

Ọlọrun a ẹ́ni inu – God will open your womb

Causes, treatment and consequences of infertility among Yoruba women in Nigeria

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Onvruchtbaarheid vormt een grote bedreiging voor Yoruba vrouwen. Een vrouw zonder kinderen heeft een ongelukkig en 'zinloos' leven. Zij voelt zich een uitgestotene en wordt van hekserij verdacht. Onvruchtbaarheid is 'onnatuurlijk'. Yoruba vrouwen weten dat de reguliere geneeskunde bepaalde problemen die met onvruchtbaarheid samenhangen niet kan voorkomen of genezen. Vrouwen zoeken daarom hulp bij lokale kruidendokters, spirituele genezers en kerken. De auteur beschrijft in dit artikel hoe Yoruba vrouwen en gezondheidzorgers de oorzaken, behandeling en gevolgen van onvruchtbaarheid zien. In de conclusie toont zij hoe angst voor onvruchtbaarheid besluitvorming ten aanzien van anticonceptie, abortus en huwelijk beïnvloedt.

[onvruchtbaarheid, vrouwen, abortus, genezers, Yoruba, Nigerië]

Introduction

The Yoruba

The Yoruba occupy most of south-western Nigeria and parts of the adjacent Benin Republic. With their population at 18 million, they are numerically one of the largest single ethnic groups in Africa. All Yoruba speak a common language. The stories about their origin are strongly tinted with legend and vagueness. *Ile-Ife* is accepted as their common spiritual home and *Oduduwa* as the founder of their race. Although most Yoruba are Christians or Moslems, the traditional Yoruba religion with its belief in many deities and ancestors who influence the lives of people on this earth, is still strong. Kinship for the Yoruba is in theory bilateral, but in practise patrilineal. The patrilineal clan (*idile*) descends from a common ancestor. Traditionally, a marriage was a family affair, and not an individual choice (Bascom 1969, Fadipe 1970). Nowadays, a man and a woman usually choose their partner for marriage, but still need the approval of the two families. The clan and sub-clan are considered more important than the nuclear family, because they are constant, and the nuclear family is not. A bride price is paid and, as is usual for patrilineal societies, the husband and his family have the right over

the reproductive 'powers' of the wife; children belong to the clan of the father. Traditional Yoruba culture would plead for an abundance of the three good things in life (for a man): wealth, women and children (Hallgren 1988).

The fieldwork

Most of the fieldwork took place in the heart of Lagos, on Lagos Island.¹ I conducted interviews with various traditional healers and their clients, and with staff members in a maternity hospital. Furthermore, I had sessions with the youth of a secondary school in another part of Lagos and in-depth interviews with women of different socio-economic backgrounds, in their homes or my house. The study populations include Yoruba women and men of different socio-economic status, but with a bias towards the lower ranks, and of different ages. The fieldwork so far has concentrated on urban populations, but will include rural Yoruba in the following phases. Data collection started with exploratory interviews with Yoruba women, selected through networking. The sampling of study locations was also done through networking, ensuring that the sampled location was not atypical. One average state government secondary school was selected through networking with teachers, one government maternity hospital through networking with doctors, two Yoruba reproductive health specialists (*olomọ wẹwẹ*) were selected through one informant in the exploratory interviews who had used these providers. One church (Celestial Church of Christ – an *Aladura* church), herbalist (*elewe omọ*) and spiritualist (*babalawo*) were also selected. In the sampled locations, various data collection techniques have been used to collect information from students, staff, providers and clients as explained below:

1. Self administered questionnaires with 200 secondary school pupils, between 13 and 19 years of age.
2. In-depth exploratory interviews with four women. The women were from different socio-economic status.
3. Fifteen in-depth interviews with one *olomọ wẹwẹ* and three with another.
4. In-depth exploratory interviews with three women, one *elewe omọ* (herbalist), one *babalawo* (*Ifa* priest), and one *woli* of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church.
5. In-depth interviews with 25 women visiting the *Olomọ wẹwẹ* for infertility treatment.
6. Interviews using a semi-structured questionnaire with 109 women visiting the *Olomọ wẹwẹ* for ante-natal care.
7. Exploratory interviews with staff of different departments of the Lagos Island Maternity Hospital.

The fieldwork is part of an applied research on 'Fertility regulation among the Yoruba of Nigeria'. Fertility regulation includes everything that women do to influence their 'natural' fertility, including prevention of pregnancy (pre- and post-coital contraception), induced abortion, and infertility treatment. Overall, informants were willing to talk to me about these sensitive topics, especially during the in-depth interviews.

