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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

EXPLORING THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIOCULTURAL FACTORS ON CHILD ADOPTION AMONG FERTILE AND INFERTILE COUPLES IN SOUTHWESTERN NIGERIA: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Background: The Yorubas in Nigeria are widely regarded as pronatalist, yet little is known about whether this extends to the acceptance of adopted children. Existing studies often rely on secondary data or focus solely on infertile individuals. This study explores the influence of sociocultural factors on child adoption among both fertile and infertile Yorubas.

Methods: A qualitative phenomenological design was employed, using Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) with 25 purposively selected participants: ten fertile couples, seven infertile couples, three adoptive parents, an orphanage manager, a legal expert, a gynecologist, a fertility expert, and a motherless babies' home administrator. Eligible primary participants were Yoruba couples residing in Ekiti, married for at least two years, and aged 18 years or older. Thematic analysis was used to identify the various sociocultural factors. Data were thematically analyzed using NVivo and ethical approval was obtained.

Results: The couples were mainly between 30 and 49 years old, identified as Christians, and had between 1 and 6 children. The women in the infertile couples were aged 20 to 49 years, experiencing primary infertility, for a duration of 3 to 12 years. Three themes emerged: cultural factors, social factors, and cultural-social hybrids. Fertile couples expressed greater openness to adoption, while infertile couples often viewed it negatively, citing stigma and community pressure. Overall, traditions, religious beliefs, and societal expectations discouraged adoption, although it was also regarded as a means of gaining family support.

Conclusion: Interventions should address cultural attitudes, reduce stigma, and simplify adoption processes. Policies must tackle unplanned pregnancies and enhance the availability of adoptable children through transparent procedures.

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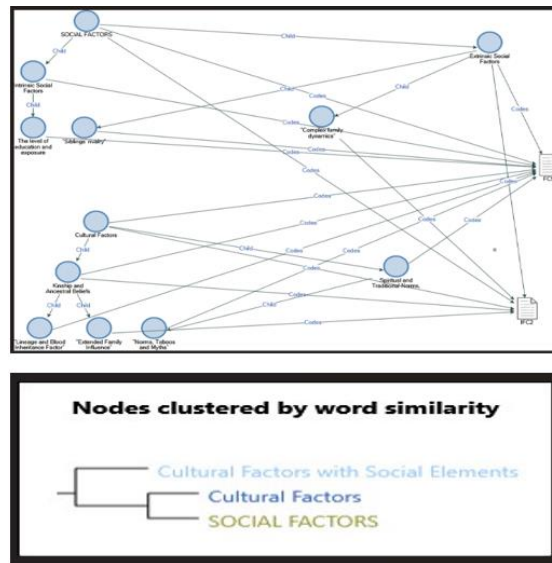
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INTRODUCTION

Globally, over 50 million couples suffer from infertility.¹ It is estimated that 50–80 million people are affected, accounting for about 8%–12% of couples worldwide.² In Africa, prevalence rates have been reported as high as 30–40%, while in Nigeria, estimates range between 20–45%.^{3,4} The World Health Organization defines infertility as the inability to achieve pregnancy after 12 months of regular, unprotected sexual intercourse.⁵ However, some studies have proposed a shorter timeframe, considering failure to conceive within the first quarter of marriage as indicative of infertility.^{6,7} Nigeria recognizes six geopolitical zones, a concept that allows states with comparable socioeconomic, cultural, religious, historical, and political values to be grouped. They are the geopolitical zones of the North-East, North-West, North-Central, South-West, South-East, and South-South. Studies conducted in southwest Nigeria indicate a low willingness to adopt among participants.^{8,9} Of the six geopolitical zones, Ekiti was selected for its cultural homogeneity and having the highest estimated number of homeless children (about 70,000) in the Southwest.¹⁰ Concerns about lineage, identity, and potential future emotional challenges often discourage child adoption. Although respondents demonstrated an understanding of adoption, prevailing cultural norms where fostering relatives' children is more widely practiced -tend to limit its acceptance.¹¹⁻¹² Religious beliefs, traditional family values, and community pressures influence perceptions of adoption. Some faiths emphasize biological reproduction, which diminishes social acceptance of adoption.¹³ Patriarchal norms related to inheritance and bloodlines further contribute to this resistance.¹⁴ Additionally, the government's lack of effort to promote adoption exacerbates the issue of reluctance.¹⁵ In Yoruba society, infertile women often endure humiliation and stigma, commonly being called 'agon'- a term that signifies being despised. An exploratory study highlights that

