

Christian Response to Widowhood Practices in Anioma, Delta State: The Anglican Example

Prof. O. O. C. Uche

Department of Religion and Human Relations
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
Email: ucheooc@unizik.edu.ng

&

Okojih, Peter Onyemaechi O.

Department of Religion and Human Relations
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
Email: revpeterokojih@gmail.com

Abstract

Widows and not widowers are the more affected group of people especially in Igboland and Africa in general when it comes to mourning their dead husbands. They are often forgotten even by their closest relatives immediately after the burial of their husbands and most Church to a large extent, do not have an existing structure or budget plan that covers the welfare of the widows floating the church. This has constantly been a wound in the hearts of these widows when departing the church premises to the cold shell of their homes to fight loneliness. Widowhood is often covered in myth and its processes left to the governance of whatever social or cultural system a bereaved person finds him/herself in. It is often felt that cultural traditions constitute the best guide to be followed or authority in widowhood. Recent societal experiences on widowhood and adjustment process however, question this position. It is clear that a more critical understanding of the widowhood process within traditional cultural, legal and psychological contexts need to emerge. The researchers adopted the historical and culture area approach with analytical method of data analysis in synthesizing the data collected for the study

Introduction

The church is supposed to be a home that shelters these group of people from sufferings but most times the reverse is the case. Widows rather than being sympathized with and assisted are subjected to near in-human treatment in certain traditional ritual rites and practices such as solitary confinement, defacement, disinheritance and a relatively long mourning period. The most obvious effects are deepening poverty, acute stress and depression, loss of identity and self-esteem. Anioma widows as part of the widows in Nigeria, face varying degrees of difficulties and untold hardships even though they tend to suffer in silence, in most cases, the challenges ranges from obnoxious legislation which subdue women under male dominance to cultural practices and disinheritance which aggravate the poverty and social dis-empowerment of the widows. A widow remains an appendage of her husband's family. Her loss is unenviable, especially if she is young and childless, for she has no one of her own to turn to and her life is spent almost as an unpaid servant within the family. Typically, widows are not well treated in Africa and Anioma in particular as compared to the widowers. This led to the study on widowhood and its challenges in Anioma culture area.

In a very precise way, the findings of this study will be significant to the Anglican Diocese of Asaba in that the challenges experienced by the Anioma widows will spur them into action. The action of attending to the needs of the vulnerable widows. The cultural subjugation and marginalization experienced by the Anioma widows should be the concern of the church also. The challenges associated with some of the widowhood practices have agitated the minds of the Anioma people over the years but little or nothing has been done to address the challenges. However, as a way to break even with the challenges created by these widowhood practices, this study has delved into the problem in order to reach a logical conclusion and to also compliment the efforts of other researchers whose lacuna this study intends to fill.

Widowhood Practice as a Concept

There are several milestones in the life of a woman which are referred to as adult passages. According to Lamana & Riedman (1991), these include marriage, the birth of a first child, wedding anniversary, the arrival of the first grandchild, and widowhood among others widow is a woman whose husband is dead and does not remarry. She can equally be referred to as a woman who has become single because her husband died and she remains unmarried. A woman becomes a widow when the man with whom she had planned the present and future life is no longer available to share, shape the hopes and the dreams of years ahead. She becomes helpless as she commences a lone journey full of uncertainties of life. She is seen as a liability, powerless, voiceless, and vulnerable. Boulding (2009) noted that a widow is like a melancholy bird that sits wailing all night, increasing her distress without redeeming features. She can also be seen as a woman who is done with her wedding affirmation of "till death do us part". This situation gives birth to widowhood. Hence widowhood can be described as a by-product of every enduring marriage which ends with a spousal (husband) bereavement. Again a widow according

to the Encyclopedia of Death and Dying (2008), is a woman (young or old) who formally contracted her marriage under the Customary Marriage Act or any religious Act and lost her husband to death but did not re-marry. Following such a tragedy in most African societies, the woman resigns into a group of marginalized, powerless and voiceless invisible beings called widows (Nnodim, 2012).

The concept of widowhood is the state or period of being a widow. Oreh (2006) observed that widowhood involves a physical break in the family relationship and it is ranked by widows as the most stressful and devastating event in life. This is because widowhood does not only involve the loss of a person most supportive of the woman, the person who has played central role in the woman's life, the father of her children, the family breadwinner and the companion of the woman, the transition from widowhood to a widow happens so suddenly and swiftly that in one minute a woman who is a wife transits to a widow. It is at this moment that she starts to experience all the widowhood practices under discussion.

