

Widowhood in Some Igbo Cultural Societies: A Neo Leprosy

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Abstract

Harmful practices against widows in several communities in Igboland have continued to attract great attention from scholars and commentators. Worrisome enough is the relevance of some of these practices in the midst of Christianity and civilisation. The women in this category, no doubt, are no less human than any other person in the society yet, they are saddled with lots of unbearable and dehumanising conditions at the loss of their spouses. With the rising economic challenges of the society, the widows are expected to be as economically active and vibrant as men to meet up with the rising cost of living and to support the welfare of the immediate and extended family members. Sadly, these practices persist despite efforts by the religious bodies, government and non-governmental organisations to eliminate some of the harmful treatment against widows. Here, the researcher compares the treatment meted out to widows in some traditional Igbo societies to what victims of leprosy witnessed during the Mosaic era in biblical times. Using the theory of social exclusion as propounded by Walker, (1997), and narrative-textual case study approach, the paper argues that widows are largely subjected to both emotional and mental excruciating pains and excluded from participating in the social affairs of their communities because of superstitious and illogical beliefs founded on outmoded cultural practices and ethos. Leveraging on existing body of literature on widowhood practices in the traditional Igbo society, it is the position of this paper that socially isolating the women grieving the loss of their spouses hurt the women in diverse means and make them economically, psychologically and emotionally vulnerable, reduce their dignity and power to contribute to the welfare of their families after the traditional mourning period.

Introduction

Widowhood represents a very difficult time in the life of a woman. It is a period that many women experience extreme emotional and psychological drawbacks following the departure of the man they had been legally married to. There is no doubt that many societies, especially the traditional ones, have several widowhood practices in line with their cultural stipulations and understanding. Scholars and commentators including Adebowale, (2006), Umezina, (2007) Boulding, (2009), Nnodim, (2012) and several others point that within many Igbo communities and clans, (found mostly in the south eastern parts of Nigeria and parts of the South South geopolitical zones and also in some parts of Benue and Kogi states in North Central Nigeria), one witnesses some of the harshest and often times cruel and unbearable treatments meted out to widows. There is no gain saying the fact that most often women spear head and champion the terms and conditions of some of these practices against their fellow women. For such women, they are certain that they are enforcing community laws and customs regardless of the implications on either on the dignity of the widow as a human person or on the legal and human rights of the widows as enshrined in various local and international laws and conventions. Oreh, (2006) observes that in several Igbo communities, dominant widowhood practices still prevalent till date subject the widows to physical, psychological and emotional torture.

However, while this work upholds that while widowhood practices and seemingly cultural dispositions towards widows in several communities in Igboland are harmful and unhelpful to fostering the healing process in the life of the widow. The greater pain and tragedy for the grieving widow comes from the social isolation and exclusion even from among her peers, family members, colleagues, members of the same faith and their likes. The effects of social isolation and exclusion on the life of the widow goes down the spine even after the period of mourning as stipulated by the cultural ethos of the society and could be likened to the leprosy of the Mosaic era in the biblical record. It is also important to state that this aspect of widowhood seem not to have gained much attention in the Igbo traditional societies and as such has not been addressed. Adebowale (2006) asserts that the widow at all times is followed with suspicious gaze even as wicked gossips trail her every movement. She is accused of all manner of things, from killing her husband to keeping his property and documents connected thereto away from his kinsmen. In essence, she is seen as a killer and a thief. Agumagu (2007) avers that widows face social isolation imposed by traditional beliefs that they are unclean and would need to pass through cleansing rituals and rights, some of which include inhuman treatments such as being forced to drink the water used in bathing the corpse, swearing before a local deity and tying of hands in rags (Okoye, 2001), before they are allowed to interact and move freely in the society.

The argument that the situation of widows in the traditional Igbo societies is akin to what lepers of old faced in their communities would be made in this presentation. The researcher would attempt to compare the agonies and taunts widows face today to what those who had leprosy in years gone by experienced as represented by the Gospel account of Luke 17:12 where ten lepers had to stand at a distance to greet Jesus Christ as the tradition of the time demanded before pleading for mercy and receiving their healing thereafter. The overall objective of this study is to identify several widowhood practices in Igboland that lead to the isolation of women who suffer the bereavement of their husbands from their societies, cutting off their means of livelihood (since in most communities as Agumagu, (2007) maintains that, there are traditional restraints that forbid them from buying or selling at least at the local markets), and making survival at a time of great psychological and emotional pain for them, a herculean task. The study also evaluates why despite various measures enacted by state and religious authorities, these unhealthy and unsuitable-for-modern-times widowhood practices remain prevalent in several communities in Igboland. Of great concern to this study is how concerted efforts can be made by critical institutions of the Igbo society including the government, the church and its institutions, the media, community leaders and socio-cultural groups can come together to begin to practically address the issues at the root of these leprous treatments and condemnation meted out to widows within the Igbo traditional societies. This work maintains that cultural practices (including ill treatment of widows) are human constructs and can also be modified by man to suit the present realities of the society we live in.