procreation is a core aspect of Yoruba marriage, with high expectations for childbirth soon after marriage, despite modernization.¹⁶ Within Yoruba culture and Nigerian society at large, infertility carries significant stigma, as having children is regarded as an essential part of social identity and fulfilment of womanhood.¹⁷ In South-eastern Nigeria (Igbo region), complex ethno-religious practices hinder adoption, and adopted children are often stigmatized and excluded from full family membership. They are perceived as outsiders and not genuine kin. This perception stems from the deeply rooted Eastern Indigenous concept of *onyebiarabia* ("the stranger"), which upholds a caste system and restricts the acceptance of adopted children's rights.¹⁸ The stigma surrounding child adoption in Nigeria arises from concerns that adopted children might originate from drug addicts, convicts, or sex workers. Abuse of adopted children -such as being exploited as housemaids, sex workers, or street vendors -is prevalent. Despite biological parenthood not being necessary for success, adopted children still encounter significant challenges and exploitation.¹⁹ Cultural values favour biological motherhood, often leading to further neglect.²⁰

Furthermore, some adopters mistreat adopted children after they have biological children. In patrilineal, kinship-based Nigerian societies, a woman requires the full support of her husband and extended family to adopt.¹⁸ Previous studies have examined adoption processes, the Child's Rights Act, and adoption for infertility.²¹⁻²³ Others explored knowledge, attitudes, and practices among women, as well as factors affecting their acceptability.^{8,24,25} While the role of culture is recognized, few qualitative studies have examined sociocultural influences on adoption among Yoruba, both fertile and infertile couples. This study explores sociocultural influences on child adoption among fertile and infertile couples and other stakeholders in Ekiti State. Unlike prior studies, this research includes both fertile and infertile couples.



It may provide policymakers with data to inform policy reforms related to infertility and access to adoption services.

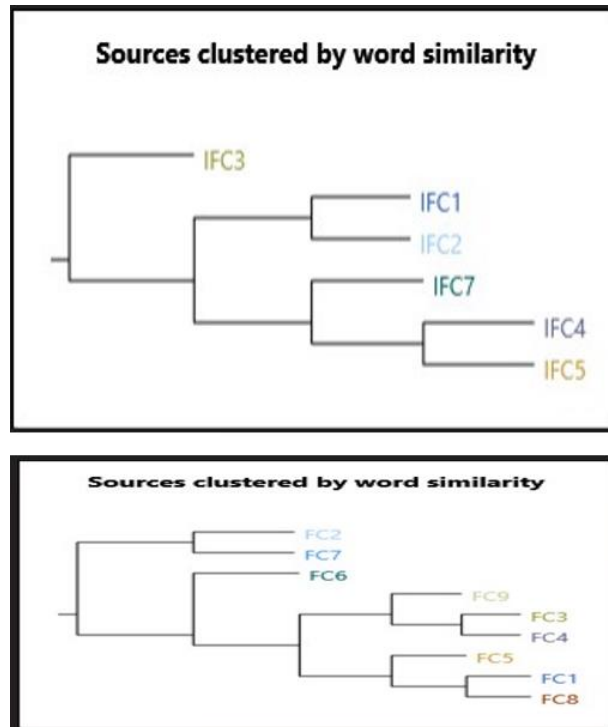
METHODS

This study was conducted in Ekiti State, a culturally homogeneous state predominantly inhabited by the Yoruba people, who are predominantly Christians.²⁶ This qualitative study explored the influence of sociocultural factors on child adoption among fertile and infertile couples in southwestern Nigeria. Utilizing a phenomenological design to explore sociocultural factors by focusing on participants' lived experiences and perceptions. This approach allowed the researcher to capture the meanings and significance of the participants' stories within their specific cultural context. The study employed purposive and snowball sampling to recruit 25 participants, comprising five key informants (an orphanage manager (OM), a legal expert (LE), a gynecologist, a fertility expert (FE), and a motherless babies' home administrator (MBHA)) and 20 couples (fertile (FC), infertile (IFC), and adoptive (AD)). Primary respondents were included if they resided in Ekiti State, were

