



Family Planning as a Stranger in Annang Traditional Culture: Barrier and Pathways to Acceptance

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Abstract

Family planning has become an important component of modern reproductive health policy across the world, yet its acceptance often varies depending on cultural beliefs and traditional social structures. Among the Annang people of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, traditional cultural values place strong emphasis on fertility, lineage continuity, and the social importance of children within marriage. As a result, practices associated with limiting childbirth have historically been viewed as foreign to the traditional worldview. This study examines the concept of family planning within the context of Annang traditional culture and explains why it is often perceived as incompatible with indigenous marital and family values. The study critically analyzes the institution of marriage in Annang society, with particular attention to the role of the conjugal family as the basic unit of social organization responsible for procreation, lineage preservation, and economic cooperation. Using anthropological and sociological perspectives, the study highlights how cultural expectations surrounding fertility, women's social status, ancestral beliefs, and the economic value of children contribute to resistance toward modern contraceptive practices. The paper further explores culturally sensitive family planning approaches that may align with Annang values, including child spacing, natural family planning methods, community-based reproductive



education, and the involvement of traditional and religious leaders. The study concludes that although family planning has historically appeared as a stranger to Annang traditional culture, culturally adaptive strategies that respect indigenous values can promote responsible parenthood while preserving the social significance of family and lineage within Annang society.

Introduction

Family planning refers to the deliberate decision and conscious effort of individuals and couples to determine the number, spacing, and timing of their children through appropriate reproductive health practices. According to the World Health Organization, family planning allows couples to achieve their desired family size and spacing of births through the use of contraceptive methods and reproductive health services (WHO, 2020, p. 3). However, the concept of controlling fertility through modern contraceptive methods is not universally accepted across cultures. Among the Annang people of Akwa Ibom State in Nigeria, traditional values historically emphasized fertility, lineage continuity, and communal expectations of reproduction. Marriage is socially expected to produce children, and a large family is traditionally considered a sign of prosperity and honour. Consequently, family planning—particularly methods that limit births—has often been perceived as inconsistent with traditional Annang cultural values.

This paper examines why family planning appears foreign to Annang traditional culture, explores the cultural meaning of marriage and the conjugal family within Annang society, and proposes culturally sensitive family planning approaches that can respect traditional values while promoting maternal and family wellbeing.

Marriage in Annang Traditional Society

Marriage in Annang society is not merely a union between two individuals but a covenant between families and lineages. Traditional marriage ceremonies involve negotiations, bride wealth exchanges, and communal celebrations that strengthen kinship bonds and social solidarity. Marriage therefore serves several important functions in Annang culture; such as continuation of lineage, creation of alliances between families, preservation of social order, fulfillment of cultural expectations of adulthood

John Mbiti explains that in many African societies, marriage is “a duty demanded by society” and childbearing is one of its primary purposes (Mbiti, 1969, p. 133). In Annang traditional religious and belief systems, fertility is also linked to ancestral approval. Rituals performed during marriage often invoke ancestral spirits to ensure fertility and marital stability. These ancestral spirits are believed to influence the reproductive success of the couple (Solomon, Yaro&Ekong, 2015, p. 54). <https://lifescienceglobal.com> This worldview underscores the interconnectedness of the community, where the passage of rites and rituals serves as a vital link between the living and the dead. Within this framework, children are often seen as a blessing from the ancestors, and large families are valued for their contribution to the community's spiritual, economic, and social wellbeing. As a result, the concept of family planning as a means of controlling family size or spacing births is viewed as foreign to the traditional Annang cultural values, which places a strong emphasis on the continuation of lineage, ancestral reverence, and community cohesion. This belief system further strengthens the cultural expectation that marriage should lead to childbirth. (Umoh 2016: 78-79),



Oath-taking is not merely a conflict-resolution mechanism, but a deeply spiritual and social instrument that restores trust, promotes intimacy, and ensures lasting reconciliation among disputants. By invoking supernatural sanction, the parties submit themselves to a higher moral authority, thereby guaranteeing sincerity, accountability, and mutual confidence. This process strengthens interpersonal bonds and reinforces communal harmony, as reconciliation achieved through oath-taking is considered sacred, binding, and irreversible. Within this same cultural logic, fertility and procreation are not treated as private or optional matters but as collective responsibilities embedded in social and spiritual expectations. Just as oath-taking binds individuals into truthful and harmonious relationships under the watch of the supernatural, marriage in Annang culture is equally sanctified and oriented toward the continuity of lineage. The promotion of intimacy through oath-taking finds a parallel in marital relations, where intimacy is culturally expected to result in procreation rather than deliberate limitation of births.

Consequently, the idea of family planning, especially in its modern sense of consciously limiting or spacing children appears alien to the traditional Annang worldview. This is because any practice perceived to interfere with fertility could be interpreted as undermining the very foundation of trust, continuity, and communal stability that institutions like oath-taking seek to uphold. Just as oath-taking restores broken relationships and ensures social equilibrium, childbearing sustains lineage continuity and secures the future of the community.

