

## **THE URHOBO SPIRIT OF *OKUGBE* (TOGETHERNESS) AND AFRICAN COMMUNALISM: PANACEA TO INFERTILITY AND SOCIAL STIGMATISATION**

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### **Abstract**

Infertility, which refers to the inability to have children either for a while or when it becomes permanent (sterility), remains a serious problem in Africa, where having children is seriously valued and seen as a cardinal purpose for human existence. It is attended with social stigmatization, psychological trauma, dehumanization of the childless couple, etc. While inability to have children often may not be the fault of the couple, very often society does not want to hear that. It is also painful to note that the woman is often blamed for most cases of infertility. This paper uses a critical hermeneutics, analytic, evaluative, and dialogical methods to argue for seeing the problem of infertility within the framework of an ethics of *Okugbe* (togetherness) and the African spirit of communalism. It argues that the challenge of infertility should be collectively faced by the community and that the community should stand with those who suffer from the problem instead of stigmatising them. The paper also argues that within the communitarian framework, in which “all children are seen as children of the village” and not just the individual, infertile and childless couples should be encouraged to embrace seeing other children as their children, and even be allowed to see adoption as a viable option to be embraced. Children, whether biological or adopted, are human beings and should be celebrated. The paper concludes that if the communitarian moral framework is adopted, it will help to restore dignity to infertile couples.

**Keywords:** Africa, communitarianism, infertility, childlessness, sterility, social stigmatisation, *Okugbe*, Urhobo.

## **Introduction**

One of the most serious challenges that people in Africa face, especially women, is that of infertility. In an African culture that is still deeply rooted in patriarchal structures and values, and where children, especially male children, are valued as the essence of married and family life and necessary for the progeniture of the group, infertility is intolerable, seen as a curse, and the woman is often blamed for its occurrence. Not only is the woman blamed, but she is socially stigmatised, insulted, and her life made unbearable. A great deal of linguistic violence is meted out to her. This dilemma is well expressed below:

One of the major challenges confronting marriages and families in African from the past to the present is the issue of barrenness or childlessness. Childlessness was often blamed on the woman, even though at times it may arise from the medical conditions of a man. African traditional culture had great value for children, and childless marriage was seen as cursed and the woman in particular was even labelled a “man” or a witch. The woman is often verbally abused, and physical violence was meted on her. The marriage is often made unbearable and uncomfortable for the woman by the man or the in-laws of the woman. In some exceptional cases, the man and his relatives were understanding and coped with the situation or the man was allowed to marry another woman, while bearing with the childless woman. In order to cope with the challenge of childlessness women even encouraged their husbands to marry another woman (women) (Ikeke, 2021, p.12).

Fortunately, African culture, of which Urhobo culture is one, is grounded in a communalistic ethics. Among the Urhobo people, this communistic ethos is called *Okugbe*. But unfortunately, when people, especially women, suffer from the challenge of infertility, this communalistic ethic of solidarity in pain and suffering is rarely applied to them. That communalistic ethos that should offer them succour, support, and stand with them in solidarity is not experienced by them. That communalistic spirit that saw “every kid as one’s kid” and that embraces other children in the village as one’s kin fails in this area. If everyone is one’s kin, for instance, there is no reason why adoption and acceptance of other children, and even taking them to live in one’s house under proper arrangement, should not be encouraged. Rather, the infertile couple is discriminated against, and many persons will not hear of their children going to help the infertile couple for fear of their children being infected with the curse upon the infertile couple.

Infertility is a serious social challenge, and this highly valued African communalism, known among the Urhobo people as *Okugbe*, should be revised and re-imagined to help in coping with and managing the state of infertility. In carrying out this task of this paper will provide conceptual clarifications, followed by an examination of the reality and situation of infertility and social stigmatisation. Then some elements of the Urhobo concept of *Okugbe* and African communalism will be explicated. This is followed by how *Okugbe* and African communalism can be used to assist infertile couples. It is pertinent here to remark that there are many issues associated with infertility, but the focus of this paper is on understanding what it is, the situation, and the social stigmatisation attached to it, and how the *Okugbe* spirit of the Urhobo people can help to mitigate the pain and stigma. Other issues, such as traditional treatment, biomedical treatment, etc, are for future research.

