

**Mothers without Breasts and Laps:
Exploration of Social Motherhood in Annangland**

By
Ekaette Raphael Udo
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Akwa Ibom State University, Obio Akpa Campus
ekaetteudo17@gmail.com, 07039485222

Abstract

The main objective of marriage for the Africans is the begetting of Children. Women who cannot bring forth children are shamed and ridiculed and their lives become unmitigated disaster in society. What then can women, who through no faults of their own find themselves without children to suckle their breasts and rest on their laps? Spurred on by this question the objective of this paper was to find answers to this important question. Making use of primary sources like participant observation, interviews, survey method and review of literature from libraries we discover the pains, the agony and public ridicule of mothers without biological children that there are indeed mothers without breasts. In spite of all these we also discover that many women cushion this effect by being mothers to other children and they are very much fulfilled. This paper recommends that Churches especially should counsel mothers without biological children that they can still get motherly satisfaction by being mothers and caring to all children.

Key Words: Mothers, Breasts, Laps, Biological Children, Social Motherhood

Introduction

Recently there was a child dedication in one of the Churches in a certain town in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria. It was an extraordinary event not only marked by deep emotion, but also enveloped in pomp and pageantry. For over ten years the couple had been without a child. The woman herself had gone through a lot: the indifference of her husband, the derision of her husband's people, the taunts of her enemies and the shame of childlessness, the scam of fake doctors and evangelists whose blinded visions brought only fractured self and despondency.

And when she had taken in and then safely delivered her first bouncing baby, there was certainly a cause for celebration. Joy, fulfilment, satisfaction and what looked like a perfect tranquillity were boldly written on the face of the once miserable, taunted and distraught woman. And those who taunted her stood aside in bewilderment, but it was real! On this day of dedication, her dress, her make-ups and everything about her gave the radiance of a joy that knew no bounds. She danced, she sang, she held the child close to her chest, threw the child up and caught it back in mid-air – a celebration freely downloaded from heaven!

All these were translated into a very short speech made by the woman at the dedication: “I thank God for making me a mother, for allowing my breasts to be suckled by a baby and for making my laps a resting place for a child. All these and more give me great joy today.”

Certainly, breasts and laps are metaphorical representations of fruitfulness, of fecundity and of motherhood and mother craft. And a childless woman in Annangland or any African society for that matter is often ridiculed thus: “Have you had any child to suckle your breasts, have you placed any child on your laps? One did not need to go far before one realised that what completes a woman is fruitfulness, motherhood – biological or social motherhood.

If the joy of motherhood could be taken literary, here was then a concrete and perfect example. The joy of an Annang woman knows no bounds when she realises that she is a mother who not only fulfils her destiny as mother and life-giver but also the destiny of her people, because on her depends the longevity and indeed the existence of the lineage (Mbiti 1970). The Annang people understands this onerous task of the women when they transform their girls, through the ritual of Mbobo initiation rites to responsible wives and mothers (Ekanem 1978, 2015).

The Joy of Motherhood

Motherhood is not only a joy to the individual mother, but it is also a source of joy and celebration for many in the community. A woman who is not able to appropriate motherhood through conception and delivery of a child is considered in the traditional society as a failure because of her inability to contribute to the longevity of the lineage. This is the view of Eka Akposi interviewed on 30th February 2021. She does not contribute to the hopes and aspirations of corporate society. She is shamed. That is the reason why, in most African societies, as social anthropologists would let us know, the arrival of a child is always greeted with singing, dancing and drinking and celebrations because it gives unbounded hope to society (Ekanem 2015).

Indeed the joy of motherhood radiates to so many in society because of a mother’s capacity for the other. The love that a mother has for her children is beyond description. This capacity of the mother for the other is profoundly manifested in the home where she is exceptionally a dispenser of sacrificing love. This is the way that a socio-cultural anthropologist John Bosco Ekanem describes this capacity for others which brings profound joys, hopes and fulfilment to motherhood and to others:

The ways the children cuddle in the grass root African homes demonstrate the profound influence that mothers have on their lives, upbringing and socialisation of the children. The African mother spends herself and decides to

be spent for her children. Carefully and devotedly, she carries the young one on her back even when going to the market, farm or Church. . . She shares the same bed with the child thus becoming one with it as expressed in shared bodily odour (Ekanem 2005: 34).