I had started out with concentrating mostly on (non) use of contraceptives and on induced abortion, because the low use of contraceptives and high rate of induced abortion contribute to extremely high maternal mortality rates (MMR) in Nigeria.² One of the objectives of the study was to give recommendations on how best to provide culturally acceptable services that would contribute to reduction of MMR. At that time, I considered the subject of infertility treatment as one of the less important factors in fertility regulation. However, during the fieldwork I came to realise how big the problem of infertility is for Yoruba women. I interviewed some 25 women who had problems with conceiving and it made me understand how the fear of infertility may influence the decisions women take concerning contraceptive use and abortion. The threat for women is that infertility is a legitimate reason for divorce, that an infertile woman may be a social outcast and be considered to be a witch.

Types of infertility – some definitions

According to Okonofua (1996) and Larsen (1995), infertility is defined as the failure of a couple to establish a pregnancy within one year of having sexual intercourse, be it that there was a pregnancy before or not. Okonofua states that this is the case for about 20% of couples in Nigeria (compared to 10% of couples in the United States and United Kingdom), Larsen talks about 33% infertile women in Nigeria. Childlessness is the most serious case of infertility. Larsen (1995) derived from the Demographic and Health Survey 1990 that one percent of women in South-western Nigeria, which is the Yoruba area, are childless. So much for the figures which show that infertility is a considerable problem, and I will now address the Yoruba perceptions of infertility.

Infertility in Yoruba is *airòmòbí* (literally: unable to bear child). Not all infertility is regarded as the same. There is a difference between not being able to conceive at all and not having live children or having only one or few children. Barrenness carries the highest stigma and having only one or two children and being unable to have more, carries the least. There is a special name for a woman who has never been pregnant, *agan*. Some women who suspect that they have this problem, may tell their husbands and others that they are pregnant, in order to at least show that they are able to conceive, although not able to carry a baby up to term. There are also women who get pregnant but are unable to deliver a live baby, (i.e. who have a miscarriage or still birth), or women who deliver live babies, but these children die, usually at a young age. These women are called *iya abiku*, mother of *abiku* children. *Abiku* are spirit children that are conceived or born to die, sometimes when still in the womb, and cause a lot of pain and sorrow for their parents.³ However, in such cases, the women have proved that they can conceive and are not completely barren. They are, therefore, generally regarded as 'higher' than women who have never been pregnant in their lives. Other women may have one or two children, after which they are not be able to conceive anymore. This may cause problems in their relationship with their husband and his family. There is no special name for such women.

Causes of infertility

Yoruba regard infertility as an unnatural state of affairs. "All women and men who have come to this world are able to conceive. Even if the doctors have given up, God can still make you conceive" said a traditional healer, and a diviner said: "There are no women who God created who cannot have children." The women and providers gave various explanations for a woman's infertility. Some of the causes, as set forth below, are acknowledged by orthodox medicine, but others are not. Most persons interviewed, women and providers alike, mentioned or recognised all causes.

Abortion

Abortion was mentioned as a major cause of infertility for women who had been able to conceive. Abortion is very common among the Yoruba of Lagos. Around half of the women informants in structured and unstructured interviews, admitted they had had at least one abortion. It is not uncommon for women to have had five or more abortions. The main reasons for abortion were that the pregnancy occurred when the previous baby was still small and the woman was afraid of gossip or too tired to have another baby, or the woman was still in school, or there was no money for a baby (and abortion is cheaper). Although abortion in Nigeria is illegal,⁴ it is easy to find providers of abortion services. They are staff in private hospitals, traditional healers, self-styled abortionists ("quacks") and unqualified hospital personnel. The last category of providers mainly consist of theatre nurses or others who have been watching doctors do abortions. The amount of money available determines where the women go for an abortion.

I was careless when I did my second abortion. My husband was jobless and I was not working. I went to a quack doctor because I could not spend more than 400 Naira (about 5 US dollar). So I started bleeding that lasted for four weeks (client of the *olomolowo*).

Yoruba people explain how abortion can cause infertility in different ways, the first is recognised by orthodox medicine, while the other two are more culturally defined:

Respondents explain that during the procedure of abortion the uterus may be tampered with, and this may in turn lead to inability to conceive or to habitual miscarriages. From the stories of the women who had difficulty in conceiving, I also gathered that this was a major reason. Surprisingly though, these women did not make the connection between their own abortion and inability to conceive, but talked about it in terms of other women.

