

The Influence of Christian Religion on Nsukka Traditional Practices

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Abstract

Widowhood practices in most parts of the world and especially in Africa are characterized by rituals. Some of these rituals reveal some social injustices. Christianity has made positive contributions that ameliorate the situation of widows. However, the intervention of Christianity into widowhood acts has generated a lot of conflicts between Christians and traditionalists. The focus of this paper therefore is to examine some traditional widowhood practices in Nsukka Local Government Area of Enugu State, and the general influence of Christianity. Areas of conflicts between traditional widowhood practices and the church's stipulations are also highlighted and suggestions for improving the lots of widows made.

Introduction

Widowhood is an unpleasant experience of family life. It has social, psychological and economic consequences particularly to the members of the immediate family and wider community. Widowhood occurs as a result of the death of a woman's husband. It is a state or time of being a widow. It could therefore be said that 'all enduring marriages ultimately end with the death of either the husband or the wife or both. The death of a spouse may be the most extreme life crisis because, it severs some of the deepest emotional bonds established in a lifetime.

What then is death? Death, according to Vine (1966:276) "is the separation of the soul from the body. The body ceases to function and returns to the dust by means of this separation. Death is the taking of a life. It is the end of human life". Death is a natural and inevitable phenomenon that occurs to people all over the world. It is a common tragedy. Whenever, wherever and for whatever reason and in whichever manner death strikes, it bespeaks grief, sorrow, horror, fear and so on. This devastating effect of death on human beings probably explains why the

possible causes of death are probed especially among the traditional African society. For death is hardly believed to be a natural phenomenon. Ilogu (1974:40-41) observes; "I have not come across any death that an Igbo accepts as a natural and biological end." Metuh (1987:252) however observes; "death after a ripe old age is called God's death or natural death, and is counted a blessing to be sought for ...Any death before this time is regarded as unnatural...."

For Okoye (1995:139-140),

No death is accepted on the surface value, so to speak as being a natural phenomenon. This explains why in many parts of Nigeria for example, the widow becomes all of a sudden the number one murder suspect as soon as her husband dies.

She further reveals that widows are sometimes accused of poisoning, witchcraft, involving in love affair with illicit lovers and total deviation from set rules. Exculpation from such accusations is only possible if the widows surrender themselves to the tortuous rituals and rites as stipulated by tradition.

The disorganizing and traumatic experience which accompanies death of husbands tends to be greater on women than that of men when they loose their wives. Whereas the wife immediately becomes the primary suspect for her husband's death, the man is immediately offered an appropriate substitution to comfort him upon the loss of his wife. (<http://www.ulb.nolelpub/1996/h/506001/korieh/chi-ma-chapter-2.html>.)

That women are ill-treated during their widowhood may have some historical reasons which vary from one locality to other. Among the traditional Igbo society for instance, marriages are contracted between two families and in some cases girls are not consulted or given free hand to choose their partners. At times they are forced into marriages they would not have entered into in a more civilized circumstance. Instances abound where a girl of about fifteen to twenty years will enter into a marriage with a man of sixty years and above, with the result that the girl may want to eliminate her old husband to have more access to younger men. The possibility of such an

action makes the wife of the deceased number one suspect. The tortuous rituals or practices laid down to be observed by the widows serve as a deterrent to other women who may have such negative intention of taking the lives of their husbands.

In addition, there is the African world-view which fashions belief systems and influences all their other social institutional structures. Two of these are the African strong belief in life after death and reincarnation. To avoid numerous traditional social consequences, numerous rituals and rites are stipulated which must be observed by the deceased person to facilitate a hitch free rite of passage to the great beyond. To accomplish this, the widow being the closest person to her husband must resign herself to these rites for her dead husband.

The position of widows, therefore could be difficult. Majorities of women suffer physical, economic and social damage as a result of the death of their husbands. Physically, Hobson (1964:222) observes that, "near the women had experienced insomnia, loss of appetite, headaches, stomach upsets and other nervous complaints." Despite these, the status of widowhood is made more intolerable by some obnoxious practices imposed by traditional African society.

The need arises therefore to examine:

- Some traditional widowhood practices in Igbo society with particular reference to Nsukka Local Government Area of Imo State.
- The general influence of Christianity on widowhood practices in Nsukka Local Government Area.
- Areas of conflicts between traditional widowhood practices and church's stipulations.
- Possible suggestions for improving the lots of widows.