The Social, Cultural and Religious Significance of Breasts and Laps

Anthropologists of the body have spent time to delineate the human body as “a vehicle of representations and as a language that speaks and introduces the body to others in multi-layered metaphoric senses, opening up the orifices of the body, and communicating profoundly to outsiders (Devisch 1994, Ekanem 2002). Dancers of Annangland, for example, communicate through parts of their bodies while entertaining. In normal human relationship, those in love sometimes communicate without uttering words through bodily language and expression. That is the reason why the Annang say, *anjen ama agwo abied erim afuho* (the one who loves drops the eyes like the rain about to fall). Not only in love, but also in conflict and dispute situations, the human body communicates very deeply to opponents and to outsiders.

When it comes to motherhood and maternal matters the breasts and the laps stand out in a most significant way. Biologically, the Annang see the female breasts as extensions of the female genitalia. Physically and socially, the female breasts serve to make the woman every inch a woman, making her to stand out complete in self esteem. The breasts are also amplifiers of the beauty of a woman. Culturally, the breasts present the woman as the performer of a fundamental and primary duty of nurturing the child to grow up as a living and healthy member of the family, the primary cell of the kindred. A weaning mother decorates and rubs her breasts with an important ritual substance, *nnom* (white clay), that changes her status as an ordinary woman to a mother and she is seen and accepted in society as the one who nurtures and nurses new lives.

The laps of a mother are the abodes of family ancestors, pillars of supports and resting places for children. The mother’s laps are representations of *akwua*, small totemic sticks stuck to the walls of Annang houses to represent their family ancestors. Libations of food and drinks are daily poured on the *akwua*, which represent the ancestors, to eat as a sign of love commensality. The Annang believe that every child born into the family is a reincarnation of one of the family ancestors and therefore carries in its body vestiges of ancestral skin. This ancestral skin is shaded off only after breastfeeding.

The implication of this is that breastfeeding is not mere feeding of a new born child but a pouring of libation to an ancestor who has come back to the family but not fully reincarnated. That is the reason why the Annang say: *ntok ajen edenge ekpo*, meaning children are ghosts; in other words children have spiritual selves awaiting the acquisition of corporality.

To buttress the importance of breasts and laps to female fertility in most African societies, it is important to delineate their metaphorical relationship with fecundity and motherhood. To be a woman is to have breasts; not just any type of breasts but big breasts that can serve as reservoir for plenty and nourishing breast milk. For the traditional Annang of South Southern Nigeria very tiny breasts are outward signs of inner infertility of a woman. What this means is that the femininity of a woman is amplified and engendered by her big breasts (Ekanem 1978). This is one of the objectives of the Fattening Room and part of initiation into motherhood and preparation for marriage in Annangland (Ekanem 2002)..

Apart from this biological function, the breasts are of religious, social and disciplinary significance in Annangland. As chief Etim Udo Udo, interviewed on 23rd March 2021, opines,

Breast milk is divinely produced by the gods and made to flow into the breasts of nursing mothers. Thus because the milk comes from the gods and is reserved in the breasts, the breasts thereby becomes sacralised. These sacred breasts are

sucked by every child and during this infantile action knit the child together with the mother in a most profound way, with the intermingling of bodily fluids and odour.

Gabriel Akpan, interviewed on 3rd March 2021 avers that the pregnant woman is an immigrant in the land of the ancestors. The pregnancy of the woman, according to Gabriel Akpan is not necessarily through sexual intercourse, but most importantly through the contact of the woman with the ancestors who give her a child. This also makes the pregnant woman sacred. This testimony by Gabriel Akpan corroborates Ekanem's (2000, 2002) ethnographic report on Annangland. According to him, the woman has a special and significant place in the world spiritual. Every person born into the house is a reincarnation of one of the members of the house ancestors. The woman is the soil on which the seed of life is planted and a vehicle through which this person is transported from the ancestral world to the world of the living. Therefore the pregnant woman is an immigrant in the land of the ancestors.

As a result of this sacred dimension of the woman, the religious and cultic dimensions of the breasts come into play. The Annang woman can threaten to curse her children whose recalcitrant behaviours have gone beyond tolerance with her breasts, and in fact some do curse. The invariably potency of breasts as instrument of curse by African mothers lies in the fact that since the mouth of the child had in a way touched the nipple of her mother's breast there is a magical connection between the child and the mother because through her emptying of her breast milk into the mouth of her child she has given all she is and has as a sign of sacrificial love.