I have been married for three years now and did not get pregnant. Before I married my husband, I had four abortions and one miscarriage. My husband is encouraging and used to bring home different types of medicine, local mixtures and black powder. I have also been to the Cherubim and Seraphim Church and they told me that there is hope, and I went to two different hospitals for dilation and curettage. My father-in-law was encouraging and he used to bring home local medicine. My only problem was my mother-

in-law. She did not like me from the start. ... No, I do not know what can be the reason that I cannot get pregnant yet (client of the *olomo wewe*, 31 years, a secretary)

Another reason for infertility that was mentioned as a consequence of abortion, was that the woman may have aborted the only child she was going to have in this world. Yoruba traditionally believe in predestination: each woman comes to the world with a certain number of children inside her. She has pledged this at her birth. When the number she was going to have is only one, she may abort the only child she was going to have. When the problem is secondary infertility, she may have used up her predestined number by aborting one or more after she had her first child(ren). Only few women said that they still believed in this. One woman added: "Anyway, Yoruba are optimistic and believe there would always be a way out by pleading with God to revoke their pledge".

When the abortion is not complete, the woman may still bleed in the womb. Yoruba generally believe that this blood may stay in the womb and form a fibroid. Fibroids cause infertility when they are too big.

Fibroid in the uterus

All women have a fibroid, *iju*, in their womb, that is natural. It becomes a problem when the fibroid becomes too big. The fibroid is really the retaining of blood (of menstruation or after an abortion) in the uterus. This enlarged fibroid prevents conception in two ways. Firstly, it can block the uterus and thus prevent the sperm from entering, and secondly, it can cause 'hotness', which makes the sperm watery and unable to fertilise the egg. The reason why fibroids get big is not certain – it just happens, especially later in life.

When the fibroid is too big, the woman will have some or all of the following symptoms: *şqmuroro*, *ęda* and *ęje dudu*. When she has *şqmuroro*, the women will notice pain in her breasts, especially towards menstruation. The breasts will be heavy and 'shiny'. She has *ęda*, when the sperm comes out of the vagina after intercourse, because of 'hotness' in the womb. There are two types of *ęda*, *ęda iduro* and *ęda idubule*. During *ęda iduro*, the sperm flows out when the woman stands up, and when she has *ęda idubule*, the sperm comes out when she is still lying on the bed, or wherever the intercourse took place. This last is the most serious type. When the menstrual blood of the woman is very dark she has *ęje dudu* (literally: black blood).

Witchcraft and evil spirits

Yoruba belief in a separate world of witches, *aje*, wizards, *oşho*, and evil spirits, *ęgbanje / emere*, is still strong. Newspapers, radio and television frequently report on life-stories about them. They are around, but not everyone can see and recognise them. These evil doers just enjoy doing bad things to people, including causing women not to conceive or to miscarry. When a woman is a witch or an *ęgbanje / emere* herself, she does not have children in this world, but has them in the spirit world. *Abiku* are also mischievous spirits who enter the fetus in the womb and cause miscarriage, stillbirth or make the baby die young.

Juju

The *babalawo* are diviners or spiritualists who can put *juju*, spells, on women, to cause infertility. They prepare special charms including *tira*, medicated pendant, *akaraba*, medicated padlock, *tẹṣṣo*, medicated feather, or may use soaked menstrual pads for very powerful *juju*. These spells are usually asked for by other people who do not want the couple to have children, for whatever reason. Co-wives may ask a *babalawo* to put a spell on another wife so that she does not have any child or more children for their joint husband. In other cases, there may be someone of the family, or from outside who is jealous of the good fortune of the woman in terms of her good marriage partner, her success in business, or her material wealth and who is trying to hurt the woman by preventing her from having (more) children.

Curse by ancestors or deities

There can also be a curse (*epe*) on the woman or the couple by their ancestors or family gods (*oriṣa*) who are annoyed with them. The reasons for the annoyance could be either that the woman, couple or family did not observe certain taboos, or did not fulfil their obligations to take care of their ancestors or family gods, or did other things that did not please them.

Aran giniṣa

Aran giniṣa is a worm, which lives in the womb of every woman. This worm has sharp teeth. Usually it does not cause any problem. When the woman is pregnant, the worm plays with the baby. Sometimes, for no special reason, this worm gets nasty and causes miscarriage with his sharp teeth. It can also cause 'hotness' in the womb, which prevents conception. *Aran giniṣa* is not known by all, but mostly by traditional providers and some women who had more information on traditionally recognised causes of infertility.