Furthermore, the peaceful coexistence and harmonious relationships achieved through oath-taking reflect a broader cultural emphasis on collective well-being over individual preference. In this context, large family size is often seen as a source of strength, social security, and prestige, rather than a burden to be managed. Therefore, the absence or minimal presence of family planning practices in traditional Annang society can be understood as a logical extension of a value system that prioritizes trust, continuity, and communal harmony.

Finally, oath-taking and the resistance to family planning are interconnected expressions of Annang traditional values. Both underscore a worldview in which social cohesion, spiritual accountability, and lineage preservation take precedence over individual autonomy, thereby making family planning appear as a cultural stranger rather than an accepted practice.

Family Planning in the Context of Annang Traditional Culture

Among the Annang people, fertility occupies a central position in social life and marital expectations. Marriage is culturally understood as an institution primarily oriented toward procreation and continuation of the lineage. Anthropological studies of African societies emphasize that children are the fundamental justification for marriage and a key source of social security for parents (Uchendu, 1965, p. 58). The Annang family structure is traditionally organized around a patrilineal system, where descent and inheritance are traced through the male lineage. The household typically consists of the husband as head, his wife or wives, and their children, forming a lineage unit connected to a wider kinship network (Essien, 2010, p. 87). www.101lasttribes.com. Because of this lineage-based system, children are considered essential for maintaining the continuity of the family and ensuring the survival of the clan. Consequently, infertility or deliberate limitation of childbirth may be viewed as socially undesirable.

Anthropological evidence also shows that fertility is culturally reinforced through traditional institutions such as the “Mbobo” or fattening room, where young girls are prepared for marriage and motherhood. This cultural practice was intended to groom women to become good wives and



mothers while also increasing their chances of fertility and healthy childbirth (Brink, 1989, p. 113). www.en.wikipedia.org. Thus, reproductive capacity is deeply embedded in the Annang conception of womanhood and marriage.

The Conjugal Family in Annang Culture

The conjugal family, consisting of husband, wife, and children, forms the foundation of Annang social organization. However, unlike the Western nuclear family model, the Annang conjugal family exists within an extended kinship structure that includes grandparents, uncles, aunts, and lineage members. In traditional Annang society, children perform several vital roles within the conjugal family: Continuation of the family lineage, economic contribution to the household, support for parents in old age, and strengthening of kinship ties. Because of these social functions, large families were historically encouraged. The presence of many children symbolized prosperity and ensured that the family would remain socially and economically stable. Consequently, family planning practices that limit childbirth appears incompatible with these traditional expectations.

Why Family Planning Appears Strange to Annang Culture

Several cultural factors explain why family planning has historically been perceived as a strange concept within Annang traditional society, these include;

Cultural Emphasis on Fertility

Fertility occupies a central and highly valued position in Annang traditional culture. Within the Annang worldview, marriage is not merely a social union between a man and a woman but a sacred institution primarily established for procreation, lineage continuity, and the expansion of kinship networks. Consequently, fertility is regarded as both a personal blessing and a collective social expectation. The ability of a woman to conceive and bear children affirms the legitimacy of marriage, enhances family prestige, and ensures the survival of the lineage. As such, the cultural emphasis on fertility significantly shapes marital relations, gender roles, and community expectations in Annang society (Ekanem, 2002).

In Annang traditional society, marriage is closely tied to procreation. The union between husband and wife is socially validated and spiritually fulfilled when children are born. A marriage without children is often viewed as incomplete or unfortunate. This perception arises from the belief that children guarantee the continuation of the family line and preserve ancestral heritage. The fundamental objective of marriage is the production of children who will perpetuate the lineage and maintain the family's social identity. Children are therefore considered the visible proof of a successful marriage and a vital link between the living, the dead, and the unborn (Ukpe, 2003, p. 64). Within this framework, infertility may generate social anxiety and sometimes stigma for couples, particularly women, because fertility is culturally associated with female marital responsibility.

Similarly, in many communities in Akwa Ibom State, including the Annang, the expectation of childbirth is deeply embedded in marital customs and kinship structures. The extended family closely monitors reproductive outcomes because children increase the strength, influence, and continuity of the lineage. In Annang culture, children are perceived as a form of wealth and social security. Large families historically provided labor for farming, fishing, and other economic activities, which were the backbone of the traditional rural economy. Consequently, fertility contributed directly to household productivity and survival, (Ekong 2001, p. 112).



The traditional agrarian structure of Annang society encouraged large families because children contributed to agricultural labor and supported the household economy. As a result, parents considered many children an advantage rather than a burden. Beyond economic value, children also served as a source of social security for parents in old age. Since traditional Annang society lacked formal welfare systems, parents relied on their children for support in later life. Children are regarded as the caregivers of aging parents and the inheritors of family responsibilities; therefore, having many children increased the likelihood of security and care in old age (Akpan, 2008, p. 93).