To effectively achieve the stated aims of this work, the researcher employs the Narrative-Textual Case Study (NTCS) approach. The NTCS, according to Gilgun (1994) is a methodology that employs peer-reviewed journal publications, articles, speeches and other literary presentations found in libraries, online web sources and in focus group presentations to the study of a social phenomenon. In line with the aforesaid, this work relied on the published views and presentations of informed authorities on the subject of Igbo culture and traditions, widowhood in Igbo societies and the interaction between culture and religion to critically capture leading thoughts on these subject areas with a view to giving the presentation a clear direction and achieve the stated purpose guiding the research efforts.

Conceptual Clarifications

It is necessary for the purpose of clarity to offer the definition that would guide some of the key ideas that would be discussed in the course of this paper. It is those definitions and contextual understanding as contained in this section that would be adopted in making the central arguments that had earlier been captured in the previous section.

Widow/Widowhood

A widow would be represented here as a woman whom the man she had been legally married to had passed on and who had not been married to another. Nzewi (1981) was succinct when the author posited that a widow is a woman who has been separated from her husband on account of death. A widow within the context of this presentation shall therefore, be taken to connote a woman who has become single because her husband died and she has either by design or circumstances chosen not to remarry. Oreh (2014) avers that a woman becomes a widow when the man with whom she had planned the present and the future life is no longer available to share, shape the hopes and the dreams of years ahead. As a widow, a woman becomes helpless, struggling to juggle several roles while dealing with the reality of her husband's departure. At this point, she becomes vulnerable to all sorts of social, cultural, traditional and religious factors and she may find herself powerless and voiceless in a family and society she had been an active part of for a long time. For a widow, especially in the African context, widowhood is a time of emotional and psychological distress, when she now realises that she has to face the world without the emotional, psychological and financial support of the man that had once served as her backbone and pillar. It comes with fear, sorrows and a sense of abandonment as family members most times as Nnodim (2012) posits, begin to show their "true colours", stripping the woman of her husband's assets and even going as far as claiming his entitlements from his place of work without the knowledge of the woman or the deceased's immediate family. The woman in this situation becomes voiceless owing to the fact that she is unable to express her disappointment or get the attention of anybody in the extended family who can come to her aid without making unpleasant demands. She is placed in the very difficult position of trying to be humble and respectful while at the same time trying to make sure that what the husband worked for while alive is not appropriated by another. The widow appreciates that life must continue and that if the deceased husband left any children behind, those must be catered and provided for; most times using a part of what the husband had acquired or earned in his lifetime. The widow therefore, is a grieving individual (woman) who has to battle with the sadness that comes with the departure of her spouse while at the same time dealing with harsh traditional practices that make her an object of suspicion for many in the community even as she grapples with the difficulty of adapting to her new role as both provider and supporter to the children left behind by the deceased as Okorie (1995) posits.

Widowhood therefore, is a fallout for a woman who lost her husband to death. Oreh (2008) argues that the concept of widowhood describes the state or period of being a widow. Widowhood in most Igbo communities is a period of great pain and misery owing to traditional religious and cultural practices which subject the widow to several shades of physical, emotional and psychological abuses. This happens because of the woman's vulnerability occasioned by the sad departure of her husband, and the desire to be seen as not having a hand in the death of the husband which forces her to cooperate with those whose actions and utterances most times are simply designed to demean and rubbish her person and usefulness to the family.

