

# Commercialism and Commodification of Illicity: A Political Economy of Baby Buying/Selling in South East of Nigeria

Okoli, Al Chukwuma

Department of Political Science,  
Federal University Lafia,  
PMB 146, Lafia,  
Nasarawa State, Nigeria.  
Email: [okocho007@yahoo.com](mailto:okocho007@yahoo.com)

## ABSTRACT

*This paper seeks to proffer a political economy interpretation of the phenomenon of baby buying/selling in Nigeria with particular reference to the South East. This is against the backdrop of the rising incidence and prevalence of the phenomenon in the country over the recent years. The method of the paper is qualitative and descriptive-analytical. By way of discursive exegesis of relevant secondary sources, anchored on Marxian political economy theory, the paper argues that baby buying/selling is a manifestation of over commercialization of social formation in keeping with the logic of capitalist commodification. The paper recommends, among other things, effective regulation of legitimate child adoption as well as criminalization of all forms of illicit dealing on babies as the way forward.*

**Keywords:** Commercialism; commodity; commodification; baby buying/selling; baby factory.

## 1. Introduction

Commodification is ineluctably the essence of capitalism. As a pattern of societalization, capitalism refers to “the organization of a social formation under the dominance of profit-oriented, market-mediated differential accumulation as the axial principle of social organization” (Jessop, 2011:14).

In capitalism, production and exchange are commodified. This gives rise to ‘a market economy’ “dominated by profit-oriented and market-mediated activities” (Jessop, 2012:8). In addition to engendering a market economy, contemporary capitalism is increasingly transforming into a sort of ‘market society’ characterized by the paramountcy of commercialism. In this context, virtually all aspects of societal affairs are ‘economized’ marketized’ and ‘monetized’. This includes the hitherto noneconomic practices that had obtained outside the conventional market realm (Schimank & Volkann, 2012).

The Nigerian political economy is appreciably capitalist in orientation. In the sections of Nigerian society where capitalist societalization has ossified, commodification of the market realm is being replicated in the wider society in the fashion of commercialization of the inclusive spheres (Polanyi, 1977). This is a dominant trend in the South East of Nigeria, where people tend to do business with virtually everything so

far as it guarantees prospects of material returns (profiteering). In this context, both licit and illicit business avenues are explored in an attempt to ensure material accumulation. It is in this circumstance that untoward and obnoxious ventures such as human trafficking, kidnapping, and child buying/selling readily become 'a business'.

## 2. Aim, Rationale, Method and Structure of the Paper

The aim of this paper is to attempt a political economy interpretation of the phenomenon of baby buying/selling in Nigeria with particular focus on the South East. This is against the backdrop of the rising in incidence and prevalence of the phenomenon in the country over the recent years. So far, the extant body of knowledge on the subject matter has been crude and scanty. Besides, the bulk of the existing works in that regard has been characteristically journalistic and superficial, lacking in analytical depth, rigours and fecundity. The present endeavour, among other things, intends to engender a systematic thinking to the prevailing discourse on the subject matter with a view to stimulating further scientific inquiries thereof.

The method of the paper is qualitative and descriptive-analytical. By way of discursive exegesis of relevant secondary sources, hinged on Marxian political economy theory, the paper argues that baby buying/selling is a manifestation of over commercialization of social formation in keeping with the imperative of capitalist commodification. In addition to the foregoing introductory sections, the rest of the paper is sub-divided into five sections as follows: frame of reference/conceptual framework, theoretical framework, incidence and prevalence of baby buying/selling in South-Eastern Nigeria, political economy of baby buying/selling, the way forward, and conclusion.

## 3. Frame of Reference/Conceptual Framework

Three basic concepts form the conceptual thrust of this paper. The concepts are commercialism, commodification and baby buying/selling. Highlighted below are the contextual meanings of the concepts.

**3.1 Commercialism:** Commercialism refers to the syndromic tendency of people who are preoccupied with the desire to earn money or buy/sell goods rather than other values (cf. Merriam Webster online, 2013). It also connotes excessive emphasis on commercial profiteering. Commercialism is a crude manifestation of capitalist commodification whereby commercial tendencies pervade all facets of the societal life. In this context, even anti-social activities tend to become rather commercialized and pass for a business.

**3.2 Commodification:** A commodity simply means any saleable product. In effect, commodities have their real essence in commercial production. According to Jessop:

... a commodity is a good or service that is actively produced for sale in a labour process. A Commodity can result from peasant petty commodity, state production, co-operative production, or societal enterprise as well as capitalist production. What matters is its production for sale (2012:8).