In Annang society, fertility is strongly linked to women's identity and social status. If a woman who bears children, she gains recognition, respect and acceptance within her husband's family and the wider community. Motherhood is therefore considered one of the most important achievements for married women. Childbirth enhances a woman's status in the marital home and secures her position within the lineage of her husband. A fertile woman earns admiration and authority, whereas childlessness may expose a woman to emotional pressure or social scrutiny. In many cases, women themselves internalize these expectations and aspire to bear many children in order to fulfill cultural ideals of womanhood. Fertility reinforces gender roles in Annang society, where women are culturally valued as mothers and custodians of family continuity (Ekong, 2001, p. 118). The emphasis on fertility also derives from the Annang belief in lineage continuity. Traditional cosmology emphasizes the connection between ancestors, the living generation, and future descendants. Children therefore serve as the bridge that links these three realms of existence. Procreation ensures the survival of the family lineage and prevents the extinction of ancestral heritage. Without children, the lineage risks disappearing: which is considered both socially and spiritually undesirable.

Moreover, male children have traditionally been valued for their role in preserving the patrilineal family name and inheritance system. However, daughters are also valued because they expand kinship networks through marriage alliances. Because fertility is so highly valued, infertility is often perceived as a serious challenge within Annang society. Couples without children may seek traditional remedies, spiritual interventions, or medical solutions to overcome reproductive difficulties. Childlessness in traditional Annang communities often attracts communal concern and sometimes pressure from extended family members who expect the couple to produce heirs. In some cases, cultural mechanisms such as polygyny historically provided alternative solutions for ensuring procreation when fertility problems occurred, (Essien 1995, p. 52)

Therefore, Annang cultural emphasis on fertility reflects the deep connection between reproduction, marriage, kinship, and social identity. Fertility ensures lineage continuity, strengthens the extended family system, provides economic and social security, and affirms women's status within the community. As a result, childbearing remains a central expectation in Annang marriages. Understanding this cultural emphasis is essential for interpreting attitudes toward reproductive behavior, family size, and modern family planning practices within Annang society.

- **Social Status of Women**

The social status of women in Annang traditional society is shaped by a complex interaction of cultural expectations, kinship structures, economic participation, and reproductive roles. Within the Annang worldview, women occupy an important and respected position in both the family and



the wider community. Their status is primarily defined by their roles as wives, mothers, economic contributors, and custodians of family continuity. Although the society is traditionally patriarchal, women exercise significant influence within the household and in certain community institutions. Therefore, the social status of women in Annang culture cannot be understood simply in terms of subordination; rather, it reflects a system in which women possess recognized responsibilities, authority, and social value (Awak & Mboho, 2024, p. 217). The Annang social system is largely organized around the extended family and patrilineal lineage. In this structure, men are usually regarded as the heads of households, while women play crucial supportive and managerial roles within the family. A married woman becomes an integral part of her husband's lineage and contributes to the stability and continuity of the family through childbearing, domestic management, and economic participation. Women in rural societies of Akwa Ibom State, including the Annang, are central to family organization and social reproduction. Their responsibilities extend beyond domestic duties to include economic activities such as farming, trading, and food processing, which significantly contribute to household welfare (Ekong, 2001, p. 123).

Furthermore, Ukpe (2003, p. 78) supported that although authority in the lineage structure is formally vested in men, women exercise influence through their roles as mothers and wives. Their participation in family decision-making, especially regarding children and household welfare, often gives them considerable informal power within the household. Motherhood is the most significant determinant of a woman's social status in Annang culture. A woman who bears children, especially several children, gains respect and recognition from both her husband's family and the wider community. Childbearing demonstrates a woman's ability to fulfill one of the central expectations of marriage and contributes to the continuation of the lineage.

Essien (1995, p. 61) opined that fertility enhances the prestige of women in Annang society because children symbolize the prosperity and continuity of the family. A mother of many children is often admired and accorded respect in social gatherings and family meetings. Similarly, motherhood strengthens a woman's position within the marital home. Once a woman has children, particularly male children, her relationship with her husband's family becomes more secure and her voice may carry greater weight in family matters.

Annang women also gain social recognition through their economic roles. Traditionally, women engage in farming, petty trading, food production, and local commerce. These activities provide financial support to the household and contribute to community development. Women in Akwa Ibom rural communities are often heavily involved in agricultural production, particularly in the cultivation of food crops such as cassava, vegetables, and maize. Their economic contributions are essential for sustaining family livelihoods. Market participation not only enhances women's economic power but also creates opportunities for social interaction and community influence. In addition, women frequently dominate local markets and trading networks. Through these activities, they gain financial independence and social visibility.

Although leadership positions in traditional political structures are generally held by men, Annang women participate in several social and cultural institutions that allow them to exercise collective influence. Women's groups, age-grade associations, and cooperative societies serve as important platforms for social participation and community development. Women's associations in Annang communities play important roles in organizing social ceremonies, resolving minor disputes, and supporting community welfare activities. Through these groups, women can collectively express



their concerns and contribute to community governance, (Etuk, 2002, p. 89). Additionally, elderly women and mothers of large families often enjoy special respect in community gatherings. Their life experience and maternal achievements earn them recognition as advisers in family and social matters.