Use of orthodox contraceptives

In the interviews many women had stories about themselves or of other women who had problems with conceiving after using orthodox contraceptives. The harmful contraceptives are pills, coil (IUCD) and injectables, they believe these contraceptives would damage the womb or make their menstruation irregular (see below).

After my third child, I had family planning injections for about three years. In the clinic where I got the injections, they said it could take me some one year after I stopped, to get pregnant again. Since the injections my menstruation comes irregular. Before it always came on the same day. I think that because of the injections I have problems to get pregnant. I did not have any problem to get pregnant with my other children. (She also tells me that she had an abortion last year, after she stopped with the injections – but she

does not seem to infer that she thus did get pregnant after she stopped and that her problems to conceive may be due to the abortion) (client of *olomq wewq*, 31 years).

Sexual behaviour and gonorrhoea

When a woman has sex with many different men it will cause infertility, because then she is likely to get gonorrhoea, *atqsi*. Chronic gonorrhoea – or ‘too much’ gonorrhoea – causes infertility, because it causes ‘hotness’ in the womb. This ‘hotness’ in turn makes the sperm watery and it, therefore, comes out of the vagina after intercourse (*eda*).

Menstrual irregularity

Yoruba women are pre-occupied with the regularity of their menstruation. Menstruation is a sign that the woman is fertile. Just after menstruation, when the womb is cleansed of the blood and other dirt gathered there, the womb is open to conceive. If there is any irregularity, such as, too short or too long intervals between menstruation, too few or too many days, blood clots, dark blood (*ejq dudu*) caused by retention of menstrual blood, and foul smell, women consider themselves not able to conceive.

Dreams of having sex and dreams of the spirit husband

When a woman dreams of having sex, this can cause miscarriage or inability to conceive. Such dreams should be stopped by reading psalms and fasting. Dreaming of having sex with the spirit husband is a special case. All women have a spirit husband, *okq qrun*, in the other world. Usually this *okq qrun* keeps quiet, but when he starts to bother the woman in her dreams, she may not be able to conceive. There are special ceremonies to get rid of such dreams. They are organised by spiritual Christian churches and by traditional spiritualists. A woman, who had gone through such a ceremony to get rid of a spirit husband, who was a possible cause for her (secondary) infertility, reiterated her experience with the spiritualists from the Celestial Church.

Many times I had dreams that I had sex. When I was young I found it interesting, but when I heard that it is a bad thing, I knew I had to do something about it. I told my husband who agreed. I did it through a spiritualist from the Celestial Church – those dressed in white – some three years ago. She is an old woman from Cotonou: from the Egun people, who do not speak Yoruba. The ceremony cost me 7.000 Naira (at that time about 125 Dollars). With the money, the spiritualist bought many things, so many that I cannot imagine that the money was enough. The spiritualist also did not ask for more, *what a Yoruba certainly would have done. Egun people are very straight and honest.* The spiritualist had found that my dreams about having sex were caused by a spirit husband and not by a witch or wizard. The ceremony resembles a wedding. I was dressed like a bride: put on new clothes, necklace, earrings, bracelets and slippers, bought for me. The

spiritualist and her seven helpers brought me into the bush – near Badagri. I had to carry a heavy basket with gifts for my spirit husband, that was covered with a cloth and I never saw what was in it. I was warned not to let it fall. There was also much food cooked. The seven helpers – all Egun – fasted that day and were spiritually high. We came at a small hut made of palm-leaves. I had to stand in front of it, but with my back towards it, was not allowed to look back. I had to kneel down, put the basket down, put all my jewellery and clothes on top of the basket. I told my spirit husband to leave me alone, prayed that I would give him everything, talked to him. Then I had to throw the basket back over my head and not look back, else I would see my spirit husband and be lost. Then I had to run away, the spiritualist behind me who told me all the time not to look back so not to see my spirit husband. We stopped at a certain place. I had to take handfuls of the cooked food and throw it away to all sides, as in a wedding, also throwing it telling it was for the husband. The spiritualist prepared water to bath: water that was prayed in – I washed my whole body and then was given a new cloth. Since then I never had the dream again (woman, teacher, 36 years).

Unfortunately for her, the woman still has not conceived though eight years later have lapsed since.

