

## ETHICAL APPRAISAL OF ABORTION FROM THE IGBO-NIGERIAN PERSPECTIVE

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### **Abstract**

*Abortion is a highly debated human act in ethical studies; it has attracted the attention of both the pro-life and pro-choice scholars. While pro-lifers' major take on abortion is anchored on the sanctity and inviolability of human life (taking into consideration that foetuses also enjoy right to life), the pro-choicers on the other hand, based their views on the freedom and right of a woman over her body (this is to say that, even if the foetus can be said to be human, its rights are subsumed under that of the mother's because, it cannot survive on its own). Arguments from the pro-choice scholars are based on expediency; that is, given to some circumstances surrounding conception and pregnancy itself, the potential mother reserves the right to keep or terminate a conceptus. In view of this, this study, first of all, considers (in their merits) some of the reasons given so far for or against abortion. Considering the high rate of maternal death in Nigeria resulting from abortion, this study, using the philosophical method of hermeneutics, interprets these arguments on abortion vis-à-vis their Igbo-Nigerian implications. This was done by considering the legality of abortion in Nigeria and its ethical implication and the pristine Igbo thoughts around the value of life in the light of abortion. At the end, it concludes that, induced abortion is alien to the pristine Igbo tradition and due to the high rate of the act of abortion amongst the Nigerian youths today, the act of abortion should remain criminalized. Going forward, Nigerian parents should reduce the act of female chastisement and be more accommodating. If abortion must be carried out (maybe as a result of the ill-health of the mother), the study recommends that it be done in accordance to the provision of the principle of double effects as propounded by Thomas Aquinas.*

**Keywords:** Abortion, Igbo, Nigerian, Ethics, Thomas Aquinas

### **Introduction**

Abortion is another practice that raises some moral questions for bioethicists; before going into these moral concerns, it is very important to briefly consider the meaning and kinds of abortion. Abortion is defined in the encyclopaedia Britannica as the expulsion of a [foetus](#) from the [uterus](#) before it has reached the stage of viability.<sup>1</sup> Abortion is the removal of pregnancy tissue, products of conception or the foetus and placenta (afterbirth) from the uterus. In general, the terms foetus and placenta are used after eight weeks of pregnancy. Pregnancy tissue and products of conception refer to tissue produced by the union of an egg and sperm before eight weeks.<sup>2</sup> It is usually referred to as the termination of pregnancy. So many factors are responsible for the termination of pregnancy and these factors can be fully discussed side by side the kinds of abortion that are.

Abortion can be classified into non-induced and induced. Abortion is non-induced when it is spontaneous, that is, when it was not intended. This is also referred to as miscarriage. Spontaneous abortions, or miscarriages, occur for many reasons, including disease, trauma, genetic defect, or biochemical incompatibility of mother and foetus etc. this kind of abortion is not willed but happens as a result of circumstances beyond. This kind of abortion may be placed under acts of man instead of human act because, it is not willed but happens.

Induced abortion on the other hand is a wilful termination of a conceptus. According to Higgins, an abortion is induced when it is the result of intentional interference with the foetus.<sup>3</sup> An induced abortion is carried out for personal, medical, economic, social and traditional reasons. Induced abortions may be performed for reasons that fall into four general categories: to preserve the life or physical or mental well-being of the mother; to prevent the completion of a [pregnancy](#) that has resulted from rape or incest; to prevent the [birth](#) of a child with serious deformity, [mental deficiency](#), or genetic abnormality; or to prevent a birth for social or economic reasons (such as the extreme youth of the pregnant female or the sorely strained resources of the family unit). It is also pertinent to state that induced abortion has become a convenient means for promiscuous and reckless living amongst the youths today. The alarming rate with which induced abortion is carried out today makes it look like a norm. Induced abortion is normally classified into two; therapeutic and non-therapeutic abortions. An abortion is said to be therapeutic when there are medical indications why it should be procured and is non therapeutic when such is not evident.<sup>4</sup>

From the explanation given, induced abortion falls within the ambit of human act as against the act of man's categorization of non-induced abortion and thus, qualifies it as a subject for ethical discourse.

### **Ethical arguments on Abortion**

Arguments and counter-arguments on abortion are mostly categorized into the pro-life and pro-choice. While pro-lifers are those that argue against induced abortion, the pro-choicers on the other hand are in favour of abortion. These arguments will now be considered in their merits.