In a similar way, the mother's laps are sacred. Along with the breast they went to the spiritual world to get the child, as it were, from the ancestors. This also means that the thigh is sacred through this migration to the spiritual world. Socially, when a child is born in Annangland it is placed on the ground. Placing the child on the ground has a great religious signification. The child for the first time comes in contact with the Earth Deity – *Ikpaisong*. The child therefore gets into covenantal relationship with *Ikpaisong*, the giver of life and protection.

The child is then handed over to the mother and she places it on her laps. From then on, the mother's laps become almost a permanent receptacle of the child. The mother places the child on her laps to bathe her, cuddle her, rob her with oil and put her to sleep. On the laps the child cries and drenches her tears on them. On them the child defecates and urinates and on the laps the mother changes the child's napkins. The laps are therefore metaphors of mother craft, sacrificial love, dedication and total self-giving and indeed joyful suffering.

The laps of a woman therefore are symbols of fertility and inseparably associated with motherhood. They occupy space for socialisation and cultural activities. They are sacred, and like the breasts, are instruments of maternal sanction and discipline. The mother can curse her children who are stubborn, unrepentant and recalcitrant with her laps. All she needs to do is the place her two hands on her laps and the curse is set out. Therefore the curse becomes efficacious because of the sacredness of the laps and the part they played during the nurturing of the child by the mother.

Mothers without Breasts, without Laps and without Biological Children in Annang Traditional Society

Ekanem (2015) in his research findings among the Annang of south southern Nigeria presents an interesting ethnographic report on the marriage system of the Annang of Akwa Ibom State and the Andonis of Rivers State. Apart from the various variants of polygamy, Ekanem goes on to report on another type of marriage among the people, which he calls marriage between a woman and a woman. This type of marriage should not be mistaken to be

like the “marital” union of lesbians. In fact lesbianism is a taboo in these two ethnic nationalities.

One of the parties is often an influential, rich and elderly women some of who have passed childbearing age. They are women who spent most of their lives in their patrilineal homes and had never been married, while some others are those who had tried marriage but were barren and could not continue to live in their husband’s house and so on their own, they refund the marriage compensation paid on their heads and go back to their fathers house. One such woman was met and interviewed during the course of this research. Her name is Ngwoko Etokudoh, interviewed on 3rd April 2021, who narrated her experience of bareness after being married to her husband for over twenty years. She was hard working and had gotten enough money and wealth. Therefore she decided to refund the dowry paid on her head to her husband and went back to her parents. She then went and married a young girl and brought her to her parents’ house. She gave the girl to a man in the kindred to mate with her and the children born out of the union are named after the father of the woman who ‘married’ the girl. Immediately after delivery the young child became the social child of the woman and she becomes a social mother to those children and a mother without breasts and laps.

An important point that must be noted is that such women will no longer be ridiculed and discriminated against by society because she is without their biological children. They have now acquired self-esteem because they have appropriated motherhood as social mothers and mothers without breasts and laps. In fact in some parts of Annangland their status in society rise beyond the ordinary more than other women in society. This assertion has been corroborated by Ngwoko Etokudoh who had this to say at the interview: “After getting my own children from my “wife” men have respected me and accepted me into their midst in a number of cases.”

Mothers without Breasts and Laps and Biological Children in Contemporary Society

In our contemporary society, the joy and the satisfaction of motherhood are not limited to biological motherhood epitomised in the suckling of the mother’s breasts by a child and settling on her laps. There is what could be referred to as social motherhood. Saint (Pope) John Paul II of blessed memory has succinctly captured the idea of social and religious motherhood thus:

There are religious and social mothers all over the world who are promoting motherhood by being mothers to the motherless and by radiating joy to them. Thus there are many women who have not gotten the physical joy of biological motherhood and that of bringing up their biological children, but who are joyful and caring mothers to so many children in the world (John Pall II 2015).

Ekanem (2018) has given a cryptic report of the Civil war in Nigeria when the streets of Ikot Ekpene were littered with young children and babies abandoned by desperate mothers who ran for their lives and fled for safety from jet fighters and jet bombers that mercilessly bombarded the city. it was indeed a pitiable sight, thus the then Catholic Bishop of Ikot Ekpene, Dominic Ignatius Ekandem who later became Dominic Cardinal Ekandem, went into the streets of Ikot Ekpene and collected these abandoned, build a home for them and handed them over to the Sisters of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus. He was the one who laid a solid foundation for what I would call a Reservoir where orphans were kept while awaiting their social mothers.