Infertility caused by men

Nowadays, it is increasingly being recognised that when a woman is unable to conceive, the cause can also be weak sperms of the man. A man's sperms can get weak as a result of chronic gonorrhoea, due to having sex with many women or drinking too much alcohol. When he has too much gonorrhoea, *atqsi*, his body becomes hot, which makes his sperm watery and not able to fertilise. The sperm will come out of the woman's vagina after intercourse.

Service providers and their treatment for infertility

Because infertility is considered an unnatural state of affairs, Yoruba women who have problems in conceiving will not give up and keep on looking for providers who will help them to get pregnant. One woman who has been trying since 15 years to have a second child, and has visited all kinds of providers: "We Yoruba people never loose hope. We have a miracle God who can do and undo". Yoruba women in Lagos town have many providers they can choose from for infertility treatment or prevention. They shop around the different providers and use them at the same time or one after the other.

Orthodox medicine providers

Women said they get oral medicines and injections to treat infertility in orthodox medicine-style hospitals and clinics, both private and government owned. In these centres they can also do a scan of the uterus, testing of hormonal levels and can have operations

for fibroids or opening of ovarian tubes. Some of the local healers said they sometimes sent their clients to the hospitals for investigations and through the results of the tests knew what treatments to prescribe. As a way of prevention of infertility, women get dilation and curettage done after delivery, miscarriage or abortion, or just when they want to get pregnant. They call it *ifọ inu* (literally: to wash the inside)

Ọlọmọ wẹwẹ

Ọlọmọ wẹwẹ are Yoruba specialists in reproductive health. They take care of the women during pregnancy and delivery, and have ways to treat problems of not being able to conceive. Their name means literally: 'owner of small children'. They take care of the health of the mother, because this is the pre-condition for the health of the baby. *Ọlọmọ wẹwẹ* are trained 'on the job' by their fathers, grandfathers or other relatives. Against payment, a person can also become an apprentice with an *Ọlọmọ wẹwẹ*. Strangely enough, the vast majority of *Ọlọmọ wẹwẹ* are men.⁵ Most *ọlọmọ wẹwẹ* give physical and spiritual treatment. *Ọlọmọ wẹwẹ* prevent and treat infertility by giving *agbo* (herbal drinks), *asejẹ* (soup made of herbs, fish, snails and other ingredients), medicinal soap, and black powder to be put in the porridge. There are many different types of medicines, and the type of medicine given depends upon the cause of infertility in each particular case. One *ọlọmọ wẹwẹ* reiterated how he treats a woman who comes for infertility treatment:

I start with hearing the history of the woman, the number of days she menstruates, how regularly it comes, the substance and colour of the blood etc. Then I ask her if she has *ẹda*, if the sperm flows out when she has met her husband. I also ask her about her breasts, if they are shiny just before menstruation. My treatment is really trying out different medicines. If the woman still does not get pregnant after many months of trying every medicine, I may ask her to bring her husband. I will interview the husband and may ask him to go for tests in the hospital to see if his sperm is weak, I then can give medicines to make the sperm strong. I can also ask the woman to go to a hospital to do tests which may point at the cause. However, when I suspect that witches or other evil forces which are stronger than me, are the cause of infertility, I will send the woman to the *babalawo*.

Babalawo

A *babalawo*, *lfa*⁶ priest, uses divination to find out the cause of infertility. He uses cowry shells or kola nuts or other divination instruments to consult the *lfa* oracle. The oracle may tell him that certain deities or ancestors are annoyed with the woman or her family, because they did not fulfil their ceremonial obligations or did not observe certain taboos. Bascom (1969), explains that nearly all *oriṣa*'s, deities, can be bringers of children, but that *Oshun* is the one major *oriṣa* who brings fertility. The *babalawo* will tell the woman who wants to conceive, what sacrifices to make for the deities or ancestors to appease them. Sometimes, he may hear from the oracle that a curse or spell has been put on the woman by witches or other *babalawos*. In that case, he will have to use

all his power to uplift the spell and the woman has to buy the ingredients for the ceremony, such as kola nuts, gin, a cock, a goat, and pay him some fee.

Elewe qmq

Originally, the *elewe qmq* (literally: owner of herbs) are herbalists, mostly women, who provide the herbs for the medicines of the *qlmq wewę*. They also sometimes called *alagbo qmq*, (literally: owner of medicinal herbal drinks for children). The *Qlmq wewę* mix the herbs, grind them, add other ingredients and 'power' to make their medicines. The traditional idea is that women should not touch these medicines when they have their menses, because it would cause the medicines to spoil. Nowadays, more *elewe qmq* mix the herbs to medicines, and also provide medicine for infertility treatment.

