

WIDOWHOOD RITUAL IN IGBOLAND IN DIALOGUE WITH CHRISTIAN FAITH

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Abstract

The Igbo cultural milieu is pervaded by numerous ritual activities. Since for an Igbo and indeed the African, religion and culture are strictly interwoven, almost every major phase of man's existential reality passes through the crucible of one ritual activity or the other. These rites range from rites of passage, circumcision rites, rites of naming, purification rites, burial and funeral rites, and the rites of widowhood, among others. The ceremony surrounding the ritual activities is usually performed with the devotion it demands. Every aspect of life is initiated or concluded thanks to one ritual activity or the other. Owing to the religious worldview of the Africans, these rituals, when not fully understood by outsiders, could be casually dismissed or judged to be irrational. At the death of one's husband, the widowhood rite is expected to be celebrated through the instrumentality of some kinsmen/kinswomen. In the African global community, there is an evident setback in development based on the uninformed understanding even by promoters of some of these rites that even at times infringes on one's freedom of worship. The researcher intends to explore a rite of widowhood and to what extent its dialogue with the Christian faith will help to arrive at a healthier understanding of the rites of widowhood. In this research, the researcher will use the descriptive method of investigating the rites of widowhood and its intricacies. The analytic approach will be used to give a critical examination of how through the dialogue with the Christian faith, the widowhood rites will minimize the setback it has created in some African communities.

Keywords: widowhood, rites, ritual, dialogue, Christian faith

Introduction

Right from creation, God has continued to give man the opportunity to collaborate in the work of creation. This is evident in the mandate given to man to be "fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen. 1:28). The human participation in divine operation evidenced in

marriage is an opportunity towards continuing and improving on the work of creation. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council (1998) established that the intimate partnership of married life and love has been established by the Creator and qualified by His laws and is rooted in the conjugal covenant of irrevocable personal consent. Hence by that human act whereby spouses mutually bestow and accept each other, a relationship arises which, by divine will and in the eyes of society too, is a lasting one. (The Church in the Modern World, n.48)

In this way, man continues to transcend himself and aspire towards the spiritual realm, which is his ultimate goal. This divine-human cooperation, according to Murphy-O'Connor (1990:802), is a mode of divine activity inaugurated by Christ. This spirit of working together enhances what Camarihna-Matos, L.M et al. (2008) called shared creation, which involves a process through which a group of entities enhance the capabilities of each other. It more fundamentally involves the mutual engagement of participants to solve a problem together, which implies mutual trust and thus takes time, effort, and dedication.

In human society, marriage has remained a veritable way of manifesting this divine-human cooperation. The institution of marriage and its accompanying conjugal love are ordained for the procreation and education of children and find in them their ultimate crown. Thus a man and a woman, who by their compact of conjugal love "are no longer two, but one flesh" (Matt. 19:ff), render mutual help and service to each other through an intimate union of their persons and their actions. Through this union, they experience the meaning of their oneness and attain it with growing perfection day by day. As a mutual gift of two persons, this intimate union and the good of the children impose total fidelity on the spouses and argue for an unbreakable oneness between them." (The Church in the Modern World, n.48)

This bond is unfortunately and painfully broken down by the death of one of the partners. The resultant effect is that one remains a widow or widower, as the case may be. In this state that most often occurs in an impromptu manner, the widow is devastated not only by the loss of his/her partner but also by some cultural demands involving some dehumanizing rites to be performed. The researcher wishes to investigate these rites to see how the Christian faith can dialogue with these cultural elements. Such dialogue aims at reducing, if not

extirpating, the pains of the victims and the uplift of human dignity and freedom of worship, especially where such practices attempt to suppress it.

Widow/widowhood: basic understanding

The word widow, from its Old Saxon origin *widowa* and its Sanskrit *vidhava* as presented in the Dictionary of Etymology (2000), is connected with the idea of being lonely and solitary. From there, it trickles down to the Latin *vidua* meaning widow. Its Latin verbal form *viduare* meaning “to deprive,” and the adjectival form *viduus-a-um* meaning “deprived, bereaved”, as presented in Cassell’s Latin Dictionary (1968) go, clearly denote the status of a widow/widower as one deprived of her husband or his wife by death.