Traditional Widowhood Practices

Widowhood practices have been a long established religious and sociological practices observed in different societies by women throughout their husbands. Njoku (1989:28) citing Meek posits that ; "in most African communities, a widow's movements is highly restricted the first one month and the following eleven months." This is what Ubesie (1979) describes as *ino na nso* (period of seclusion). In the early century, Basden (1906) recorded that, a widow moves from her husband's house to a small hut. While there, she wears no clothes unless perhaps a rag, sit on a block or stool instead of a sleeping mat, a banana leaf must suffice, she is prohibited

washing her body or combing her hair. Azikiwe (1994:30) quite agreed with some of the widowhood rites mentioned above but disagreed with Nwoga's (1989: 33) submission on great influence wielded by *Umuada* (married and unmarried daughters of the extended family) as regards proper treatment that should be metted to the wife (widow) of their brother, along the line they have decided she merited from her treatment of their brother. For according to Azikiwe, *Umuada*, have no part to play in widowhood practices in Afikpo community. This observation therefore indicates that the general notion on the power of the *Umuada* as architects and perpetrators of widowhood practices in Igboland is not generalizable. On widowhood rites, Okoye (1995:45) also observes that; "the widow is forced to drink the water with which the corpse of her husband is washed as proof that she had no hand in the man's death."

She further observes that:

In India, widows many years ago faced being burnt alive at the cremation ceremony of their deceased husbands, In Zambia and in Ghana an indescribable emotional violence is suffered by the widow as her husband's relations (ie her in-laws) swoop on the dead man's property in the zealous and scandalous scramble for his property. In Parkistan, the widow epitomises bad luck. She must not allow a new bride to behold her. A sight of a widow is enough to blight the whole future of such a bride.

In a nutshell, Okoli (1998:32) in an unpublished thesis enumerated the following traditional widowhood practices as observed in Nsukka sub-cultural zone;

- Confinement of a widow in a room for a period of time, usually 28 days
- Sitting and sleeping on floor, mat or mattress
- Restraining widows from taking bath at will.
- Wailing at a particular time
- Performance of sacrifice for various reasons
- Scraping of hair
- Observation of widowhood run
- Wearing of mourning attire, which could be black or white.

Some of the above traditional practices of widows are in consonance with earlier observation of Afigbo (1989) Azikiwe (1994) Basden (1968) (1937) Okoye (1995) Ubesie (1979) to mention but a few.

However, it should be noted that the observation of some practices has greatly reduced and some elements of change introduced which brought about by the advent of Christianity and Western civilization.

The General Influence of Christianity

Christianity which is an off shoot of Hebrew religion recognises the status of widows and their sufferings and makes provision for the welfare of widows against their maltreatment. Instances abound in the Bible concerning their welfare. In Deut. 14:29. God commands that widows be considered part of the covenantal community. The people of God must extend to them the same merciful protection that they bestow on orphans and defenceless.

In Jer. 49:11, provisions are made for them. Thus at the harvest time, a portion of grain, some fruit of the olive tree and grape in the vineyard are left for her sustenance. In the apostolic era, appointment of the first deacons were made whose duties included taking care of the widows.

The arrival of early Christian missionaries in Nigeria, the country has been affected by urbanization, western education and new technology. This highly influencing western civilization has adulterated the existing traditional setting. To illustrate this influence of Christianity on the modern Igbo society, Catholic Bishop Okafor of the Diocese (1994:41) in a pamphlet titled "Death, Burial, funeral and Widowhood" instructs that:

- The widow /widower is legitimately entitled to go to the property of his or her partner, whether they have children or not. Each individual is exhorted to make a will to guarantee this right.
- The shaving of hair is to be done by anybody on any day of the week...
- Whatever the surviving partner does is done in charity and should be devoid of impositions, especially with regard to widows. On the state of the mourner, the following should also be upheld:
- The place where the mourner stays shall be clean, airy, comfortable and hygienic.