Marriage is a crucial institution that defines the social identity of women in Annang culture. A woman who is married and has children is generally regarded as socially fulfilled. Marriage provides a woman with access to social networks, economic resources, and cultural recognition. Marriage integrates a woman into her husband's kinship network and establishes her as a legitimate member of the community. Through marriage, she participates in social rituals, family inheritance systems, and lineage continuity. However, women are also expected to conform to certain cultural norms such as respect for their husbands, commitment to family welfare, and adherence to moral standards. These expectations shape the way women navigate their social roles within Annang society.

Age and experience significantly influence the social status of women in Annang culture. Elderly women, particularly those who have successfully raised families, are highly respected in the community. They often serve as custodians of cultural knowledge and moral values, (Ukpe 2003, P. 82). Older women play important roles in advising younger couples, guiding family ceremonies, and preserving traditional customs. Their authority is derived not from formal political power but from their life achievements and social experience.

The social status of women in Annang traditional society is multifaceted and deeply embedded in cultural values and family structures. Women gain recognition and influence primarily through motherhood, marriage, economic contributions, and participation in community institutions. Although the society is traditionally patriarchal, women exercise important forms of social and economic power that sustain family and community life. Understanding the status of women within Annang culture is essential for analyzing broader issues such as marriage patterns, fertility expectations, and attitudes toward family planning in the society.

- **Economic Importance of Children**

In Annang traditional society, children are not only valued for emotional and cultural reasons but also for their significant economic contributions to the family and the wider community. The traditional Annang economy has historically been agrarian, relying heavily on subsistence farming, fishing, and local trade. Within this economic framework, children represent an important source of labor, economic security, and family continuity. As a result, the economic value attached to children has historically influenced fertility expectations and family size among the Annang people.

One of the most important economic roles of children in Annang culture is their contribution to family labor. In traditional rural communities, agricultural production forms the backbone of economic life. Families cultivate crops such as cassava, yam, cocoyam, maize, and vegetables, which require substantial manual labor. Children assist their parents in farm work, thereby contributing directly to household productivity. Rural families in Akwa Ibom State depend largely on family labour or agricultural activities, and children form a significant part of this labor force. From an early age, children are gradually introduced to farming activities such as planting, weeding, harvesting, and food processing. Through these activities, children not only support family production but also learn skills necessary for their future economic survival.



In Annang communities, children participate actively in household tasks such as fetching water, gathering firewood, assisting in food preparation, and helping with farm produce. These responsibilities reduce the workload of adults and contribute to the overall functioning of the household economy, (Essien1995, p. 73). Beyond labour contributions, children serve as an important form of economic stability for families. In traditional Annang society, having many children increases the likelihood that some will succeed economically and support the family. Parents therefore perceive children as long-term investments in the future welfare of the household.

Children are regarded as economic assets who contribute to family survival and development. As they grow older, they provide assistance to their parents through financial support, labour, and participation in family enterprises (Akpan, 2008, p. 110). This expectation reinforces the cultural preference for larger families. Furthermore, in traditional Annang communities where modern social welfare systems are limited or absent, children often function as the primary source of support for parents in old age. The economic importance of children therefore extends beyond childhood labor to include long-term family security.

In Annang culture, children are expected to care for their parents during old age. This expectation forms a crucial part of the intergenerational support system that characterizes many African societies. Since traditional communities did not rely on government pensions or formal retirement benefits, parents depended on their children for sustenance and protection in later life. The birth of children ensures that parents will have assistance and care in old age. Adult children are culturally obligated to provide food, shelter, and financial support to their aging parents. Consequently, parents often view having many children as a strategy to guarantee security and comfort during their later year, (Ukpe 2003, P. 94).

In addition, children who migrate to urban areas for employment frequently maintain strong economic ties with their families by sending money or goods back home. These remittances contribute significantly to household welfare and community development. Children also contribute to the economic prestige and social capital of their families. A large number of children often signify wealth, strength, and influence within the community. Families with many children have greater access to labor resources, which can lead to higher agricultural productivity and economic advantage.

Essien (1995, p. 75) Argues that the presence of many children enhances the social standing of families because it reflects prosperity and reproductive success. Such families often command respect within the community and may possess greater influence in social and cultural affairs. Moreover, through marriage alliances, children—especially daughters—can expand the economic and social networks of the family. Marriage relationships create ties between families and communities, which may result in mutual support, trade connections, and cooperative labour.

Children in Annang society are also important for the preservation and transmission of economic skills and cultural knowledge. Parents train their children in various traditional occupations such as farming, fishing, craft production, and trading. This process ensures the continuity of economic practices across generations (Ukpe, 2003, p. 94). Ekong (2001, P. 134) contributed that traditional education in rural societies occurs largely through observation, participation, and apprenticeship within the family. Children learn practical skills by assisting their parents and elders in daily



economic activities. This informal system of education prepares them for adult responsibilities and sustains the economic stability of the community.