Commodification, therefore, refers to the process by which a material value takes on the form and substance of a commodity: the transubstantiation of a 'use value' into an 'exchange value'. In relation to monetization, commodification has been conceived thus:

Processes through which one or another aspect of material provisioning takes the form of commodity production and/or through which some economic agents seek to desire monetary revenues from material provisioning or immaterial activities that were not previously subject to monetary exchange (Jessop, 2012:17).

Commodification and commercialism have been abiding features of the contemporary capitalist social formation, otherwise referred to as the market economy. Hence, a market economy is characterized by “commodity production and exchange” (Jessop, 2012:14) and the embedding of “the market economy in a market society” (Polanyi, 1977: n.p).

**3.2 Baby buying/selling:** Baby buying/selling refers to the practice of commercial dealing on infants: offering an infant as an article of trade or exchange. This reflects the imperative of capitalist commodification and commercialism in societies where commercialist tendencies tend to pervade the entirety of societal spheres. Baby buying or selling thrives in societies where “child harvesting” (Wikipedia, 2013), has crystallized into a sort of black market industry. In Nigeria, this trend has given rise to the arcane phenomenon of ‘baby factory’ or baby trafficking as it is popularly known in local parlance.

#### **4. Theoretical Framework: The Marxian Political Economy**

This paper adopts the Marxian political economy approach as its theoretical framework. This theoretical approach has been influenced by the pioneering work of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, ‘*The Communist Manifesto*’ (1948). The core elements of the theory can be summarized thus:

- i. It emphasizes the primacy and paramountcy of material (economic) conditions in determining the general complexion of society.
- ii. It takes the economic (material) factor as a point of departure in an attempt to come to terms with social realities.
- iii. It considers social phenomena historically, organically, dialectically and holistically
- iv. It recognizes the essential inter-connectedness and/or inter-relationships of social realities.
- v. It underscores the ‘economic determinism’ of social actions, occurrences, and dynamics (Ake, 1981, McLean & McMillan, 2003; Okoli, 2009).

Applied to the present discourse, the Marxian political economy approach would enable us to properly appreciate and situate the economic under-currents cum underpinnings of the phenomenon under investigation. In this regard, it is to be noted that baby buying/selling is necessarily a manifestation of capitalist commodification in an unusual pattern whereby social life is inundated by excessive commercialization and crass profiteering. This tendency has been prevalent in the South East of Nigeria apparently in view of the manifest traditional predilection of the people towards vulgar capitalism and commercialism. In the light of the Marxian political economy theory, therefore, the phenomenon of baby buying/selling would be conjectured as being fundamentally economic in origin, essence and import. This is not with any prejudice to its social and cultural externalities. It is thus instructive to go beyond the realm of socio-cultural conditionality in an attempt to concretely come to terms with the nature of the problematique.

#### **5. The Locus of the Paper: South East, Nigeria**

The paper focuses on the geo-political South East of Nigeria. This is one of the six-polar political divisions of Nigeria namely North-Central, North-East, North-West, South-East, South-West, and South-South.

The South-East zone comprises the five states of the current Nigerian Federation viz: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo. The zone is populated by the Igbos, the third largest ethnic group in Nigeria. The ethnic Igbos have been variously described as individualistic, republican, industrious, enterprising, and dexterous. These attributes typify the Igbos as capitalist oriented people. Indeed, the Igbos

have been quite famous in the areas of commerce and industry. At the same time, they have been notorious for excessive commercialism and crass materialism.

The capitalist orientation and worldview of the average Igbo-man naturally endears him to business and market behavior. In effect, he has the tendency to do business with virtually everything, provided that the prospect of money-making is guaranteed. Hence, the typical Igbo capitalist does business with politics, religion, voodoo, fraud, as well as sundry acts of illicitness. He does not do so because he is an Igbo-man *per se*. He does because he is a naturally inclined, self-conscious capitalist, who is hell bent on profiteering.

## 6. Prevalence of Baby Buying/Selling in South East of Nigeria

Commercial dealing on infants has been a fast burgeoning enterprise in some parts of Nigeria. This curious emerging enterprise has been quite prevalent in the South-Eastern part of Nigeria over the years. According to Asoluka:

In more recent times, child trafficking has become a big and lucrative business in Nigeria. The ignoble trade, like most other crimes, has gained an unprecedented notoriety in the South East of the country. It is on record that the South East has unfortunately appropriated to itself the hub of the untoward conduct .... Growth in this pernicious trade has been directly linked to the increase in the demand for babies by the various categories of buyers, the knack for Nigerians to cut corners and the un-quenching desire of most to us to make profit even when it is not necessary (2013:para 1).

