

THE CHALLENGES OF WIDOWHOOD PRACTICES IN OGBARU LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF ANAMBRA STATE

Festus C. Ajeli

Department of History and International Studies,
Nwafor Orizu College of Education Nsugbe, Anambra State
festus@gmail.com

Abstract

Thus a widow is a woman who lost her husband to death. Generally, in Africa, being a widow is a daunting experience. The woman who lost her husband is meant to pass through many demeaning ordeals in the hands of the relatives, friends and family of the deceased. The widow is meant to observe most of the harmful traditional practices as obtained in her husband's community or clan. In Ogbaru local government, though widows are not that badly treated in some notable communities, yet the remnants of some of this obnoxious cultural practices on widowhood is still prevalent. This study is necessary as it will bring to the knowledge of the general public the challenges that widows pass through in our environment because of some cultural practices which is due to be phased out in the present century.

Keywords: Widowhood, Ogbaru Local Government, Anambra State

Introduction

Widowhood is the state or period of being a widow or widower. It is a period when a man or woman who is legally married lost his or her partner. Thus a widow is a woman who lost her husband to death. Generally, in Africa, being a widow is a daunting experience. The woman who lost her husband is meant to pass through many demeaning ordeals in the hands of the relatives, friends and family of the deceased. The widow is meant to observe most of the harmful traditional practices as obtained in her husband's community or clan. Some of the practices widows pass through on the loss of their husband are, shaving of hair on their head, drinking of remains of bath water used to wash the husband's corpses, mourn her husband's death for about three to twelve months depending on the ethnic group, right of inheritance as women do not have right to inherit land or property, widows are not allowed to bathe, clean their surrounding during mourning period, on rare cases bath once a day.

In Ogaru local government, though widows are not that badly treated in some notable communities, yet the remnants of some of this obnoxious cultural practices on widowhood is still prevalent. These practices include shaving of hair, restraining of the widow from coming out from her room to see her visitors, being confined in the room for one month, denial of husband's properties by her husband relatives as well as compelling the widow to marry any of her husband's relative (nkuchi) who desires her at the detriment of the widows' choice.

Sometimes, in the case of envy, some widows are accused of killing their husbands when it was clear the husband died of a known illness. They accuse the widow for ill-treating her husband when he was sick, not taking care of him appropriately that made him to die and at other times made her to take an oath of innocence on the death of her husband. To an extent this treatment has become a major challenge that widows face after the demise of their spouse which have in many cases affected widows emotionally, physically, psychologically, culturally and socially. This paper is an x-ray on the challenges of widowhood practices on women in Ogaru local government area of Anambra state. On many occasions, widows dies few months after the death of their husbands because of emotional break down and shock as they assume they cannot withstand the type of ill-treatment to be meted on them after their husband's burial especially when they listen to other widow's testimonies.

This study is necessary as it will bring to the knowledge of the general public the challenges that widows pass through in our environment because of some cultural practices which is due to be phased out in the present century.

Overview of widowhood practices in south eastern part of Nigeria

It is basically in the context of the social values, norms and beliefs from which they are derived that we can begin to understand how widowhood practices came into existence and what functions they performed or still perform. In some communities in the south east such as Ogwuaniocha widowhood begin as soon as the husband of the widow dies while in some communities' widowhood begin after the burial. In Ogaru certain ritual practices are performed to separate the woman from her husband and to purify the woman from any relationship that he had with his late husband.

Before the burial, and immediately after the burial, up to seven to fourteen weeks while funeral visits is still taking place, the widow is secluded in a most restricted manner. Ubesie (1978) described this as *ino na nso*. This is a period

when a widow is shielded from public appearance for certain period. In Ogbaru communities it usually lasts for one month while mourning period (*iri uju*) lasts for six months to one year. According to Korie (1996) ritual seclusion and general isolation of the widow for a certain period from the community or village is a widespread practice in Africa, but its intensity and duration varies. In the Islamized communities of West Africa, this period was known as *iddat* or *idda* (the period of continence between being widowed and being allowed to remarry if a widow were so minded and still marriageable) (Afigbo, 1989).

In concurring with the above, Trimmingham (1959) observes that in Islamic law the widow should observe *idda* for three periods of legal purity, or four months, ten days during which she may not remarry. A slave wife observes half the period. If the widow is pregnant the period is extended till her delivery. Custom varies slightly. In some places, it is four moons; in Hausa land some five months, others 130 days while in others it is 122 days. But in Ogbaru it usually lasts for one month after which the widow begins to associate with people, goes to market and commences daily activities for the sustenance of her family.

Widowhood during and after burial

The widow faces a lot of challenges during and after the burial of her husband. On the news that her husband is dead and following her moment of grief, she is confined in a room where she remains until the time of burial. This method is application if the husband is to be buried immediately without the normal burial rites after which she will be allowed some freedom. During this period, the widow is accompanied by other women and friends who came to console her.

Speaking on why a widow is confined in the room for that moment of grief with some people, Nduka (2018) maintains that the aim was to rescue the widow from taking any regrettable action against herself due to shock from the news of her husband's death. According to him, a widow may decide to take her life or if she remembers that her continued stay in the family without her husband will be regrettable. She is therefore, protected from such imminent tragedy.

