

AJADU NWANYI: WIDOWHOOD ISSUES AND EXPERIENCES IN CONTEMPORARY IGBO SOCIETIES

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Abstract

Widowhood practices abound in many cultures in Nigeria but regrettably, many of the practices are obnoxious especially among the Igbo of southeast Nigeria. Today, widows experience very devastating practices even when it is assumed at some quarters that some of the obnoxious practices had been abolished. Such practices include forced moodiness, restriction of movement, dispossession of husband's property, subjection to ritual sexual intercourse (Ajana ritual). Others include brutal beating, compelling the widow to drink the water with which her husband's corpse was bathed, accusing the widow of killing her husband, not allowing the widow to see the corpse of her husband before burial; forced compulsory load wailings by the widow as an expression of grief and restricting her to a set of derogatory clothing for a specified period of mourning. This study was conceived to investigate cultural widowhood practices among the Igbo and the major problems encountered by these widows as a result of these practices. The study adopted area culture approach of the qualitative method and the Social-Psychological Theory of Carl Rogers to establish that some of these somewhat obnoxious widowhood practices were not originally designed to dehumanize or humiliate the widow. They were rather conceived on the premise of Igbo cosmology in pursuit of ontological harmony of the Igbo universe. The study further noted that such practices like dispossession of widow's deceased husband's properties by in-laws are dubious interpretations of family inheritance practice among the Igbo. The study therefore recommends a social review of some of the practices and a possible synthesis between the Igbo worldview and contemporary Christian widowhood model since most Igbo communities now profess Christianity.

Keywords: *Nwanyi, Ajadu, Widowhood, Igbo*

Introduction

In the traditional African societies, marriage is a contract between two families. African marriages have a strong communication character. In most African societies, a woman upon marriage enters into the family community of her husband as a worker and bearer of children for the whole social group. She is married not only to her husband, but in a very real sense to the group itself. According to Kisémbó, Magesa and Shorter (1977), she is the wife of the whole family – our wife. The death of her husband does not terminate the union; her marriage to the family is still regarded as being in existence and the family members of the deceased husband take care of the widow and her children. This

view is also confirmed by Otite and Ogonwo (1979) who observed that among the Urhobo and Kanuri of Nigeria the widows and their children live with the deceased's younger brother who takes care of them. Following the communitarian nature of African marriages, it is expected that in-laws should rally round their widow and assist her to adjust to the new life of widowhood. Unfortunately, many widows in Igbo land today are being treated as parasites or strangers by the same family members who once accepted them as an integral part of their family. Agomoh (1987) notes pathetically that when a woman becomes a wife, she receives encouragements, support and plenty of guidance from relations, friends and well-wishers. But when she becomes a widow, she enters into no man's world through which too often she is left to make her way alone in a world where kindness and goodwill are often in short supply.

Widowhood practices are traditional to the different cultural setting of different societies among. Those traditional widowhood practices have their various reasons and interpretation in their societies. Elders in different cultural societies support and encourage widowhood practices in multi-various ways. Some of the practices tend to add unjustifiably to the burden of bereavement, for the surviving spouse (s) of the deceased. Such unbecoming practices need to be re-addressed by the societies. The situations in Igbo land is regrettable and requires urgent attention. It is widely known in folktales that although all enduring marriages ultimately end with the death of either the husband or wife or both, the disorganizing or traumatic experience which accompanies the death of the husband tends to be greater than that which accompanies the death of the wife. The widows are subjected to a variety of rites, though the intensity varies in different states and local government areas in Igbo land. These violate some of the human rights of the widow and erode their self-esteem. The plight of widows in these circumstances is better imagined than witnessed especially in more remote communities. Furthermore, there are traditional inheritance laws which preclude women from inheriting land and personal property directly from their husbands in most states of Nigeria. Some widows are pauperized by lack of means of sustaining themselves and their children. This starts partly from the fact that traditionally wives are regarded as the property of their husband.