## **Conceptual Clarification and Analysis**

The term Urhobo here is used to designate the Urhobo people of the Niger Delta and their culture. They are the largest ethnic group in the Delta State of Nigeria. They occupy mainly the Delta Central Senatorial District of the State. Some Urhobo inhabit some neighbouring states, and there are equally many in the Diaspora. They speak the Urhobo language, and many can also speak other languages such as English, French, Spanish, Pidgin English, etc. The most common and popular tradition is that: “The ...Urhobos were at some distant past among the people of Ife. They migrated to Benin about the 6th Century A.D. During the Ogo Dynasty, they began the series of migrations from Benin and by the 11th Century A.D. had peopled by and large, the area now known as Urhobo-land” (Obiomah, n.d., para 1). As popular as this view is, it is equally disputed by others. The land could not have been bereft of people before migrants came from Edo territory. There are likely to be some indigenous people endogenous to the land whom the migrants joined up with to become the Urhobo people.

Infertility is a situation in which a woman finds it difficult to get pregnant or conceive after one year of marriage, and the causes of infertility can include low sperm count or testosterone, ovulatory disorders, and endometriosis (Cleveland Clinic, 2023). It can also be defined as: “... a disease of the male or female reproductive system defined by the failure to achieve a pregnancy after 12 months or more of regular unprotected sexual intercourse”(World Health Organisation, 2024). Concerning infertility, it can be primary or secondary. It is primary when pregnancy has never been experienced, while it is secondary when at least one pregnancy has taken place previously (World Health Organisation, 2024).

The word, communalism is rooted in the same root as community, communal, and communion. “Communalism is a term derived from the Latin word *communitas-tatis*, which means joint possession or use, participation, partnership, or sharing. It also refers to social relationships, fellowship, socialites, organized society” (Ejeh and Arum, 2021, p. 241). Communalism speaks of privileging and giving priority to the things that bind the community or group together. It does not deny the place of the individual, for it is the individuals that make up the society or community. But whatever the individual does should foster the community’s good before any personal good. As the individual privileges the community, the community will care for and support the individual. It should be understood that: “Communalism is a traditional social system which is community-oriented. Here, the interest of the community reigns over the interest of the individual in a social relationship. It manifests in every aspect of African social life, and has metaphysical dimensions” (Akudolu, 2024, p. 45). Communalism is not restricted to Africa. Many indigenous communities are communitarian. To peak of African communitarianism is to emphasize the fact that it was a core aspect of the traditional African way of life. It is still prevalent to a certain degree, though by modernization, urbanisation, western influences, etc. Africans were communistic in all their ways, whether it was in land ownership, agricultural activities, hunting, celebration of festivals, decision-making, rearing of children, marriage celebration, etc. Life was centered around the community. In the evening, after coming from the farms and other activities, you can see the children in the village gathering under the trees or the village square at moonlight to listen to folktales. Most conflicts were settled by the elders in council. When you read a novel like *Things Fall Apart*, you see a communalistic way of living running through all the activities in the village. When people gather for a meal. It is not because they don’t have food in their houses, but it is because it is good for kinsmen to gather.

In every African community, especially in pre-colonial times, communalism was practiced. It was described by various names or terms. Concepts like *Ubuntu*, *Ujamaa*, *Okugbe*, etc, are all concepts that describe African communalism. *Okugbe* is an Urhobo word that means together, the gathering, the collective. It implies solidarity, common concern, collective care, and unity. *Okugbe* desires living together and sharing a common life. Urhobo people believe that life is a social reality and phenomenon, and it is to be shared and lived together. *Okugbe* is a collaboration, and there is strength in *Okugbe*, and through it, people can confront common problems facing society and overcome them, such as youth unemployment, etc (Ewherido, 2021). Through *Okugbe*, the Urhobo people came to the support and help of one another. In *Okugbe*, difficult problems dissolve. *Okugbe* is like the saying, “two good heads are better than one.” Division in a community can be very destructive. The coming together of people in Urhoboland to form and create villages and live together is a sign of *Okugbe*.

