

On spanking/whipping and Child Abuse: Reflection on the case of the Igbo/Nigerian/African Professor who spanked his children (Professor of Business Studies at Alcorn State University and resident in Jackson, Mississippi).

Published as "Is spanking/whipping Child Abuse?" In USA Africa Dialogue Series, Oct. 27, 2006. See USAfricaDialogue@googlegroups.com

First, I must acknowledge Reuben Abati for opening up this 'cancer of --'. The exposition of the dilemma of parents from countervailing cultures living in the US and who must, therefore, bring up their children by American code of parenting speaks to many of us here in the US. Should I feel for the gentleman, notable professor, who is presumably trapped in this dilemma? And I mean 'presumably' because I'm not sure that he is a victim of culture clash. I know that I feel for the children living without their mother and undergoing this trauma from their father. Now without both parents, they have to deal with another pain - the prospect of dad going to jail.

Speaking as an Igbo woman from Nigeria, one of the more than fifty four countries in Africa, I am in a kind of dilemma too about broad generalizations in the media about African culture, Nigerian culture, Igbo culture, an Igbo person's behavior as African culture, when it comes to negative issues. If a white American hits his child and inflicts wounds on him, they'll likely focus on the man's background when he was a child to find out why he is violent, but not so for an African man. It is culture!

When an African man beats his wife, it is explained as African culture. Statistics show that four women die every day in the US from wounds inflicted by their boyfriends or husbands, but this is not attributed to American 'culture.' It is called 'domestic violence'. It is not easy to expunge notions of Africa as ugly and dirty that we have internalized from media, books, and isolated examples like this one (the African professor that beat his son), but we have to try. Growing up in Igbo villages and later carrying out research in some as a scholar, I know that wife-beating exists, but it is not sanctioned. It is castigated in satirical songs. It also leads to wife-abandonment. It sometimes leads to vengeance from the wife's siblings or family.

Similarly child abuse is castigated in Nigeria. But there is confusion in perceptions. I was involved in a research project in which we saw great discrepancy between global perspective and the views from different regions of the world. For example, the practice of sending children to hawk commodities have often been described as child abuse, but many market women in Nigeria view the practice as an effective way of keeping the family together – they know when the children return from school for they have to come to the market to help out, acquire skills in the trade, and support family business (not the best, but in the socio-economic circumstances of the women, What is better?).

Now to spanking. Women, I mean parents, do spank their children, but not to inflict wound or cause damage. Flogging is not a secret act. It is usually open. The child usually runs and this is expected to be the end of it. There is always someone who will prevent it from happening or rescue the child with "it is enough" (talk of rules of punishment). I'm

not saying that flogging is a great thing, because I'm against any kind of physical, psychological, emotional maltreatment, damage, or oppression. In the case of spanking a child, when does it slip from 'correction' (with good intention) to 'maltreatment' ('bad belle', bad intention, inflicting wound, damaging)? Society expects a mature adult to know the boundaries. Some Americans would not see 'whooping' a child's 'behind' as maltreatment. Some may call it 'tough love.' US law also leaves the parent to apply mature judgment on the matter. Many States allow "reasonable and appropriate physical force" "necessary and appropriate to maintain discipline or promote welfare of the child."

I don't see the difference between the US law on spanking and the notion of spanking in Igbo, Nigerian, and/or African contexts. I have never heard that a father put pepper in his child's 'wetin-call', and even though I've now heard it, I know that it is not Igbo or Nigerian culture. I believe that if it is true, we don't know the whole story. We can't gloss over it with generalizations of 'culture.' We have to ask questions. Why are other Igbo/African men not doing the same thing? It is Igbo culture for a man and his wife to raise children together. Why is the professor's wife not there?

I think that we should credit this man with individuality first, before we jump to that "abused mother" called "African culture." What is peculiar about his circumstances or experience that makes him different from other African men in the US? This kind of investigation might be more useful in saving him from possible jail term, and also helping him to work out better skills for managing anger, and maintaining discipline and peace in his family.

We are not all abusers and we don't come from 'abusing cultures'!

Chinyere G. Okafor, PHD
Department of Women's Studies
Wichita State University