The economic roles of children in Annang society are often shaped by gender expectations. Boys typically assist their fathers in farming, fishing, and other physically demanding tasks, while girls often help their mothers with domestic duties, food processing, and trading activities. This gender-based division of labor prepares children for their future adult roles within the community. Boys are trained to become household heads and economic providers, while girls learn the domestic and economic skills required for managing families and participating in market activities (Akpan, 2008, p. 113). Despite these distinctions, both male and female children contribute significantly to family welfare and economic productivity.

The economic importance of children in Annang traditional society is deeply rooted in the agrarian nature of the economy and the extended family system. Children provide essential labour for agricultural production, contribute to household stability, and serve as sources of support for parents in old age. They also enhance family prestige, strengthen social networks, and ensure the transmission of economic knowledge across generations. These economic roles help explain the strong cultural preference for large families in Annang society and influence attitudes toward fertility and family planning.

- **Religious and Ancestral Beliefs**

Religious and ancestral beliefs occupy a central place in the worldview and social organization of the Annang people of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Traditional Annang religion is deeply intertwined with everyday life, influencing social behavior, moral values, family structures, and cultural practices. The Annang believe in a spiritual universe where the Supreme Being, divinities, ancestors, and various spiritual forces interact with human beings. These beliefs shape the community's understanding of life, fertility, morality, and the relationship between the living and the dead. At the apex of Annang traditional religious belief is the recognition of a Supreme Being who is regarded as the creator and sustainer of the universe. Among the Annang, this Supreme Being is often referred to as Abasi, who is believed to possess ultimate power and authority over all creation. Although Abasi is acknowledged as the supreme ruler of the cosmos, direct worship is often mediated through lesser divinities and ancestral spirits (Abasiattai 1987, pp.87-92).

Belief in a Supreme Being is a fundamental feature of traditional religion in Akwa Ibom societies, including the Annang. Abasi is regarded as omnipotent and omniscient, responsible for the creation of human beings and the regulation of moral order within the universe. However, because the Supreme Being is perceived as distant and transcendent, individuals often communicate with him indirectly through spiritual intermediaries, (Etuk 2002, P. 52). The Annang people acknowledge the supremacy of Abasi in all aspects of life, including fertility, prosperity, health, and protection. Major life events such as birth, marriage, and death are believed to occur under the authority of the Supreme Being.

In addition to the Supreme Being, Annang traditional religion recognizes the existence of various divinities and spiritual forces that influence human affairs. These spiritual beings are believed to act as intermediaries between humans and the Supreme Being. They are often associated with natural elements such as rivers, forests, and sacred lands. The traditional African societies commonly attribute spiritual significance to elements of nature, and the Annang people are no



exception. Sacred groves, rivers, and shrines often serve as places where sacrifices and rituals are performed to appease spiritual forces believed to control aspects of human life such as fertility, health, and agricultural productivity. Through rituals and offerings, members of the community seek protection, blessings, and guidance from these spiritual entities. Religious specialists such as priests and diviners often mediate communication between humans and the spiritual world. For instance, the river spirit may be honoured because rivers provide water for farming and fishing, while the forest spirit is appeased before entering sacred groves for rituals. Shrines located under old trees or beside streams are places where sacrifices like chickens, palm wine, and food are offered. The goal is to secure fertility for women, good health for families, and productivity for farms.

One of the most important components of Annang traditional religion is the veneration of ancestors. Ancestors are believed to be the spirits of deceased family members who lived honorable lives and continue to maintain a spiritual relationship with the living. They are regarded as guardians of family traditions and protectors of their descendants. The Annang believe that death does not terminate existence but rather marks a transition to the spiritual realm where ancestors continue to influence the affairs of the living. Ancestors are therefore respected and honored through rituals, prayers, and offering (Ukpe (2003, P. 101). The relationship between the living and the ancestors is reciprocal. While ancestors provide protection, guidance, and blessings to their descendants, the living are expected to remember them through sacrifices, memorial ceremonies, and adherence to family traditions. Failure to respect ancestral customs may be believed to result in misfortune or spiritual punishment.

Ancestral spirits are regarded as moral guardians who ensure that members of the family observe ethical behavior and cultural norms. They are believed to reward good conduct and punish wrongdoing within the lineage. Religious and ancestral beliefs also influence attitudes toward fertility and childbearing in Annang society. Children are often viewed as blessings from God and the ancestors, and successful reproduction is believed to reflect divine favour. As a result, fertility rituals and prayers are sometimes performed to seek spiritual assistance in cases of infertility.

Family planning is viewed as a “stranger” to Annang tradition partly because it disrupts gender roles and fertility expectations that are tied to witchcraft accusations. Olusakin (2013, p. 176) states that many men do not believe women should lead them in any way, because to many, women are witches. In Annang culture, a woman’s primary value has been tied to childbearing and submission. When a woman adopts modern family planning to delay or limit childbirth, men may interpret it as disobedience or a sign of hidden power. Because “women are witches” in this worldview, any attempt by a woman to control fertility can be read as witchcraft - i.e., she is “killing children” or rejecting her God-given role.