The starting point of the arguments of the pro-lifers is the belief that foetuses are persons and should be treated so. If it is wrong to kill a person, then, it is also wrong to kill a foetus because foetus is a person. On the question of when life begins, most pro-lifers argued that life begins at conception. This goes against the earlier Aristotle's biology of the 4<sup>th</sup> century which claimed that foetus is devoid of soul within some weeks after conception and thus not a person in those weeks of soullessness; it takes 40days after conception for the male matter to be ensouled while that of the female takes 90days, thus, abortion is justifiable within those weeks. But such biology has been discredited in the light of many scientific proofs that showed that life begins immediately the egg is fertilized by the spermatozoa.

Capturing the stance of the catholic church that of pro-life, Fisher quoted the Vatican Charter on the Rights of the Family: "Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception. Abortion is the direct violation of the fundamental right to life of the human being".<sup>5</sup> This is also aptly captured in book of Jerimiah; "before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you."<sup>6</sup> Foetuses are seen in this tradition as the youngest members of the society and the human family. One of the justifications of the induced abortion is its therapeutic use such as to prevent the [birth](#) of a child with serious deformity, [mental deficiency](#), or genetic abnormality. This was refuted by Pope Francis who held that abortion was always unacceptable, regardless of whether a foetus is fatally ill or has pathological disorders.<sup>7</sup> He went on to argue that it is illegitimate to take out human life in order to solve a problem the same way it is not permissible to contract a hitman to solve a problem. A decision to abort based on medical information about an ill foetus amounted to "inhuman eugenics," he said, and denied families the chance to welcome the weakest of children.

What the Pope was trying to establish here is that deformed children also have the right to life and an attempt to terminate such life amount to a 'quick fix' just like someone who hires a hitman to solve a problem. It will be a great disservice to the specie of 'deformed children' if doctors resolve to aborting them as against seeing them to existence. This will also lead to the cutting off of the

joy that those who are already born deformed could have experienced by having their like around. The same can be said of an abortion that was carried out in order to save a woman that has cancerous womb. In this case, a pro-lifer would argue that the child that was to be aborted in order to save the woman also has right to live and aborting him/her amounts to using the child as a means to saving the mother which is deontologically not permissible.

Arguing against the above views from the pro-lifers, the pro-choicers anchored most of their arguments on the claim that foetus is not yet a person, therefore, cannot make any claim of right. They claimed that a foetus lacks viability, genetic structure, physical resemblance, presence of a soul and self-awareness which are the basic criteria for personhood. This makes its right (if at all it has) to be subsumed under that of the potential mother. They went further to assert that even if foetus has any right (given that it is a person), such is still dependent on the right of the mother; it does not prevent the mother from carrying out abortion when she deems it fit. It is her body and she is the one to decide how it will be used.

On the issue of the personhood of a foetus, pro-lifers, like Karl Barth share the view that the foetus has its own autonomy, saying that it has its own brain, nervous system and even its own blood circulation. That it can have its own illness without the mother being sick and it may be healthy when the mother is critically ill. It may also die as the mother still live or live and could be rescued through surgical operation after the mother's death. It is a human being in its own right.<sup>8</sup> This makes abortion of a foetus a morally wrong act. This view can be refuted by the pro-choicers; it is arguable to say that the wellbeing of the mother determines that of a child in the womb. The food the mother eats for instance, determines the nutritional wellbeing of the baby in the womb, if the mother mistakenly takes something that is harmful, it will also affect the health of the baby in the womb etc. Suffice it to say that any claim of right for the foetus is not independent of that of the mother. The question is: does the right of the mother over the foetus/baby make abortion a justifiable act?

To answer this question, it is important to define right to mean that to which one has a just claim. Does the right of the mother justify her getting rid of the foetus in her womb? The justification in the definition of right connotes responsibility and duty. The potential mother's right over the baby means that she owes it as a duty to the baby to ensure his/her wellbeing and should be responsible in doing so. Most times, 'feminist' understanding of the right of a mother to her body is the ability to do whatever thing she wants with her body. But how justifiable is this claim of right is also ethically paramount. From the above explanation of right, it comes necessary to state that right is not a licence to reckless living because every right must be justifiable within its context. Right is not immunity from moral scrutiny and responsibility. This line of argument is best applicable to induced abortion that is done at will without any therapeutic reasons other than getting rid of foetuses for flimsy reasons (this kind of abortion is more prevalent today among the youths and even some married couples). What about induced abortion that is carried out for therapeutic reasons such as; rape, health of the mother, deformity and malformation etc? How justifiable is it?