The obnoxious practices meted out to the widows such as brutal beating, jeering at, making uncomplimentary remarks about the widow and making her sit under the sun for hours could cause her physical and emotional damage. These cultural tortures and brutal handling by husband's relatives are perceived by civilized people as inhuman and degrading to the emotional state of the widows. For a wife who was emotionally close to her husband, consequently, this situation should not be aggravated by inhuman treatment. For instance, the 'Ajana' ritual (subjection to ritual sexual intercourse) prevalent in Awka, Anambra State is one of the most psychologically damaging factors in the life of the widow because her self-esteem, self-concept and self-image have been damaged and destroyed. One therefore wonders why the loss of a spouse should necessitate oppression and deprivation instead of sympathy and support. This paper tries to investigate if the prevalence of

these practices is traceable to the fact that the communitarian character of the Igbo traditional society is being rapidly replaced by pervading spirit of individualism and greed or that there is a cultural interpretation given to these widowhood practices by the Igbo.

The Concept and Issues in Widowhood

Widows are essentially married women with or without children who lose their husbands as a result of death. In a similar vein, widowhood refers to the loss of a husband, companion, breadwinner and supporter. The word is derived from the Latin word *vidua*, meaning widow and divider; that is to divide or separate. According to Webe (1981), from early times, a widow was not only separated from her husband through death, but separated from the society because of her new role. She became a member of a group set apart. This separatist bias is still prevalent in the present day treatment of widows. Agomoh (1987) describes widowhood as a social stigma. Nwafor (1989) accords that tradition in many parts of this country has placed the widow in a state worse than the eighteenth century slave. Ezekwesili (1988) had compared widowhood to a sore on the palm of one's hands. It is always there and it hurts. In her judgment, Okoye (1995) defines widowhood as a cultural tragedy meaning that the death of a husband is of devastating nature. But societies have turned this natural phenomenon into an agonizing dehumanizing cultural tragedy for the widow. The death of a husband produces a critical situation, a reorganization of roles and relationships suitable to the new status. This is even more critical for elderly widows. Arling (2009) perceives widowhood as an event which constituted the greatest change. He contended that it may have deleterious consequences, not only because of the loss of the central role partner, but also because of the lack of cultural expectations regarding the proper role of the widow. The researchers believe that this role inclusion is responsible to a large extent, for the withdrawal of the widow from public activities.

Widowhood involves both social and personal disorganization, especially for the aged widow. This is because old status and roles are lost and new relationships must be substituted in order to effect a satisfactory adjustment to a changed situation. Berardo (1968) argues that transition to widowhood is made difficult not only by the lack of clearly defined cultural expectations but also by the lack of missing supportive relationships. In other words, the loss of a husband tends to restrain and dissolve other relationships the widow has. Wiebe (1987) found out that the image of widowhood that emerged from the Old Testament Practice is that of a group of women isolated in their poverty, subject to oppression and injustice, whose cries were often not heard, and who in their loneliness and abject need became a symbol of all oppressed and needy. In contrast to this image, the New Testament presented a more wholesome picture of widowhood. Widowhood is no longer seen as a shame or a reproach. Instead, widows were accepted as huddled persons in need of healing and assistance. Besides providing economic support for

them, the early church also established an ecclesiastical order of widows who carried some significant responsibilities in the church of ministry of prayer.

Isaiah too had a positive image of widowhood. Abdalati (1982), opines that widows were "the trusts of Muslims and had to be kept jointly" (p. 200). Perhaps, this concern for widows is the reason why Prophet Mohammed married a widow who was fifteen years older than himself as his first wife and remained only with her until her death. He also took part in the rehabilitation of widows. Despite the recognition and respect accorded to widows by Christianity and Islam, widows today still bear an image of poverty and discrimination, in a society that is becoming increasingly concerned with sexual relationship or coupling, this image may be adding a third elements, the third element is one left over after pairs have been made, it could be said that gains made during the time of Christ and Mohammed has been lost.