This tension increases in polygamous homes. Olusakin (2022, p. 177) notes that, in a polygamous home, the first or the second woman as the case may be, is always a witch especially if one has children and the other is barren. If one wife uses family planning and remains barren while the other has many children, the barren/child-spacing wife is quickly labeled a witch who is “blocking” the lineage. Even contraceptive use itself can be twisted to mean she is using mystical power to prevent conception.

The suspicion also extends to in-laws. Olusakin (2022, p. 177) adds that, aged mother-in-law is also a suspect by her daughter-in-law. A daughter-in-law practicing family planning may be



accused by the mother-in-law of rejecting the family's desire for grandchildren. Conversely, the mother-in-law may be accused by the daughter-in-law of causing infertility through witchcraft because she pressures her to stop using contraceptives. Thus, family planning becomes culturally "strange" because it triggers the same mystical causality logic: any deviation from expected fertility must have a human or spiritual agent behind it.

Traditional beliefs often link fertility to the spiritual approval of ancestors. Couples who experience difficulties in conceiving may consult diviners or spiritual leaders to determine whether ancestral displeasure or spiritual imbalance is responsible for the problem (Akpan, 2008, p. 118). These beliefs reinforce the cultural importance of childbearing because children ensure the continuation of the lineage and the preservation of ancestral memory. Without descendants, the lineage risks disappearing, and ancestral traditions may be lost. The mystical causality explains why couples who have difficulties in conceiving often become targets of witchcraft accusations in many African societies.

Olusakin (2022, p. 122), Explained that witchcraft accusations are common in societies where misfortune or evil is believed to have human cause and where the concept of mystical causality holds sway. Infertility is treated as a misfortune or evil because it threatens lineage, marriage stability, and social status. The concept of mystical causality holds that occurrences in the physical realm are orchestrated by spiritual forces. Thus, when medical explanations fail or take time, the Annang worldview, which believes in a symbiotic relationship between the physical and the spiritual, leads the community to search for a causal agent. The childless couple, especially the woman, may then be accused of witchcraft, of offending ancestral spirits, or of being spiritually "blocked" by an envious person. This belief finds expression in Africa due to its religious worldview that every misfortune has a causal agent be it human or spiritual forces (Olusakin, 2022, p. 122). As a result, instead of seeking only medical help, couples are often sent to diviners, priests, or prayer houses to break spiritual barriers before conception can occur.

Religious ceremonies and rituals play an important role in strengthening social cohesion among the Annang people. Festivals, sacrifices, and communal prayers bring members of the community together and reinforce shared cultural values. Traditional religious practices in Akwalbom communities function not only as spiritual activities but also as mechanisms for maintaining social harmony and cultural continuity (Etuk, 2002, p. 63).

Through these rituals, individuals reaffirm their commitment to community norms and ancestral traditions. Annang religious and ancestral beliefs also serve as a foundation for moral regulation within the society. Cultural norms regarding honesty, respect for elders, marital fidelity, and communal responsibility are often reinforced by the belief that ancestors and spiritual forces observe human behavior.

Religious and ancestral beliefs are integral to the cultural identity and social organization of the Annang people. The belief in the Supreme Being (Abasi), the presence of spiritual forces, and the veneration of ancestors, shape the community understanding of life, morality, fertility, and social responsibility. These beliefs also reinforce the importance of family continuity, respect for tradition, and communal solidarity. By influencing attitudes toward marriage, childbearing, and moral conduct; religious and ancestral beliefs continue to play a vital role in sustaining Annang cultural values and social cohesion.



- **Misconceptions about Contraceptives**

In Annang traditional society, attitudes toward contraceptives and modern family planning methods are often influenced by deeply rooted cultural beliefs, religious values, and traditional perceptions about fertility and reproduction. While modern healthcare systems promote contraceptive as a means of improving maternal health and regulating family size, many Annang communities historically viewed contraceptives with suspicion and skepticism. These misconceptions arise from cultural expectations surrounding fertility, limited access to reproductive health education, and the influence of traditional beliefs about procreation and family continuity.

One of the major factors contributing to misconceptions about contraceptives among the Annang people is the strong cultural emphasis on fertility and continuous childbearing. In Annang culture, marriage is traditionally associated with procreation and the continuation of the family lineage. As a result, practices that intentionally limit childbirth may be perceived as contradicting cultural expectations. Fertility occupies a central position in Annang marriage because children serve as symbols of family continuity, social prestige, and ancestral survival. Consequently, any attempt to deliberately prevent pregnancy may be interpreted as rejecting the cultural purpose of marriage. This perception often contributes to the belief that contraceptive use is unnecessary or culturally inappropriate.

