

CHRISTIAN IMPACT ON OBNOXIOUS TRADITIONAL WIDOWHOOD PRACTICES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The problem of persistent inhumane practices meted out on widows in contemporary societies remains a concern. Many widows are subjected to some obnoxious practices like being coerced into drinking the water used in bathing their husbands' corpses, having their hair barbed as a sign of respect for the dead, denial of access to their husband's property and appearing tattered for a one year or six months among others. What is more worrisome is the fact that these practices still persist today in the face of modernity that has changed quite a lot of cultural practices considered anti-people. Christianity has made much socio-political impacts in Africa but these obnoxious widow practices remain unyielding, even on widows of Christian husbands from Christian families. In spite of Christian teachings that emphasize love and care for the bereaved and helpless widows, there is still persistent disrespect, inhuman, disorganizing, and humiliation of widows upon the death of their husbands. This unpleasant injustice against widows leaves nothing to be desired. Therefore, this study investigated Christian impact on obnoxious traditional widowhood practices in Nigeria. Specifically, the study, using the qualitative research approach, consulted relevant literature to ascertain the various shades of obnoxious widowhood practices prevalent in the land and what Christian responses towards these practices should be. Based on the review of related literature, it was found that the obnoxious practices are harmful to widows while the Christian impacts bring succour to them. It is therefore recommended that the Christian model of concerns for the widows should be the standard because it provides an exemplary way for the Christian church in addressing the concerns of the harmful cultural practices.

Keywords: Widowhood, Nigeria, Cultural Practices

Introduction

There is a persistent, irresistible, unfriendly, traumatic, barbaric and insurmountable obnoxious traditional widowhood practices in Nigeria. Gbenga (2011) affirms that in the face of the massive support from numerous international human right instruments that seek to combat all forms of discrimination and harmful traditional practices against women, practices such as widowhood rites are still persisting. There are various forms of widowhood practices such as levirate marriage, shaving of hairs, stipulated period of mourning, and so on.

Odimegwu and Okemgbo (2003) say that mourning and burial rituals are inherently left for women to suffer whenever a man dies. They add that this situation presents a traumatic, painful and regrettable experiences all over the world, but worse in developing countries including Nigeria, where there are lots of these obnoxious practices and rituals. Unpleasant traditional widowhood practices are still prevalent in Nigeria despite the tremendous impact of Christianity in this part of the globe. Akinbi (2015) maintains that despite various changes in the modern Nigerian society, like many other traditional practices, widowhood practices have continued to exist silently or openly.

Amasiatu (2009) affirms that a typical Nigerian widow is by tradition expected to undergo these serious mourning rites and widowhood practices which is an enduring period of deep rooted agony, seclusion and exclusion, anxiety, deprivation, trauma, insecurity and pain. All these have lots of social and health implications for the widow. The term traditional is derived from tradition. The word tradition comes from the Latin noun *traditio* (handing over). Tradition is derives from the Latin verb *tradere* (hand over, deliver). It is closely related to the Greek *paradosis* which also comes from a verb *paradidomi* (hand over) (www.encyclopedia.com>tradition) Prickett (2009) defines tradition from the Tertullian and Church fathers standard ecclesiastical meaning of bequeathing any doctrine to posterity from age to age. Tradition could be oral or written. They are ancient teachings which are observed from generation to generation. Tradition means to hand over the ingenuity of dogma to every generation. Shils (2006) corroborates that the term tradition comes from *traditio*, which is derived from the verb *tradere*, a combination of *trans* and *dare*, meaning to surrender, deliver or hand over. This study is aimed at investigating Christian impact on the obnoxious traditional widowhood practices in Nigeria. The struggle against horrible traditional widowhood practices form part of Christian struggle. The study focuses on the alleviation of traditional widowhood practices in Nigeria. It implicitly shows how Christianity plays fantastic roles in this regard. This study is accomplished through a qualitative method.

Traditional widowhood practices in some parts of Nigeria

Olakitike (2009) expresses that widowhood practices vary from one place to another and many of these practices violate a woman's human right. Nwoga (1989) defines widowhood practices as Sets of expectation as to the actions and behaviors by 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. He sees the later phase of these practices as issues of inheritance, the state of the widow and marriage or remarriage of the widow. Oreh (1998) expressed that widowhood practices can be seen as socio-cultural practices encompassing burial rites, mourning rituals, inheritance rights of the widow, her expected behavior towards others and other people's behavior towards her arising from the death of her husband. Nwaogugu (1989) sees these practices as culture-bound because they reflect the prevailing values of a given socio-cultural milieu. Some of these practices shall be further considered.

The term widowhood is an enigmatic. Oreh (2006) views widowhood as a bye-product of every enduring marriage which ends with a spousal bereavement. Odunze (1989) sees widowhood as unwanted and unpleasant stages that women pass through in life. It is a period of sadness, unhappiness, loneliness and helplessness. The pain and agony of this period cannot be expressed in words. Zahedi (2006) says that widowhood entails emotional loss and change in lifestyle, identity, social status and role. It is also a period of intense emotional stress in which the woman who is the bereaved is expected to express and handle her feelings of loss at that period before she starts to get over it and reorganize her life.