Dominant widowhood practices in most communities in Igboland

Mourning of the dead in most societies takes various forms and shapes and the situation is not different in Igbo communities where most times, the dead are given dignified farewell as they journey to the land of the dead. These traditional rites of passage inevitably affect the women left behind by the deceased who are expected to undertake certain actions that prove that they have no hand in the death of their husband that they are willing to show their sadness by the painful demise of their spouses. Nwoga (1989) captures the socio-cultural practices widows face in Igbo communities following the departure to the great beyond of their husbands to represent social expectations regarding her conducts, relationships and interactions from the time of the husband's demise till the end of the traditional mourning phases, which could range from three to twelve Gregorian calendar months. Critical at this time are matters regarding inheritance of the late husband's property, especially when there are no offspring from the marriage, the relationship between the widow and the deceased husband's extended family members and if the woman is to be "inherited" by an adult member of the extended family or made to return to her father's house or marry externally; the questions around these would be determined by native customs and laws and level of enlightenment amongst the actors.

Weighing in on the dominant issues around widowhood practices in Igbo communities, Oreh (1998) opines that widowhood practices can be seen as socio-cultural practices which may cover such areas as burial rites, mourning rituals, inheritance rights of the widow, her expected behaviour towards others and other people's behaviour towards her arising from the death of her husband. These practices draw from the cultural and religious beliefs of the communities and what they believe cover the overriding ideas of "honouring the dead." This explains why Nwaogugu (1989) states that widowhood practices are culture-bound, arguing that they reflect the prevailing values of a given socio-cultural ecosystem. This is underpinned by the observation that widowhood practices change from one community to another. While in some places, the strict application of olden day practices against widows no longer hold or are applied only partially, several other communities have continued to do things the way they were done before the coming of the Christian faith and western education system which encourage civility and logic (not superstition) in every undertaking.

Culture, Custom and tradition

As a concept relevant to this paper, this work captures culture to represent a way of life of a particular group of people. It is informed by traditional belief system and guides the disposition, attitude and orientation of the people towards themselves, other members of the society, non-human beings and the social and religious practices within the community space where the same cultural values hold true. Oreh (2008) states that culture in a holistic approach, covers the general way of life of the people, and is also dynamic in the sense that it changes as the people's awareness of reality shifts in line with existential realities within the larger society changes. Culture therefore, is an important part of the identity of a people or community. It defines the worldview of many and underscores how they interact with others and interpret events around them. Elements of culture include the dominant dress codes (for male and female) prevalent in the community, the nature of the food, male and female occupation choices, rites of adult initiations, marriage and burial rites and widowhood practices. Culture generally stipulates the ways members of a conduct themselves and those who control the means by which these ways are acquired over time succeed in transferring their outlook to future generations.

Ahonsi (1997) takes a wider view of culture by introducing customs to the concept and argues that culture and customs refer to the totality of the way of life in a society as shaped by the

material conditions therein, history, systems of beliefs, political organization and legitimation. The connotation therein is that custom has a direct relationship with the culture of the people or rather influences the cultural practise and inclinations dominant in the community. Oreh (2008) points that it includes all the material and ideational or intellectual equipment of a people through which they satisfy their biological and social needs and adapt themselves to their environment. It therefore, connotes the way the people interact with their environment and cosmic forces around them. Customs, Ahonsi, (1997) posits include all habits socially learned, socially performed and socially transmitted, whereby the associated practices have gradually become accepted as appropriate modes of behaviour.

Tradition is another idea closely aligned to the concepts of culture and customs. Understanding the connections between culture, customs and traditions and how they underpin widowhood practice, would help in capturing and achieving the objectives guiding this paper as already outlined. Tradition connotes the worldview and practices within the religious and cultural spheres of a community, what constitutes the permissible and non-permissible actions that guide social and economic interactions within the micro or macro ecosystems. Tradition according to Imam (1991) entails the ideology of the dominant group in a society as it is used to maintain existing relations of inequality and to make the subordinate groups to believe and accept as normal the prevailing structure of inequality. The essential idea captured in Imam's take is that tradition covers the belief systems and practices of the dominant groups in a society (according to tribal identities, sexes and religious interests) which are used to enforce the privileges enjoyed by the most powerful while maintaining the social and economic systems prevalent in the land. Ahonsi (1997) further toes the same line as Imam when the author points that tradition covers a set of ideologies used to legitimize or rationalize practices that may not match with prevailing socio-economic realities.