Having looked at some of the interpretations of widowhood by various authors, the researchers see widowhood as a journey from being single to getting married and then returning to the single state again, that of a widow, one who has lost her husband but this time with additional responsibilities of taking care of herself and her children and perhaps other dependants. This painful transition from being a married woman to becoming a widow is inexpressible.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Social-Psychological Theory

In this section social-psychological theory of self is discussed. This theoretical formulation is summarized and related specifically to widowhood. Self-theory has received most attention in the last quarter-century. No theorist, however, has had as much influence on self-theory and its relations to counseling as Carl Rogers. Roger's concepts and their extensions by theorists like Truax and Carkhuff are the most fully developed and most extensively researched positions on theory (Hanson, 1982). Self-theorists are concerned with what people think of themselves, how a conception of self emerges from social interaction, and how it in turn guides or influences and individual behaviour. The individual's perception of the responses of others towards him reflects the actual responses of others toward him Kinch, (1967). Erikson (1963) maintains that some people are more important than others in forming the self. These people are called the significant others; typically these significant others are involved with the self in an intimate relationship. Significant others, in various combinations, comprise reference groups, whose norms are used as anchoring points in structuring perceptual and behavioural fields (Sherif and Sherif, 1964). Usually a spouse is a significant other, perhaps the most important significant other. Similarly, one's family tends to be a most salient reference group.

Previous studies demonstrated that damage to the self often accompanies widowhood: some of the widowed commit suicide. Bock and Webber, (1966) and others express anomie feelings, unhappiness, low morale, and personal isolation. If

the spouse was significant other, then damage to self is likely to follow widowhood. Among the variables affecting the extent and duration of this damage are the intensive of involvement with the departed spouse and the availability of alternative significant others.

Among the research findings relevant to the present study is the work of Townsend (1957) who reports that loss of a material partner was less traumatic for women than for men, and that widowed people were less likely to express feelings of loneliness if they had been widowed a long time than if the widowhood was recent. While it may be true that the death of a spouse is more traumatic for the man than for the woman in some Western cultures, generally, in African situation the reverse is the case. The African woman sees her husband as both her provider and protector. Thus his death is a tragic experience for her. To confirm this assertion is the confession of aged Igbo widow: "I have buried my child. My own parents are dead. In all my experience of death, none was as painful as the death of my husband (Okoye, 1995).

Widowhood Experiences among the Igbo

One of the events of life which many women go through is widowhood. For most widows, the death of the husband is not only a time for emotional grief, but also a time that severe torture and humiliation would be meted out to them by their in-laws. It is a time for scores to be settled with the deceased's extended family. Under normal circumstances, a widow is to be pitied, and helped out of the psychological valley into which the unexpected has plunged her. Unfortunately, this is not the case in many instances. In most African societies, she is stigmatized as the killer of her husband; oppressed, suppressed, afflicted, neglected, accused openly, insulted and consequently made to succumb to widowhood rites on account of customs and traditions. Usually, the widow's ordeal begins the very moment her husband breathes his last, as revealed by Dei (1995). The sympathy for her ends on the spur of the moment. Promises and assurances are made at the graveside. But as soon as the earth swallows the dead, the widow becomes a victim of neglect, accusation, and bizarre cultural practices. In most cases, the in-laws use the mourning period as an avenue to give vent to their anger and ensure that the widow's solitary life is made more miserable. They strip her virtually of her self esteem and all the wealth she had acquired with her late husband. Consequently, the death of a husband dramatically alters a woman's status and leaves her at the mercy of her husband's relations who are customarily empowered to take decisions concerning her and the properties left behind by the deceased not minding her welfare and that of her children if any.

As observed in Women's Rights Wake Up Call Report (2001), the plight of widows is made worse by various widowhood rite through-trot uniform in all societies, but existing in one form or another almost everywhere. While it is more entrenched in the rural areas, the practice affects many women in African societies especially as it is common with those who die in the cities but are to be buried in

rural areas (hometown burial). As the prime suspect of her husband's death, the widow is usually compelled to go through an ordeal to prove her innocence. In some cases, she is made to drink the water used to wash the corpse (Kantiyok, 2000). To express their grief widows are sometimes required to sleep on the floor, abstain from taking baths, shave their hair, and wear dirty rags as clothes for as long as mourning lasts. In a similar vein, she is made to cook with broken pots and eat with unwashed hands (Akumadu, 1998). For instance, Nna and Nyeke (2007) note that:

Widows all over the world face varying degrees of difficulties and untold hardship. Even though they tend to suffer in silence in most cases, the problems range from obnoxious legislation, which subsumes women under the male dominance, of cultural practices such as widowhood practices and disinheritance which aggravates the poverty and social disempowerment of women. (p. 34).