It is important now to define social stigma. “Social stigma is the disapproval of, or discrimination against, a person based on perceivable social characteristics that serve to distinguish them from other members of a society. It may also be described as a label that associates a person with a set of unwanted characteristics that form a stereotype” (Wenk, 2020, para 1). “Social stigma represents a set of negative beliefs and attitudes held by a group of people towards others for a particular characteristic they might share; for example, a person with a specific physical attribute or mental disability or involvement with a particular activity is judged negatively and may also be considered inauspicious and discriminated against” (Pandey & Singh, 2024, p. 369).

Social stigmatisation refers to the process or act by which a person is discriminated against or perceived as evil or even bad as a result of a perceived quality or characteristic that deviates from what

society expects. Traditional African society, and even in many places today, expects that a couple should have a child (ren) as soon as they are married, within the first year of marriage. When pregnancy does not occur at the time expected by society, they begin to raise questions and look upon the couple with disdain or in a negative manner. It happens that because of the patriarchal nature of African societies, the woman is often blamed for the infertility, even when it is obvious that the problem is with the man.

### **The Reality and Situation of Infertility and Social Stigmatisation**

Infertility is a global problem. “Infertility affects millions of people – and has an impact on their families and communities. Estimates suggest that approximately one in every six people of reproductive age worldwide experience infertility in their lifetime” (World Health Organisation, 2024, para 1). In Africa, the rate of infertility is as high as 20-30% depending on the region of the continent (Leke,2024). Similar observation can be seen in the following statement: “Infertility is a significant reproductive health issue with high prevalence rates in Africa, where it is often stigmatized” (Ekpor, Brobbey, Kumah, Akyirem, 2025).

Infertility does not just happen. Some factors cause it. “In the male reproductive system, infertility is most commonly caused by problems in the ejection of semen, absence or low levels of sperm, or abnormal shape (morphology) and movement (motility) of the sperm. In the female reproductive system, infertility may be caused by a range of abnormalities of the ovaries, uterus, fallopian tubes, and the endocrine system, among others” (World Health Organisation, 2024, para 2 and 3). In females infertility can result from blocked fallopian tubes, outcome of unsafe abortions, untreated sexually transmitted diseases, postpartum sepsis, uterine disorders ovaries disorders, disorder in the endocrine systems; while in males, it can be caused by reproductive tract obstruction,

hormonal disorders, lack of sperm and low sperm count (World Health Organisation, 2024). It should also be noted that: “Lifestyle factors such as smoking, excessive alcohol intake, and obesity can affect fertility. In addition, exposure to environmental pollutants and toxins can be directly toxic to gametes (eggs and sperm), resulting in their decreased numbers and poor quality (1,2)” (World Health Organisation, 2024, para 17). Causes of infertility in society can include unsafe abortions, poorly-treated pelvic inflammatory diseases, ignorance about infertility, and the age factor (Okoro, 2020).

The following ancient poem about a woman informs much of African culture:

Be you as beautiful as a mermaid, the beauty of a woman is to have a husband. Be you one who has been to the land of while people, the beauty of a woman is to have a husband. If a woman does not marry, her beauty declines. One who is beautiful is best to be in her husband's house. When you get to your husband's house, have a baby. After you look after the child, the child will look after you (Amadiume, 1987, p. 72).

Infertility brings a lot of social stigmatization. The stigmatisation often falls on women, as women are perceived in an African patriarchal society as the cause. In Africa, the success of many marriages depends on a woman getting pregnant, the woman is socially disgraced, called names such as witch, man, barren tree; and as they are socially excluded and disgraced, their state of happiness is affected, and their health is negatively impacted (Abebe, Afework, & Abaynew, 2020). On the social stigma of infertility, it should be noted that: “In the African context where having children constitutes the *raison d'être* of all marriages, infertility is considered a curse and a real tragedy for the couple”

(Leke, 2024, para 2). Being a parent is a key marker of social belonging identity in Africa, and being a mother is a sign of being successful (Fledderjohann, 2012, as cited by Ekpore, Brobbey, Kumah, Akyirem, 2025).