One would therefore, bring the three concepts captured in this section- culture, customs, and tradition- to connote an embodiment of beliefs, practices and behaviours which date back to earlier eons and determines the worldview and interactions of the people within the communities and with members of the external communities. These worldviews as enshrined in culture, customs, and traditions determine how widows are treated in various communities. This paper argues that many of these practices should have no place in the modern era defined by logic and civility. Many widowhood practices across several communities in Igboland have since been overtaken by events in modern times including economic and social realities and the changing role of women as not just dependents in the financial sustainability of their families but as active contributors to the economic wellbeing of the households and responsibilities that are threatened by outdated widowhood practices.

Traditional society and lepers

People with leprosy in times past suffer various levels of humiliation in the societies but the most notable is their isolation and exclusion from the social and economic life of their people. They are sent off to a distant forest where communication with other members of the community would be restricted. Nwankwo (2010) maintains that persons afflicted with leprosy are often perceived as if they have breached the taboos of their locality, offended their gods or committed abominable offences in their present or previous existence. The central idea captured above is that in the traditional society, many imagine that people suffering from leprosy must have offended the land and are being punished for the "sins" and so must be forbidden from associating with others during the time they are undergoing due recompense for the wrongs they have done in the present or past incarnations. Kaufman, Neville and Miriam

(1993) assert that leprosy is conceived with loathing and aversion. It is therefore, seen as a curse from the gods, with the sufferers made to pass through extreme social stigma. Many therefore would, on account of tradition, custom and social realities, stay away from the leper because of fear that getting too close may lead to a transfer of what many believe was an affliction sent directly from the gods to punish those guilty of extreme deviation from the laws of the land.

By carefully paying attention to the plight of lepers, this work seeks to create a parallel between what obtained for victims of leprosy and widows in traditional Igbo societies with a view to helping create a better understanding of a major issue that hardly gets the attention it deserves. This is made all the more cogent by the fact that leprosy is less prevalent today as it was years ago and in the estimation of the author, widows are quickly becoming today's lepers owing to the kind of treatment meted out to them in several communities and clans.

Theoretical Framework

This presentation would be pinned on theory of Social Exclusion. Social Exclusion Theory points to the deliberate exclusion of some members of the society or an identified group from certain rights and privileges shared by every other member of the community using laws and customs and similar social and economic constructs. Walker, (1997) argues that the concept of social exclusion is a multi-dimensional one that goes beyond just lack of material resources but also limits the participation of the affected group in the social life of the community, lack of cultural and educational capital, inadequate access to services and lack of power within the social and economic circles. The theory refers to persistent and systematic instances of deprivation of members of a group thereby disempowering and alienation them from the rest of the people.

Dominant widowhood practices in some communities in Igboland

In this section, we would carefully x-ray some of the dominant widowhood practices in most communities in Igboland.

Periodic Wailing: Oreh (2014) states that in some communities, the widow is compelled by tradition to wail every morning before and after the funeral to the hearing of people in the neighbourhood. This, it is assumed, is to show in the most eloquent way, the extent of her grief at her husband's passing.

Sitting on the floor: This tradition is enforced by the *Umuada* (adult daughters of the kindred whether married or unmarried), to symbolise the grief and loss of status the death of the husband has caused the widow.

Ritual Seclusion: This particular practice is called *Ino na nso* in several communities. It is about the widow being secluded in a most restricted manner because the widow is regarded as defiled and unclean. Within this period, the widow dresses in a particular outfit usually a white cloth till the mourning period is completed. The tradition and custom of some communities forbid the woman from associating with others until certain traditional rituals are undertaken to bring purification.

Why the stigmatisation and abuse of widows persist despite efforts to curb them

As earlier pointed out, widows in some communities in Igboland are treated as lepers who must be avoided or treated with disdain by other members of the society. Widows are disrespected on account of cultural prescriptions and traditions of several communities and made to suffer deeper psychological and emotional pains beyond the ones caused them by the departure of their spouse. Although several efforts have been made through the enactment of various

legislative instruments to criminalise the dehumanisation of widows by various organs of governments especially the state houses of assemblies in the various south eastern states, these practices persist and strangely, little efforts have been made by the authorities to enforce the provisions of the law made to protect widows from harmful cultural and traditional widowhood practices. The inability of the government to enforce its own laws in the communities even as the circumstances that necessitated the enactment of those laws is a clear pointer to the complexity of the problem. Azikiwe (1994) posits that seeking to regulate traditional and customary practices through legislative fiats would always yield less than optimal outcomes. This is because no one would want to be seen as an accessory to the destruction of the traditions and customs of a people, purportedly handed down from several generations earlier. According to Alutu (1995), the cultural and religious norms, superstition, fear, and traditional resistance to cultural changes, have persisted because the victims (widows) condone such violence and seem to be complacent, unable to fight back. This is especially true in communities where there is a disproportionate number of illiterate women who are vulnerable to manipulations and intimidation from the men. These women, whether widows or not, are most often uninformed, and have remained within the confines of the village for much of their lives and have witnessed these practices all their lives so for them, there is nothing untoward about the brutalisation and injustice meted out against widows in the name of enforcing local traditions and customs.