- The mourner shall be personally clean in body, in dress and in soul.
- He/she must be well fed from clean and decent utensils as usual.
- The mourner shall be well catered for with Christian love, sympathy and respect.
- The mourner should not be dispossessed in whatever manner or form of property possessed as 'one flesh' such as barn, food items, material goods and economic trees.
- The mourner should not be deprived of necessary repose.
- The mourner may communicate his/her feelings by talking, nodding, hand shake or smile without hindrance.
- All forms of rituals or sacrifice other than that of the church are prohibited.
- When sound in health, the mourner should be physically present to participate at the burial and funeral rites of his or her partner.

These suggestions of the Bishop appear to spread across other denominations amongst the Igbo Christians. Thus, since most Igbo people are Christians, the Christian religion probably might have introduced some welfare package to the Igbo widows in Nsukka inclusive. For instance, the church has relaxed some practices like:

- Restriction of a widow's movement, which before could last up to a year to few days now;
 - Wailing at a particular time;
 - Restriction of widows from taking their bath and combing their hair.
 - Performance of sacrifice for various reasons and few others.
- However, the changes brought into these traditional practices have put some widows at a cross road.

Areas of Conflict

As earlier mentioned, the introduction of Christian ideas into traditional widowhood practices has brought a lot of difficulties during the

implementation especially in rural area where these practices are usually observed and many widows conservative. For instance, at Lejja some Christian widows who adhere to Christian widowhood practices are sometimes opposed by both the traditionalists and their fellow Christians. There are cases where a Christian widow may be surrounded by both Christians and traditionalists, as her Christian members give directives on how she has to mourn her husband, the traditionalists and even some Christians who feel that tradition should be upheld will counteract the order thereby creating a very big conflict and putting the widow concerned in a dilemma.

At Obimo community in Nsukka Local Government Area, the widow happens to witness an event of a recently widowed lady who belongs to one of these independent churches. When the time came for her to scrape her hair and put on her mourning dress, she refused on the ground that her faith cannot compromise such tradition. She had the backing of her church members. She was highly attacked by her husband's kins who are both Christians and non-Christians. Her natal relations also threatened to disown her if she refused to comply. The pressure became so much on her that she eventually succumbed. But by that time a lot of people had lost interest in her. In the end, she was abandoned to her fate ostracized and her husband's property devoured by her. Her church members on the other hand were very unhappy with her succumbing to the pressure thus putting the woman in a dilemma.

In many other cases, like in Nsukka Community, crises arise with Christian women fearing that the traditionalists may scrape their mourning hair, do it themselves before the stipulated period. There is also tension when the choice of colour for the mourning dress is to be made. Usually, the traditionalists would insist on black cloth while the church prescribes white. Other traditional rites like sitting on the mat on the bare floor, wailing at a particular time, observing the widowhood run and so on are still observed by both parties despite directives from the church that those rites should be stopped. To achieve their purpose at times, Christians send observers to ensure that none of these traditional practices are abided by the widow. This type of situation usually puts the widow concerned in a very terrible state thereby adding more problem to her already bereaved state.

Indeed, the dusts unleashed by the clash of the two cultures Christianity and traditional cultures have infested the society so much that one needs to find solution in resolving the problems.

Recommendations

Having analysed the conflict between traditional and Christian widowhood

practices, there is the need for the two opposing groups to come together. This could be done when Christians adopt a new attitude and understanding towards traditional cultural institutions. The good cherished customs of the people should be appreciated by Christians while the obnoxious ones that infringe on the basic human rights should be dropped by traditionalists. On this, Karimu Damap (2007:19) suggested that; "any custom that is offensive to the scripture or hazardous to widows should be stopped and any resistance should be penalized through church discipline".

However, the writer is of the view that the process of this change should be gradual. It is not just easy for indigenous Christians to part ways with their traditional set-up. The church should always bear this in mind.

Both the traditionalists and Christians should note the important element in inculturation as a part to the right direction. Inculturation here means a situation whereby as one picks and chooses the elements that suit his purposes in other cultures, one discards some and retains some. Ekwunife (1995:36) also observes; "one never swallows new imported methods of cultivation without first subjecting them to rigorous tests and purification of the inherent chaff in human endeavours". For instance, during the confinement period, a widow is surrounded by both her relations and her husbands relations. In most cases, they give her both spiritual and material support. This communal aspect of life which traditional African people are noted for helps her cope with the mounting problems of widowhood. Onwu (1987:68) also noted this communal aspect of Africa life, thus "African communalism has more in common with this communal spirit of the early church which Paul highlighted and clarified in his Common Wealth Concept." If the church believes in this communal living of their brethren, they should accommodate African communalism. The above submission was made because of the writer's observation of intolerant attitude of some Christians when they see their member(widow) surrounded by her relations except if they are their own brethren.