Mother Theresa of Golgotha of blessed memory was one of such social and religious mother. Ust like late Dominic Cardinal Ekandem of Ikot Ekpene, through extraordinary love and care, made so many abandoned and street children in India to enjoy the warmth of

motherhood. Yes indeed, Mother Theresa was a mother without the pangs of biological childbirth, so were also his religious sisters whom she inspired and who are presently living out the spirit and vision of their Mother Founder by continuous provision of motherly warmth and care to otherwise distraught and abandoned children.

Analysis and Conclusion

We cannot but call to mind many mothers without biological experience of child delivery in our society who had become dedicated, caring and loving mothers to so many orphaned children, and who have provided hope where there was none. Sisters Gabriel and Stephen, all Sisters of the Congregation of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus readily come to mind. These Religious Sisters and social mothers became mothers to many children abandoned in the streets of Ikot Ekpene during the Nigerian Civil War and gathered into a home by Dominic Cardinal Ekandem as referred to above. With extraordinary care and unequalled commitment, these Religious Sisters spent themselves with exemplary sacrificial love to provide quality life to the orphaned children. Today, many of these children have not only been given hope, but they are occupying prominent places in the society that seemed to have rejected them as medical doctors, lawyers, nurses and engineers..

It is in the same vein that Her Excellency Ekaette Unoma Akpabio, the caring wife of the former Executive Governor of Akwa Ibom state was referred to as the Mother Theresa of our time. Apart from her biological children, Her Excellency, following the footsteps of Mother Theresa, had put smiles on the faces of so many distressed children and she not only derived joy from doing this, but she radiated this joy to others. And the present wife of the Governor of Akwa Ibom State, Martha Udom Emmanuel, is certainly following in her footstep.

During the course of this research, I was profoundly touched by what I witnessed in the Convent of the Holy Family Sisters of the Needy in Ikpe Ikot Nkon/Itu Mbon Uso Quasi Parish, Ini Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. I saw over fifteen orphaned children, nurtured and cared for by these dedicated religious Sisters. Some were playing, some were bottle-fed, and some were bathed. Indeed these Religious Sisters are extraordinary and really mothers without breasts and laps.

Religious Sisters who are managing many secondary schools as administrators over the past decades have also many children to nurture, care, love, and provide warmth of Mothers without Breasts through the dedicated service to children who continuously sleep like babies they really are, in class and who miss their parents and siblings with anguished eyes the very day they return. These Religious Sisters have spent themselves and decided to be spent in the formation and mothering of future biological mothers and mothers without breasts. Religious Sisters are indeed mothers without the pangs of child birth.

From the exposition we have seen the agony and public ridicule of mothers without biological children. We have also discovered that there are mothers without breasts. In spite of all these we also discover that many woman cushion the effect of childlessness by being mothers to other children and they are very much fulfilled. It is therefore recommended that Churches in particular and other related agencies should counsel mothers without biological children that they can still get motherly satisfaction by being mothers and caring to all children.

I often ask myself this question time and time again: What would the world be without a mother? Indeed it would be an orphaned world. Motherhood is certainly a blessing to society. It is the source of life and fecundity, the reservoir of care and dedication and the engine that spins the progress of life. Motherhood gives hope to a hopeless world. It is indeed an Unmistakable Hope!

References

- Ekanem, J. B. (1978) *Nkuho Ceremony: The Making of an Efik Bride*, unpublished B. D. Thesis, Bigard Memorial Seminary, Enugu
- Ekanem, J. B. (2000) *Clashing Cultures: Annang Not(with)standing Christianity – An Ethnography*, PeterLang Brussels and New York
- Ekanem, J. B. (2005) *Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World: Implications for the Church in Africa*, Saint Joseph Publications, Ikot Ekpene
- Ekanem, J. B. (2018) “Consolidating on the Legacies of Dominic Cardinal Ekanem,” in Ebong, T. S. et al. (eds.) *Cardinal Ekandem Lives on: Echoes from Ikot Ekpene Diocese*, The Communication Department, 2018, pp. 128-150
- Pope John Paul 11 (1995) *Collaboration of Man and Women in the Church and in the World*, Vatican City
- Mbiti, J. S. (1970) *Introduction to Africa Religions and Philosophy*, London

Interviews

S/N	Name	Age	Gender	Date of Interview
1	Eka Akposi	50 years	Female	30 th February 2021
2	Chief Etim Udo Udo	70 years	Male	
	Gabriel Akpan	65 years	Male	10 th March 2021
	Ngwoko Etokudoh	45 years	Female	3 rd April 2021