

The Anglican Church and Widowhood Rites in Igboland

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Abstract

The work centres on the Anglican Church and Widowhood Rites in Igboland. Widowhood is a condition in which a woman lost her husband by death. It is a state in which a woman or widow has lost her husband by death and has not remarried. The death of a man automatically plunges his wife into widowhood. Widowhood rites pose ordeal which every widow must pass through at the demise of her husband. In a patriarchal society, widows are subjected to inhuman treatment at the death of their husbands. Widowhood rites thrive in a society where there is suspicion of widow over the death of her late husband. The church equipped with pastoral care is saddled with the responsibility of alleviating the plight of widows in the society. Therefore, the work examined the role of Anglican Church in alleviating the plight of widows in Igboland. The researcher collected data through primary source like observation and secondary sources which consist of books. It used phenomenological approach. It was descriptive and analytical. The writer discovered that the church has not addressed the major challenges that confront the widows which include, psychological trauma, anxiety, stigmatization, loneliness, poverty, expensive burial ceremonies, low self esteem that are associated with widowhood. There is need for the church to teach her members that death is both inevitable and natural. The widows should be given assurance through teaching that non-observance of widowhood rites does not attract the wrath of their late husbands.

Keywords: Marriage, Widowhood, Death and Church

1 Introduction

The high rate of widowhood rites in Igboland is a source of anxiety and stress to the widows that struggle to adjust to life. There is an increasing number of widows due to wars, ethnic conflicts, epidemics (HIV/AIDS), disease, hunger, inadequate medical treatment, wars, religious crisis and natural disasters (Kunhiyop, 2008:259). Widows are the most vulnerable in the society as a result of the death of their husbands. The existence of widowhood rites despite modernity, science and technology, Christianity and western culture is a clear indication that the church has not done enough to eradicate widowhood rites. This led Phiri (1997:51) to observe that “the position of the African widow is pathetic, as she goes through dehumanizing rituals. Unfortunately, modernization and Christianity have not done much for the African widow”. It must be stated that any church that glosses over the needs of the society in the 21st century stands the risk of being declared moribund, irrelevant and irresponsible. It seems that the church has not realized that mission and evangelism are channels of good news to the poor, particularly, widows. There is no doubt that it is an unquenchable desire of widows to be liberated from the shackles of widowhood, so that they can benefit from the *koinonia* and *diakonia* which the church is called to carry-out in an oppressive and hostile society in which the widows find themselves. The work examined the role of the church in alleviating the plight of widows with the aim of sensitizing the church to see the necessity of abolishing widowhood rites in Igboland.

1.1 Clarification of Terms

There is the necessity to clarify the terms so that they can be more comprehensive.

Marriage

Marriage marks the beginning of matrimonial relationship between a man and a woman. Nnachi (2011:2) opines that marriage is a union between a man and a woman who are sexual mates. It is ordained by God for the purpose of companionship. Agha (2003:97) asserts that marriage is ordained by God for procreation. It is a means through which humanity fulfills the divine command of multiplying and replenishing the earth. According to Igbo (2011:31), marriage is a legal union of man and woman who are husband and wife. It is an enduring relationship between husband and wife. Haselbarth (1976:70) states that marriage is a divine institution. It is an intimate oneness of an adult male and female.

Widowhood

According to Webster’s New Encyclopedic Dictionary, the term widow is derived from old English word *Wuduwe* and Latin word *Videre* both mean to separate. Literally, a widow means a woman who has separated from her husband as a result of the death of her husband. Agumagu (2007:16) avers that a widow is a woman who has lost her husband by death and has not remarried. Townsend (1995:891) intones that a widow is a woman whose marriage partner is dead and who has not remarried. Nnachi and Nnubia (2011:146-147) maintains that widowhood means the condition in which a woman finds herself at the death of her husband.

Webster's New Encyclopedic Dictionary maintains that widowhood is a state of being a widow. It is a period in which a woman remains a widow. Widowhood consists of the position in which a woman occupies at the loss of her husband.

Death

Death is inevitable in every society. Okoli (2008:47) posits that death "is the separation of the soul from the body. The body ceases to function and return to the dust by means of this separation". It is a means through which human soul returns to his maker. Onwurah (1999:158) points out that death is a transmutation of man from the physical world to the spirit world, from which he acts as an overseer of his family. Death is not a cessation of life, rather it is a continuation of life in the spirit world. According to Iwuagwu (1998:175), death is not a natural occurrence. It does not occur by accident. Death is attributed to other sources other than natural occurrence. Every death must have a cause.

