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A THEOLOGICAL EVALUATION OF CHILD ABUSE AMONG THE IBIBIO OF AKWA IBOM STATE.

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Abstract

The devastating forms and effects of child abuse in Ibibio attract scholarship attention especially when some children are branded as mme Ufot (witches and wizzards), abandoned to become ndito nsanga esien (street boys and girls), and forced to serve as eyen ufok (house maid) and nick named and stigmatized as ndioi ndito (vermin and evil children). Child abuse does not only affect the family, but also affects the society at large. Theologically, like adult, children are also human beings who are composed of the image of God (imago Dei), therefore belonging to the kingdom of God. Descriptive method through a body of related literatures and participant observation were used to gather information and arrive at the fact that children are vulnerable of abuses. The work recommends that the church, government and the larger society should rise up to protect children's fundamental right through children department in the church, seminar to enlighten the adult human beings against all kinds of child abuse. Children themselves should be conscious of their rights and try to obey their elders in the light of the Lord. The work concludes that child abuse is an attempt to negate the fact of imago Dei in children therefore should be discouraged in Ibibioland.

Introduction

Child abuse is now becoming a social or societal concern. It is generally understood in our society as physical, mental and spiritual harassment of children. It involves inflicting physical harms on children such as excessive nagging, whipping and depriving children of physical needs, or subjecting them to sexual perversity. Child abuse can also be described as causing emotional and psychological pains to children through acts of maltreatment, abandonment, and the like.

These ill-treatments measured to children challenge the fundamental human rights of children. The rights of children comprise of the basic human rights such as right to life, dignity of human person and other ones enshrined in chapter four of the Nigerian constitution published in 1999.¹ Theologically these rights relates with the purpose of divine creation of human beings. That is to say, in theology, the term human includes male and female, adult and children which means that, all human beings are created by God and made in the image and likeness of God.²

It is true that children are gift from God, possessing the image of God; they deserve to be accepted and regarded in the same way adult human beings are being regarded. But most times they are not regarded in this way. For instance, in most of our churches, children are not given places to sit; if they came to church early to secure seats, they are harshly asked to vacate such seats for a rich man or woman who comes late to church. The effects of child abuse extend from the family to the church and to the society at large where children are neglected and robbed of their right.

In Ibibioland, in Akwa Ibom State of the researcher's origin, cases of child abuse abound such as putting false claim on children calling them witches and wizards and such children are stigmatized as evil children. This is because witchcraft is considered as evil. Some other activities in Ibibio that promote

child abuse include exposing children to serve as house maids which later put them in hard labour like hawking while their mates are learning in school. Some of them are abandoned into the streets from where they carry out illicit sexual activities and other forms of crime. Also, some of the male children are initiated into cult like *ekpo* masquerade and other forms of cultism. Some of them are used as errand boys while the female ones are introduced into an early illicit sexual relationship. These children are denied of medical care, education, and other benefits children should get.

This work aims at highlighting the effort of Christian theology which promotes the dignity of human beings including children. It will further enlighten people on how children are being viewed in the Bible. It is hopefully expected that it will spur the adult human beings into taking positive actions concerning the up-bringing of children against all kinds of abuses as well as protecting the fundamental right of children.

Definition of Concepts Theological

The *Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary* defines theology as "the study of the nature of God and religious truth."³ According to the *New Dictionary of Theology*, "theological as well as theology is derived from the Greek, "theologia," combination of two words- *theos* and *logos*, meaning basically an account of, or discourse about gods or God.⁴ Hence, in Christianity, one of the major religions of *Ibibio* people, the term refers to a broad range of church doctrine. It also denotes "teachings about God and his relation to the world from creative to the consummation, particularly as it sets forth in an ordered, coherent manner."⁵ Theology is the systematic study of the existence and nature of the divine (God) and his relationship to and influences upon other beings especially human beings. Thus, theological refers to looking at a concept in the light of God and from the point of view of the word of God as contained in the Bible.

Child

According to *Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary*, a child is "a young human who is not yet an adult".⁶ A child is a person who does not get to the age of full physical development. If adulthood starts from eighteen years of age, then the official age of a child should span from one to seventeen. This way of thinking saves the concept of a child in this work. It puts a child as a young human being, from conception/ birth to puberty.