Spiritual churches

In spiritual churches, including *Aladura* and Pentecostal churches, special weekly sessions are held for women who have problems conceiving. *Aladura* (literally: 'owner of prayer') churches are African independent churches which combine elements of the traditional belief with the orthodox Christian dogma. Besides the *Aladura* churches, which date from the beginning of the nineteen-twenties, many spiritual, Christian, churches have sprouted up in Nigeria which recognise the existence of bad witches and spirits who try to do harm to people. These churches have special ceremonies and sessions to deal with the bad spirits in the world. An attendant of the Cherubim and Seraphim church tells me about the sessions for *agan*, barren women.

On Tuesday's, the *agan* come to the church with water and fruits. Fruits are important, because when you throw fruits anywhere, they will grow. The fruits to bring are bananas and oranges. No pawpaw, because evil power had possession of it. Many women have gone to other healers first and then come to this church. The *woli*, priest, will tell them what to do: fasting, praying and taking a sip from the mixture of perfume and olive oil that he has prayed in. When women do this a few times they will conceive when sleeping with their husband. Women will also bathe in the stream. Sometimes there are special prayer nights from 12 midnight to 5 in the morning, this is also the time witches and *qgbanje* meet. The *woli* may point to the *agan* and say that she is *qgbanje*, and that is the cause for her infertility in this world. The woman should be ready to have treatment to get the *qgbanje* out of her. It may also be that the *woli* says that she has spoilt her womb by sleeping with too many men, or has done abortions. Women who come for treatment would promise something to the church when they do get pregnant, it can even be a car.

Prevention of infertility

Infertility is a threat to the happiness and social position of all Yoruba women, therefore, women will take precautions against all evil that may prevent them from getting a baby. When a Yoruba woman is pregnant, she will try to prevent the threat of miscarriage by taking preventive measures. To protect herself from witches and evil spirits who are out to tamper with the fetus, she will not walk outside in the hot sun between 12 and 3 p.m. and in the night between 12 midnight and 6 a.m., when the evil spirits are out. These spirits can not only cause miscarriage, but can also cause the baby to be born malformed or cause the baby to be possessed by an evil spirit. She will always walk around with a safety pin and a small stone, that will protect her and her baby against those spirits.

Taking preventive measures against miscarriage is called *ideyun* or *oyun dide* (literally: to tie the pregnancy). The *ḡlḡmḡ wẹwẹ* has various methods to prevent a miscarriage and each *ḡlḡmḡ wẹwẹ* has his own methods. The method reported to me was to rub an egg upwards over the abdomen of the woman. The *ḡlḡmḡ wẹwẹ* would then keep the egg somewhere till one week before the expected delivery, when he would rub it downwards over her abdomen, to free the fetus. The *ḡlḡmḡ wẹwẹ* can also give the pregnant woman an *oruka*, medicinal ring, to wear around her finger, to protect her against miscarriage. The *ḡlḡmḡ wẹwẹ* will have put the ring in *asejẹ* when he was preparing it. The woman has to eat the *asejẹ* and wear the ring till she is ready to deliver. Some women, who feel embarrassed to walk around with an *oruka* obviously from an *ḡlḡmḡ wẹwẹ*, let the *ḡlḡmḡ wẹwẹ* use their wedding ring to put a charm on it. Adetunyi (1996) describes this *ideyun* process for Yoruba women in Ondo State. He explains how different healers prescribe different food taboos and have different ingredients for their herbal soups and drinks. Adetunyi found that the women use various providers, orthodox, spiritual, and traditional, at the same time. According to him, the major goal of this mixing was to maximise protection, since potential dangers could be physical and spiritual. Women in Lagos have the same pattern of going to different providers.

Some women, when they want to become pregnant, will not wait to find out if they are fertile or not, but go straight to the *ḡlḡmḡ wẹwẹ* to get herbal drinks that will prevent everything that could go wrong. Maclean (1982) in her study among the Yoruba in Oyo State, also found that all women had used traditional medicines and consulted traditional practitioners for ensuring conception and avoiding infertility.