With the death of one of the marriages, partners set in the period of widowhood. According to Oliobi et al. (2001:71), this “passage from life is an event that is marked with special rituals in all cultures. In consequence, Christians and non-Christians have rituals specific to their faith.” The burial and funeral, as well as widowhood, have their different rites.

Widowhood, which we are concerned with here, continued Oliobi et al. (2001a), is “a mourning period, which commences at the death of a partner and lasts for unspecified period...” This initiates another passage in life. It changes the status of the married woman to that of being a widow and that of a married man to being a widower. It is a status that goes with sorrow and mourning and that requires fortitude to forge ahead. It is a condition that is accompanied by apparent helplessness as far as marital companionship is concerned. Odunze (2005:15) gave an apt description when he presented widowhood as an unwanted and horrible period that women pass through in life. Widowhood is an awful period for any woman whose husband has died. A lot of stress and punishment is meted out to the woman as soon as her husband is pronounced dead. In some towns in Igboland, hardly can a man die, and his kinsmen will accept that he died a natural death. The automatic perception is usually that someone is responsible for his death, and in some cases, the wife is the first to be accused. The widow is treated worse than a murderer. She undergoes certain rituals to appease the dead husband and the spirits of her forefathers. It is this

dehumanizing treatment that gave rise to the saying *di bu ugwu nwanyi* . To that effect, as soon as the man dies, her dignity crumbles like a paper house; and she is left at the mercy of other male relatives.

Widowhood ritual

Rite is derived from the Latin *ritus*, meaning custom, usage, especially a religious observance or ceremony. Rite of passage marks the end of one phase and the start of another in the life of an individual. The ritual, which is the adjectival form of rite, refers to events about or consisting of rites or rituals.

Ritual is the performance of ceremonial acts prescribed by tradition or by sacerdotal decree. Ritual is a specific, observable mode of behaviour exhibited by all known societies (Penner, *Encyclopedia Britannica*).

Among the Igbos, some rituals formally initiate widowhood. Oliobi et al. (2001:72) describe it thus:

The bereaved is generally initiated into widowhood by the shaving off of hair. The shaving is done by the widow-daughter of the family. The shaving of the hair rituals initiates the inhuman treatment meted out to the widow. She is severely restricted from any movement for several market weeks, doing no work, including not going to the market.

More so, Okafor (1996:n.15) affirms that she “undergoes an elaborate rite of extrication from the bond of the deceased partner, a traditional rite which includes some dehumanising treatments.... In some communities, she is deprived of all her husband’s belongings. Black dress is worn for one year to mourn the deceased husband.”

All these widowhood ceremonies are tied to the religious worldview and understanding. They are reflecting that John Mbiti (1991:30) stated that Africans are “notoriously religious” and that religious heritage “is by far the richest part of African heritage”. In his book *Introduction to African Religion*, he brought out the fact that every aspect of the life of the African has a religious component, beginning from pregnancy to death. The Africans have rituals for everything important event in their lives. And their religious worship is full of life. Africans celebrate life. Customary rites form an integral part of cultural practices in Africa. Such practices reveal the values and beliefs of a particular group of people (Maluleke 2012). According to Gill (2013), traditional practices

encompass marriage, festivals, funeral rites, birth rites, and widowhood rites.

Widowhood rites are culturally defined as ceremonies that a spouse undertakes in honour of his deceased partner (Ayagiba, as cited in Atindanbila et al., 2014). For George et al. (2016), widowhood rites are sociocultural rituals which a woman undergoes to show respect and mourn her deceased husband. Manala (2015) notes that widowhood rites serve as a transitional period that prepares a woman from marital status to being a widow. However, widowhood rites have some positive consequences for women. In that vein, Tasié (2013:156) asserts that

primarily, widowhood rites in Africa were not intended to de-womanise African womanhood or impoverish and oppress women, nor are they part of the so-called male chauvinism. Instead, by and large, widowhood rites are intended for the general well-being of the widow.