Child Abuse

A child is a young human who is not an adult. Abuse connotes misuses, maltreatment, insult and all forms of corrupt practices. It involves using something wrongly or harmfully. Therefore, child abuse is about the misuse, maltreatment or exploitation of children. It occurs when children are handled unjustly or corruptly by adults in the society either verbally, physically, mentally or otherwise. Child abuse is considered a criminal act because it denies the fundamental human right of children.⁷ Maltreatment of any kind meted to any person, child or adult should not be considered as the will of God. God desires discipline and training not abuse. In the Bible, it states, "do not make light of the Lord's discipline and do not lose heart when he rebukes you because the Lord discipline those he loves" (Heb. 12:25-26). Child abuse is a crime of harming a child.

Ibibio

The word *Ibibio* describes both a people and the culture of a group of people. The Ibibio consist of people from Akwa Ibom State. These people are classified into three major groups namely, the proper Ibibio, the Annang and Oron.⁸ Presently, this position is challenged by both Annang and Oro people that they form different ethnic groups in the State other than the Ibibio. This position is upheld based on the fact that Oron and Annang

constitute respective languages for the two ethnic groups in the State. Speaking these languages is difficult to a non-indigene. However, a number of issues still put the three ethnic groups- Ibibio, Annang and Oron together; Ibibio language is generally spoken by all tribes. Moreover, they maintain a homogeneous political system described as a "stateless society with a strong and formidable structure organized on segmentary, unilateral principles."⁹

They have a very strong bond of kinship rite reflected in their belief in a four-God model of *Abasi iman*, (God of kinsman) *Abasi ukot*, (God of in-law) *Abasi eyeyen* (God of grand Children), *Abasi esenowo* (God of strangers). These beliefs under guide their morality which they share in common. They are loving and kind-hearted people and expect same from their moral clients, for instance, when they send their children as maids to strangers, they do not doubt the fact that their children will be well cared for. This is because; their feeling is that masters and mistresses of their children have same belief of *Abasi esenowo*.

The three groups also share same economic, social and patrilineal system; the first is the immediate family (Idip Ete) which consists of the father, his wife (wives), children, and his siblings. A collection of idip ete forms the *Ufok* (family), a collection of *Ufot* form an *ekpuk* (linage) and the collection of *ekpuk* form an *efak* (ward). While the collection of many *efak* forms *Obio* (village) which many villages give rise to a clan. For Ekong, each unit is autonomous, but connected with a common ancestry.¹⁰ Each unit has a head, the *obong* appropriated to the unit name. The *obong* is usually the oldest person who is at the apex of all activities- political, agricultural, economical, social, and moral and others.

The three ethnic groups share a common worldview which is religious. Their belief is basically traced to the fundamental belief in *Abasi Ibom* (the Supreme Being and his massagers, divine

and humans (the ancestors and humans who are still alive). This is to say that the traditional Ibibio believed that God existed and was active in the universe. This belief helped the Ibibio people to fully accept the God presented by Christian missionary. This worldview permeates and dominates everything in the universe. This forms the basis why the Ibibio people should be seen as religious. Their world is that of culture, political, social, economical and ethical follow from the religious worldview.

Issues of Child Abuse in Ibibio

Generally speaking, child abuse exists in our societies today in forms like physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect. Physical abuse includes all acts that create injury or a substantial and unnecessary risk to the child. It also includes causing a child to walk on broken bones, burn marks, as well as putting a child in addictive behavior, as well as passing through an undue corporal punishment, beatings, and cuts, scars which can cause unbearable pains or humiliation to children. Sexual abuse is a form of child abuse in which an adult or older adolescent abuses a child for sexual stimulation. Sexual abuse includes forcing a child to engage in sexual activities regardless of the outcome. Emotional abuse is generally more difficult to identify and to prove, but it is nonetheless very harmful. It includes words or attitudes intended to provoke, neglect, disgrace, or bring shame on a child or younger person. In Ibibio, child abuse takes forms as follows:

Child Witchcraft

Witchcraft (*ifot*) belief is vital in Ibibio as well as other African societies. It is a terrible experience to think that one is attacked by witchcraft; this makes the existence of a witch or wizard in a home to be dreaded. Although, Anyanwu describes witchcraft in two forms namely, the white witchcraft that consists

of benevolent spirit while the black witchcraft consists of witches with malignant power. They are “capable of attacking the ethereal or spiritual bodies of their victims...during sleep”.¹¹ Black witchcraft is dangerous. Onunwa reveals that those who practice witchcraft feed on the soul of their victims. He adds,

*The idea of eating of the soul and sucking of the blood of a victim is a spiritual exercise and experience, which has tremendous physical effect on victims of attack of witchcraft. People believe that witches eat the soul and suck the blood of the victims...the witch could transform into any of the animals or birds through the process of metempsychosis and cause bodily and spiritual harm on an individual.*¹²

It is dreaded to believe that children are being initiated into black witchcraft. The initiation rite can be done by parents, senior siblings or older witches and wizards through food, sometimes, without the consent of the minor in this case, the child.¹³ Consequently, parents and older people who initiate children into witchcraft to perform nefarious activities in the society are really abusing those children.

Moreover, the most popular way of abusing children through witchcraft in Ibibio is mainly exaggerated by those plagued with ill-luck ranging from business failure to ill-health, problems in marriages, miscarriages and even death are believed to be caused by child witches in the family. Repeated cases abound when unfortunate cases like illness, infertility, etc. are taken to the so called “spiritual churches” for prayers. If another person's child stays in that home, the words of prophesy will brand the child as witch and attribute such cases to that child. In addition, the child

will be subjected to excessive torture and forced to confess even when the child is not a witch. If indeed such a child had been initiated into witchcraft without his/ her consent, the church should pray for divine mercy to deliver the child rather than subjecting the child to abuse namely, any kind of torture or rejection.

House Maid Abuse

Based on the four-God model discussed above, Some Ibibio parents like giving out their children to stay with other people including parents' siblings, friends, in-laws and even strangers. House maid experience in some homes, is a very devastating experience to the maids. In some homes, maids do not eat from the same pots that direct family members eat from. While the true members of the family eat good soup, maids eat soup made with okra, water and magi. If they must eat the same dishes, they must wait to take the waste, spoilage, sour and even the one misused by children. Maids also experience starvation as they are not given food when they are hungry. They are also exposed to hawking so that they have to produce more than they consume. They are denied a lot of things such as good education, good clothing and medical care.

House maid abuse is prevalent in Ibibio because a lot of reasons fascinate its existence. O'Donovan identifies one of them as poverty. For him poverty is related to all crimes in Africa.¹⁴ He puts forward the following:

If people do not have enough to eat, they steal to survive. When people become desperate for food and other necessities they will steal or even kill to get what they need. The great increase in crime in many African countries today, especially in the cities, is directly related to the problem of unemployment and poverty.¹⁵

This means that the state of poverty in Ibibio as one of the tribes in African can push parents to send their children to those they feel can care for their children. Some parents prefer collecting money to the education of their children.

To some parents, it may not be poverty but because the Ibibio believe in the four-God model, namely, God of kinsman, God of in-law, God of grandchildren, and God of strangers. This belief propels Ibibio concept of communalism. So they send their children to their siblings, in-laws, and even strangers not really as maids but as helpers in the spirit of solidarity and communalism in the light of God. Such parents do not demand for any ransom from the guardian. But unfortunately, bad guardians expose these children to all kinds of abuse. It is indeed child abuse when parents pass on or abandon their responsibility of caring for their children and leaving such responsibility in the hands of guardians.

Vermin or Street Life Exposure

Vermin is a Latin term which means "worm" or "noxious life." Homeless children who wonder in the street are often described derogatorily as *vermin*. They are so branded because they beg, steal, sell their bodies, and if they do not die early, they grow up to be hardened criminal. In Ibibioland, these children are found in Ibom Plaza, large circus and under the over-head bridges in Akwa Ibom State. Some of them are orphans or children abandoned by irresponsible parents. The society here exposes them to harm, abandonment and no love. They in turn feel that they are good for nothing so that they can do anything they like.

How can children made in God's image be considered vermin and detestably described as street boys and girls? Every child has great value in the sight of God; they are a big concern to God. Jesus never saw children as vermin. He viewed them as souls of immortal value, he posited that the kingdom of God belongs to such as children (Matthew 19:13-15).