These practices which stem from societal traditions and family perception are no doubt harmful to the health of the widow in question besides being extraordinarily harsh. Moreover, most of these rituals erode the dignity of the widows and also traumatize them. Besides exposure to diseases such as cholera, diarrhea, etc, occasioned by eating with unwashed hands, drinking water used to bathe the corpse is also poisonous. Worst still, any attempt to contest such practices is met with stiff resistance and the confined widows, in the wake of these treatments no doubt, suffer pawn social degradation, inferiority complex and low self-esteem.

Despite various changes in the modern Nigerian society, like many other traditional practices, widowhood practices have continued to exist silently or openly in spite of modernization. In Igboland as in many other African societies, human greed exist in many families and the death of a male member of the family offers an opportunity to the other male of the extended family to increase their holding of the scarce and inelastic commodity 'land'. The commodity now in question can expand to other items or properties. Its acquisition, that is, the ownership of the scarce commodity, land, basically controls the treatment of widows. The implication of this is that, the in-laws could throw the widows and their children out or falsely accuse widows of killing their husbands so as to acquire the late man's properties and land. All other activities serve the same purpose and any mystification and other rituals and superstitious sanctions are geared towards the oppression of the widow. The Igbo widow, in the course of fulfilling funeral rites, is subjected to a greater agony than the grief of the loss of her husband. As Ogamba (2000) puts it, "it is almost a common syndrome that widows are accused of being responsible for their partner's death" (p. 15). So they establish their innocence through certain acts, most of them very wicked and dehumanizing.

Nwanegbo (1996) makes us to understand that, in some parts of Igbo land; when a man dies the wife will tie a wrapper over her chest without a blouse. She must not talk to anybody and will not have her bath until her husband is buried. After the burial, the 'Umuada' (daughters of the man's ancestors) will come to shave her

hair, bath her in an open compound, only having the privacy of being surrounded by the 'Umuada'. Apparently oblivious of the tragic loss which every widow suffers on the death of their husbands, callous in-laws conspire to apply vicious burial rites to dehumanize the embattled widow. They confront her with questions on how and when the deceased husband died, the circumstance that led to his death, what she did to save him from dying and her extent of contact with the late husband's family before his death? Where the explanations are not satisfactory, the widow must drink the water used in bathing the corpse of her husband to prove her innocence. In fact, there is no end to the humiliating punishment encountered by widow under the cover of native laws and customs.

Nzewi (1981) found that among the Igbo people of Nigeria, the relatives demand for document relating to the deceased properties including lands, investment and bank account and the widows were required to take oaths as proof that the knowledge of relevant land and personal property of the deceased were not concealed. Subsequently, the widows are required to provide expensive items like a white goat and two jars of palm wine for purification purpose to the female members of their husband's lineage who made and implemented decision on every matter concerning widows. The widows are forbidden to touch any object so as not to defile them. Hence they are given piece of sticks to scratch their bodies, while their food is also cooked in old pots rather than those normally used for cooking for other members of the family. Also, they are to sleep on old mats placed on wooden planks which would be burnt at the end of the mourning period. If a woman dies during the one year mourning period, she is perceived as being responsible for her husband's death and therefore commits an abomination (Nzewi, 1981).

Though Christianity has brought about some modification in widowhood practices, such as wearing white cloth instead of black, but the practices still exist. Bentimas observed her experiences with widows in Imo State. According to her, a childless widow in Imo State stated that she was beaten and tormented and finally thrown out of her matrimonial home by the Umunna (kinsmen). She was not allowed to participate in her husband's burial. She went back to her parents but they could not help her. This is because it is traditionally believed that childlessness is a curse. Another widow said that she suffered dehumanizing treatment because she refused to be married off to a brother in-law. As a punishment, all her husband's land and properties were taken away from her. One of the respondents, a 22 years old widow said that her two children (aged two and five years) were forcefully removed from her, also all her husband's properties were removed, because she told her father in-law that she would like to remarry.

Generally, in Imo State, widows mourn their husband's death for a minimum of six months. This period is counted from the date the husband is buried. Immediately the husband is lowered to the grave, other elder widows take her away and shave her hair, she is not expected to participate in the husband's funeral or receive any

gift from visitors. She is kept in isolation. If the husband is a very young man, possibly under 30 years, she will dress in black throughout the mourning period, but if the husband is elderly or a Christian, she dresses in white. She does not sit on a high raised chair. She sits either on the floor, mat, or kitchen seat; if the husband is a first son or in possession of family property, the immediate younger brother takes over the properties including the woman because she is regarded as one of the properties. However, if the widow has son(s) the property is shared between the sons and the brothers. Thus, if the sons care to retain their mother they can do so by taking her as part of their share.