The widowhood rites help the widow to sever her relationship with her late husband. The severance is symbolized in the shaving of the widow's hair. According to Boaheng (2022:103), the widow uses the hair in a ritual which not only severs her relationship with her deceased husband but also indicates to the ancestral world that her late husband was a responsible person who paid her bride price. It is also important to note that, notwithstanding the potential benefits of widowhood rites, Boaheng (2014:104) maintained that these rites sometimes lead to infringement on human rights. Yet, widows are compelled to religiously observe the rites; or else they incur the wrath of their ancestors.

Further still, culturally, widowhood rites are meant for both men and women. However, women seem to be the only ones going through the ordeal of widowhood rite in most cultures (Yu et al. 2019). Widows, therefore, experience more psychological effects than widowers (Yu 2019)

Grades of widows

Ordinary layman's observation immediately reveals to us that all widows are not in the same category. Though they have the common denominator of the loss of their husband, the post-mortem (after death)

challenges vary. Ezeokafor (2022) made a clear distinction in this regard between very early widows without offspring, widows within marriageable age and well-placed widows at an advanced age.

When the widow is childless, she suffers enormous psychological torture, especially from her immediate relations. Such torment is as excruciating as it is devastating. Some become widows/widowers at an early stage of marriage when the children are still very young. Such is an obvious case of prolonged widowhood with its attendant prolonged challenges. Those within the marriageable age, especially the widows, can still remarry.

Some others become widows/widowers at a later stage of married life when the children must have grown up and become autonomous. In such a case, the widow/widower is supported and taken care of by her children, especially if they are financially buoyant, compassionate and embrace it as their responsibility. Consequently, challenges are minimal. It will be more of a lack of companionship, whereas the former has to battle with the lack of companionship and the heavy demand of rearing up the children as an accidental single parent. Of particular attention are the barren widows. We must not fail to note that in the bible, barrenness is worrisome to the man as well as to the woman. Recall the case of Abram when he complained to the Lord God, "Behold, you have given me no offspring; and a slave born in my house will be my heir." (Gen. 15,2-3); even Rachel said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I will die" (Gen. 30,1-2) and also the provocation Hannah received incessantly from her rival because of her childlessness (1 Sam.1,1-11). Such widows remain an object of pity, torment and, at times, even cruel subjugation, and they most often suffer social marginalization, psychological and emotional torture, and spiritual anguish. Frymer-Kensky (2006) noted that "in ancient Israel, women did not normally own land, which made them economically dependent on men, first on their fathers, then on their husbands, and ultimately on their sons" (p.160). The case of being a barren widow is, by that fact, a double tragedy.

Christian faith: It's understanding

The word faith derives from the Greek and Latin nouns *pistis* (ἰς) and *fides-ei*, respectively. The two nouns reflect an attitude of trust, confidence, belief etc. It is noteworthy that Πίς like its adjectivetός was

initially used about a personal relationship with somebody or something (Bultmann et al., 1968:176); on the contrary, their opposites - *apístoç* and *ía* have the senses of distrustful and unfaithful, unreliability and unfaithfulness respectively. The later development of *Pistis* brought in the idea of putting faith not only in human words, as the case may be, but also in divine sayings and even deity itself. (Bultmann et al., 1968:179).

There is, however, no gainsaying the fact that “faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ” (Rom. 10,17). Since faith passes through an auditory process, *ipso facto*, it demands teaching and listening and application of the content of what is thought to real-life situations. Sequel to that, human agents are crucial in the process of evangelization. Therefore, faith and teaching are unavoidably interwoven. In the same vein, for faith to bear fruit, unquestionable obedience to what is preached becomes a *sine qua non*. Preaching plays a significant role in the initiation and sustenance of faith. It is faith that leads to Christ, who is the Light that liberates from the shackles of the darkness of unbelief and sin, and in the long run, goes to unveil the vision and knowledge of God. And that is the hallmark of the Christian faith. As Baham (2020:1-2) has it, the attitude of the heart that is recognized as faith drives how the Christ follower interacts with the world, their fellow human beings, and what shapes their hopes for the future and their understanding of the past and the present. It is faith founded in Christ. Such faith in Christ is anchored on obedience to His Words enshrined in the Bible and the teachings of the Church.