While the helplessness of the womenfolk in confronting some of the degrading widowhood practices against women is terrible on its own, what many writers like (Ilika and Ilika 2005, Alutu, 2005) find reprehensible is the active participation of the women in the perpetuation of the dehumanising widowhood practices in the communities. The role of women in the enforcement of widowhood practices as either *Umuada* or *Umuokpu* or members of other women groups are very well known and they are oftentimes at the centre of such practices as shaving of the widow's hair, tying of hands with rags, accompanying to the evil forest and traditional bathing as this study had copiously elaborated on.

One can therefore, argue that widowhood practices that border on the violation of the rights of women remain strong today because of the taboos and superstitions attached therein. This, the researcher can also posit, based on personal observation and from literature that lack of political will to enforce legislations outlawing the inhuman treatment of widows is also a very big factor in explaining the persistence of these practices even after it had become clear that they had outlived their usefulness. Lastly, the connivance of women (*umuokpu* or *umuada*) against the helpless and vulnerable widows and in some cases some women who play indifferent in challenging these practices have also provided the ground for the festering of the cultural cancer across communities in Igboland.

Restoring the dignity of widows

It has been established over the course of this paper that widows pass through several challenges including emotional challenges such as shock, grief, sadness, sorrow, anxiety, denial, loneliness, anger, confusion, frustration and insomnia following the death of their husbands in addition to financial crises arising from the fact that she has to take over the responsibility of catering (alone most times) for the welfare of her children. This is a responsibility she may have shared with the husband before his demise. The level of heat and physical cum emotional attack from in-laws, *umuada*, social groups, peers and even some family members pose challenges on the shoulders of the widow. All of these, as Nzewi (1989) presents, negatively affect the dignity of the women, damage their self-confidence and make them appear subhuman within their families and in the larger society, subjecting them to the

status of lepers of old through social isolation and other measures that limit their interactions be it for economic or emotional purposes.

In view of the common disgust, help by many authors against the dehumanisation and social isolation of widows in some communities in Igboland, this work maintains that what are needed at a time such as this are strategic and concerted efforts that would involve public sector actors, especially the ones charged with the protection of the rights of the citizens such as the National Human Rights Commission, Women Affairs Ministries in the states and Women Welfare bodies working in collaborations with religious bodies, non-governmental organisations, traditional rulers and enlightened members of the communities to seek holistic and effective ways of tackling these issues from the roots through advocacy campaigns in villages, communities, mass media, at religious and community gatherings and in educational institutions. Beyond advocacy, there must be greater enlightenment in the communities telling people about the harmful impacts of the dehumanisation of widows on their dignity and on their ability to integrate with other members of the society after the mourning period had been completed. The messages should be aimed at eliminating all practices that are deemed harmful to the self-confidence and dignity of the widows.

This work maintains that if all of these measures are adopted faithfully, the social crises of treating widows as lepers would be a thing of the past and the human dignity of the women grieving the loss of their spouses would be respected. Achieving the aforementioned would restore empathy to the widowhood process and give the widows a sense of belonging in their communities.

Conclusion

This study has carefully x-rayed the issues around widowhood practices in Igboland, the cultural and customary underpinnings behind them and their impact both in the lives of the widows and their families. The author compared the situation facing widows in many communities to the ordeal faced by lepers in the Mosaic era. Examples of widowhood practices were made and details provided as to how they impinge on the dignity of the widows.

This paper identified lack of political will, the helpless and active participation of women in the dehumanisation of their fellow women under the guise of widowhood practices. Some of the reasons why the practices have persisted and would take concerted efforts of stakeholders through conscientious sensitization, regular advocacy and enlightenment for the menace to be effectively tackled. The dignity of widows should not be sacrificed at the altar of unhealthy tradition because the widows need to operate on and with their mental sanity to enable them face their life with confidence while continuing to cater for their families without unguarded customary or cultural limitations.

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