Similarly, traditional Annang society values large families because children strengthen kinship networks and provide economic and social security. Therefore, the concept of limiting childbirth through contraceptives may appear unfamiliar or even undesirable within this cultural context (Essien, 1995, p. 91). Another common misconception surrounding contraceptives in Annang communities relates to fears about potential health complications. Some women believe that contraceptive methods can cause infertility, serious illness, or premature death. These fears are often reinforced by rumors, misinformation, and lack of adequate reproductive health education (Ankoma, Anyanti, & Oladosu, 2011, pp. 99-104).

Misconceptions about modern medical practices are common in many rural communities where access to accurate health information is limited. As a result, contraceptives may be viewed with suspicion, especially when individuals rely on traditional explanations for health outcomes (Ekong, 2001, p. 152). In some cases, women fear that contraceptive use might permanently damage their reproductive organs or prevent them from having children in the future. Because motherhood is highly valued in Annang culture, the possibility of infertility becomes a significant concern for many women.

Another misconception about contraceptives in Annang society is the belief that they encourage sexual immorality or promiscuity. Some community members believe that contraceptives may promote irresponsible sexual behavior by allowing individuals to engage in sexual relations without the perceived consequence of pregnancy (Ankoma et al, 2011, pp. 95-105).

Traditional moral frameworks in many African societies associate sexual relations primarily with marriage and procreation. Practices that separate sexuality from reproduction may therefore be viewed as morally questionable (Etuk, 2002, p. 95).

This perception sometimes leads to the assumption that contraceptive use undermines traditional values and encourages immoral conduct. Consequently, some families discourage unmarried individuals from accessing contraceptives because they believe it may promote premarital sexual



activity. Religious and ancestral beliefs also influence misconceptions about contraceptives in Annang society. Since children are often regarded as blessings from God and the ancestors, some individuals believe that preventing pregnancy interferes with divine or spiritual intentions. In communities where procreation is associated with spiritual approval, contraceptive use may be interpreted as resisting the will of God or the ancestors. Couples may therefore hesitate to adopt family planning methods because they fear spiritual consequences (Akpan, 2008, p. 121). These beliefs reinforce the perception that fertility should be left to divine control rather than human intervention.

Misconceptions about contraceptives are also influenced by gender dynamics within Annang society. Traditionally, men often play a significant role in decisions related to family size and reproductive behavior. If men hold negative perceptions about contraceptives, women may find it difficult to adopt family planning methods even when they desire them. Patriarchal family structures in many Nigerian communities give men considerable authority over reproductive decisions. Consequently, women's access to contraceptives may depend largely on their husbands' approval (Ekong, 2001, p. 156). In addition, some women may fear that the use of contraceptives without their husbands' consent could lead to marital conflict or accusations of infidelity.

A lack of comprehensive reproductive health education also contributes to misconceptions about contraceptives among the Annang people. In many rural communities, information about modern family planning methods may be limited or poorly communicated. Traditional knowledge systems in Annang society often focus more on cultural practices and less on modern medical concepts. As a result, individuals may rely on hearsay or community rumors when forming opinions about contraceptives (Essien, 1995, p. 94).

Misconceptions about contraceptives among the Annang people are deeply connected to cultural values, religious beliefs, gender dynamics, and limited access to reproductive health education. The strong cultural emphasis on fertility, fears about health risks, concerns about morality, and spiritual interpretations of childbirth all contribute to skepticism toward modern family planning methods.

Culturally Sensitive Family Planning Methods for Annang Society

Although family planning has traditionally been viewed as strange to Annang culture, certain approaches can be introduced in ways that respect cultural values and social expectations, these include.

1. Emphasis on Child Spacing Rather Than Birth Limitation

In many African societies, including Annang society, children are traditionally regarded as a blessing, a source of social prestige, and an important means of ensuring lineage continuity. Consequently, family planning programmes that focus primarily on limiting the number of children may encounter resistance because they appear to conflict with deeply held cultural values regarding fertility and family growth. A more culturally acceptable approach is to emphasise child spacing rather than birth limitation. Child spacing refers to the deliberate interval between successive pregnancies in order to promote the health and well-being of both mother and child.

The concept of child spacing is not entirely foreign to traditional societies. In many African communities, prolonged breastfeeding, postpartum abstinence, and other customary practices were historically used to create natural intervals between births. Modern family planning initiatives can therefore be presented as an extension of these traditional practices rather than as a rejection of



cultural values. By focusing on the health benefits of adequate birth intervals, such as reducing maternal mortality, preventing child malnutrition, and improving child survival rates, health educators can encourage greater acceptance of family planning among community members. This approach allows families to maintain their cultural preference for children while promoting responsible reproductive health practices.

2. Promotion of Natural Family Planning

Natural family planning methods may be more acceptable within culturally conservative communities because they do not involve artificial contraceptive devices or medications. These methods include fertility awareness, the calendar method, cervical mucus observation, and periodic abstinence during fertile periods. Since natural family planning relies on understanding the woman's reproductive cycle rather than altering biological processes through external interventions, many individuals view it as being more consistent with traditional and religious values.

