

Widows and Man-made Experiences in Anioma Culture Area of Delta State: A Socio-Religious Narrative

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Abstract

Widowhood practices abound in many cultures in Nigeria but regrettably, many of the widowhood practices are considered obnoxious and man-made especially among the Igbo of Anioma in Delta State Nigeria. The principal findings of this study indicated that in Anioma, widows experience very devastating challenges in their lives that some wonder why such negative experiences befall them. Such practices include forced moodiness, restriction of movement, in some cases dispossession of husband's property, subjection to ritual sexual intercourse (*Ajana ritual*). Others include 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. The researcher recommended a socio-religious process whereby the church should be involved in defending and ameliorating the plights of the widows. The women on their own should as well lead a common front in protecting their gender. In executing this research, however, the researcher adopted analytical method as well as the primary and secondary sources of data collection

Introduction

Some bitter and obnoxious widowhood practices abound in Anioma culture area of Delta state, Nigeria. These wicked widowhood practices and other obnoxious practices bedeviling the widows of Anioma are man-made and artificial in the sense that they are being perpetrated by some disgruntled elements in the society. These man-made/obnoxious practices have made the widows experience very devastating challenges in their lives that some have even lost their lives in the process, given that their late husbands' brothers have taken the advantage of the said cultures to marginalize and deny them access to the properties of their late husbands. Aside from the evils mated to the said widows, they seem not to have a voice in the society. As they struggle to feed and take care of their children, they are being forced to raise more children which they are not capable to cater for thereby increasing their woes.

The children of the said widows are the ones mostly hit by such practices. Those who inflict this hardship on the widows and their families are so doing for their selfish interests. They would cart away with their deceased brothers' assets and flee into oblivion. The situation leads to a shift in gender roles with a dramatic increase in the number of women heads of households. This happens because the widows after the death of their husbands and having nothing to rely on would fend for their families independently.

As the widows are being abandoned to their fate, they live in fear, poverty, deprivation, degradation, rape, dehumanization and so on. The Anioma widows are not different from any other African widow in terms of the numerous "hang over" the men and the society have about them. Widows in Anioma culture appear to be inferior to men due largely to their ascribed vulnerable conditions owing to their eloquent subjugations. Anioma culture is accentuated by socio-cultural orthodoxy and extreme suffering as regards to widowhood practices (Uchendu, 2009). The Anioma widows in spite of the violence in the area are still subjugated to an unassailable conditions, tending their children and even their immediate relatives. He further reports that the widows of Anioma have continued to suffer the effect of a forceful evasion of their late husbands landed properties. However, it is based on the above background that the issue of widowhood practice was investigated in Anioma.

Literature Review of Related Literature

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.

Every society has its own rites for the dead which affect the wife of the dead and the children in some cases. In Anioma, this unique phase of life is accompanied by certain socio-cultural practices which Nwoga (1998) referred to as:

Sets of expectations as to the actions and behaviours of the widow, actions by others towards the widow and rituals performed by or on behalf of the widow from the time of death of her husband. Later phase of these practices may include issues of inheritance, the state of the widow amid marriage or remarriage of the widow⁶.

Ore (1998) expressed that widowhood practices can be seen as a socio-cultural practices encompassing burial rites, mourning rituals, inheritance rights of the widows, her expected behavior towards others and other people's behavior towards her arising from the death of her husband. These practices according to Nwaogugu (1989) are culture-bound because they reflect the prevailing values of a given socio-cultural milieu. Adebayo (2014) lamented that the culture of the people is held higher and given prominence above the word of God. Umezina (2007) noted that although widowhood practices are common phenomena in Igboland/Africa, the intensity is not the same in every town. These cultural practices he further explained have portrayed the Anioma of Delta State, Nigeria in a very bad light, particularly regarding the treatment of women who have lost their life partner, breadwinner, confidant and husband, all rolled into one. This supports the statement of Foener and Cozart (1988) who lamented that these practices make widowhood exhaustive and traumatic and capable of making the widow lose focus. Thus the widow is frightened, lonely and grieving excessively.

In Anioma culture, widowhood practice is exclusive preserve for widows, not widowers. Aguamgu (2007) observed that a widower has no traditionally laid down laws governing his mourning rites. This period which is supposed to be quite and private time as the widow strives to accept her loss has been turned into a period of agony, anxiety, pain and insecurity for the widow in Anioma. This is because it is usually a period the widow is subjected to psychological, social, physical and emotional torture as a result of her bereavement.