married for at least two years, and were above 18 years, while divorcees and cohabiting partners were excluded. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews lasting 60–90 minutes in private settings, then transcribed and back-translated for accuracy. Validity and reliability were ensured using Lincoln and Guba's trustworthiness framework.³⁶ Thematic analysis, aided by NVivo 11, clustered codes into three themes: cultural factors, social factors, and cultural-social intersections, highlighting the complex influences on child adoption decisions.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

This study was approved by the research ethics committee (REC) of Landmark University, Omu-Aran, Kwara State (LMUIREC/HS/049/2025). All participants provided informed consent. The researchers ensured respect for confidentiality, privacy, and cultural sensitivities throughout the research process. Codes / ID numbers such as *FC1*, *IF2*, and *AD3*, representing "Fertile Couple 1", "Infertile Couple 2", and "Adoptive Parent 3" respectively, were used to conceal the identities of the participants.



RESULTS

Respondents Characteristics: The couples were mainly between 30 and 49 years old, identified as Christians, and had between 1 and 6 children. The women in the infertile couples were aged 20 to 49 years, experiencing primary infertility, for a duration of 3 to 12 years.

Theme 1: Social Factors

Social circumstances played a crucial role in shaping adoption attitudes, with two sub-themes emerging: intrinsic and extrinsic social factors.

Intrinsic Social Factors: These capture how education, exposure, and personal convictions shaped perceptions of adoption.

Education and exposure: FC2 (29-year-old public servant, fertile couple): *Due to my background, people around me don't see anything wrong with child adoption, even the majority of my mother's friends adopted because of infertility issues. Growing up, we mingled together, even with some*

of the adopted children -during end-of-the-year parties, and until, in some cases, my mother told me about the fact that they were adopted, they I didn't know. And they treated those children very well.

Personal resistance despite social acceptance: IFC4 (25-year-old infertile hair stylist): "As of today, it's not even an option for us now at all. We don't believe it is a good option, but you will agree with me that people have varying options..."

Extrinsic Social Factors: These reflect the influence of family, siblings, financial barriers, bureaucracy, and stigma.

Complex family dynamics: IFC2 (30-year-old housewife, barren for 7 years): "I cannot adopt a child because ...I can't stand the way my husband's relatives will be looking at me..." IFC1 (37-year-old cook with secondary infertility): "Sir, I cannot go for child adoption even though we have waited



For eight years... The major reason is that my husband doesn't approve of it at all."

Siblings' rivalry: FC5, FC7 and FC9 remarked respectively: "...I don't want unnecessary competition between the adopted child and my biological children, especially from my wife." "...We Yorubas believe that the biological children may not accept the adopted child like their siblings." "...The fear of unhealthy rivalry between the biological and adopted children also affects how we embrace adoption..." AD3 (adoptive parent): "...my lastborn initially did not want to agree. She was mad at me... I had to sit her down and explain... we'd like to adopt children in the future."

Financial limitations: IFC5 (37-year-old farmer): "...we have heard from reliable sources the amount of money... is not small, you know how things like that work in Nigeria." FC10: "I can't adopt in the future because... I'd rather take one of my children whose financial responsibility will be handled by his/her parents..."

Bureaucratic and legal challenges: IFC7 (41-year

old teacher, barren for 10 years): "Child adoption is not as easy as people think... the stress one has to go through to even get a child... we were discouraged."