#### **Aborting a baby conceived from rape**

Abortion on the grounds of rape is a delicate one that is somewhat janus-faced. This is because, even though it appears appealing and convincing to abort a baby that was conceived forcibly without consent but the baby to be aborted is innocent though conceived as a result of rape. The mother would be saved the trauma, regrets, agony and other emotional challenges that could have accompanied carrying the baby to full term talk less of seeing the baby growing. Watching the baby grow will amount to bringing back the ugly memory of rape. The persisting question is: was it the fault of the baby? The baby remains innocent and not guilty of the said rape. Is rape

enough reason to abort a baby? Is it justifiable to destroy the embryo that resulted from rape? Here, we are no longer arguing on whether the foetus or embryo is a person or not; given that it is a person, is it justifiable to terminate its life?

To answer the above questions, a recourse will be made to some of the principles of bioethics namely: Autonomy and Beneficence. Since we are operating on the premise that the foetus is a person, we are faced with the autonomy of two persons; the raped potential mother and the foetus/baby. The abortion of the baby conceived from rape diminishes the autonomy of the baby because he/she has the freedom and right to life. On the other hand, it also brings harm than good to the baby thereby going contrary to the principle of beneficence. On the side of the potential mother, not aborting the baby constitutes harm to herself and there will be a continuous reminder of the harm she went through in the course of the rape. Her autonomy is exerted if the abortion is allowed.

Resorting to ethical theories, Utilitarian ethical theory would consider the magnitude of happiness that the act of aborting such baby would bring as against its pain. The potential mother will avoid the agony, emotional torture and regrets that could have been her lot if the baby stays. It will also save the cost of raising a baby that she never wanted. The baby will be saved from the stigma that he/she could have faced as an unwanted child that was conceived from rape. Counting on these reasons, act utilitarian ethical theory would subscribe to aborting the baby because of the pains that keeping him/her would bring. On the other hand, Kantian deontological ethical theory would advise against aborting the baby. This is because, using the universal law formulation of Kant's categorical imperative which states that 'one should always act in such way that his/her action will become a universal maxim', the potential mother that suffered rape should be able to decide if she would wish to be aborted if placed in the position of the innocent baby. Kant's 'humanity in itself' formulation also admonishes one to always act in such a way that he will never treat humanity as a means but always as an end in itself, thus; will condemn the act of aborting a baby conceived from rape on the grounds that it will tantamount to using the innocent baby as a means instead of as an end.

In the light of the above, it becomes necessary to weigh the reasons given in support of aborting the baby conceived from rape with the reasons given against it. This is important in that it will help establish a synthesis between the conflicting ethical considerations given so far. Going by the reasons given in support of aborting in this case, it will not be out of place to label them as superficial. This is because, all of them are gearing towards the material, psychological and emotional wellbeing of the mother. The question to be considered here is: are these reasons commensurate with life of the innocent baby? Most of the moral injunctions are all in service to life; that is, they are all gearing towards the preservation of life. Therefore, whenever they are in conflict with the preservation of life, the preservation of life must hold sway. The only value that surpasses life is its preservation which in turn, is also in service of life. Suffice it to say that the life of the innocent baby is worth more than whatever reasons given for its termination.

It is important to state that the act of rape can never be justified on any reason and that the accompanying agony the woman suffers is very glaring but aborting a baby conceived from rape may even add to this agony instead of being a cure. This is because, in addition to the pain inflicted on a woman by the act of rape, the act of terminating the life of the innocent child will be more excruciating. It could be argued that the pains (psychological, emotional and physical) sustained as a result of rape may on the long run affect the life of the woman; therefore, getting rid of the pregnancy will help erase the bad memory of rape and also aids the healing process of the woman. This point is not cogent enough to justify the act of termination of the life of an innocent

life. The reason is that it is not the making of the innocent child that the woman should go through any agony and so does not pose any form of threat to the life or health of the woman. It could have made a difference if we are discussing the life of a rapist. Assuming that someone who suffered rape had the opportunity of taking the life of her rapist, in this context, it can be argued that the act of killing the rapist is a justifiable one given to the reason that it poses threat to her own life. But in the case of the innocent baby, abortion is not justifiably therapeutic in the real sense of it. Although it is not easy to carry a baby conceived from rape to full term, but it is even noble to give birth to such a baby and give him/her up for adoption than to terminate the life.