Culturally in Anioma, widowhood burial rites involve varying degrees of physical hardship, deprivation, ritual contamination, emotional instability, and socio-economic and psychological trauma. Ngwoke (2015) underscores widowhood practices in some parts of Anioma area in Delta state, Nigeria as dehumanizing rites and rituals that widows are mandated to follow such as bathing in the river at the middle of the nights, staying indoors for a couple of months, not taking their baths for some days amidst other stringent rules attached to widowhood practice. Agu (2018) maintains that widowhood has appeared to be the beginning of life-long oppression and misery for women. For Clarke (2012), it entails the observance of certain rites by women that differ from culture in Nigeria. Although reduced in some of the Igbo-speaking South-eastern Nigeria but still in place at some interior Anioma villages like Isheagu, a woman is expected to wail and cry loudly at her husband's death, show a deep sense of grief, cry aloud morning and night. The hairs on her head and body which are compulsorily shaved. (Uzoho, 2014)

Arinze & Anyaogu (2011) stated that in some areas of Anioma, it is demanded that the widow sleeps with the high priest of a deity to separate herself from the spirit of the dead husband as a mark of purification. The widow is made to sit at a place on a chair or on the floor from morning till evening. She is not allowed to shake hands, and compulsorily undergoes twenty-eight days of seclusion without stepping out of her compound thereafter she settles for additional two or five months of mourning depending on the particular cultural observances. The dress during this period is either black or white depending on the family and religious inclination (Nwankwo.2015). A. Igbokwe (personal communication August 5, 2022) stated that in Anioma culture, the widow is not allowed to see the corpse of her husband or eat the food cooked for the burial rites of her husband. This he maintained, have a belief as passed down from generation to assist with movement of the husband's spirits and protect the living from further harm. As painful as it is, these obnoxious practices are perpetrated on the widow by women called *umuada* which are daughters of the deceased immediate and extended families married to other families.

Nwandu (2009) maintains that in Anioma culture like other Igbo traditional practice, widows, especially those without sons are excluded from land ownership which has left many of them destitute after their husbands' death. The identified gap in the above literature reviewed is that nothing much has been raised as solutions to the problem under study as regards to ameliorating the plights of the widows in Igbo/Anioma Land. That is the reason for this research so as to proffer some lasting solutions to the widowhood subjugations.

The Effect of Male Dominance and Patriarchy on the Widowhood Practices

Male dominance and patriarchy primarily influence the practices of widowhood and the inferior status of women in society. Men usually remarry shortly after the death of their wives while women mourn for months and are subject to inhumane torture. In addition, the act of bride price payment by men has made them regard women as commodities exchanged for material things. In most Igbo communities, women are excluded from the decision-

making process both in their parental and matrimonial homes which has a great influence on the oppression of widows. (Nmah, 2008; Ndiokwere, 1995; and Barrett, 1970). Women's lack of economic freedom and inability to fend for themselves make them vulnerable to oppression and exploitation by in-laws, clans, village heads, or villagers. Often hiding under the custom and traditions, these people subject women to unwholesome practices which include demanding the late husband's properties and most cases selling off some in the name of raising funds for the burial of the deceased. With widowhood, many women lose their social status. Some widowhood practice in Anioma culture with its imposition of restrictive and extensive mourning, seclusion, and mandatory dress codes have great implications for the socio-economic status of widows.

Widows around Africa face loss, trauma, discrimination, and stigma by their peers, families, communities, and societies. In addition to the aforementioned, they also have to sustain themselves financially. The burden is doubled if they have children to take care of. In some Igbo communities as reported by Osondu (2022), that harmful widowhood practices are still going on. The ill treatments range from denial of rights, to banishment from communities for flimsy reasons. From Investigations conducted in some Anioma communities like; Igbanke, Igbodo, Igbuku, Illah, Isa-Ogwashi, Iselegu, Isheagu, Isikiti-Ishiagu, Issele-Azagba, Issele-Mkpitime, Issele-Uku, Isumpe, Kwale, Mbiri, Ndemiri, and Abbi unwholesome widowhood practice of forcing a widow to shave her hair in honour of their deceased husbands and in professing their love for their dead husbands, is still in practice.