Gynecologist: *The major issue about adoption is emm...people are adopting children now actually, ehh it's difficult to get a child to adopt because nowadays, there are not many abandoned children, there are not many children in orphanages and there are many Yoruba people whose eyes are now opened to the child adoption option...the process is more difficult and getting the child also is more difficult because the demand is now more than the supply. After all, like in Ekiti here and I believe in other Yoruba states, I think it is the Women's affairs that are involved and if you obtain a form, you will have to queue. So, most of the time, it's the heavyweight in the society that is favoured to adopt. However, I know that there are some cases in which couples adopt after several failed attempts at IVF and they eventually settle for what I can refer to as "private child adoption" because of the bottleneck*



of the conventional process of child adoption. And I know of a few cases of Yorubas who are now embracing child adoption more than ever. It's just that it might not be as easy as it sounds to eventually get a child to adopt, it's not a fast-food affair; many bottlenecks can frustrate the undetermined.

AD1 (adoptive parent): "...many potential adoptive parents are in dire need... but unfortunately, they are not easy to come by because of the several hurdles you have to cross..."

Fear of stigma/judgment: IFC3 (39-year-old teacher, infertile 12 years): "...it will be very difficult to consider adopting a child because we are already established here... the people already know our infertility condition. So, if they suddenly see us with a child, the people will start talking and gossiping."

Theme 2: Cultural Factors

Cultural traditions and beliefs shaped adoption decisions, centering on kinship, lineage, and spiritual or traditional norms.

Kinship and Ancestral Beliefs: These highlight concerns around inheritance rights, bloodlines, and extended family control.

Lineage and blood inheritance: FC1 (42-year-old cleaner): "...assuming I am childless and I adopt a child... except if I deliberately will my properties... the relatives will not allow the child to inherit the properties."

FC5 (lecturer): "...we believe any child you should have must come from your bloodline... a child that an armed robber gave birth to might have such tendencies..."

FC6: "Some Yorubas don't adopt because of the bloodline – the curses in the family, the prevailing character and sicknesses that run in the blood of the potential adopted child."

Extended family influence: IFC2: "Even if I intend to adopt, it's not just my decision to make—it's the whole family's pride, lineage, and silence that I must carry like a burden."

reproductive expectations. One major cultural barriers to child adoption discovered in this study was the emphasis on bloodline lineage continuity. *Some participants* linked biological reproduction to the continuity of the family name, ancestral heritage, and spiritual duties to forebears as found in a previous study.²⁸ The findings of this study align with earlier research suggesting that the Yoruba in Southwestern Nigeria tend to be more accepting of child adoption.²⁹ The cultural belief that “*ori omo lo npe omo wa ’ye*” (meaning that the presence of a child often attracts unborn children into the physical world), as revealed in the study, further reinforces support for adopting children. It was inferred that adopters can more easily welcome adopted children into their families and communities and therefore receive the blessings of having biological children. Conversely, based on some Yoruba cultural beliefs, adopted children are perceived to become ungrateful adults who are likely to walk away from their adopters, who must have invested so much in them, later in life. In contrast, some others are said to have the tendency to engage. In contrast, antisocial behavior later in life is often rooted in their family history. On account of the foregoing, some males in infertile marriages are encouraged to marry another woman.³⁰ Adoptive couples, however, expressed reservations stemming from concerns that an adopted child might display antisocial behaviour, which could in turn affect the family’s reputation. These perspectives were echoed almost verbatim by several respondents, and previous studies have also affirmed this position.^{12,31} Succinctly put, these cultural factors unveil the powerful impact of tradition and belief systems in shaping reproductive behaviours and parenting options in Yoruba society. The findings align with the impression that adoption is often construed not merely as a social or legal arrangement but as a culturally incongruent practice that challenges core notions of identity, legacy, and spiritual order.³² The study also showed how social dynamics and interpersonal