Church

Dike (2015:2) quips that the Old Testament words for church are *Qahal and Edna* meaning people that are called out and the synagogue respectively. Obilo (2007:21) states that church doubles as both Assembly of God's people and the place of worship. Aluko (2002:106) insists that church is derived from the two Greek words *Ek* which means out of and *Kaleo* meaning to call. Therefore, church is an organized assembly that is properly called out for worship. Sowale (2003:2) argues that church means a local congregation and not ordinary building or house of God. Church is a congregation of Christians who are summoned to praise and worship the Lord. It is an Assembly of Christians who is called to serve God and humanity.

1.1.1 Theoretical Framework

The work used structural-functionalist theory. This theory was propounded by Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. However, it was popularized by August Comte and Emile Durkheim. It was Durkheim who used the structural-functionalist theory to explain the solidarity, consensus, order and stability in the society. The theory focuses mainly on social order and stability in the society. It should be noted that structural-functionalist theory emphasizes on the contribution of sub-units of the society to the maintenance of social order and stability of the larger unit. It also considers the interaction or functional dependence among the sub-units (Igbo and Anugwom, 2011:13).

Organismic Theory

It is an arm of structural-functionalist theory. This theory holds that the society can be compared with a biological organism. The human society like a biological organism is made up of interrelated parts. Biological organism maintains itself through the interdependence of the various units (Igbo and Anugwom, 2011:14). This theory is adopted on the basis that family is the smallest unit of the society. It is believed that any disruption of the orderliness in the family will automatically affect other units. Therefore, family uses widowhood rites to restore breach of order caused by death in the family. Again, women traditionally depend on their husbands for their means of livelihood. This accounts for the suffering widows pass through at the death of their husbands.

1.1.2 Widowhood Rites in Igboland

To say that widows pass through excruciating pains at the death of their husbands is to state the obvious. Ihezue (1972:69) avers that widowhood is detestable and terrifying not as a result of the woman's loss of a companion, a friend, a bread-winner, a head of the family and father but on the grounds of indignity, degradation and poverty that are associated with widowhood rites. The inhuman treatment takes place before, during and after the burial ceremonies of their late husbands.

Immediately a woman has lost her husband, she is secluded for 28 days which is known as *Ino na nso*. The widow within this period is forbidden from taking her bath and must sit on the ground. She is not allowed to eat with the family members and her food must be cooked by a widow. The widow eats with broken pots and plates which must be disposed at the end of the seclusion. She is not allowed to scratch her body with bare hand. Rather, she uses brooms or knife to avoid further pollution of the rest of her body (Nnachi and Nnubia, 2011:152-153). It is believed that the widow is polluted by the death of her husband. Therefore, to avoid polluting others, she must be secluded.

Widowhood rites inconvenience widows at a time they need comfort and consolation most. Widows are prohibited from wearing attractive cloths other than black cloths. They are not allowed to attend social gatherings and should not shake hands with people. They are forbidden from greeting people with a smile and

should not take snaps. The widows sleep on *Okpoabo* (Rafia bed) and they have to stay indoors. In a case where there is suspicion that the widow is responsible for her late husband's death, she is locked up with the corpse (Ihezue, 1972:69, Nnachi, 2011:181). In most cases, she is compelled to drink the water used to wash her late husband's corpse in order to prove her innocence. Many innocent widows have passed through this ugly experience.

In Igboland, widows are not permitted to inherit their late husband's property. This is based on the belief that women are chattels of their husbands. Therefore, widows do not have right to inherit their late husband's property, rather they are inherited through levirate marriage *Ikuchi Nwanyi*. The widowhood rites encourage the sharing of widows alongside with the property of their husbands by the brothers' in-law. Widows cannot inherit their deceased husbands' landed property, economic trees, houses and so on unless they have grown up sons that are entitled to inherit their fathers' property. This practice has deprived widows a lot (Agumagu, 2007:16, Orabueze, 2012:51). The deprivation of widows of the right to inherit their late husbands' property becomes tragic where both men and women are predominantly farmers. Widowhood rites have great consequences on the widows that are struggling to adjust to the new status. Akam (1995:161) describes the situation of widows thus; "the widow surrounded by orphans whose daddy is gone; draped in rags, she is alone in a crowd, with bony and sunk-in-cheeks and cracked lips....". In fact, she is a shadow of herself. Widows pass through psychological trauma. Some of the psychological problems they pass through as a result of widowhood rites include fear, rage, anger, anxiety and feeling of destabilization. The widows are faced with the problems of emptiness, pressure of adjusting to live alone, making unilateral decisions and learning to be singles again. All these experiences result to stress that degenerates to physical and nervous pressure like body heat, rapid heart beat, migraine, sleeplessness, body pains and breathlessness (Nnachi, 2011:184, Collins, 2007; 492, Ukaejiofo, 1995:172-174). It is discovered that within the period of widowhood rites, widows are deprived of the opportunity of attending hospitals for medical checkups. This can lead to the untimely death of widows.