In many African counties such as Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, Uganda, Zimbabwe, children are seen as family support, source of social security and social status and family continuity; having children brings social honour, and so not to have children is seen as an abomination and it is often the women who are blamed even when it has been found that the cause is the man; and in some communities like among the Ijo, women are ostracised from some public gatherings and when they die they are buried outside the town; and for the men they are called derogatory names and attacked at their genitalia and to avoid shame they isolate themselves (Sinsai et al., 2023). Infertility can make men turn to extra-marital affairs, polygamy, seek divorce, and subject the woman to domestic abuse and violence. Among the Urhobo people, an infertile man is called "Ochebe," meaning fool and impotent. It is true that not only women suffer when there is infertility. In some cases, men are mocked and laughed at, too. Associating with their friends and colleagues becomes difficult. Gossip is common in African society. When there is infertility, some people gossip about the couple. Infertility is deeply influenced by social and cultural norms, and those who are infertile are stigmatised (Ekpor, Brobbey, Kumah, Akyirem, 2025).

In African culture, women are labelled incomplete, abandoned, and ridiculed (Fledderjohann, 2012, as cited by Ekpore, Brobbey, Kumah, Akyirem, 2025). There are many cases of divorce and broken marriages arising from infertility. When there is infertility, men are pressured to marry another woman or go and have a concubine. There is deep emotional hurt and psychological trauma that women go through as a result of infertility in

marriage. “infertile women experience greater psychological stress than infertile men, and they are often stigmatized for being infertile and being childless (Fu B, Qin N, Cheng L, Tang G, Cao Y, Yan C, et al, 2015, as cited by Taebi, M., Kariman, N., Montazeri, A., & Alavi Majd, H, 2021). In traditional African society, and that belief is still prevalent even in modern African societies, “Childlessness is a personal disgrace. It is also felt as a kind of slur on the community, a social fault, and it often leads to divorce or polygamy” (Bujo, 1992, p. 116). From key informant interview of Africans in the Diaspora in Poland, it was revealed that it was shown that women are blamed for infertility even when there are medical conditions affecting the man; it was also indicated that parenthood arising from marriage and forming a family was a primary value in African society; and while men are to bring home bread for the family, the women is to have children (Kościółek., Binczycka-Gacek, Romanowska, Cieślík, ., & Targowski (2024).

Some Christian religious preachers and churches have exacerbated or compounded the suffering of infertile couples. They use biblical passages to argue that infertility is a curse and that those who are infertile are demon-possessed. Some of these couples are made to do unceasing all-night prayers, fasting, and some of them are defrauded of their money. There is nothing wrong in itself to offer prayers for infertile couples, but to manipulate the situation to instil fear and make couples nervous is unacceptable. The point should be well noted that: “Infertility is not a curse from God for which people need to pray unceasingly for divine intervention and propitiate God through monetary donations from the lean purses of many poor African women to praying pastors who falsely claim that they have the ability to cure the curse of infertility”(Ilo, 2020, p.xiii).

## **Using Okugbe and African Communalism to Transform Infertility**

The challenge of infertility must be confronted. Human flourishing or happiness depends on people being able to have children, either biologically or even through adoption. “Every human being has a right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. Individuals and couples have the right to decide the number, timing, and spacing of their children. Infertility can negate the realization of these essential human rights (3)”(World Health Organisation, 2024, para 18). In much of Africa, as noted previously, women are often accused of being the cause of infertility, and they are stigmatized for this. Infertility must be managed in such a way that women are not stigmatised. And so managing infertility can help improve gender relations.

At the heart of *Okugbe* is concern and support for others in society. The community did not neglect the individual because the individual is weak and vulnerable. While laziness, indolence, and anti-social behaviours were shunned, the society and community were mindful of the individual. The African spirit of communalism, which is called *Okugbe* among the Urhobo people, made individuals in society act either as age grades or in various other groups to give support to each member of society. This author could remember while growing up in the village, a women’s group, for instance, bringing firewood to a woman that has just delivered. The birth of a child was a great joy and occasion for celebration. This kind of attitude should also be extended to infertile couples. There should be a reappraisal of the traditional philosophy about family, marriage, motherhood, childbearing, etc. While it is true that children are important and marriage is also important, the fact remains that the whole essence of life is not just about marriage, but also about fully living a good life and fulfilling purpose.