Consequences of infertility for a Yoruba woman

Being infertile has many negative consequences for a woman:

Unhappiness and insecurity

Children are a source of insurance for the future, and they bring happiness and joy in one's life. "A woman without a child has no reason for living, and will always be un-

happy.” say students in a secondary school. Children are there to take care of their parents in old age, to take over the family business, inherit the properties that their parents have worked for, and bury their parents when they die. A person without a child has nobody to bury him or her. The life of a person without a child is miserable. But it is more miserable for women than for men. Until recently’ infertility of a couple was always the fault of the woman. The man was advised to take another wife. “Even if he had married ten wives who could not conceive, people would still say that it was his destiny to always marry an infertile woman!” said a woman during the in-depth interviews.

Abuse by in-laws, husband taking a second wife and breaking up of marriage

The pressure from the in-laws on a barren women is high. They do not think of the happiness of the woman, only of the continuation of their lineage. Children are the connection between the ancestors and future generations. A barren woman is useless for her in-laws and may be abused. “They say that instead of giving birth to children, I just eat and drink in the house” says one woman who has not conceived and whose husband has taken a second wife who delivered two children. Not all barren women are abused, but the pressure on them is always there.

In the interviews, I heard many examples of how a man sent away his wife because she was unable to give him a child. Often the men were forced to do so by their families. The stories were either from a woman who was sent away, or from the second wife of a man who divorced his first barren wife. If the husband is ‘nice’ to the barren woman or the woman who cannot get enough (according to him) children, he may not send her away, but take a second wife, or have children outside the marriage.

I had tried for 15 years of marriage to get pregnant. Everybody was very sympathetic, including my husband and we kept on hoping. I went to all sorts of doctors and traditional healers in Nigeria and had also examinations and operations abroad. My husband had two daughters of another woman who were just brought to the house when they were about ten years old. I did not know anything about it till that time. (A woman of high socio-economic status who was so fortunate to finally conceive at age 44 and again at age 48).

It is generally accepted that men have affairs with other women or have more than one wife, although none of the women I interviewed liked it. Women who are (still) the only wife of their husband say they recognise that it may happen to them one day. They are not sure what they would do, whether they would leave the man, stay, but not sleep with him anymore, or just accept. All of them foresee trouble when it does happen. There is much jealousy between wives of one man, often kept alive by the man himself. The wives of one man can do terrible things to each other, and each other’s children. They will try to put curses and *juju* on the other to prevent her and her children from progressing in life.

It is not only barren women who risk losing their husbands by divorce, or to second wives. Any woman who is not producing any more children, because she does not want

any more, or because she cannot have more children, is at risk of her husband taking a second wife. The 'no children producing' woman is not attractive to the man, and having sex with her is even considered to be bad for his health. The semen would just stay inside the woman and will not be cleansed by monthly menstruation. This dirt may affect the man and cause *atpsi*, gonorrhoea.

Accusations of witchcraft

Barren women are under suspicion of being witches. Many secondary school students stated this in their self-administered questionnaire. Witches do not have children in this world, but in the spirit world. Witches are bad, they are a threat to other people's children who they want to use for their ceremonies. They may use other women's womb to carry their children and cause death and havoc, they always try to entice people to become part of their (bad) world. Witches can only be 'seen' by *babalawo* and other spiritualists.

How the fear of infertility influences decision making

The fear of the severe social consequences of infertility may cause a woman to take decisions which are otherwise contrary to traditions and which even may be detrimental to her health.

Ways of securing a child

Infertile women are always suspect, and may go far in securing a child for themselves. Informants told me that some women, suspecting their husbands of being infertile and not wanting to lose their husbands due to their "supposed" infertility, are advised by their family and doctor, to get impregnated by other men and pretend it was by their husbands. It was not possible to get this as first hand information, since a woman would not disclose this to anyone, because if her husband would find out, he would definitely divorce her. However, a medical doctor reiterated the story of a man with two wives who only had daughters and had his sperm tested. His sperm appeared to be infertile. Later both women, separately, admitted to the doctor that they had the children from another man. The doctor did not say anything to the husband about his infertile sperm.

There are stories that barren women snatch babies from other women, and babies are said to be sold from the hospital. A woman who is late in conceiving will show her pregnancy obviously, so as not to have people suspect her of having snatched the baby after delivery.

Adoption is not common among the Yoruba, though there are many orphans in the orphanages. One never knows where the child comes from and people fear that the child may turn out not to do things in the interest of the family. The only sort of adoption which is practised, is to adopt a child from a family member, but this is also not common.