For experiences in Anambra State, a 26 years old widow who had only one daughter when her husband died said that her husband's only brother collected all her husband's properties and the "Umunna" supported him because she does not have a son. Another widow said that her husband does not have any property because he was a civil servant. According to her, her husband depended on his salary. Thus, when the husband died, none of the relatives came to help her, instead they were sure that she spent all that she had and all that sympathizers gave her on the funeral rites. After the burial, she was left to care for the children alone. Another widow whose son is a "Revered Father" in the Roman Catholic Church popularly known as "Mama Fada" said that no discriminatory treatment was meted out at her. She shaved her hair because of her respect for her husband. She is mourning and wearing white because she loves her husband and she missed him. She will go to church after six months to celebrate the end of her mourning period. It is worthy to note here that this type of treatment is rare. It could be because of the respect that the Christian community has for the clergy.

In general, widows shave their hair immediately their husband is buried. They do not come out during that period. They stay indoors for 12 days or more depending on the community which they belong, they are not supposed to sleep over at night, they do not relate with anybody. Whatever they will eat will come through the back door or across the fence. They do not share anything with other members of their family including their bathing bucket, cooking utensils and so on.

Understanding Widowhood Practices in the Light of Igbo Cosmology

A clear understanding of any peoples' worldview is first or rather a leeway to understanding the people, their belief system and cultural practices. Here the Igbo people are no exception to this general aphorism. Therefore, the need to place some of the cultural practices and belief systems in cultural context of the traditional society of the people, with reference to the widowhood practices is not just necessary but inevitable in advancing a balanced assessment of Igbo widowhood issues and experiences. This will aid our understanding and strengthen our interpretations. In adopting this assumption as a matrix, Tasie (2013) side-steps the modern popular opinion, which considers most of the traditional widowhood practices as the de-humanization of the Igbo woman akin to any patriarchal society. In his own words, widowhood rites in Africa were not primarily designed

to de-humanize African widows ...or impoverish and oppress women or part of the so-called male chauvinism. Rather, the rites are generally intended for the overall good of the widow. It is against this backdrop that this present work is designed to make socio-anthropological and hermeneutical reconsiderations of some of these widowhood rites as practiced by the Igbo with the view to finding out the real motive behind widowhood practices in Igboland.

There is a general belief in Igbo ontology that death creates for the dead the problem of gaining entrance into the convocation or guild of ancestors of any given community. Thus, without fulfilling appropriate mourning rites by the living on behalf of the dead, the peace and stability of the entire community will be at jeopardy, with the children, property and posterity being the worst hit. Therefore, most of the rituals done this period are aimed at assisting the deceased gain entrance and comfort into the world beyond and also to make the living community have her peace and maintain a harmonious relationship with their ancestors. Here, Metuh (1978) writes that all practices associated with death and dying must be meticulously gone through, if not there would be considered to have been improperly or inconclusively buried and would be denied admission into the guild of ancestors. While Ohale (2003) reports an interview she had with a widow in 1982 to confirm the above assumption. In her own words: When my husband died, someone came and told me after some days that he saw my husband in dream. He reported that my husband was complaining that he is not at peace yet. By then he was not yet accepted by the dead ancestors. His sons performed certain rituals before his spirit finally rested. Reiterating the same ideality, Reads (1970) writes that these were the acts performed by the living to cause the spirit of the dead to be settled in a place. The living had certain rites to carry out on behalf of the dead, which if omitted would bring the displeasure of the ancestors upon them. Some of these rituals include but not limited to intermittent wailing by the wife/wives of the deceased, the daughters and other relations. The traditional rite of Iwa Nkita Anya or Okwukwu, the eulogizing of the deceased by his wife/wives, children and other close relatives, the killing of goat, chicken/hen or any other livestock are all geared towards ushering the deceased into the land of the ancestors.