Ntozi (1997) states that widowhood is a process that is characterized by rituals, forced marriages, rejection, loneliness, poverty, loss of status, fear of the future and depression. Oreh (2006) states that a woman becomes a widow when the man with whom she had planned the present and the future life is no longer available to share; shape the hopes and the dreams of years ahead. She adds that a woman becomes helpless as she commences a lone journey full of uncertainties of life. She is seen as a liability, powerless, voiceless and vulnerable.

Ogamba (2000:15) holds that it is almost a common syndrome that widows are accused of being responsible for their partner's death. Akinbi (2015) says that they establish their innocence through certain acts. The travails of a widow begins immediately her husband breathes his last breath, she is made to go through various traditional rites, most of them very wicked and dehumanizing.

Widowhood practices among the Yorubas

Adekanye (1988) states that a widow is expected to express her sorrow of losing her husband through wearing black clothes, crying and often falling into the ready hands of others surrounding her to prevent her from injuring herself. She is also expected to go into seclusion for seven days during which she is not expected to take a bath or change her clothes. As a sign of severing bonds between her and her late husband, she may be expected to unweave her hair, have a low cut, shave or scrape her hairs depending on the type of practice prevalent in such Yoruba community.

Fasoranti and Arunah (2007) buttressed that the mourning period varies in different communities. She is nevertheless expected to sit on a bare floor or a mat at best. In some Yoruba communities, a widow is expected to eat from broken plates and cook with broken pots. At the end of forty days, three months, four months as the case may be, the final rites are performed on the widow. The final rites include being 'washed' in the night after having the final wailing and making some rituals which are expected to finally put the spirit of the departed to final rest and the 'outing' which involves change of dresses and being led to the market. Adekanye (1988) notes that widows are inherited at the end of the mourning period by a male relative of her dead husband, just like the rest of the man's property. A process called "Osupo" in Yoruba.

Widowhood practices among the Igbos

Nwanegbo (1996) makes us 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 bathe until her husband is buried. After the burial, the 'Umuada' (daughters of the man's ancestors) will come to shave her hair, bathe her in an open compound, only having the privacy of being surrounded by the 'Umuada'. Akinbi (2015) affirms that 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.

Nzewi (1981) states that in some parts of Igbo land, 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 were required to provide expensive items like a white goat and two jars of palm wine for purification purpose to the female members of their husbands' lineage who made and implemented decision on every matter concerning widows. Nzewi (1981) holds that the widows were forbidden to touch any object including themselves without defilement.

Hence they were 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 were 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

Common widowhood Practices in Nigeria

There are several common obnoxious traditional widowhood practices in Nigeria. Usually, most of these harmful widowhood practices include though not limited to these:

1. Shaving of Hairs

One of the prevalent harmful widowhood practices is the shaving of hairs. Traditionally, it is expected for a widow to shave her hairs as sign of respect for the late husband to enable him descend to the ancestral world. The rationale for it is that, the husband will not starved while on the way to the ancestral world so that the deceased will not return angry to torment the family. Nwanegbo (1996) opines that in some places the widow will be taken to an isolated place where she will have her food in broken earthen pot, while her hair will either be left unkempt or be completely shaven off; while in some other places, ten men will have to lie with the widow after her husband's death and she has to cry very early each morning and call her husband by his name, this she will do for one month.

2. Wearing of Black clothes

In most communities in Nigeria, traditional widowhood practice involves the wearing of black clothes. A black cloth signifies mourning and no one mourns with neat clothes. Widows are intentionally left to put on black clothes so that they would not look attractive as if they are celebrating. A widow is meant to bemoan the death of her husband with unpleasant appearance to show the level of pain she is passing through. Tattered black clothes are unappealing most times. A widow is meant to look dejected within the period of mourning.

3. Drinking of bathed corpse water

It is a common phenomenon to make a widow drink the bathed corpse water of her husband's corpse in order to prove her innocence. A widow is often suspected as the killer of her husband especially if the woman was fond of maltreating the man when he was alive. The prevalent practice is for her to drink the bathed corpse water in order to vindicate herself. If she refuses to drink the bathed corpse water, she would be held responsible as the killer. Most times a widow is compelled to drink the bathed corpse water in order to please the family members. This practice is done without thinking of the

medical effects on the woman. This type of inhuman treatment often makes the widows to fall sick because of the psychological trauma on them.

4. Widow inheritance or levirate marriage

A woman is seen as the property of the husband. Upon the death of her husband a widow is forced to be inherited by a relative of the husband in order to secure her right in the family. It is rare for the relatives of the deceased to allow another man to marry their widow especially if there are children. A widow will either submit to the bidding of the deceased relatives or pay for the alimony so that she can return to her family members. For in as much as she is still within the deceased vicinity without the payment of alimony, she is still their wife and she is viewed as their property which must be inherited.