The promotion of natural family planning can help address fears and misconceptions associated with modern contraceptive methods. Some community members may believe that artificial contraceptives cause infertility, birth defects, or other health complications. By introducing natural methods as an initial option, health practitioners can build trust and encourage greater participation in reproductive health programmes. Furthermore, natural family planning encourages communication and cooperation between spouses, thereby strengthening family relationships and shared responsibility in reproductive decision-making. While natural methods may require proper education and commitment to achieve effectiveness, they provide an important culturally sensitive alternative for couples who may be reluctant to use modern contraceptive methods.

3. Cultural Education Through Community Leaders

Community leaders occupy a position of authority and influence within traditional societies. Traditional rulers, village elders, clan heads, religious leaders, and respected opinion leaders often play a significant role in shaping public attitudes and behaviours. As custodians of cultural values and social norms, these leaders are well positioned to facilitate the acceptance of family planning and reproductive health programmes.

Involving community leaders in reproductive health education can help bridge the gap between public health objectives and local cultural beliefs. When respected leaders endorse family planning initiatives, community members are more likely to view such programmes as legitimate and beneficial rather than as foreign or culturally inappropriate interventions. These leaders can help clarify misconceptions, address fears, and communicate health messages in culturally meaningful ways. Furthermore, their participation ensures that family planning education is adapted to local customs, values, and communication patterns. Through community meetings, religious gatherings, traditional ceremonies, and public forums, leaders can promote informed decision-making and encourage positive attitudes towards reproductive health services.

4. Integration with Maternal and Child Health Programmes

One effective strategy for improving the acceptance of family planning is to integrate it into broader maternal and child health programmes. Rather than presenting family planning solely as a means of controlling population growth or reducing fertility, it should be framed as an essential component of maternal and child health care. Such an approach emphasises the direct benefits of family planning for women, children, and families.



Adequate birth spacing has been shown to reduce the risks associated with closely spaced pregnancies, including maternal exhaustion, low birth weight, premature birth, and infant mortality. Family planning enables mothers to recover physically and emotionally between pregnancies, thereby improving overall maternal health outcomes. In addition, children born after appropriate intervals are more likely to receive adequate nutrition, parental attention, and healthcare. Integrating family planning services into antenatal care, postnatal care, immunisation clinics, and child welfare programmes creates opportunities for healthcare providers to educate families about reproductive health within a familiar and trusted healthcare setting. This integrated approach reinforces the message that family planning is fundamentally a health-promoting intervention rather than a mechanism for limiting family size.

5. Involvement of Men in Family Planning Education

In many traditional societies, men play a dominant role in household decision-making, including decisions relating to marriage, fertility, and family welfare. Consequently, family planning programmes that focus exclusively on women may face significant challenges if male partners are not adequately informed or involved. The active participation of men in reproductive health education is therefore essential for improving the acceptance and effectiveness of family planning initiatives.

Educating men about the health, economic, and social benefits of family planning can reduce resistance and encourage supportive attitudes towards contraceptive use. Men who understand the importance of birth spacing are more likely to support their spouses in accessing reproductive health services and making informed family planning decisions. Male involvement also promotes shared responsibility for reproductive health, thereby reducing the burden placed solely on women. Community-based educational programmes, men's discussion groups, religious gatherings, and workplace seminars can serve as effective platforms for engaging men in family planning education. By fostering open communication between spouses and encouraging joint decision-making, male involvement contributes to stronger family relationships and improved reproductive health outcomes.

6. Use of Indigenous Cultural Institutions

Indigenous cultural institutions continue to play a significant role in preserving social values, promoting community cohesion, and facilitating social education within traditional societies. Women's associations, age-grade organisations, village assemblies, family councils, and traditional social groups provide established structures through which information can be disseminated effectively. These institutions enjoy community trust and can therefore serve as valuable channels for family planning education.

Utilising indigenous cultural institutions allows reproductive health messages to be communicated in ways that are culturally familiar and socially acceptable. Women's organisations, for example, can provide safe environments where women discuss issues related to fertility, pregnancy, childbirth, and child care. Traditional gatherings can also create opportunities for health professionals and community leaders to engage directly with families and address misconceptions about contraceptive methods. Because these institutions are deeply rooted in local culture, they can help ensure that family planning information is presented in a manner that respects traditional beliefs while promoting responsible parenthood and family well-being. Their involvement



enhances community ownership of reproductive health programmes and contributes to the long-term sustainability of family planning interventions.

Conclusion

Family planning has historically appeared as a stranger to Annang traditional culture because fertility is deeply embedded in the cultural meaning of marriage, lineage continuity, and social identity. Within the Annang worldview, the conjugal family is expected to produce children who will sustain the lineage and contribute to the economic and social wellbeing of the household. However, cultural traditions are not static. With appropriate cultural sensitivity, family planning can be adapted to respect Annang values while addressing contemporary challenges such as maternal health, economic pressures, and population growth.

By emphasizing child spacing, involving community leaders, and integrating reproductive health education into existing cultural institutions, family planning can gradually become compatible with the cultural framework of Annang society.

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