Since faith is a spiritual reality, it is not comprehensible through mere human reason. There is a limit to human reason, for one cannot arrive at the knowledge of God and other heavenly realities through reason alone. To that effect, we do not ascribe to a blind faith that would exclude rational investigation. Such rational investigation arms one to “always have answers ready for people who ask us the reason for the hope that we have” (1 Peter 3:15).

Against this background, it is clear that faith, through spirituality, also has a concrete dimension in its manifestation. Since faith appertains to man’s spiritual dimension, since man, thanks to the grace of God, is

both the agent for the transmission of faith and the recipient of its content, since man by nature has a dual component, spiritual and material, we cannot exclude the cultural context where that faith is lived. It is in the same cultural context that conflict oftentimes ensues concerning the practice of faith. The meeting of two cultures, for example, the divine culture (faith) and temporal culture, is most often fraught with conflict and tension. The tension is consequent upon the divergence in their objective. The former has a transcendent goal; the latter, though ultimately geared towards the supernatural, is more so weighed down by its earthly ties. This calls for dialogue.

Dialogue

Dialogue is derived from the Greek word *diálogo*. According to Liddell and Scott (1999), it is a composite of two words, *diá*, which, among other things, means “mutual relation, one with another,” and *lógos*, which, apart from meaning “word” also means “speech, discourse, conversation.” Based on these etymological foundations, Chambers's Twentieth Century Dictionary presents dialogue as a conversation between two or more persons, especially of a formal or imaginary nature: an exchange of views in the hope of ultimately reaching an agreement.

Since man is naturally a social animal, he is, therefore, prone to dialogue. In the everydayness of man's existence, dialogue remains a regular exercise that is engrafted into his nature; be it in the diurnal exchange of pleasantries or the day-to-day cross-pollination of ideas or even in the ordinariness of daily routine of life. Dialogue permeates his whole life. So, it covers not only an exchange of views on scientific and intellectual subjects but even the most ordinary conversation about what we experience in our daily lives. It could be political dialogue, religious dialogue etc. Religious dialogue regards matters of divine faith and mundane faith.

In this religious context, we must remember that primarily God initiated a dialogue with man right from creation. This is evident in the document of Vatican II (1998), where it is stated that “First, there is the dialogue between God and man: “The Bible teaches that man is created ‘in the image of God’, capable of knowing and loving his Creator...” (Gaudium et Spes n.12); in Scripture, according to Rulla (1986:34), man is the only creature whom God calls ‘you’ and to whom God directs

commandments and restrictions, awaiting an answer on the part of man.

Faith and culture, all things being equal, should enjoy interpenetrating co-existence. In the case of faith-culture friction, dialogue comes in as the proper instrument of peace and normalcy. It is based on this that it becomes necessary to establish a dialogue between the widowhood ritual and the Christian faith.

The excruciating plight of widows

According to the report of the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (2001), it is evident that across a wide range of African cultures, widows are subject to patriarchal customary and religious laws and confront discrimination in inheritance rights. Many of these widows suffer abuse and exploitation at the hands of family members, often in the context of property disputes.

The state of widowhood goes with obvious difficulties ranging from forced marriage, deprivation of inheritance, oppression through widowhood ritual and a host of others.

Forced marriage: In some communities in Africa, widows may be forced into new conjugal relations with a male relative or be forbidden to remarry, even if they wish to do so. As a result, many women may spend a long period of their lives in widowhood, with all its associated disadvantages and stigmas (United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (2001:3).

Deprivation of inheritance: Many widows became victims of their husband's male relatives who, rather than protect and support them, denied them any access to their husbands' land or property. (United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (2001:9). Some of the negative practices derive from the belief that "the beauty and dignity of a woman is her husband". Consequently, at the death of her husband, if she has no male adult children, she may be ejected from her husband's house as both it and his land will have been inherited by his oldest brother. In most cases, the husband's kin does not provide the widow with any economic support, particularly if she will not accept the status of being an additional wife to one of her husband's brothers.