However, some Anioma communities have stopped or modernized some of the practices like reducing the mourning period for a widow to enable her continue with her business or job. Moreover, the issue of brothers' in-law pestering a widow to give them details of her husband's property is also still common in most Anioma communities. There was a case of a situation in Issele-Uku where, after the burial ceremony of a woman's husband, she had to go to the city because she is a civil servant. The next thing she heard was that her late husband's elder brother had forcefully taken over her husband's house and moved her family into the house on the argument that a dead man does not own property. There was also the case of the brothers of the late husband of a certain widow in Isheagu whose properties was confiscated by her late brothers' husbands, leaving the widow and her six children with nothing.

Widowhood Experiences in Anioma

Though, it may sound false but alas it is true that the heavy burden attendant to Igbo widow or more specifically the Anioma widows has no span. Does the widow have no child, the incidence of the demise of the husband and evil machinations of the kindred falls squarely on the confused widow, and does she have children, the plots against the tender growing fatherless aim at their mother like arrows on her ribs. The worst thing is that at meetings where the kindred will be plotting against the bereaved, culturally, no woman, not to talk of the widow will be allowed to attend. Rarely will the male offspring of the man be of age to talk even when permitted to be in attendance. In short, the widow is denied a voice. Assembling *Umuada* if they be God-fearing unfortunately takes a time lag.

Twenty-nine years after the death of her husband, O.S Deborah (personal communication, August 8, 2023) shared her ugly experience with four children (Three boys and a girl) of how she was ousted from the very compound she was married into in a fetish manner. Such is the plight of this testifier- staying outside without a mango tree or coconut tree to shelter her, children and grandchildren for four years. Is that not horrible? She has refused to go to the police, army, human right, organization or to the native doctor. Rather she made timely report to her church (Local and Diocesan). However, nothing tangible was done by the church she confided in. Up till now, she is still waiting on the miraculous never-failing God.

The widow does not say or decide her fate. The experience is devastating no matter one's relationship with the late husband. A widow from Isheagu who does not want his identity disclosed narrated her ordeal thus:

My story started on the 31st of January, 2003 when my husband suddenly took ill and died exactly one week later on 7/2/2003 at UNTH Enugu. I thought the world has come to an end but I thank God for my first son who was there for me. After the clearance and settling of his bills at Enugu before the corpse was taken to the morque, my husband's cousin requested for the death certificate but my son refused to give him that. He turned blue and became antagonistic and was ever ready to fight. On arriving Isheagu on Saturday morning the first call I received was from my husband's other cousin whowarned that I should not sign anything if there was need for anything to be signed. It should be taken to the patriarch of the family who does not know that my husband has died. Until the date the burial was fixed no one related to my husband visited. Shortly before the burial I was invited to Onitsha by his relations and I was asked how much he had in his bank account and unfortunately he had nothing in his account. He was even owing the bank because he took a loan of N400,000 in November 2002 and died in February 2003. They had earlier accused me of killing him and because of the loan he was owing the bank. I

wondered why I should kill him. They asked how much the university where my husband had earlier worked was bringing for the burial and warned that whatever I presented to the visitors that they must partake of it. Meanwhile none of them gave me kobo and were not ready to assist me financially. They never thought of the large family their brother left behind. The immediate younger was busy pursuing my husband's benefit because his records at personnel showed that he was the next of kin. My husband forgot to update his records. He was shuttling from Onitsha to Nsukka monitoring when the benefits would be ready. He never visited us even for one day. he made every effort but failed because God of the widows was in absolute control. When he discovered that the benefit has been paid without his knowledge he became furious and decided to seize the house my husband has in the village. To his greatest surprise I did not ask him about it and for eleven years he was collecting the rent, he thought I would come fighting, but I ignored him. My husband's death drew me nearer to God and I became matured overnight. I didn't know a lot of things when he was alive but his death opened my eyes. All those who were visiting, coming to stay with us when he was alive turned their backs on us not even one of them remembered us. One of his relations who thought that I should succumb to his orders got disappointed when he discovered that I was not ready to sleep with him. He went about saying all manner of things about me. I could only reply to what I wanted to answer to because whatever labels they gave to me no longer mattered because God is there for me. On 2005, my first daughter got married and my husband's kinsmen took what would have been given to me as the mother of the bride. I ignored them and when they wanted to repeat it in 2008 when my second girl was getting married I stood my ground that it won't be repeated. They called me names but it never mattered to me. In 2013 when one of my sons wanted to marry they insisted that he must bring the girl to their individual homes. A task that was almost impossible for him to accomplish, because he refused to take the bride to their homes they refused to accompany him to the bride's family even after pleading with them. God made a name for himself and shamed the devil. They were ready to fight any one who wanted to help the family because to them I did not share my husband's benefit with anyone. They avoided me as one who has a terrible disease. No matter what you do the stigma is there but God promised to give me a new name by which I will be known and surely He will rewrite my story.