The high prevalence of baby buying/selling in the South East of Nigeria has been vividly demonstrated by the proliferation of the so-called “baby factories” in the states of the region (*The Nation*, June 28, 2013:1). Currently, the business thrives as a “black market” with “black handed transactions” (Asoluka, 2013: para 4) that depicts its illicit essence. The prevalence of the ‘trade in babies’ has been associated with a number of factors including:

- (i) The premium placed on child-bearing as a means of ensuring genealogical inheritance and continuity;
- (ii) Demonization of infertility and childlessness; and
- (iii) Stigmatization of teenage pregnancy and single parenting (*Street Journal*, 2012; Onwuka, 2013; Onyemelukwe–Onuobia , 2013):

More importantly, there is a more analytically involving dimension to the issue. The capitalist tendency of the people of the South East tends to have engendered a syndrome of excessive commercialism in the region. This has since found expression in the prevalence of illicit businesses as a means of material accumulation. This perspective constitutes the point of departure in this paper. The high occurrence of baby buying/selling in South-Eastern Nigeria, therefore, stems from an inter play of factors – social, cultural and economic. As this paper is wont to argue, among these factors, the economic factors are the most decisive and compelling. Table 1 hereunder highlights the major instances of baby factory discoveries in South–Eastern Nigeria over the recent years.

**Table 1: Instances of Baby Factory Discoveries in South Eastern Nigeria, 2004 and 2013**

S/N	YEAR	STATE	INCIDENT
1	2004	Enugu	A baby factory operating in the guise of a maternity home was discovered at Zik Avenue, Enugu
2	2008	Enugu	A network of baby factories claiming to be orphanages was revealed in Enugu Metropolis.
3	March, 2009	Abia	Forty-two (42) pregnant girls were discovered at a baby factory in Umunkpeyi Nvosi in Isiala Ngwa Local Government of Abia State.
4	June 2011	Abia	Police raided a bay factory and rescued about thirty-two (32) pregnant girls in Aba town; the baby factory was known as 'The Cross Foundation)
5	October, 2011	Anambra	Thirty (30) pregnant girls were rescued from a baby factory (Iheanyi Ezuma Foundation) in Ihiala Local Government of Anambra State
6	2012	Abia	Nineteen (19) pregnant girls were discovered in a baby factory in the town of Umuahia
7	2013	Abia	Twenty-six (26) pregnant girls were rescued from a baby factory at Umuaka in Njaba Local Government of Abia State by the police. Two (2) male adults were also arrested there in connection with impregnating some of the girls
8	April, 2013	Abia	About thirty-two (32) pregnant girls were rescued from a baby factory in Umuozuo, Osisioma Ngwa Local Government Area of Abia State.
9	May 2013	Imo	Seventeen (17) pregnant girls were discovered in a baby factory operating in Owerri town
10	May, 2013	Enugu	Six (6) girls were rescued from a baby factory operating as a conventional health clinic in Enugu town

**Source:** Authors compilation from various media/online reports.

The records reflected on Table 1 point to the rising incidence of baby buying/selling in the South East of Nigeria. The incidents recorded on the table are only a few isolated instances of reported baby factory discoveries over the recent years. There are many of such cases that were never reported or publicized by the media. Yet, a lot more have been undergoing security investigations to establish criminal culpability. The spate of baby factors in South-Eastern Nigeria, among other things, suggests that the region is grappling with an infant trafficking pandemic, with an avalanche of black-market charity and maternity homes in operation.

### **7. Political Economy of Baby Buying/Selling: Insights from South-Eastern Nigeria**

Marketization of babies appears to have come to stay in the present age of global capitalism. The quest to buy or sell babies is largely driven by the logic of demand and supply, like any other market system (Albers, 1999:12). Globally, two important developments tend to have added impetus to the ever growing commercial demand for babies. The first factor is desperation for child adoption for sentimental purposes (Albers, 1999:104). The second factor has to do with the rising trend of childlessness in the

context of marriages. In effect, “there are enough childless marriages to create a demand for promising babies, and therefore a market” (cited in Albers, 1999:108). These developments have crystallized in the emergence of ‘black markets’ for commercial ‘merchandizing’ and adoption of infants.

From the stand-point of the American experience, contemporary trajectories of ‘baby market’ have been captured thus:

The sentimentalization of adoption had un-anticipated and paradoxical effect. By creating a demand for babies, it also stimulated a new kind of baby market. While the nineteenth-century mothers had paid baby farmers to accept their ‘unwanted babies’, twentieth-century adoptive parents were willing to pay to obtain an infant. “Baby traffickers” thus found an additional line of business making money not only from the surrender of babies, but doubling their profit by then selling them to their new customers. As a result, the value of a priceless child became increasingly monetized and commercialized (Albers, 1999:108).