Notably, both the individual members of the deceased family and the community at large are involved in all these rituals. These funeral rituals are part of the manifest demonstration of mourning and irreparable loss of a close person. It is also believed that death causes dislocation of relationship both physically and spiritually, therefore the rites aim at reconnecting the dislocated relationship, though in wider portal. In Igbo tradition, children that have not performed second burial for their deceased parents are strictly prohibited from partaking in any food, drink or music whenever such burial ceremony is being performed for another person. These rites are what are considered in Igbo ontology as spiritual gate openers for the deceased, which also accelerate the spirit of the deceased admission into the cult of the ancestors. This will in turn restore the dislocated

balance in the natural order. Therefore, if these rites are not carefully performed, it will be considered as not only neglect but as a dishonour and effrontery to the particular dead person and by extension to the entire ancestors of the community. The consequence of such neglect or effrontery has always been dreadful and fatal mainly to the deceased family and to the community at large. Overtly, most of the funeral rites and rituals do not only aim at honouring the deceased but also to ward off the anger of the ancestors. As these rites and rituals facilitate the deceased admission into and peaceful repose in the great beyond, while the living community enjoys the peace and balance which is considered a gift from the ancestors. When there is harmonious relationship between the physical and spiritual world, then the people in this side of grave enjoy peace, prosperity and good health.

On account of this Okorie (1995) notes that from that moment the husband died, the widow is believed to be unclean and likely to contaminate herself and others. Therefore, no one touches her except her fellow widows, who are equally believed to be defiled. She is given a piece of stick to scratch herself in case of natural body irritation and palm oil chaff in order to reduce her uncleanliness. It is therefore a general belief among the Igbo people that all the relations of the deceased, especially the widow, who is the closest agnate enter into a natural state of impurity at the death of her husband, father, brother, son, daughter etc. thus, till the defilement is purified, every relation, especially the widow cannot touch anything or anybody with her bare hands. This ritual practice insulates the widow from further pollution and consequent attack of the “gods” and spirits of the land, who guide the moral horizon of the community. With such defilement occasioned by the death of her husband, it then becomes a taboo for her to feed herself, eat from the general family dining; hence her food is cooked separately with broken pots and served with broken bowls. Here she is fed with left hand by another widow. This practice serves dual purposes, one it insulates the widow from the attacks of the “gods” and spirits of the community. Two it makes the widow repugnant to the spirit of her deceased husband, which is lurking around, seeking to have the usual relationship with the wife. Thus if this practice is interpreted within the cultural context that gave birth to it, it paints a picture of care-given and protection, instead of oppression, de-humanization and inferiorization of the widow. The practice shows a community with a humane face and great empathy to the woman in a desperate situation.

In Igbo ontology, a wife is regarded as the closest person/companion to her husband. Thus, the close relationship binds both morally, spiritually and physically together that often if the ritual of separation is not properly conducted, the relationship will crisscross to the other side of the grave. Hence even at death, the man or the woman still regards the husband or/wife with jealous care and concern and often seeks to continue the normal relationship which he/she had always had when both were on this side of the plane. Therefore, Metuh (1978) surmises, in Igbo culture, who could be closer to the dead man than the wife? This fact made it necessary for many rituals to be performed to enable the man hands-off his wife or

wives. It is then suggestive that the unhygienic and awful personal appearance of the widow is simply a strategy or part of the overall efforts to make her look unattractive to the deceased husband. In the words of Tasie (2013), the overall aim of widowhood rites could therefore be summed up as to sever the ties between a dead husband and his living wife/wives. This practice is informed by the fact that there is this Igbo general belief that until the mourning period and its accompanying rituals is perfectly and fully performed, the spirit of the dead still prowls around the immediate physical environments to hunt the living and continue to perform his duties to his living relations. It is part of this ontological belief that warranted the widow to wearing pad and other weird ritual practices accompanying mourning in most part of the traditional Igbo society. Enunciating on this practice of wearing pad among the Isiokpo people of Ikwerre in River state, Tasie (2013) notes, that the demands of this period are very stringent for the widow and they are surrounded with innumerable regulations and taboos. These include dressing in pure black material, moving on bare feet, wearing pad as menstruating women do and wearing of tattered and uncombed hair. At the superficial level, these practices look bizarre and humiliating but unprejudiced contextual investigations on these issues reveal that all these are simply a ploy to inveigle the spirit of the dead man away from the widow through her unpleasant looks.