Consequently, another respondent who is a widow from Ndokwa narrated her ordeal (personal communication 17th February, 2023) thus:

My husband died in the year 2010. When he was still sick and we were in the hospital, his brother went and ransacked our house and took away all his documents. My husband acquired a lot of properties before he died. After his death, Ifeanyi started selling his properties not minding that I had 5 children for their late brother. He sold one land of my husband (personal land) N200,000 and brought only N14,500 and I rejected it. Now he has claimed our entire house and my shop in the market. He entered into his father's house and seized another document and we got information that he has sold the 2nd land. He is also in possession of my late husband's bank account which my 1st son is his next of kin. He wanted to use the boy to go and collect the money but I refused.

The above horrible experiences have obviously revealed that widowhood is an awful experience, the worst thing one should wish his or her worst enemy. To lose a life partner, particularly a husband, is usually traumatic. This is because it leaves the woman in vulnerable situation especially where she had a very intimate relationship with the husband. It is always the woman that is subjected to dehumanizing and degrading treatments by way of customs and traditions.

The Women's Roles and Quest for Freedom

The Igbo people of Nigeria always go to their women "Umuada" (daughters of the village) as a last resort when they are faced with serious conflicts or disputes of any sort, and were unable to resolve the situation. The matter was often placed before the daughters of the village. These daughters were and are still known to have very patiently heard the two sides and given prudent judgment. It is also known that once they have given a ruling on a particular controversy, the matter is deemed closed. They also take decision on issues which concerned them as a gender. If a woman is observed to be failing in her duties, especially in her traditional female role as a wife and mother, the daughters of the extended family would usually come together and caution the culprit. If she does not heed their warning, then they reserve the right to fine her. This fine would usually range from kolanuts, palm wine to money.

The (daughters of the land) "Umuada" have thus become a formidable force, through which women fight for the welfare of themselves and of the general public, while members draw considerable strength and support from one another. In some cases, when an offender displays some considerable obstinacy, these daughters who are also

recognized as her (offender's) husbands could take her back to her parents and could authorize the man involved to marry another wife.

On the other hand, if a man is found to be cruel to his wife, the daughters of the extended family would come together and speak very seriously with him while they recount to him his duties towards his wife. If he continues to be nasty, they would come around and tell his wife to stop cooking for him. In addition, they would impose a levy on the man. Commenting on the role of Umuada, Green (2018) writes:

"These women acted as political pressure groups in their natal villages in order to achieve objectives. They stopped quarrels and prevented wars. So powerful was their reputation that their villages had to reckon them and their possible reaction to every major decision"⁶.

From the above cited examples, it would be realized that the Igbo woman played significant socio-political role during all three main developmental stages of her society: pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras. It is this significant role which gives her the liberty she enjoys, it is the same significance which made it possible for her in the past to embark on the confrontations she had with British colonial authority, a symbol of patriarchal political and economic oppression.

The Anioma women can employ these numerous strategies which the woman has for combating male domination and widowhood subjugation and for standing their ground in the tussle for status quo. These methods include the use of organized action to build the countervailing power. This includes several women's organization which by and large have political affiliation. Through such groups, while demonstrating to all that they are capable politicians as they are remarkable wives and mothers, they seek to acquire respect and prestige on the one hand and freedom from subjugation and denigration in their society on the other. This type of organization in Zambia has made notable contributions towards the improvement of the position of the Zambian woman. The African National Congress Women's League has handled specific issues concerning the women and widows and even though it has not been particularly successful, it has demonstrated its combative spirit, and has created a significant impression on the minds of the people.

Conclusion

The widows need to be protected. In all, the strategies to be adopted in combating the problems of widowhood subjugation and male dominance in Anioma 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 overturning 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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