Marriage

Traditionally, a woman had to be a virgin before her marriage. After the wedding night, the bed sheet stained with her blood, would be proof of her virginity. If she turned out not to be a virgin, it was shameful for her and her family. Nowadays, most women are not virgins when they marry. There is no data, specially on Yoruba available, but studies show that between one third to more than half of girls have sexual intercourse before they are 20 years old (Akinyemi et al. 1996: 11, 28) Not only do they have intercourse before they are married, but nowadays in Lagos, many women are pregnant, or have a baby, before they get married. In this way they prove that they are fertile and that they are worth having as a wife. Many women said that they would move in with their future husband only when they would be pregnant or have a child.

Use of contraceptives and abortion

Not to have been pregnant at all is worse than never having delivered a child. Therefore, women may decide not to use contraception, but rather get pregnant and submit themselves to the danger of aborting their pregnancies. In this manner they at least prove that they are fertile! Women talked openly about their abortions and some seemed almost proud to have had so many, as if to say they were very fertile. Furthermore, there is a lot of fear that oral and injectable contraceptives cause infertility, and this prevents women from using these devices. The women also feared the speculum examination before insertion of the intra-uterine device (IUD). They suspected that something inside could be tampered with that could cause infertility.

Conclusion

Fertility and infertility are central issues in Yoruba life. Infertility makes a woman's life useless, so the threat of infertility looms over her happiness, not only in terms of personal fulfillment, but also in terms of being a full and respected member of society. The threat of infertility causes women to take decisions that are against traditional rules, such as not having sexual intercourse and not having children before marriage. The fear of infertility could also explain why so many women abort unwanted pregnancies, and few women use contraception to prevent unwanted pregnancies. This is because the pregnancy per se may not be unwanted, because it shows the woman's fertility to the family and her husband. The family knows she is worth having in the lineage, and for the husband she is attractive and 'clean'. The part that is unwanted is the carrying of the pregnancy till the end, because having a baby may not be timely for economic reasons, or not be compatible with work, or schooling, or the woman's health. This hypothesis will be further explored in the following phases of the fieldwork.

Since infertility is regarded as a serious health and social problem among Yoruba, (as in some other African ethnic groups), and than in Western Europe and North American, infertility should be addressed as a public health problem. Infertility prevention

and treatment should be integrated in regular public health and reproductive health services in which orthodox physicians and traditional healers work together. The vicious circle of (fear of) infertility, non-use of contraceptives, incidence of sexually transmitted diseases and practise of unsafe abortion should be broken, so that the commonly heard prayer "*Olqrun a shi e ni inu*" will be answered.

Notes

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1. The first period of fieldwork was from November 1996 to June 1997, and the second started in February 1998 and is on-going.
2. Some figures: The Federal Ministry of Health, 1994, estimated the contraceptive prevalence rate for Nigeria at 11.3% of women of reproductive age. Renne (1996) cites figures on abortion in Nigeria of 200.000 to 500.000 annually and a death-from-abortion figure of 10.000 annually. Concerning maternal mortality ratio, the number of maternal deaths per 100.000 live births, Royston and Armstrong (1989) gave a figure for Nigeria of 1500, and Okafor 1994 reported between 800 and 1500 – based on hospital studies. Internationally, a maternal mortality rate of over 1000 is considered extremely high.
3. Many ceremonies are intended to try to keep suspected *abiku* children alive, including making *gbere*, incisions, on the cheeks, so that the spirit children in the other world will not recognise the child and will not call her to join them in the other world and leave the earthly parents.
4. Induced abortion is illegal in Nigeria, except when the life of the woman is in danger.
5. Informants gave different explanations for the fact that most *qlqm̩ w̩w̩w̩* are men: "Delivering babies is very heavy and tiring work and can be better done by men" (an *qlqm̩ w̩w̩w̩*); "When women who menstruate touch the medicines they will spoil" (an *qlqm̩ w̩w̩w̩*); "You need courage to face the evils that can cause problems during pregnancy and delivery and that can cause infertility, and men have more courage than women" (an *qlqm̩ w̩w̩w̩*) "It is just a way to keep the knowledge within the patrilineal family" (a female nurse) "Men just want the monopoly and say that menstruation spoils the medicines. I have been making medicines my whole life and they never got spoilt when I had my menses" (a female herbalist, *elewe qm̩*).
6. *Ifa* is the intermediary between Supreme Being (*Olodumare*) and other deities, on one side, and the people on earth, on the other. Through *Ifa*, people can know the actions of the deities and can try to influence the actions of deities for their own good. Only the *babalawo* can talk with and hear and understand *Ifa*.

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