Apart from the psychological problems widows pass through, they also lose their social status as well. Agbo (2003:35-36) observes that;

not only that the death of a loved husband and life companion is a physical loss, it is also a loss of social and economic status of the widow. The obnoxious, cruel, selfish, primitive and retrogressive widowhood exposes the widow to hair scraping, ritual cleansing, naked walk, sleeping on the floor and staying naked.

These practices in the name of widowhood rites are contrary to natural law and reason. They violate widows' human rights, reduce their status to nothing and expose them to inhuman and degrading treatment. The widowhood rites are unbecoming of people in the 21st century.

1.1.3 Widowhood in the Biblical Perspective

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 Zarephat, the widow of Nain and Dorcas were taken care of by God. He did not only care for the widows but also He defended their cause (Exodus 22:22-24). 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, 2012:21, Kunhiyop, 2008:263). 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 would 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 widows. In that era, heads of families, *pater familias*, 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) (1 Timothy 5:8) (Pfeiffer, Vos and Rea, 2000: 1803). 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, 1 Timothy 5:9) (The strong's concise concordance 1999:412). The relief contributed a lot in alleviating the plight of widows in the New

Testament period.

1.1.4 The Church and Widowhood Rites in Igboland

It is pertinent to examine the role of the Anglican Church in alleviating the plight of widows in Igboland. The missionaries fought relentlessly to destroy widowhood rites by encouraging Christian widows to exercise the freedom of marrying to other families. They discouraged men that had wives from inheriting widows (Onyeidu, 2004:53). The church's dogged position on monogamous marriage raised the social status of widows. It was the Church Missionary Society (CMS) that established "women's homes" in places like Emii in Egbu-Owerri, Ezeoke -Nsu (Imo State) and Obosi, Awka (Anambra State) and so on. These "women's homes", *amanwanyi*, produced literate married women and spinsters that could read and write, especially in the vernacular. Women were taught how to be industrious by learning laundry and sewing, spinning and weaving of cotton, corn milling and gardening. These various occupations engaged by women sustained them before and after the death of their husbands.

The church has contributed a lot in rehabilitating the widows after they have passed through the ordeal of widowhood by empowering them through job creation. Kunhiyop (2008:260) narrated the horrible experience of a widow thus;

I was widowed almost three decades ago. My properties were taken away by clan members in what was referred to as property inheritance, not minding that I had four sons and four daughters to be taken care of. I had dropped my job with the Police force to take care of our children but after the death of my husband, I was forced to look for another job. Though I did not manage to get back to the force, luckily enough, having been in medical field, I got a job with a local missionary hospital as a nurse.

There is no doubt that if the missionary hospital did not employ the widow, the hope of caring for the family would have shattered. The Anglican church in Igboland has established hospitals, printing press, factories and so on where many widows are gainfully employed, thereby, reducing the suffering of the poor widows.

The church has founded humanitarian associations to cater for the needs of widows. There are associations of widows in many Dioceses in Igboland. These associations are saddled with the responsibility of alleviating the plight of widows. In many Dioceses, widows smile homes with money, cloths and food stuffs. The children of indigent widows are offered scholarships. In some Dioceses, widows have received donations like houses. Onah (2008:77) observes that the church through women organization has reduced the burden of widowhood. In some places, widows can put on decent cloths. The church has reduced the mourning period from one year to six months while few widows do not observe widowhood rites. Some widows can now take baths and sit on upholstery chairs. The mourning cloth has changed from black to white which symbolizes purity and innocence. But, Christian widows are persecuted by the community members for following the directives of the Church rather than that of their various communities. It must be stated that the reformation brought by the church on widowhood is peripheral in the sense that the church intervenes after the widow has been dehumanized.

1.1.5 Evaluation of the Church and Widowhood rites

It is worthy of note that despite the contribution of the church towards the eradication of widowhood, it has continued unabated. The observance of widowhood rites not only causes incessant conflicts between Christianity and African Traditional religion but also has resulted to the untimely death of some people. Mbefo (1996; 44) recalls a tragedy that happened at Nanka in Anambra State where a Christian man instructed his wife not to observe widowhood rites for him. Unfortunately, when he died, his kinsmen compelled the widow to observe widowhood rites by abstaining from participating in her late husband's burial ceremony. But, the widow disregarded their instruction and participated in the burial ceremony of her late husband. The people were enraged which resulted to the digging and reburying of the corpse of the man in the bad bush, *ajo ofia* or *ajo ohia*. It was during the process of reburying the corpse of the man in the bad bush that conflict ensued between the Christian group who supported the widow and the traditionalists, *Ndi amala*, in which a man and a woman were shot dead and others sustained serious injuries. The church should forestall this unfortunate incidence by entering into dialogue with the African Traditionalists with the view of resolving perennial conflict of reincarnation, second burial *Ime okwukwu*, ancestorship and widowhood rites.