During the burial, the widow in some cases were not allowed to come close to her husband's grave or while some may be denied the right to bid their husband 'bond' farewell by depositing sand into his grave also known as dust-to-dust ritual. This practice has become a controversial issue in our community today especially between Christians and none Christians alike. Okafor (2019) contends that the essence of depositing sand on the grave of the deceased husband is to renew the bond of relationship between her and her husband to the end of age. But on why the simple dust to dust ritual on the man's grave turns to be a

serious problem Okoye (2017) observes that why the non-Christians oppose this religious belief of depositing sand on the grave is because it is believed that the spirit of the dead husband will hunt any man who wants to take possession of his wife and thus the consequence would be grave for the victim. Thus the non-Christians see the belief as a restriction of their freedom of association and choice.

Again, during the burial and after, till a one-month period, the woman's hair is shaved, she cannot cook, cannot take her bath by herself and cannot appear in public places. This practice of seclusion did not only contravene the widow's right of freedom of association and movement but also proves hazardous to her health as not taking her bath for a long time may lead her to contracting an illness. This challenge has made some widows to develop high blood pressure on the news of their husband's death when they think of what will befall them from that period onwards.

Major forms of Widowhood Practices in Ogbaruland

Generally, these harmful widowhood practices as obtained in Nigeria and Ogbaruland include, shaving of hairs. This practice includes shaving even the pubic hairs. Sometimes broken bottle are used for shaving the hair on her head and razor for the pubic hair. Before the present century, the widow's hair is shaved with certain designs on her head after scrapping off the hairs. Ilozue (2007) was of the view that the significance of this design is that, since the husband is dead, there is nobody to beautify her hair for, at least for a period of time. This goes to buttress our point that some widow passes on few months after the demise of their husband as a result of their inability to cope with this obnoxious practices that will befall them soon after their husbands' dies.

Another practice that is harmful to the widow as earlier noted is the practice of the widow not taking her bath for a number of days. It is general maxim that cleanliness is next to godliness. Neglecting a personal appearance and hygiene is an invitation to ill health especially among the womenfolk. The widow will be forced to stay for a number of days without taking her bath. This practice is simply unspeakable, unimaginable and honestly cruel, for a woman that just lost a husband, who needs pity and not punishment. In an interview with Ekemma in Ossomala, an old woman and a widow, she noted that the practice is more of a punishment than that of a cultural practice since culture are meant to help the people improve and live their lives in a way that encourage community and personal upliftment, (Ekemma, 2010).

Widows are also compelled to wear black or white clothes. This simply suggest that widow is in mourning mood and also make her un-attractive and remind everybody that her husband is dead. When the researcher sought to know why the widow is subjected to all these, as if she was the one that killed her husband. An informant Okoyeagu Udenze, says that in Igbo tradition, a widow is meant to loose every right she has since her husband was her only possession and when her husband dies, she has lost all. But in this modern time, especially in Ogbaru women are allowed to choose the type of material to wear when mourning her husband.

Sitting and sleeping on the floor or mat is yet another practice which the widows had to pass through in Ogbaru traditional setting. This is meant to inform the woman that the death of her husband meant her dethronement. Because a woman by marriage becomes absorbed into the husband's family and is recognised by her role as a wife, therefore, the loss of her position and entitlements in the family, hence, the sitting on the floor or mat, (Akinbi: 2015).

A widow is also made to swear with her husband's corpse to prove her innocence over the death of her husband. If a woman is being suspected of having a hand in the death of her husband, she is meant to swear with her corpse and prove she is innocent. But we have seen occasions where some mischievous men are behind the plan against the widow as they have something against the widow one way or the other. According to Nzewi (1981) once a man dies, the in-laws immediately accuse the wife and ask her to confess to the killing, and to prove her innocence, she must be made to drink the water used in bathing the corpse of the late husband. If she refuses, obviously, she killed the husband. Therefore, she must be punished; or the widow crosses the husband's coffin three times, if she dies before the mourning period is over, she will be thrown into the evil forest because her death confirms her as the murderer.

Seclusion and general isolation of the widows for a certain period from the community is a widespread practice in Africa. In most parts of the Igbo society, the early parts of this period are usually rigorous. During the first 28 days, the widow is not allowed to go anywhere; certain rituals must be performed at the expiration of the 28 days before the widow can perform normal activities. Umejesie (2002) maintains that at this time, the widow is regarded as unclean. To make matters worse for the widows, every movable items are often transported homewards by the in-laws, leaving the poor widow empty handed. They believe that every asset belongs to the man.

Why widowhood practice is still in prevalent

One of the reasons adduced for the continued existence of the obnoxious widowhood practices is failure of men to write their will and share their properties to their families. Husbands do not see any need of writing their will so as to share their property to their families in case of death and if a woman suggest that to his husband, it would mean to the man that the woman wants to kill him and inherit his properties. That will be another trouble for the woman. Lack of any written will pertaining to inheritance of properties will place the wife at a disadvantaged position since the in-laws would want to confiscate their brother's properties, and evict her from the family house.