relationships control adoption decisions. A recurrent concern among the participants was the fear of social stigmatization. Adoption, usually among fertile couples, was occasionally met with suspicion in the community.³³ Some participants shared that neighbors and relatives often question the legitimacy of adoptive families or spread rumors about the child’s origins. Such community attitudes strongly influence whether couples view adoption as socially acceptable. This finding aligns with reports that stigma and fear of gossip remain major barriers to adoption in Yoruba communities.¹² However, other studies indicate that adoption is increasingly seen as a positive and socially supported option, particularly when it is framed as providing care for vulnerable children.²⁹ Another crucial sub-theme was the influence of extended family and peer groups in decision-making. The approval of the elders in a particular family, in-laws, and even siblings is often sought before a couple can proceed with adoption.³⁴ This communal orientation strengthens conformity and discourages deviations from traditional norms. Even among couples who expressed a willingness to adopt, some of the interviewees reported being discouraged by relatives who considered adoption shameful, unnatural and a decision that has the proclivity of bringing about the devaluation of the entire family in the sight of the community. Biological parenthood is regarded as a reflection of social maturity, respect, and marital success.³⁵ Adoptive parents, particularly those who are fertile, may be seen as being inadequate, as their decision challenges the social norm that equates parenthood with biological reproduction. In this manner, child adoption is socially constructed as a “lesser” form of parenting, undermining its potential as a legitimate and honorable option.³⁶ While the cultural and social factors are individually distinct, individually distinct, they often overlap in practice. The theme “hybrid cultural-social factors” encapsulates these overlaps, especially in places where belief systems and communal values unite

to shape the disposition toward adoption. An example of such overlap or intersection involves the conflict between religious perspectives and traditional beliefs. Some of the participants asserted that Christian or Islamic doctrines generally promote compassion, care for orphans, and social responsibility.³⁷ However, these ideologies often conflict with cultural perspectives that prioritize blood ties and ancestral approval. Some religiously inclined respondents expressed internal conflict between their faith's encouragement of adoption and their cultural identity's resistance to it.³⁸ Another hybrid theme was the perception of adoption as a symbiotic relationship, a means to an end, in which the adopter takes in a much younger child with the view of training him. At the same time, he also reciprocates the kindness by being available to provide companionship and help with mostly domestic chores when the biological children have since left their parents behind. This is worse when only one surviving partner is left behind without a companion. The interplay between cultural and social forces creates a complex environment in which child adoption is negotiated. While on one hand, some participants recognized the emotional and social value of adoption, particularly for infertile couples, widespread cultural and social barriers persist. On the other hand, fertile couples face additional resistance due to the perceived weirdness of adopting when one is capable of procreating naturally.

CONCLUSION

Exploring sociocultural influences on child adoption among fertile and infertile couples in Ekiti State revealed multi-dimensional hesitation toward adoption. Fertile couples emphasized cultural factors and were mostly pro-adoption, while infertile couples emphasized social factors and were mostly anti-adoption. Sociocultural factors generally discourage adoption, though positive experiences and fear of an empty nest encourage it. Recommendations include culturally sensitive

advocacy, reducing stigma, implementing policy reforms, and enhancing accessibility.

Findings highlight the need for culturally sensitive advocacy addressing legal, social, and symbolic meanings of adoption, including lineage, gender, and spiritual beliefs. Efforts should reduce stigma, improve accessibility for fertile and infertile couples, and reform policies to discourage baby abandonment and unwanted pregnancies. Policy reforms must ensure a transparent, efficient adoption process to increase the availability of adoptable babies.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO KNOWLEDGE

Most fertile couples were pro-adoption, while infertile couples were mostly anti-adoption. Fertile couples emphasized cultural factors; infertile couples focused on social factors influencing adoption in Ekiti State. Sociocultural factors generally discourage adoption, especially among infertile couples. Besides infertility management, Yorubas primarily adopt for companionship and support in old age.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest concerning the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

FMO conceived the study. FMO, IOS, AND OAJ were involved in the literature review, IOS drafted the methodology, FMO, IOS and OAJ were involved with data collection and data analysis.

FMO, IOS and OAJ contributed to the interpretation of findings and the writing and critical review of the manuscript.

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