Some Widowhood Practices in Anioma

Some widowhood practices in Anioma culture area are considered obnoxious because of the dehumanizing and Psychological Trauma Associated with the Practice. Widowhood has appeared to be the beginning of life-long oppression and misery for women of Anioma. The dehumanizing cultural practices entails the observance of certain rites by widows which infringe on their fundamental human rights and it appears that people sees nothing wrong in it. In order words, some traditions appear as the means to an end instead of an end in itself. The reason Uzoho claimed is because the Igbo people have not deeply embraced their culture as an enduring tradition and way of life but rather as a means of solving problems. They understood culture in the sense that it must be capable of proffering solutions to life's expectations otherwise one would look for some alternatives in a way of emulating other cultures (ie culture variations and culture assimilation). Uzoho is however worried that if the people's mindset is not corrected on what culture really stands for, some vital elements of Igbo will be eroded by the adulterated cultural traditions

The Role of the Anglican Diocese of Asaba in Alleviating the Plight of Widows

The widows of Anioma are not fully supported, defended and protected by the church. So far the much the Anglican Diocese of Asaba has done is not encouraging. There is every need for the Diocese to double up efforts in combating the widowhood practices that are inimical, obnoxious, dehumanizing, and barbaric so as to be reduced to the barest minimum if not completely wiped away.

There are archaic and backward customs that need to be revisited to protect the widow. The Igbo/Anioma customary law has therefore not done much to help the widows, in fact its applications have affected widows negatively. The law as espoused in Section 34 (1) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2011 as amended, clearly states that "every individual is entitled to respect for the dignity of his person..." and goes on to say in sub-section (a) that "no person shall be subjected to torture or inhuman or degrading treatment". From the foregoing, it is clear that the ground norm that is the Constitution, which is a set of laws must bow to, enshrines the fundamental right to dignity for any Nigerian, including widows. It is unlawful therefore for a widow to be treated in an inhuman way that diminishes her person and strips her of her dignity. Therefore, the Anglican Diocese of Asaba shall take up the responsibility to protect the Anioma widows.

Expanding Employment and Entrepreneurial Opportunities for the Widows

One of the major ways to ameliorate the plights of the widows is through employment and entrepreneurial skills. Due to the high rate of unemployment in the country, the people devises different means available to survive. The teaming population of Nigerians especially the young population have so much been affected by the high rate of unemployment that majority of them have considered relocating from rural to urban areas as the only way forward. However, owing the mass exodus of youths to urban centers, it has further heightened the rate of unemployment following an increased rate of rural/urban migration. The Igbo youths who are seemingly becoming lazy in the recent years are mostly university graduates who are in wanton search for unavailable white collar jobs. Even those who have reached the highest academic echelon, are hopeless, helpless, jobless, and at times homeless. This has a matter of fact increased the fraudulent activities ravaging the Igbo region and Nigerian nation. Following this development, however, there is an enormous need for the church and the government to inculcate the entrepreneurial zeal among the people. There is no doubt that most evil practices including the obnoxious widowhood practices are promoted by unemployment. It is hoped that such evil practices can be changed for good and the perpetrators of the heinous crimes in the society can be motivated to play some significant role in economic activities. A lot still needs to be put in place to achieve the desired and required growth among the Anioma/Igbo people. Even the widows can be empowered to be self-reliant. This is because the strength of any individual cannot be isolated from his/her economic/financial prowess. Such financial motivation remains a hope for the future. It is expected that the church and the government should rise to the challenge of catalyzing the Anioma

widows into acts of self-reliance and sustainability. The purpose of this research is to explore strategies for inculcating into the widows the zeal for hard work which will spur them towards their liberation from the shackles of poverty, obscurity and shame through entrepreneurial skills.

Christian Response to Widowhood Practices in the Light of the Bible

The Greek word for widow in the Bible is pronounced like “khay-rah”. It means deprived, cut-off, stripped bare, or abandoned. In the Bible, a widow is a woman bereft of the full provision or flourishing that could be provided by a husband or a family. Although the denotation of widow referred to a woman whose husband had died, because of the social context the word quickly acquired the connotation of a person living in a marginal existence in extreme poverty.