As noted previously noted infertility may not be the fault of the couple. Even if it is the fault of the couple, for instance, if there were some sexual misbehaviours bringing infertility, the couple still deserves compassion, empathy, and support, not intolerance or maltreatment. An infertile couple needs to be encouraged and supported. Infertility does not remove one's fundamental human right to life, dignity, etc. Infertile couples should not be made to feel rejected and have low self-esteem. Your humanity is not diminished because you are infertile. You remain a human being and somebody. Infertility or fertility are accidents to the essence of humanity. For instance, a person can become infertile because of sickness, accident, or other circumstances, but the person remains a person. The ethics and values of African communalism, which *Okugbe* stands for, should never be neglected. It should be kept in mind that:

There is a need to create an ethics of care to enhance the dignity of women, especially childless women. The worth of a woman should not be seen merely as that of child-bearing. A woman is still valuable even when she is not a biological mother. Baloyi writing in 2001 notes that the purposes of marriage include partnership of life, intimacy, friendship, complementarity, and friendship. There is a need to create an ethics of care for childless women in Africa. Abasili rightly notes that "Patriarchalism should be replaced with marital justice and sexual fairness" (p.14). He notes that women should not be made powerless and speechless as happens to Tamar in Genesis 38. They should not be denied sexual justice and their rights to personhood should be guaranteed even when they have no children (Ikeke, 2021, pp. 18-19)

There is this deep African belief that is also common among the Urhobo people: every child is seen as a child of the community. In Africa, people never eat alone. It was rare in Urhobo and other African villages to see a mother or woman who had prepared a meal and would not invite the children in the neighbourhood to come and eat. Even without an invitation, the children in the neighbourhood already know they are invited. Before the food is brought from the fire, they are already there. The African saying is that “all kids are our kids.” If all “kids are our kids”, or “it takes a village to raise a child,” then there is no reason why an infertile couple should be made to feel lonely, alone, treated as an outcast, stigmatised, and maltreated. An infertile couple should be free to embrace other people’s biological children as their own, also in the African spirit of communalism. The African notion of motherhood should not be restricted to biological motherhood. In the spirit of communalism, nobody should discriminate against an infertile person, especially a woman. The woman should be able to embrace other children, and other children should be allowed by their parents to assist in domestic and other permissible chores. Though challenging, the infertile couple should not live in sadness or sorrow. It is a fact that there is still a hostile attitude towards adoption, as the children from adoption are seen as strangers (Kościółek, Binczycka-Gacek, Romanowska, Cieślík, & Targowski, 2024). But the fact is that legal adoption is a legitimate and moral way to have children. Just as biological children can bring challenges to a family, so also adopted children. It should be used as an excuse then not to adopt, for even biological children also bring challenges.

Since there is an African spirit of communalism, life should be more than personal survival or family survival of the individual or family. At times, there is too much emphasis on personal and family continuity to the detriment of the collective continuity of the group. There have been people all through history in African and Urhobo culture who were infertile and never conceived children

until the moment of their death. It did not stop the continuity of history and the survival of the ethnic group or clan. It is agonising to see situations in which women spend countless fortunes just to get children at the detriment of their health and life. In the spirit of African communalism, infertile couples should be allowed and encouraged to adopt children. There should be nothing shameful in adopting children. In the spirit of *Okugbe* and “all kids are our kids,” it should be a joy to adopt children. The community should not frown at it. No one should come to old age deprived of the care they need simply because they have no biological children. Adopted children should be of help to them. And in case they have no children at all, the community should give the necessary support. Take into consideration the following reality that: “At the heart of African religio-cultural traditions, is the acceptance of the bond of life as a shared value, which everyone must participate in and draw from a well pool. The bond of life is the result of a state of harmony and life-giving relationships among humans, nature, spiritual relationships, the living, the unborn, and the living dead, which promotes human and cosmic flourishing “ (Ilo, 2020, p. xi).