With this curious monetization and commercialization of the ideally ‘non-market’ phenomenon of a baby, commodification of infants has become more or less consummated and entrenched in the world’s capitalist market order.

In Nigeria, baby buying/selling has thus become a thriving business (Onwuka, 2013). A burgeoning commercial enterprise, the baby business depicts a sort of industry wherein a number of actors participate in more or less differentiated roles. The first and the principal actor is the proprietor of ‘a baby factory’ whose role is to ‘garner’, harbour and nurture unmarried pregnant girls with a view to obtaining babies for sale. The proprietor usually poses as an altruistic health or social worker; and in some cases a charity or faith disciple. Under the pretext of a dubious Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) or a Faith-Based Organization (FBO), the proprietor creates an affected platform tactically designed to advance his illicit business. The use of NGOs and FBOs as a subterfuge for perpetrating illicit business in Nigeria explains the apparent proliferation of such organizations in the South-Eastern Nigeria, nay elsewhere in the country. In 2012, the then Commissioner for Women Affairs and Social Development in Anambra State, Dr. Ego Uzoemie, disclosed that “more than fifty (50) illegal orphanages and motherless babies’ homes are operating within the State” (*Street Journal*, 2012: para 9).

The second actor in the baby market enterprise is the middleman. This is an agent (broker) commissioned by the proprietor of a ‘baby factory’ to prospect, scout and solicit for public patronage to his illicit business. The middleman actively recruits single pregnant girls for his employee, the proprietor. He is also responsible for looking for possible baby buyers to patronize their venture. For his role, the middleman gets a pecuniary reward in the form of a commission per good ‘business’ turn. With reference to the incident that took place in a private hospital at Zik Avenue, Enugu in 2004, a media report documents:

... the clinic had agents who went in search of pregnant single girl; the job of the agents on the hospital management’s payroll was to convince the girls to come to the clinic and register instead of aborting their pregnancies .... Unfortunately, their babies are sold when they put to bed and the mother paid off (*Street Journal*, 2012: para 4 and 14).

The third actor is the vulnerable young pregnant girl. She is unmarried and often facing rejection and stigmatization from family and society (Asoluka, 2013). She is stranded and desperate to overcome her plight. She then finds solace in one of the ‘charity’ or ‘maternity’ homes where she is assured of good ante-natal care and post-natal ‘pay-off’; the ‘pay off’ being a token of cash payment by which she gives up her presumably unwanted baby to the host organization for onward sale to a possible adoptive parents or couple.

The baby buyer is the last participant in the ‘value-chain’ of the illicit trade. Being desperate to adopt a child for emotional or socio-cultural reasons, he is ready and eager to pay quite handsomely in

exchange for a baby. And when he does, the ‘baby sale’ transaction is thus consummated. This transaction typically bears out core elements of market exchange. Way back in 2004, a media report observed:

The mothers got between N40, 000 and N60, 000 for female children while those who were delivered of baby boys were paid between N80, 000 and N100, 000 .... Most of those (clients) on the list were said to have paid about N100, 000 just to register with the clinic. The financial capability also determined how much was paid, though baby girls then went between N250,000 and N400,000 while boys were sold for between N500,000 and N1million depending on the financial strength and bargaining power of the buyer (*Street Journal*, 2012: para 6 and 7).

Recent revelations from ‘baby factories’ in the South East of Nigeria indicate that ‘baby business’ is on the booming scale. Apart from enriching the operators of the so-called baby factories, the emerging industry has created for its efficiency a crop of jobbers and agents who rely on the illicit business to make a living. As observed by Asoluka “There are those who serve as facilitators. These are people who engage in ‘runs’ to make a living, and are the go-betweens for the potential buyer and the baby factory owner.....” (2013: para 8).

The tendency to indulge in baby selling in Nigeria becomes rather compelling in the face of dire socio-economic and livelihood malaise in the country. In this context, it could be seen as one of the desperate survival tactics that people may resort to in a bid to cope with harsh conditions of living. Hence, .....some teenage girls voluntarily go into baby trade as a means of etching (sic) out a living, as recently reported of a couple who claimed they sold their baby in order to raise money to pay their rent! (Asoluka, 2013: para 10)

The situation has been complicated in the South East of Nigeria by the prevailing culture of commercialism and materialism, whereby marketization and monetization of social life have come a long way in defining the economic and normative complexion of society.

