is owned by patrilineages, women as daughters of these lineages can acquire houses and property through their own economic activities. Most women try to accumulate wealth to pass on to their own children or for security in old age. Very few succeed, however. Those who do are more likely to be either childless or sub-fertile and accumulate property through trading. Upon their death their property reverts to their patrilineages.

One activity related to economic well-being is attendance at family meetings. Issues addressed include land disputes with neighbors, allocation of common family land, and the burial of kin. While childless mothers are eligible to attend, women without children rarely do so and claim that they are not regarded as equal members. This disadvantages them vis-à-vis other family members regarding the division of common resources, such as building plots and agricultural land. Sub-fertile women, however, are more likely to attend, especially if they have at least one son.

Workload and foster children

Nigerian households require many hands to function: it is virtually impossible for one person to fetch water and firewood, cook meals, wash clothes and keep house, thus children are usually recruited for menial tasks. Even in a polygynous compound or in their father's home, childless women, and to a lesser extent sub-fertile women, have a serious disadvantage in performing these daily tasks. Their recourse is to foster in relatives' children, whom they agree to raise and school in return for help with daily chores. This arrangement would appear to be advantageous for all parties concerned: the childless woman receives not only help but also the love and loyalty of a younger person, and the children receive the care and attention of a devoted adult. In the long run, however, the relationship rarely turns out to be what the woman hoped for and it certainly does not alleviate the yearning for a child.

Most Amakiri women fostered children from their own patrilineage, either their brothers' or their father's children, emphasizing the strength of patrilineal descent among the Ijo.

Permanent adoption (as opposed to fostering) from outside the patrilineage in Amakiri is not an option for acquiring a child. The strictly patrilineal ideology of the Ijo is strongly opposed to this, given that these children come from unknown ancestors and are not "of the blood."

Old age

The major concern of childless women, unless they have managed to accumulate property through their trading activities, is where to live and how to survive in their old age. As most of these women are divorced, they have no rights to live in their husbands' homes. They do have residence rights in their fathers' compounds as daughters of the family and this is where they usually end up. By the time they return to Amakiri, however, their fathers are frequently deceased and the women are at the mercy of their brothers and their wives. Very often they live in marginal conditions, in back rooms or decrepit buildings, uncared for or even maltreated. As we saw, their foster children usually abandon them and several are dependent on the goodwill of strangers for sustenance. Sub-fertile women fare little better unless they have a son. Their daughters are married patrilocally elsewhere and have no rights to bring their mothers to live with them.

Since having several generations of descendants present at one's funeral is the ultimate achievement in an Ijo person's life, funerals of childless women are sad affairs. The funeral of a woman (or man) with children lasts for several days and nights, with children and grandchildren dancing around the corpse which sits embalmed in a hut constructed for this purpose. The descendants shave their heads and once the corpse is buried, stand around and ritually vocalize. These elaborate rituals are not performed for women who have no descendants.

Discussion

Amakiri can be characterized as "pronatalist": individuals desire children in order to be able to control dependents on which their status and welfare depend (Goody, 1971; Guyer, 1993, 1995). In one Igbo community, Smith (2004) calls this the "importance of having people", meaning that it is the extended kin networks that function to 'allow individuals and kin groups to gain access to the resources of the state and the wider economy through social networks that have their roots in the family, the lineage and the local community.' Miers and Kopytoff (1977) dubbed this phenomenon 'wealth in people,' and the Amakiri Ijo talk about the importance of 'having people behind you.' One result of this pronatalism is the marginalization of the community's childless or sub-fertile women.

In Amakiri, women are basically considered bearers of children for the patrilineages, with the bride wealth paid by the groom's patriline serving to affiliate these future children to the lineage. Women who have never given birth are therefore characterized as 'useless.' They cannot attain mature womanhood or join associations, and they face difficult marital relations, ostracism and divorce; consequently, most migrate out of the community. Some

manage to accumulate wealth or attain a higher level of education, but most fear a lonely and marginal old age. The Ijo term for 'barren' (*tubofaere*) is derogatory and denotes women who have never been pregnant. There is a difference in the respect given to women who have had even one child, even if that child died. The biological process of gestation and birthing confers an adult status on these women, allowing them to undergo initiation and to function as mature female members of their community. This is not to say that these so-called childless mothers' lives are necessarily happy. These women, like those who have never given birth, seem to spend their lives searching for a (subsequent) pregnancy and a child. Nevertheless, they are able to claim a status that is quite different from that of barren women. Suffering is indelibly associated with all these conditions, whether of women who have never conceived, women with too few children, or women without living children.

In the life course, the most prominent periods of suffering are the transitions from the stages of *ereso* to *erera*, i.e. from girl to mature woman, and in the period of old age. Women without descendants depend on their brothers for housing and care in their old age. They have no rights to live in their marital compound since they have no sons who would honor and look after them. So they become dependents in their compounds of origin, in a childlike state rather than as elders.

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