5. Mourning for a stipulated period

Mourning for a stipulated period is another repugnant traditional widowhood practice in Nigeria. Usually a widow is meant to mourn her husband for a period of three to four months before she would be allowed to come out in the public. The essence of this is to allow the deceased to descend into the ancestral world because it is believed that when a person dies, he hovers within the family for a period of three months before departing into the spirit realm. A widow is meant to stay at home within this period so that she will not be tormented by the spirit of her late husband.

6. Sleeping and Sitting on the Floor or mat

Traditionally, a widow is expected to sit on the floor or mat to mourn her husband. Nzewi (1981) maintains that it symbolizes a dethronement of a woman at the death of her husband because when a woman marries, she is engrossed into the husband's family and is known by her role as a wife. The death of her husband however means loss of her position and entitlements in the family, hence, the sitting on the floor or mat.

7. Seclusion

This is another method of harmful widowhood practice in Nigeria. Sharka (1996) states that seclusion and general isolation of the widows for a certain period from the community is a widespread practice in Africa. Umejesie (2002) buttresses that the early parts of this period are usually rigorous in most parts of the Igbo society. 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. At this point, she must refrain from bathing, she must sit on the ground, her food must be prepared separately and she is fed by another widow from a broken plate which will be thrown away after the seclusion period. She will hold a kitchen knife or broom stick because she is not allowed to touch any part of her body with hands, but must use this

knife or broom stick at this time she is regarded as unclean. The knife or broom stick is also used to protect her from the spirits, which may attack her during this period.

Christian impact on obnoxious traditional widowhood practices in Nigeria

Obnoxious traditional widowhood practices appear to be unabated. That notwithstanding the impact of Christianity is highly conspicuous. There are various areas of Christian impact on obnoxious traditional widowhood practices in Nigeria: these include although not limited to the following.

Shaving of hairs

Fundamentally, a woman would shave her hairs when she lost her husband. Presently, the reverse is the case because of Christian teaching in Deuteronomy 14:1 that a widow should not shave her hairs for the dead. “Since you are the people of the Lord your God, never cut yourself or shave the hair above your foreheads for the sake of the dead”. A lot of widows have adjusted to it. The issue of hairs shaving is more or less for unbelievers who are not Christians. Nevertheless, since majority of the Igbos are mainly Christians, a lot of people have decided to follow the Christian lifestyle of not shaving hairs for the dead. This happened as a result of Christian impact.

Mourning with a white cloth instead of black cloth

Christian widowhood practice is different from traditional widowhood system. The scripture enjoins Christian to mourn but not like traditional people who are hopeless. 1 Thess. 4:13 “now, we do not wish you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who from time to time are falling asleep (dying), in order that you may not be mourning in the same manner as the rest who do not have a hope.” Christian widows mourn with white cloth because death is a passage to eternity.

Drinking of corpse bathe water

Christianity has made a tremendous impact on this because it is wrong for a Christian widow to swear or defend herself because God is the defender of widows. Psalm 68:5 “God is a father to the fatherless, a defender of widows.” While some typical traditional people still embark on it, a majority of Christian widows do no longer succumb to that because it is unhygienic and barbaric.

Widow inheritance

Christian impact is very conspicuous in this aspect because Christianity teaches monogamous marriage. It also teaches dissolution of marriage at the demise of one’s spouse. This enlightenment has made a lot of widows expunge the idea of widow’s inheritance. Widows object to the issue of widow’s inheritance because they contest that

they are not property to be inherited. Adekanye (1988) affirms that widow inheritance has been affected by modernization, education, Christianity and high level of exposure of the woman as widows who fall under the above influences refuse to be inherited like property by the relative of the dead husband.

Mourning for a stipulated period

Some Christian denominations such as the Roman Catholic Church have stipulated days which a funeral service is done usually not more than three weeks. This helps to reduce extravagant burial expenses and the issue of stipulated period of staying at home for months. Immediately after the funeral service, the preceding Sunday, the widow goes to Church for outing service. This practice has helped to alleviate the issue of stipulated period of mourning. The idea of mourning for a long period in order to ward off the spirit of the dead is worldly because the scripture in Eccl 9:5 says that “for the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten.” NIV

Conclusion

This study has examined Christian impact on the obnoxious traditional widowhood practices in Nigeria. There are several traditional widowhood practices which are dehumanizing to widows. These practices were mainly perpetuated by the male folk. A traditional widowhood practice was effective due to patrilineal system in the society. Nigeria is a patrilineal society with male dominance over female. It is crystal clear that traditional widowhood practices have caused more harm than good to widows. Widows experienced trauma, bitterness, agony and so on in the name of traditional widowhood practices. Although no widow prays for such nasty experience widows have been victims of this unforeseen circumstance. It is therefore necessary to do away with such abhorrent practices in the contemporary era. Christianity is a bulwark to the numerous widow challenges. A lot of Christians are exponent of widows' welfare. The various obnoxious traditional widowhood practices are gradually fizzling out due to the tremendous impact of Christianity. Although this practice has not been totally eradicated it is however alleviated. The seemingly insurmountable part will also be defeated. There is therefore need to align with Christianity so that other persistent abhorrent widowhood practices can also be surmounted.

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