### **Abortion on the grounds of deformity and malformation**

This is the one of the most occurring form of abortion in the world that somewhat appeals for justification. Discovering the deformed nature of a baby in the womb (using ultrasound or other means), many parents usually opt for the termination of the life of such baby. Instances of such deformities are: Tay-Sachs disease, phenylketonuria (PKU), spina bifida and other life-threatening conditions. The reasons for the abortion of such babies by some parents are that: some of these conditions are incurable, that is to say that such babies will have to live with such deformities with the impending stigma and agony, parents are to be relieved from the cost (both time and material) of having to care for such babies all through their existence and that it is better to end their lives in the womb than allowing them to live in order to die from such diseases.

On the moral justification of the abortion of a deformed baby in the womb, most of the arguments advanced on the case of rape are applicable here because, the two cases share one thing in common which is the innocence of the baby in the womb. Deformed babies have right to life and should not be deprived of such. Many of them are given birth to and it will be a great disservice to their community if their likes are aborted. Many adults become deformed as they surge on in life but could such warrant the termination of their lives? Even though that some of us who suffered deformities that are painful to live with do wish to die instead of continuing to live with the agony, do we now justify the abortion of babies who share similar pain if born with such deformities? (more of these arguments will be considered subsequently under euthanasia). The only difference here is that we are not in the position to know what the innocent baby in the womb may wish for himself/herself.

Many diseases that did not have cure hundred years ago do have cure today due to the progressive nature of science. Therefore, terminating the life of a deformed baby on the ground that it is incurable is a defeatist attitude because, there may be a cure tomorrow. Another argument is the religious one that presents God as the creator that has reasons for creating us the way we are and aborting on the ground of deformity is going contrary to the intention of He that creates. This is without prejudice to deformities that happened as a result of the recklessness of the mother such as drunkenness and drug abuse. Some deformed babies grow to become more responsible and productive than some 'well-borns' and terminating their lives will prevent them from this opportunity. The whole arguments boil down to the fact that man is not omniscient in determining what becomes of deformed or malformed babies; therefore, aborting them may be a great injustice to them as humans.

### **Is abortion justifiable if the mother's life is at risk?**

There are situations where pregnant women's lives are at risk as a result of ill health (such as cancerous womb etc) and continuing with the pregnancy increases their chances of not surviving. Aborting the baby in the womb will facilitate a better treatment for the potential mother and allowing the baby to live will slow the treatment of the mother and also may lead to the death of the two. Therefore, the lesser evil is to abort the baby in the womb. When recovered

the full health, the mom still has opportunities of begetting more babies.

The above case of abortion is a dicey one and should be ethically handled with care. This is because, the arguments advanced so far on the innocence of the baby in the womb are still applicable but this time, we are talking about two lives (baby and the potential mom) risking death. Ontologically and cosmologically speaking, no life is more important notwithstanding any form of advantage attached to it; lives are fundamentally equal in its original sense but in the case at hand, we are referring to two lives that are facing probable extinction; therefore, the option of lesser evil may be resorted to but must not be willed for its sake. This falls within the ambit of the principle of double effects where there is a good intention that may result to bad effects. One cannot desist from carrying out the good intention but must do so by carefully not willing the bad effect.

In this case, the good intention is to cure the sick pregnant woman but this may result to terminating the life of the innocent baby in the womb. Therefore, the doctor should do everything possible to cure this woman and should also try to avoid killing the baby in the womb but if such happens in the bid of saving the woman, then, it may be ethically justifiable. A religious extremist may argue that since such may lead to killing of the baby in womb, why not avoid the treatment and live with the hope and faith that the mom will be fine? A question the extremist should grapple with is: what if we end up losing the two lives while hoping? Since there is a justifiable trial available to save the two lives, what stops us from giving it a shot? As long as the doctor's effort is based on the principle of double effect, such is ethically justifiable. The first known example of double-effect reasoning is [Thomas Aquinas'](#) treatment of homicidal self-defense, in his work [Summa Theologica](#).<sup>9</sup>

In order to morally carry out such actions that have double effects, the following conditions must be fulfilled:

1. The *nature-of-the-act condition*. The action must be either morally good or indifferent.
2. The *means-end condition*. The bad effect must not be the means by which one achieves the good effect.
3. The *right-intention condition*. The intention must be the achieving of only the good effect, with the bad effect being only an unintended side effect.
4. The *proportionality condition*. The bad effect must not be disproportionate to the good effect.<sup>10</sup>

According to Obi (2019):

Once any of the above conditions is not adhered to, the said action is morally wrong. The moral agent must not intentionally will the evil effect but it can only be seen as indirectly voluntary. If he can bring about the good effect without the evil effect, he should do so but if the evil effect becomes a necessary evil without which the good effect will not be achieved, then, the above conditions must be met. The intended good effect must outweigh the bad effect tolerated otherwise, it becomes counterproductive. This principle/doctrine of double effect helps to exonerate especially the medical practitioners from being blamed for permitting evil effects that are unavoidable towards achieving some good ends. The principle comes handy in the instances of Abortion and euthanasia.<sup>11</sup>

### **Moral questions on the Legalization of abortion in Nigeria**

Domestic legislation on abortion varies from one country to another in Africa; while some have total ban on abortion, others opted for partial ban thereby allowing abortion in some

circumstances such as, rape, incest, to save the life of the mother etc. In Nigeria, though there is no clear-cut legislation on abortion in the constitution of the country but this was captured in the criminal and penal codes. Under the Nigerian Criminal code,

**Section 228:** In this section of the criminal code, it states that any person who, with intent to procure the miscarriage of a woman, whether she is or is not with child, unlawfully administers to her or causes her to take any poison or other noxious thing, or uses any other means whatever is guilty of a felony and is liable to imprisonment of fourteen years.<sup>12</sup>

**Section 229:** In this section of the criminal code any woman who with intent to procure her own miscarriage, whether she is or is not with a child, unlawfully administers to herself any poison or other noxious thing or uses force of any kind or uses any other means, whatever, or permits any such thing or means to be administered or used on her is guilty of a felony and is liable to imprisonment for seven years.<sup>13</sup>

**Section 230:** Any person, who unlawfully supplies to or procures for any person anything whatever, knowing that it is intended to be unlawfully used to procure the miscarriage of a woman, whether she is or is not with a child, is guilty of a felony and is liable to imprisonment for three years.<sup>14</sup>

**Section 297:** In this section of the criminal code a person is not criminally responsible for performing in good faith and with reasonable care and skill a surgical operation upon any person for his benefit, or upon an unborn child for the preservation of the mother's life, if the performance of the operation is reasonable having regard to the patient's state at the time and all the circumstances of the case.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, the Penal Code holds,

**Section 232:** Whoever voluntarily causes a woman with child to miscarry shall, if such miscarriage were not caused in good faith for the purpose of saving the life of the woman, be punished with imprisonment for a term, which may extend to fourteen years or with fine or with both.<sup>17</sup>

**Section 233:** Whoever with intent to cause miscarriage of a woman whether with child or not does any act which causes the death of such woman, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may be extend to fourteen years and shall also be liable to a fine, and if the act is done without the consent of the woman, with imprisonment for life or for any less term and shall also be liable to fine.<sup>18</sup>

**Section 234:** Whoever uses force to any woman and thereby unintentionally causes her to miscarry shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may be extend to three years or with fine or both and if the offender knows that the woman was with child, he shall be punished with imprisonment for a term, which may be extend to five years or with fine or both.<sup>19</sup>

Looking at the above extracts from both the criminal and penal codes, it becomes clear that abortion is not condoned in Nigeria except when the life of the mother is at risk. Many critics have attributed the high rate of maternal death in Nigeria to the ban on abortion. This is because, many women die in the hands of quacks due to fear of going to hospital for abortion. They would also argue that in spite of the criminalization of abortion in Nigeria; there is a conservative

estimate of 610,000 abortions being performed every year in Nigeria.<sup>20</sup> Some even keep the pregnancy they never wanted to keep owing to the ban on abortion. Therefore, it is argued that it is better to allow abortion since its ban did not put to an end to its practice rather it endangers the lives of many who fearfully fell into the hands of quacks.