The *Okugbe* or communalistic bond should be operative amid infertility and not become a thorn to infertile couples. In the African spirit of Ubuntu, which is what *Okugbe* is also about, what afflicts others also afflicts you. The pain of others is also your pain. It is like the Pauline imagery about the functions of the different parts of the human body. The plight of infertile couples is the plight of the whole community. Infertile couples should not be supported, not merely tolerated. The negative attitude of being hostile to them should stop. It is a communal challenge, not simply the challenge of the couple. But the community should not treat it by making life unbearable for the couples. The present author agrees with the ideas expressed in the Igbo ethics of “*Onyeaghala Nwanne ya* (no kith or kin should be left behind or abandoned)” (Okoro, 2020, p.

139). The fact is that Urhobo culture in particular and African culture in general are not cultures set apart on their own; they have been influenced by Christian values, as many in these cultures are Christians. It is practically difficult not to mention Christian values. At the heart of the Christian story is sacrificial love and the call to hospitality. There is a fundamental call to love of neighbour. What infertile couples need is love, compassion, and hospitality. You are a human being deserving honour and affirmation, no matter your reproductive status. The fact is that the Christianity many Urhobo people have embraced is rooted in a communal framework. The Christian church in Urhoboland has not done enough to speak about the stigmatization of infertile couples. There needs to be more teaching and counselling on the issue.

In the spirit of African communalistic ethics, it is imperative to critique this perception of the essential function of women as having children. And so if the woman is not able to have children, the woman is seen as worthless and insignificant. This is akin to a section of the Pauline passages that sees women as existing to bear children. ...These passages of could must be subjected to critical cultural existential hermeneutics. ..Women do not exist to give birth to children. They do not exist to satisfy the sexual needs of men. They do not exist simply for procreation. It is true that African communalistic ethics, while giving women a sense of belonging, can also, as it is rooted in patriarchal impede the agency of women and their self-determination, as women are expected to fulfil societal patriarchal expectations (Nyawo, 2021). African culture is not a perfect culture. While it is true that communalism suffers from some weaknesses, it can also be harnessed to promote values of gender equality, human dignity, etc. Permit a long quotation that this present author agrees with below:

I contend that it is utterly misguided to elevate infertility to the status of a cultural catastrophe when it remains fundamentally beyond human control, influenced by biological and environmental factors that no amount of belief or tradition may alter. To place such an undue burden on individuals, as though infertility were a moral failing or a spiritual deficiency, mirrors a profound misunderstanding of both science and humanity. This misdirected focus only drives unnecessary shame and marginalisation, reducing complex, uncontrollable challenges to simplistic cultural and spiritual crises. It is nothing short of absurd to treat infertility as a social stigma or cultural curse as if, and only if, human biology should bend to cultural whims and ancestral expectations. This irrational fixation not only disregards medical realities but also insults the very essence of human dignity, reducing individuals to mere dishes of reproduction rather than acknowledging their complex, multifaceted humanity. Rather than cementing compassion, it cultivates a toxic, judgemental environment where scientific understanding is trampled by archaic beliefs that punish the innocent. Such backward thinking traps communities in a cycle of ignorance, ensuring that the very progress needed to address infertility is stifled under layers of superstition and societal shame (Diko, 2025, para 3).

## **Conclusion**

The paper has examined the challenge of infertility in African marriages. The situation of infertility is a serious one. It is a challenge that many marriages and married couples are facing. The paper presented some of the main causes of infertility. It was noted that while men may be the cause of infertility, in an African patriarchal culture, women are often blamed for the problem. Because of this, they are castigated, stigmatised, and linguistically violated. They are caused by unbearable names. The paper argued for using the Urhobo spirit of Okugbe, which stands for communalism to mitigate the challenge. Childless couples and infertile couples should be

shown love, compassion, and kindness. The society should stand in solidarity with them. They should be allowed to adopt, and they should equally see other children as their children. Aged couples who have no biological children should be supported with services from other children and not allowed to suffer in their old age. African traditional communities and traditional institutions should be readily available to show communal love to these couples. The spirit of Okugbe or communalism, if applied, can contribute to enabling infertile couples to experience some peace and happiness in society.

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