The tattered look of the widow is a ploy to make them appear unpleasant to the ghost spirit of their dead husband, who is still hovering around the homestead and may still want to continue to commune with them. The austere look of the widow and rejection of anything that gives pleasure and comfort is a ploy aimed at pacifying the vengeful ghost of the deceased to make his widow appear seriously pained at his demise. These rituals are carried out to liberate the widow from the influence of the dead husband and reintegrate her into the society to begin a normal life. As for Okorie (1995), the interpretation of the widowhood practices among the Igbo people should be sought in their concept of death. In his own words: The traditional concept of death is also an important fact in the widowhood practices...since traditionally, it is believed that the dead continue to participate in and influence the lives of the living, we saw in one area, where widows had to rub very hot mixture across their faces to expel the spirit of their departed husbands (Nzewi, 1989). From the discussion so far, one fact becomes prominent and that is that mourning in Igbo traditional society with its attendant rites and rituals is meant to protect the widow, preserve the community and maintain mutual harmony between this world and the world on the other side of the grave. Therefore, besides the widow, many other relations of the deceased, the men, children, other relations and friends come under varying degrees of cleansing and purification rituals and rites.

Notably, the Igbo traditional society provides norm and rules which constrain the men to mourn their wives and rigorously fulfill the mourning rites. Then with regard to wailing ritual that accompanies widowhood ritual, one notes that it is not

the reserve of the widow. Thus the sisters, children, brothers, other relations and friends of the deceased have a fair share of the wailing festival. In fact, in some occasions, there is somewhat manifest display of wailing among the deceased kinsfolk that a casual onlooker may misconstrue the entire panorama as a competition or fiesta. However, in such scenario, it is expected that the widow of the deceased will out-wail the other relatives in loudness, bitterness with touching elegies or eulogies. Further, the seclusion, rituals of purification and cleansing with all food restrictions are not the preserve of the widows, hence other relatives of the deceased at varying degrees join in tandem, so also the wearing of the mourning attire (Afigbo, 1989). The allegation by scholars of suffragettes' bent that widowhood rites and rituals are patriarchal manipulations of the widowhood ritual and rites against the women has been addressed by Tasié (2013) as he avers that the widowhood ritual and rites in African culture and among the Igbo people in particular is not limited to the women. However, the less stringent manner in which the men observe their own ritual is defined in Igbo sexual cosmology. Accordingly, Tasié notes that it is the preserve of the men to make sexual advances to the women in physical life existence and this belief is carried to the spiritual world on the other side of the grave, hence it will be an aberration for the ghost spirit of the deceased woman to make advances to her living husband. Therefore, the strict rites of separation undertaken by the women/widow as against the soft one taken by the men are explained by the general Igbo cosmology. However, Nzewi (1989) notes that in her research, she was informed that a man died after about three year of the death of the wife and the inquiry party reported that it was the dead wife that killed him out of jealousy. This is because the widower was making serious arrangement to get married to another woman without faithfully completing his mourning rituals and rites of separation. Thus, the ritual demands of widowhood are not made on the widow alone.

Conclusion

A clear understanding and sound hermeneutical discussions on Igbo traditional practices, especially widowhood must be sought within the Igbo cosmology and context. It is noted in this work that the motive behind all the mourning or rather widowhood rituals and rites is the protection and preservation of the community and the maintenance of spiritual congruence between the physical and spiritual words apart. Remarkably, widowhood ritual and rites are not meant to dehumanize any specie of humanity (man or woman) as both species are indispensable part of each other and as both play important but distinct roles in maintaining the ontological harmony that nature needs to operate freely and smoothly as to attain its selfhood. Be that as it may, it is undeniable that most widows complain of the somewhat obnoxious practices associated with the death and mourning of their deceased husbands. Besides, culture is dynamic and as such the Igbo ontological understanding of the universe, especially as it concerns a harmonious existence between the living and the dead could be revisited with the view to finding more globally acceptable means of hounouring one's deceased spouse as well as maintaining the ontological harmony for the wellbeing of all. Furthermore, most Igbo communities now profess Christianity, and as such, the Christian widowhood

practices could be adopted if not synthesized with some pristine Igbo practices for the benefits of all, both the living and the dead.

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