Other forms of child abuse in Ibibio includes sexual abuse which constitutes cases of rapes and incest. Although not yet brought to book in the state, this bad experience lives on in the life of the child or victim up to the time she/ he grows up to adulthood. Lack of discipline is also considered as child abuse, that is, when parents seem to be occupied by businesses and jobs thereby leaving their children in unruliness; these children will become loose and lead immoral lives. Kore adds that even the unborn children are abused through abortion.¹⁶ To avoid shame and blame for irresponsibility, many parents take to the option of abortion when their wayward children get pregnant. Apart from destroying the fetus (unborn child) in the womb, the teenage girl is also abused as she is made to pass through the process of abortion.

Effects of Child Abuse

Child abuse in the home, the school, the church and the society can have devastating effects on children. In the book, *Culture and the Christian Home*, Children become "less developed socially, intellectually, emotionally, and even physically due to parental love and this can result in low self-esteem and personality disorder."¹⁷ Kore adds, "Children become passive and indifferent in life filled with fear, hatred, insecurity, tension, guilt, depression, anxiety, and excessive need for love, self-blame, and flashback nightmares, powerful feelings of revenge and guilt."¹⁸

Moreover, some children grow to become unwanted elements in the society because of neglect and abuse meted to them while they were very young. The devastating state of abuse can possibly lead to death of the child. Such maltreatment to children simply provides the evidence that children who are human beings created in the same image and likeness of God such as the adult themselves are therefore treated as animals or robots. To add to the above effect, child abuse infringes on the Fundamental Rights of children.

Fundamental Rights of Children

Accordingly, the law also provides legislation against child abuse and neglect in the areas of legal duty of parents and the society to take care of children, prevention of cruelty in the area of an informal conversation, provision for illegitimate children in cases of death, disclaimer of children or outright abandonment of children, forceful marriages, denial of education, rape, and seduction and others.¹⁹

The Child's Rights Act, first and foremost, has adopted all the fundamental human rights set out in the 1999 constitution of the federal Republic of Nigeria and subsequent constitutions or amendments thereto as Act protecting the fundamental human rights of the children. These rights include: Right to dignity, Right to parental care, protection and maintenance, Right to free, compulsory and universal primary education, Right to leisure, recreation and cultural activities, Right to health and health services, Right of a child in need to special care and protection, Right of the unborn child to protection against harmful social and cultural practices, Right not be imprisoned with the mother, Right to protection against abuse and torture.²⁰ Ayantayo supported that child right is an offshoot of Universal Human Right declaration of 1948 which is typified in chapter four of Nigerian Constitution.²¹ This means that the declaration of the Universal Human Right and Fundamental Human Right enshrined in the Nigerian Constitution informed the declaration of the right of children.

Why do we have Right Law for children? Onyenweaku's reply is tenable;

The children are the future generation of our society, both church and state. They are the assurance of the continuity of the human society. Without children today there will be no society of human being tomorrow. Yet they are the most vulnerable members of the society. By their nature

*they deserve protection. As children they lack the physical, mental and emotional maturity required to face life. They, therefore, require special safeguards, care and protection. The children are unique by their nature and needs, and as such the normal rights guaranteed adults are observably not adequate to accommodate the special needs of children hence the child's rights law.*²²

Moreover, Christian theology which places a high premium for children, looks at them as of great values to God-children belongs to God and are gifts from him to human beings (Psalm 137:3-5). Theology provides teachings to protect the vulnerable people of the society including children. In this case, it serves as a creamer to the fundamental rights of children or that the right act of children are ratified in the bidding of theology.

Christian Theology and Child Abuse

Theologically, human beings are creatures of God, who possess the image and likeness of the creator. Berkhof in his *Systematic Theology* holds that humanity means that we are created by God, through a conscious, purposeful act by God not through a chance process of explosive evolution. But since human beings are created by God lies the ultimate reason for his/her existence; a reason which lies in the intension of God.²³ The whole concept of human creation by God is referred to as *Imago Dei*. The Latin phrase, *Imago Dei* means the image of God. Theology refers to it as the image of God only to human beings not animals. This also means that the image of God is intrinsic in all humans, both adult and children. No one will be human without image of God.

