

Global Capitalism and Commodification of Breastfeeding: An Investigation of Its Impact on the “Traditional” African Conception of Family Life and Motherhood

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Abstract : Breastfeeding in public has become a contentious issue in contemporary society. Mothers are often subjected to unfair discrimination and harassment for simply responding to their maternal instinct to breastfeed their infants. The unwillingness of society to accept public breastfeeding as a natural, non-sexual act is partly influenced by the imposition of a pornified and hypersexualised Western culture, which was imported to Africa through colonisation, enforced by the apartheid regime, and is now perpetuated by Western media. The imposition of the modern nuclear family on Africans, and the coerced aspiration to subscribe to bourgeois values, has eroded the moral standing of the traditional African family and its cultural values. Western-centric perceptions of African women have altered the experience of motherhood for many, commodifying the practice of breastfeeding. As a result, the use of bottles and infant formulas is often perceived as the preferred method, while breastfeeding in public is viewed as primitive, immoral, and unacceptable. This normative study seeks to answer the question of what ought to be done to preserve the dignity of African motherhood and protect their right to breastfeed in public. The African philosophy of Ubuntu is employed to advocate for the right to breastfeed in public. This moral philosophy posits that the western perception of a person seeks to isolate people from their environment and culture, thereby undermining the process of acquiring humanity, which fosters social cohesion. The Ubuntu philosophy embodies the aphorism, “umuntu ngumuntu nga bantu”, meaning “a person is a person through other persons”, signifying people’s interconnectedness and interdependence. The application of the key principles of Ubuntu, such as “survival, the spirit of solidarity, compassion, respect, and dignity” can improve human interaction and unite the public to support the government’s efforts to increase exclusive breastfeeding rates and reduce infant mortality rates. A doctrine called “Ubuntu Lactivism” is what the author proposes as a means to advocate for breastfeeding rights in fulfilment of African traditional values.

Keywords : ubuntu, breastfeeding, Afrocentric, colonization, culture, motherhood, imperialism, objectification

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