Inheritance of widow: Widow inheritance or levirate marriage was another aspect of widowhood which was a common practice in many parts of Africa. Luke (2001) records widow inheritance as a normal occurrence in which a widow was inherited by one of her husband's brothers or other close male relations. She further stipulates that inherited widows were better off than non-inherited widows. The word levirate comes from the Latin word *levir*, which means brother-in-law. This was an ancient custom which was practised among the Semitic people and the Arabs of Yemen (Holy Bible, Ruth Chapter 1:9-21, 4:1-6, Deuteronomy Chapter 25:5-10). In most villages, widows were to remarry their brothers-in-law or the successor of their husband, as this gave the widow considerable security. Tati (2018) maintained that widowhood inheritance preserved and maintained a continuous relationship between the widow, her children and the deceased family. Through widow inheritance, the levir became the widow's sole legitimate sex partner, and the children produced from such a relationship continued to bear the name of the deceased husband. The widow was prohibited from having additional sexual partners.

The economic upliftment of some widows empowered them financially, and so they had no reason to seek the support of a levir. The empowerment of widows rescued them from harmful widowhood practices and dehumanizing treatment and abuses.

Oppression: Francis (2016), without mincing words, singled out widows among those that suffer untold oppression.

Widows, along with orphans and foreigners, were the most vulnerable groups in society. The rights afforded them by the Law could be easily disregarded because, being isolated and defenceless, they could hardly be assertive. A poor widow, there, alone, with no one to defend her, might be ignored, might even be denied justice and will have no one to make recourse to. She is all alone.

Undoubtedly, most of these oppressive practices aimed at dehumanizing the widow/widower are, in the words of Okafor (1996a:n.63), imposed by their relations, social groups, traditional mores and religion, are inhuman, unjust, and contrary to Christian principles. Sadik (1995), the Executive Director of United Nations Population Fund Activities at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, insisted that we must be courageous in speaking out on issues that

concern us (women). We must not bend under the weight of spurious arguments invoking culture or traditional values. No value worth the name supports the oppression of women.

Iloka (2022:49) made her point clear when she maintained that “the subjugation of women is deeply rooted in our culture and tradition emanating from the alleged inferior status of women, unstable character and impropriety of women’s political and social participation, also stretching economic circles.” Further still, Iloka (2022b:49) opined that, “widowhood rituals include the physical and emotional torture, which a widow is subjected to. Widows are made to suffer double jeopardy of losing their husbands, sometimes even at the early period of their marriages, and going through some excruciating cultural rites of proving their innocence in the death of their husbands.”

Widowhood in the light of Christian faith

The central message of the Christian faith is the love of God and neighbour. And “if anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1John4:20). There could be no other time more appropriate to manifest such love than moments of bereavement; and no other person more desirous of it than widows and orphans. The biblical testimonies confirm the necessity of having a tender solicitude towards widows. For God listens promptly to the cries of the widows and orphans and avenges any harm inflicted on them (Ex. 22:21; Deut. 10:18). In that regard, Tertullian (1994:1.8) affirms that “these two names, left to the care of the divine mercy, in proportion as they are destitute of human aid, the Father of all undertakes to defend.” Jesus himself also showed compassion on the widows (Lk. 7:11-17). St. Paul, on his part, stipulates how a true widow should behave and the need to show assistance to her. In his word, “If any Christian woman has widows in her family, let her assist them; in this way, the church will not be burdened and may assist those who are truly widows” (1Tim.5:16). Special mention is made of some widows like Judith (Jdt 8:4-6) and Anna (Lk. 6:36-37) who remained faithful despite their state of widowhood; the widow of Zarephath (1Kg. 17:17-24) who welcomed and fed Elijah with the last bit of flour that she had; and thus found favour in the face of the Lord through their prayers and devotion. The widow has to be prayerful, resolute in keeping the faith and see their

condition as a sacrifice to the Lord. With this orientation towards the faith, she gets involved in the service of the Lord. Their sustenance comes from the unwavering delight in their spiritual inclination.