In line with the utilitarian ethical theory, allowing abortion in Nigeria will bring more happiness than pain to many; the high rate of maternal mortality will be reduced, the psychological effects and the stigma that go with the keeping of unwanted pregnancies will be curbed etc. The question here is; at whose expense? The innocent babies in the womb will have to bear the brunt. It will amount to using them (innocent babies) as means only and this violates the 'humanity in itself' formulation of Kant's Categorical Imperative.

Ban on a particular action does not necessarily denote its stoppage (though such can be envisaged); therefore, the argument that the ban on abortion in Nigeria has failed to stop the very act of abortion is not logically sound. For example, the ban on murder has not made people to stop committing murder but has simply condemned the act of murder and criminalizes it by attaching punishment. The argument can even be that the ban on abortion has made many who would have committed abortion to refrain from so doing in fear of punishment and the possible death from the likely complications if done by a quack.

As stated earlier, the sanctity of the life of an innocent baby in the womb makes the act of abortion morally not permissible except when the life of the mother is at risk, then, abortion may be indirectly permitted following the principle of double-effects rules. This is because, life as the highest value can only be tampered with when another life poses as a risk to it. This is why killing in self-defence is morally and legally allowed. Aside this, any other reason given as a defence for the termination of life cannot be in *pari passu* with life and therefore, not morally defensible. Suffice it to say that the ban on abortion in Nigeria is morally plausible since it keyed into the above argument by allowing abortion only in situations where the life of a mother is in danger. It is also pertinent to state that the government should device a means of fishing out these quacks and even qualified medical practitioners who endanger the lives of women when carrying out illegal abortion; this will help reduce the high rate of maternal death resulting from abortion in Nigeria.

### **The meaning of life in the traditional Igbo and implication for abortion**

In the traditional Igbo worldview, life is valued, treasured and preserved. Life happens to be at centre of Igbo's placement of values while other aspects of life are all at its service. Sequel to this, Igbo do everything within their powers to protect, nurture and even prolong life. Underscoring the values of life, Panthaleon Iroegbu argued that “value for life is ultimately founded on its sanctity and quality as a precious gift to be protected, nurtured and made to flourish for the good of both society and the possessor of life itself.”<sup>21</sup> Supporting this view, Uzodimma Nwala narrated: “While almost all societies have respect for life, Africans have a deep reverential deference for life, especially human life. Its beginning is elaborately celebrated in pregnancy, birth, naming and initiation ceremonies. Its growth and continuity is feasted in adulthood, and adolescence rites, family rites and communal festivities. Its end is buoyantly celebrated in death rites, departure rituals and funeral festivities.”<sup>22</sup>

The kind of names Igbo people bear go a long to confirm how highly placed life is to them; names for the Igbo people are not just tags but means of revealing sentiments, aspirations, hopes, fortunes, misfortunes and values. They (names) are accurate records of the people's beliefs, moral concepts and way of life, wishes and aspirations. Few instances of the Igbo names that



capture the Igbo value for life are:

*Ndubuisi*: Life is primary and first. Hence, life seen as the first value that must be preserved and protected.

*Nnorom*: It is a shorter form of *Nnorom ele uwa ka onye nwuru anwu mma* —to be alive and watch the world is better than being dead. This shows that life is worth living and is appreciated under all circumstances. Nothing could reduce the value of life.

*Osondu*: It is also a shorter form of *Qsondu agwu ike*, that is to say, no one ever gets tired running to save life. This shows that nothing can be considered more demanding in an attempt to save or protect life. All has to be endured in order to ensure the safety of life.

*Ndu ka aku* – life is greater than wealth.

*Mma-ndu* literally means the beauty of life, so human beings are the beauty of life. Man, as *Mma-ndu (mmadu)* is made up of life (*Ndu*) intellect (*uche*) and body (*ahu*). It is the sole function of life to hold body and intellect together for others cannot function without it. Keeping to this togetherness, man is said to be a human being. These three aspects, in addition, make man a rational being. As a result of their rationality, human beings act for their end by the use of their intellect, adding meaning and value to existence. Consequently, the right to life is a natural, inalienable and fundamental right in Igbo society. And the desecration of life is a direct assault on “*Ala(land)*.” For the Igbo, the basic ethical value is to promote life and to eliminate obstacles that will hinder life and individual aspirations ...<sup>23</sup>