It is because human beings are created by God, the adult human beings cannot discover their real meaning by regarding themselves and their happiness as the highest over the value of children. God wants children to be cared for, given true sense of

direction and taught the true way of life. The adult counterpart should not ill-treat children rather they should know that their value is not absolutely theirs but as conveyed to them by the creator and they are fulfilled when serving the creator faithfully.

Grudem's assertion is that the image of God is only found in human beings. He puts,

*Out of all the creatures God made, only one creature, man (used in general gender to mean humanity), is the image of God... the fact that man (humanity) is in the image of God means that man (humanity) is like God and represents God. When God says, "Let us make man (humanity) in our image, after our likeness" (Gen. 1:26), the meaning is that God plans to make a creature similar to himself.*²⁴

The similarity between God and humanity will not be conceived in physical components, of hands and legs, but rationality and freewill which make humanity think and act morally in a way desirable to God. This will make humanity know that children compose of the same ontological element as adult therefore should be treated with dignity.

Kore posits that the biblical concept of children is of acceptance and dignity and not abuse, those Children are God's gift and blessing. The author adds that God's divine plan for children is blessing and not to abuse them. He quoted the Bible, "train a child in the way he (she) should go, and when he (she) is old will not turn from it" (Proverbs 22:6).²⁵ Children must be taught the godly way of life including the Ten Commandments as contained in Exodus chapter twenty. These commandments relate human beings vertically with God and horizontally with human beings. In the horizontal relationship, no one is to be maltreated because he/she is a child. The *African Bible Commentary* also

supports this view that children should be taught the Decalogue in this case, the *Shema* which contains the statement of faith, "hear o Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deut. 6:4)²⁶. The *Shema* was to inscribe in the hearts and tablet as well as teach diligently to the children instead of abusing them.

Concerning child abuse and its implications, this is on all accounts the most pivotal passage; Mark 10:14 in the New Testament. In this passage, Jesus blesses children but when his disciples heard that little children were brought to Jesus for him to touch them, and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw these things, he rebuked them and said to them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs" (NRSV). Here, Jesus quickly understands that both children and adult were all created in the same image and likeness of God, so they do not have to be separated and deprived of God's blessings.

African Bible Commentary runs a commentary on the Epistle of Ephesians, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (6:4). For the writers, father here represents both parents and in Africa, it means those older in age than the client; all of them are to be tenderhearted in dealing with children rather than exasperating them.²⁷ They go further to add that children were created in the image and likeness of God; hence provocative words and actions are forbidden and should not be used against them. In the same vein, Kore adds that children are the precious gifts from God and they also have the image of God like the adult, "The embryo should not be seen as a piece of tissue. At the moment of conception, there exist a potential human being that is sacred and valuable to God, shown by God's personal involvement in its formation."²⁸

Parents and adult should not see children as their property to abuse. Abuse of any kind which culminates from human intension impinges the glory of God as well as his sovereignty

over creation. To add it up, children need to be loved by both parents, society likewise the church, children are to be loved not to be abandoned, hated and abused.

Conclusion

It is discovered that cases of child abuse in Ibibio have harmful effects on the right of children, especially children who are needed to be examined seriously and nurtured to grow. A lot of children have been accused falsely as witches and wizards and stigmatized as evil children. So many children have been declared vermin because they are rejected by parents and guardians and some die because of abuse. Those sent out to be house maids are maltreated by their mistresses and put on hard labour and lack formal training.

It is very surprising that even churches contribute for child abuse, even when the biblical standpoint or view of children is for acceptance and not for abuse. The church basically looks down on children not minding the fact that they were all created in the image and likeness of God. The church should take effort to train children, encourage, support and pray for agencies to spring up in the light of children development.

The government should not only enact Children Right Act but to promulgate and mount up machineries to protect the right of children. Children should be treated equally as the adults in partnership of God's image. They should be disciplined in love in the light of God and not to be tortured, mistreated as animals. Children as gift from God should be trained and nourished in the Lord and shown to them his love.

This research also condemns false claim, divorce/separation by parents, irresponsible parenting, waywardness on the part of children themselves and the like which lead to devastating effect on children. Hence, parent, church and the larger society should abstain themselves from abusing children.

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