When juxtaposed with Christian belief, Okafor (1996b n.61) observes that the "traditional Igbo custom takes a rather negative attitude towards widowhood, especially with respect to the widow." The death of the husband becomes a moment of excessive suffering for the widow in the name of rituals and sacrifices. But the most worrying thing is that some Christians in these areas, instead of propagating the paschal character of Christian death as expressed in the funeral rites (Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* n.81), even join the Traditional Religionists in vehemently defending these dehumanizing elements of the widowhood rites. One then wonders at such a syncretistic disposition. This calls for a tirelessly persistent catechesis on the one hand and a seasoned evangelisation and dialogue between faith and culture on the other. In this way, the gospel will permeate the culture.

In the wake of this manifestation of syncretism and lukewarm attitude in matters of faith, Okafor (1996) decries as unacceptable "certain practices imposed on the widows and widowers by their relations, social groups, traditional mores and religion, that are inhuman, unjust and contrary to Christian principles." Okafor (1996c) then holds that: the widow/widower is legitimately entitled to the goods and property of his or her partner, whether they have children or not. Each individual is exhorted to make to guarantee this right. Where no will is left to settle issues, sharing of the assets and liabilities of the departed should be amicably discussed between the immediate relations. The shaving of hair is to be done by anybody on any day of the week, and the hair is to be burnt or discarded. No religious or ritual importance whatsoever is to be attached to the hair or its shaving. Since the hair is an object of adornment for women, the shaving merely serves to demonstrate the subjection of that adornment to the grief and deprivation of that moment." (n.64)

He went further to denounce all forms of restriction placed on the widow and all sorts of rituals and sacrifices except those of the Church. It is here that calls for faith-culture dialogue. It is a dialogue that must have the fulcrum of listening. Thus, the gospel can assume different cultures and different tongues. The reign of God's kingdom, which the

gospel preaches, does not exist in the abstract. It is rather, in the words of Paul VI (1975), “lived by men who are profoundly linked to a culture, and the building up of the kingdom cannot avoid borrowing the elements of human culture or cultures” (n.20). But every culture has to be divested of its inhuman elements and must aim at promoting human dignity. While preaching the gospel in various tongues, the Church in no way aims at taking away “anything from the temporal welfare of any people. Rather, she fosters and takes to herself, in so far as they are good, the abilities, resources and customs of people. In so taking them to herself she purifies, strengthens and elevates them” (Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church n.13).

Conclusion

We must say without mincing words that the “apostolate of married persons and families is of unique importance for the Church and civil society” (Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity n.11). To that effect, widowhood must “be accepted bravely as a continuation of the marriage vocation, should be esteemed by all” (Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern world n.48).

Following from that, like Gregory the Great who changed his missionary strategy when he saw that coercion could not yield much fruit in his evangelization of the English people, so should a proper and humanly edifying method be adopted by all and sundry in handling funeral and widowhood problems. Christian faith is lived within one’s cultural milieu. Corroborating that fact, John Paul II (1998) affirms that “cultural context permeates the living of Christian faith, which contributes, in turn, little by little to shaping that context. To every culture, Christians bring the unchanging truth of God, which he reveals in the history and culture of a people” (n.71).

Recommendation

- i. Over and above every observation of cultural beliefs and traditional rites and rituals, in this context of widowhood ritual, the dignity of the human person must be uppermost.
- ii. Subjugation of women founded on the patriarchal root of our society has to be very much reasoned into for avoidance of undue oppression perpetrated against widows by men and even by women themselves.

- iii. If marriage is founded on love, and Christian faith is rooted in the love of God and neighbour, these dehumanizing attitudes meted out on widows contradict the entire foundation of the Christian faith.
- iv. Finally, respect for human rights and the dignity of man must be promoted in the practices of our traditional culture, especially with reference to widowhood rituals.

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