There is no doubt that the church's genuine concern for the welfare of women can stop harmful, traditional rituals as suggested by Edet (2001:15). But, the writer is of the view that the church should be cautious in their approach to issues. For instance, on the issue of disallowing widows to express their grief openly by some Christians, the writer is of the view that widows should be allowed to express their grief which is commonly through shedding of tears. For such expression gives emotional release and relieves the heart of so much burden.

It is suggested that apart from Christians' words of encouragement through Bible quotations especially as regard the caring disposition of our

Lord Jesus towards widows, Christians should intensify efforts to give practical help to widows during this trying period.

In addition, a leaf could be borrowed from the following plans of the Evangelical Church of West Africa (ECWA) for widows as submitted by Karimu Damap (2007 69-70) which says:

Firstly, pastors to deliver quarterly sermons and lectures to emphasize the position of women and widows as taught by the Bible. Secondly, Local Church Board (LCBS) to organise skill acquisition workshops twice a year for women beginning from 2007. Thirdly, the church to formulate a policy that protects women, widows and children from exploitation and adverse cultural practices as well as enhance employment opportunities and placement in leadership positions by the end of 2008. Fourthly, to encourage Christian husbands to write wills beginning from 2006.

Apart from the submission made by Karimu Damap which is quite encouraging. It is the writer's view that the church should make extra efforts to sensitize the public (Christians and non Christians alike) regularly on the implications of some obnoxious widowhood acts that are senseless and wait till there is a case at hand.

The writer recommends education and enlightenment programmes to be organized to educate the different women association on the need for them to come together to fight for the betterment of widows. In this regard, the writer envisaged that modern agents of socialization in Nigeria like the schools, mass media, internet and other organs of social communications to be guided by the United Nations declarations on Human rights especially the various sections that touch on women rights. For example attention should be drawn to chapter II article 4 of that declaration (1997:63) which states that: "Every woman has the right to the recognition, enjoyment, exercise and protection of all human rights and freedom embodied in regional and international human rights instruments."

Government at all levels-local, state and federal should enact laws to protect widows. These laws should be enforced through effective monitoring to ensure appropriate compliance.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOS) on the other hand, must also to spread their activities to rural areas where the widowhood situation

more pathetic. All widows and married women should be encouraged to be economically independent. This they could achieve by educating themselves properly which will earn them good jobs. Widows should engage their time and energy in profitable ventures. The government should also help by providing widows grants as part of social development in Nigeria. Qualified and able widows should be given appointments to enable them take good care of their children.

It is the writer's view, that if all these recommendations are implemented widows will live a happier life.

Conclusion

Widowhood as earlier mentioned occurs when one loses her spouse through death. Death on the other hand is inevitable and has been in existence since the creation of man. It can strike at any time and in any home. Whenever it strikes, women who by custom are under men and depend on them are at the receiving end. Some traditional rites and rituals that widows are expected to perform subject them to inhuman treatment. With the inception of Christianity, some of the obnoxious traditional practices are gradually fading away. But it has also introduced some tensions and conflicts in the lives of widows. The majority of them are in dilemma in a way either to satisfy their Christian faith or satisfy the traditional requirements. To salvage the situation, the writer recommends dialogue as imperative to a meaningful solution. In a similar situation, Chukwulozie (1986:X) recommends, "Dialogue in fact are now the order of the day among world religions and whenever people want to get along meaningfully together.

It then goes that traditions that are detrimental to widows' health and their general well-being should be done away with. Those that encourage African communalism should be welcomed. For the church, the emphasis should be on empowering widows spiritually and economically. Church programmes should be geared towards convincing the public on the ills of obnoxious widowhood acts. The church should also advocate, defend and protect the rights of widows and their children. Widows who want to express their grief outwardly by wailing; scrapping their hairs and putting on mourning attire should please be allowed. After all there is nothing wrong with that biblically.

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