Again, widowhood practices is still prevalent because of high rate of illiteracy. Lack of education by most women makes them vulnerable to these widowhood practices. Moreover, there are still some part of the country that do not strongly believe in educating girls. When a woman is educated and enlightened she would not allow herself to be abused and maltreated as a widow in such degrading and dehumanizing manner.

Another important reason for the prevalence is superstitious beliefs. There is wide-spread belief in African societies especially in the riverine area of Ogbaru that if this practices were not observed, the spirit of the dead man will not have rest, instead his soul will be wandering around and in some cases the dead man's spirit will bring misfortune on the community. Thus, the widow has to go through all these widowhood practices to appease the spirit of the dead.

Idleness is also a militating factor. In a situation where wives depend on their husband for their overall survival and death suddenly struck, a state of confusion will be created and the woman involved will be disappointed. This obviously placed them at abject poverty level after the death of their husbands as other members of the extended family would want to lay claim to the deceased husband's properties. If women are economically empowered, they would be able to stand up and refuse to compromise to these obnoxious widowhood practices and in fact if they know that the woman does not depend on her husband, they will not think of claiming everything because the woman will also have some properties among the husbands' own.

Another important factor for the prevalence of this practices is the absence of respect for the womenfolk. Like elsewhere, Ogbaru people view women as too inferior and no match for men. Hence the belief that everything belongs to the man even when that property was acquired by the woman while in the man's house. Therefore, the world belonged to the men. This belief makes the in-laws to treat the wife without respect when the husband dies.

Way forward

There is need for government to make a legislation prohibiting all the obnoxious widowhood practices. This especially will be geared towards extricating widows from all sort of sufferings associated with widowhood and help them contribute meaningfully in their husband's family since they will not assume that whatever they acquire will be confiscated by their husband's family as their brother's property.

Again, girl-child education should be made compulsory in Nigeria to empower the women with knowledge of the obnoxious practice and encourage them to work hard and break the barrier and keep her in-laws away from her even at the death of her husband in places where they are being discountenanced in Nigeria. This will go a long way to furnish women with their rights and make them to reject barbaric customs and practices which is detrimental to the growth and development of womanhood.

The women folk should be empowered economically by giving them viable jobs that will make them not to depend solely on their husbands. Women nowadays take up employment and do better than men in their area of endeavour (Sheppard: 1989). Thus, at present women are having more access to education and are becoming economically independent more than it was in the traditional societies.

Finally, husbands are encouraged to make adequate provision for their wives and children in the case of eventualities. This will take the form of will or making his kinsmen know about his intentions towards his family. If this is done, a lot of negative experiences would be averted and peace enthroned at the death of the husband.

Conclusion

This paper therefore concludes that to address the challenges emanating from widowhood practices in Nigeria especially in Ogbaru local government, communities in Ogbaru local government should ensure that all these obnoxious practices are replaced with best practices to enhance peaceful co-existence among members of the family. Men should also note that with what measure you give; shall be the measure you will receive. When you subject another man's wife to unnecessary wickedness, tomorrow might be the turn of your wife and she will pay the price. Although in this contemporary time, factors like modernization, education, involvement in industrial and other bureaucratic jobs, Christianity and high level of exposure of the women have gone a long way in minimizing most of these harmful widowhood practices.

Therefore, the economic empowerment of the Nigerian women (widows), among other recommendations, is advocated to liberate the women folk from these harmful widowhood practices.

References

- Afigbo, A. E. (1989) 'Widowhood practices in Africa; a preliminary survey and analysis'. Paper presented at the workshop "Widowhood practices in Imo state". June 6.
- Akinbi, Joseph O, (2015) Widowhood practices in some Nigerian societies: a retrospective examination; *International journal of humanities and social science* Vol. 5, No. 4.
- Azodo, Nkiruka. "Personal interview". 1 June. 2019.
- Ekemma, Nwayioyibo. "Personal interview". 1 June. 2019.
- Ilozue, U.A. (2007) The predicament of Nigerian widows: a case study of widows in Lagos state", Unpublished B.A. long essay, Department of History and Diplomatic Studies, OOU, Ago-Iwoye, Nigeria,
- Korie J.C (1996) Widowhood among the Igbo of eastern Nigeria. M.A thesis.
- Okoye, Leo. "Personal interview". 10 August. 2017.
- Okafor Azuka. "Personal interview". 15 June. 2019.
- Nduka Onyeibo. "Personal interview". 15 June. 2019.
- Nzewi, D. (1981) "Widowhood practices: a female perspective," a paper presented at a workshop on widowhood practices in Imo State, Nigeria, June, 6-7.
- Trimmingham, J. S. (1959) Islam in West Africa. Ibadan: Oxford University Press.
- Umezina, Anecheli. "Personal interview". 2 October. 2018.
- Ubesie, T. (1978) Odinala ndi Igbo, Ibadan: Oxford University Press.
- Umejesie, I. (2002) Angelina: the story of African widow, Aba, Oxford Publishers.