It is erroneous to think that the church is doing enough to eradicate widowhood rites when its members like "community daughters" or patrilineage daughters that are variously known as *Umuada*, *Umuokpu* and *Umungboto* perpetrate widowhood rites by inflicting all sorts of pains on widows. Ihezue (1972: 69) vividly asserts that;

worse still are the activities of the ‘umungboto’; most of whom are either Guild or mothers’ union members. They charge exorbitantly to shave the widow. They abuse her, they mercilessly fine the widow who, on the slightest allegation, is said to have failed to nurse her husband on his sick bed. They expect lavish entertainment. A widow may be forced to sell or mortgage the family’s landed property in order to entertain her ‘job’s comforters’ adequately. How this will affect her children is no-one’s concern. Her chain of eating mourners includes the Umungboto, the choristers, the church committee, the ordinary members, the Amala, the members of any society to which the man belonged. They observe wake-keepings which help to intensify the widow’s mental agony and strain, and to drain away her money.

From the foregoing, it is discovered that the attitude of *umuada*, choir and parochial church committee (P.C.C.) to the widows during the burial ceremonies of their late husbands worsens the pathetic condition of the widows. The church has done little or nothing to check mate exorbitant burial ceremonies that pose a great burden to the widows. In most places, the corpse stays more than six months in the mortuary. It is said that corpses stay longer than necessary to enable the bereaved families build new houses or renovate old ones. There are expensive publications of obituary in different news media like radio, newspaper and television. The bereaved family is pressurized to buy cows, drinks, food items, hiring of canopies and video (Arinze, 2000:25). It should be noted that Igboland is a competitive society which accounts for the expensive burial ceremonies. There is no doubt that the die-hard belief in according a befitting burial to the dead is one of the responsible factors. However, it is the widows that bear the brunt of these exorbitant preparations that precede the burial ceremonies. It is worthy of note that modern burial rites known as funerals have increased the pains of widows. The church is yet to caution the relations of the late husband of the widow to exhibit modesty and prudence during the burial ceremony of their kinsman. Nnachi and Nnubia (2011:155) submit that in the modern era, death is celebrated. It is not mourned as it used to be. In a bid to achieve this end, invitation cards for the burial ceremony are distributed. The relations of the dead invite dance groups and appear in various uniforms. Finally, the bereaved family hires undertakers that entertain the crowd by displaying the coffin of the corpse. But, at the end of the burial ceremony the widow incurs a huge debt coupled with the onerous task of raising her children. Some Churches gloss over the anomaly that is associated with expensive burial rites. It is based on the excruciating pains of widowhood that Uche Anya, the minority leader of House of Assembly, Enugu State, sponsored a bill on “the prohibition of infringement of widows’ and widowers’ fundamental human rights”. The bill was passed by the House of Assembly on 8th, March 2001, and was endorsed by the Governor to become a law on 26th, June 2001 (Agbo, 2003: 39). People have criticized the law for its lack of implementation.

1.1.6 Recommendations

1. The church should make her presence felt before and after the burial of the widow’s late husband which will help her to adjust to life.
2. The church should contribute relief for the indigent widows to enable them take care of their families.
3. Pastors should intensify pastoral care by visiting and counseling the widows to enable them overcome psychological problems like fear, loneliness and anger.
4. There should be workshops, seminars and symposia at all levels in the Dioceses for widows, where they will be sensitized on how to live as Christian widows.
5. Plans should be made to convert widowhood Associations to cooperative societies, so that widows can have access to loans for agricultural production, businesses and entrepreneurship.
6. The Dioceses should appoint widows into positions of honour, so that they can have a sense of belonging.
7. The Dioceses are expected to avail themselves of the communiqué to condemn widowhood rites.
8. Church leaders are expected to make laws that will prohibit their members from engaging in expensive burial ceremonies and widowhood rites.
9. The Dioceses are expected to campaign against widowhood rites by sponsoring a bill that will abolish widowhood rites through their parishioners in the Houses of Assembly, House of Representatives and the Senate.

1.1.7 Conclusion

Widowhood rites in Igboland has dehumanized and degraded widows. They pass through excruciating pains like loss of breadwinners, companions and heads of families. The death of one’s husband is a source of sorrow. Therefore, it is a moment she needs comfort most. But, instead of giving her comfort and succour, the patrilineage daughters, village members and relations of her deceased husband increase her sorrow and anguish. It is based on this, that the church should intervene as the last hope of widows in order to alleviate her plight. The church should not stop at reducing the period of mourning, changing the colour of mourning cloth, but also

should address the remote causes of widowhood rites in order to abolish this ugly practice that is contrary to reason as well as unacceptable in the 21st century.

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