Recent developments in the ‘baby sale’ saga have revealed vital trappings of human trafficking of the buccaneer order. Pregnant girls are often held against their will under prison-like conditions, after they have been recruited through moral or diabolical suasion, but also material inducement. Some of them are forcibly retained after the first delivery in the order to continue to reproduce for the host organization. To this end, mature males are hired by the host organization to impregnate the girls for onward procreation. This base dimension to the ‘baby factory syndrome’ was revealed in the incident of Umuaka Njaba in Abia State in 2013 where “two male adults who were said to be the ‘raw materials’ for impregnating the girls” were also arrested (Asoluka, 2013: para 11). This was to ensure a regular supply of the ‘commercial babies’ to satisfy the rising demand of the ‘products’ by the members of the public in the black market.

To further this discursive analysis, a few illustrative observations may suffice to situate our political economy of baby buying/selling. The observations include:

- i. Baby buying/selling reflects the logic of capitalist economic accumulation in its crude form;
- ii. It is an exchange (albeit illicit) regulated by market laws of demand and supply;
- iii. It is metamorphosing into a form an organized criminal enterprise (the baby factory and market phenomenon);
- iv. It thrives on irregular commodification: transformation of the ‘non-market value’ into a marketable product (cf. Tzanelli, 2006).

The aforementioned observations tie up to what has been designated in this paper as ‘commodification of illicitity. In effect, the infant being offered for sale takes the substance of a commodity, a marketable product. The transactions between the baby seller, the facilitator, and the buyer are typically

commercial in orientation; it is also largely economic in essence, motivation and purpose. The baby sellers and their abettors are conscious businessmen. They only happen to be on the illicit side of it. Obviously, the parties to the baby selling enterprise put up varying dimensions of economic behaviour as the transaction lasts. At the end of the exercise, fair bargain is made, money is paid, and exchange is thus effected.

### **8. Towards a Rescue: Some Policy Reflections and Recommendations**

Baby buying/selling has been firmly entrenched as a veritable social practice in contemporary capitalist societies that is fast 'marketizing'. This practice would continue to prevail in view at two fundamental factors. First, so long as 'market demand' for babies exists, the practice will surely find ample impetus to thrive. Incidentally, indications are rife to the effect that such demand is on the increase. This suggests that the end to the baby buying/selling enterprise is not in immediate sight.

The second factor in the fact that baby buying/selling thrives on the 'black-market syndrome' with the actors dealing rather illicitly but rationally in order to preserve and even 'legitimize' their collective interests. This way, they try to keep the 'business' thriving against obvious moral and legal impediments. The foregoing factors derive re-enforcement from the commercialist predilection of the 'market society', which tends to make people excessively market-oriented and profit-driven.

In the light of the preceding observations, it would be more feasible and pragmatic to seek to regulate the practice rather than to do away with it. One promising way of doing this is to ensure that infant adoption is done on the basis of altruistic rather than 'mercantilist' motive. Proper legislative and policy frameworks should be put in place by the government to promote and regulate legitimate infant adoption so as to ensure that all excesses and abuses in that regard are curtailed. In the same vein, criminalization of all forms of illicit dealing on babies is imperative in order to discourage the dehumanization of the infant through trafficking and conscienceless commodification.

### **9. Conclusion**

Commodification is notably the underlying "logic of capitalism" (Skoll, 2011:67). In contemporary capitalism, commodification is not merely an element of the economic realm. It has continually sought expression, dominance and paramountcy even in the wider societal spheres. This has given rise to the trend of commercialism whereby commodification of the market economy is replicated in the outer societal space in the form of inclusive marketization of society. This embedding of "the market economy in a market society" (Polanyi, 1977) tends to have occasioned a pattern of queer capitalist behaviour and commercialist tendencies, leading to over-commercialization of the societal system. Curiously, this trend is also finding expression in commercialization of the illegitimate (cf. Okoli & Agada, 2014).

The incidence and prevalence of baby buying/selling in Nigeria is a reflection of the abiding trend of illicit commercialism. Here, the commodification of the illegitimate is at issue; hence illegalities and absurdities pass for business in the proper sense of the word. In this connection, it is to be pointed out that the phenomenon of baby buying/selling typifies what has been characterized as illicit capitalist exchange (Tzanelli 2006). In any case, it involves the political economy of buying and selling, demand and supply, as well as free-willing transactions moderated by economic rationalism and (black) market imperative. Perhaps, the only problem is that it obtains on the 'wrong' side of the law and market convention, which makes it a questionable practice.

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