There are specific examples of widows in the Bible. Anna for example served God in Luke 2:36. “And there was one Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Aser; she was of a great age, and had lived with a husband for seven years age from her virginity, and she was a widow of about fourscore and four years (eighty four), which departed not from the temple, but served God with fasting and prayers night and day.” Anna, well up in years, has become a reference point to the position of widows in the Judaeo-Palestinian history. She was well accommodated in the temple and was enabled to serve God. She was not intimidated or underestimated because she was a widow.

The Role of the Church in Ameliorating the Plights of the Widows in Aniomia

The very heart and core of a Christian life is summed up in James 1:27, “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world”. In the sixth Chapter of Acts, the early New Testament church was faced with a situation that resulted in the selection of Deacons for God’s church. Notice in the beginning in verse 1, “And in those days, when the number of the disciple was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations. Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, it is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren look you out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word...” This passage above shows how the church cared for the need of the widows. It was in the need to serve widows that the office of Deacon was actually inspired.

In 1 Timothy 5:4, said thus, “But if any widow has children or nephews, should learn first to show piety and offer support/help for their parents who are widows”. Yes, this is another biblical illustration that states that the relatives of the widow would be the first to extend love and care and some have neglected this. Notice in Deuteronomy 14:28, “At the end of three years thou shalt bring forth all the tithe of thine increase the same year (the third year), and shalt lay it up within thy gates: And the Levite and the stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow, which are within thy gates, shall come, and shall eat and be satisfied; and the Lord thy God may bless thee in all the work of thine hand which thou doest”. It is clear from the above passages that God is interested in the affairs of the widows and assures His blessings to those who would support the widows, fatherless and those who have a need. The Bible specifically give many illustrations in the lives of the widows. These examples show that widows are dearest to God and any one that victimizes them attracts the wrath of God.

Generally, in the Old Testament widows were not left uncared for. God assumed the responsibility of taking care of the widows that lost their bread winners. For instance, the biblical widows like Ruth, the widow of Zerephath, the widow of Nain and Dorcas were taken care of by God. He did not only care for the widows but also defended their course (Exodus 22:22). The Yahweh provided for the widows by instructing the people of Israel to make sure there was “left over” after the harvest and widows were permitted to partake in the religious feasts and offerings (Deuteronomy 10:18, Lev 19:9-10, Deut.24:19-21, Deut. 26:12). Again, the Israelites were warned not to persecute and exploit the widows (Nwaudo, 2012, Kunhiyop, 2008). Therefore, God showed that He is a God of justice who protected the vulnerable widows from inhuman treatment, degradation, injustice, deprivation of human rights and accorded them dignity. In the Mosaic Law, the relatives and the eldest son were charged with the responsibility of caring for the widows. The levirate marriage ensured that a childless widow remarried to the brother or close relative of her deceased husband who take care of her (Deut. 25:5).

Also in the New Testament, widows were not abandoned. The early Christians quickly responded to the murmurings of the Grecians that complained that their widows were neglected in the sharing of food which led the church to appoint the seven deacons (Acts 6:1). But, the apostolic dispensation witnessed a tremendous decline in the caring of the widows. In that era, heads of families, declined in providing for the widows in their families. This situation prompted Paul to write a letter to Timothy admonishing Christian men that any man who fails to

take care of the widow in his family has denied the faith (Anathema) (1Timothy 5:8). The church filled the gap created by families by providing relief for the elderly widows that had no relations that would take care of them (James 1:27, 1Timothy 5:9). The relief contributed a lot in alleviating the plight of widows in the New Testament period.

Conclusion

In all, the strategies to be adopted in combating the problems of widowhood subjugation and male dominance in Igbo culture cannot be achieved through separation (turning roles so that men will now be oppressed as the women have been). In the welfare of humanity, men need women, just as women need men. The women do not seek the over turning of roles so that men will now be the oppressed as the women have been, by the oppressive exploitative system of the world economy. As a practical solution, women/widows have not dealt with widowhood oppression in a confrontational manner either. They have dealt with it by seeking to constructively remain engaged in the society. In searching for a solution, it is important that a healthy link between men and women be maintained so as to avoid the risk of impairing the preservation of society. Verbal protests have been used. Strikes and punishment also. Political agitation has continually been employed. The quest for knowledge and economic independence has remained the target of the majority of women. The fight is within, not without the system.

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