Explaining the importance of continuity and sacredness of life among the Igbo, Ezenwa succinctly captures it:

childlessness is considered a threat to life in the Igbo setting as it is seen as a curse striking the very root of the traditional value of life. It is bad omen for an Igbo person to leave no issues behind, who will help to increase the *Ndu* or vital force of the family, especially through male issues. Due to the importance and sanctity attached to human life, any action that promotes it is *ihe oma* – a good act; on the contrary, any action that militates against life is *ihe ojoo*, a bad omen, *aru* or *nso ala* - abomination.<sup>24</sup>

In the same vein, Placid Tempels noted that “in African societies, life force is a central value. Whatever increases it is good and whatever decreases it is bad. Wrong is anything that destroys or harms one’s life-force or the life force of others.”<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, life is intrinsically valuable and it is everyone's duty to support and nourish one's life as well as that of others. This “sacredness” attached to life is extended even to the life of the unborn; hence, abortion is extremely intolerable in Igbo society.<sup>26</sup>

From the perspective of the Igbo, blood represents life. Hence, the act of murder is referred to as “spilling of blood.”<sup>27</sup> The Igbo regard killing as an abomination because life is considered sacred and should not be taken away with impunity. Thus, a justifiable punishment for the act of killing is paying with one's life too or banishment. For the Igbo, taking the life of another denies the offender the right to live as well. The sacredness attached to human life has a lot to do with the Igbo understanding that life comes from God (*Chukwu-okike*).

## Conclusion

Judging by the above explanations, it is clear that in Igbo context, induced abortion has no place. In Igbo context, abortion is called '*Ite ime*' or '*Ishi ime*'—removing of pregnancy.<sup>28</sup> The act of induced abortion is alien to the traditional Igbo people because of their understanding of the

importance of life and their reactions to barrenness which they considered a curse. Fertility on the other hand is cherished and every Igbo woman looked towards getting pregnant.

Abortion properly so called, was very uncommon in the traditional Igbo society before the advent of Christianity or the colonial period. What was common was miscarriage. Many early anthropological works on the Igbos were very silent about the theme of abortion, unlike other themes such as; suicide, murder, rituals, sexual crimes and so forth. This silence can only be interpreted to mean and justifiably too, that abortion properly so called was not common and that it was foreign to Igbo culture.<sup>29</sup>

The Igbo placement of life as the summum bonum makes abortion an unthinkable act. No matter how a pregnancy is conceived there were always ways of remedying the situation which included the appeasing of the gods of the land (*ala*) other than terminating the life of the unborn child. Wilful abortion was categorized together with other abominable acts such as incest, murder, suicide by hanging, patricide etc by the Igbo as desecration of the land (*imeruala*) which according to Anuolam,

requires an expiatory— (purificatory) sacrifice to cleanse the polluted land, appease the earth spirit, the ancestors, in order to ward off their wrath and finally get reconciled with the community. There is the strong belief that if such an abomination is not atoned for, be it ever secretly committed, the penalty is sure to descend on the culprit's head or on his relations and descendants.<sup>30</sup>

Another area of the Igbo traditional practice to be considered is that of 'daughter's chastity', the chastity of a female child is what every Igbo family takes pride in. It is the ideal that every female child remains purely a virgin till the age of marriage. No family celebrates a daughter who conceived out of marriage, unwanted pregnancy is a condemnable act unworthy of any Igbo daughter. According to Unuigbo, “undoubtedly, on this account, maidens are tempted to conceal illegitimate pregnancy. Thus, this could lead to abortion practices which might end with sudden death.”<sup>31</sup> Most cases of abortion in Igbo land are as a result of the fear of punishment arising from the lack of adherence to the 'daughter's chastity'. This very act, for sure, helps in inculcating the sense of moral living in them but it also objectifies the female child as a programmed being that ought to be devoid of mistakes; what if out of human frailty, she gets impregnated outside marriage? Is she to be neglected and thrown away?

Thinking of what will become of her if she should disclose her pregnancy, many of them prefer terminating the pregnancy to remain a pretentious virgin before their parents and most of them die in the process of such an abortion because they must have engaged a quack or done by themselves. Therefore, parents should be more accommodating and understanding towards their children, this, will go a long to abating high death cases arising from abortion in this part of the world.

finally, this study has shown that induced abortion is morally condemnable but given to the situation where the life of a mother is at risk, abortion may become a necessary evil provided that the dictates of the principle of double effects are adhered to.

## Endnotes

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