

WIDOWHOOD PRACTICES IN TRADITIONAL IBIBIO SOCIETY: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

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Abstract

This paper examines the phenomenon of widowhood in Ibibio and assessed the negative stereotypes that are associated with being a widow. These stereotypes are rooted in cultural and traditional practices common in all culture in Ibibio land. They also vary from community to community and the degree of intensity also varies culturally. In addition, the level of education and economic status of widow determines the degree of application or enforcement of practices culturally associated with widow. Economically strong and well educated women who are widows determine or choose which practices to accept or reject without incurring the wrath of tradition, while property stricken widows are compelled to undergo the most vicious forms of widowhood practices. Apart from the fact that the widow is usually disadvantaged in the distribution of the late husband's poverty, the widow is also subjected to some unpleasant widowhood practices. Such practices include shaving of hairs, wearing of black clothes, sitting on the floor or mat, being refrain from bathing for a number of days, seclusion and being made to swear the late husband's corpse. This paper adopts a sociological view. The paper x-rays these widowhood practices in Ibibio traditional society and makes suggestions on how to improve the position of the Ibibio widows which among others included the economic empowerment of the widows.

Keywords: Gender Issues, Widowhood, Ibibio Practices, Seclusion, Social Justice.

Introduction

Across different cultures in Ibibio, there exist harmful traditional widowhood practices which have attracted the attention of the global struggle in general on violence against women. In addition to this perspective, another aspect of gender based violence that includes concern for the status of women in Ibibio land relative to men in the circumstance of death. Sufficient evidence suggests that widows are severally affected financially, psychologically, sexually and socially (Stallion, 1984, Afolayan, 2011). The severe effects of widowhood in Ibibio are rooted in cultural and traditional practices as well as the socialization processes that condition women to passivity and dependence. These conditions have erected enormous difficulties for women to creatively and stoutly initiate new robust relationships with both men and women in social and economic spheres upon widowhood. The debilitating conditions of women are worsened by societal factors that instrumentally feed into the situation ranging from loss of livelihood upon widowhood, and the fact that "widows are less likely to remarry than widowers" (Stallion, 2011). Widows rather than sympathized with even assisted are subjected to near inhuman treatment in traditional ritual rites and practices such as solitary confinement, defacement, disinheritance, a relatively long mourning period of limited but active socio-economic activities and outright ostracisation. The most obvious effects are

depending poverty, acute stress and depression, loss of identity and self-esteem. The widowhood conditions expose women to psychological and physical abuse as well as a whole range of health related problems including HIV/AIDs (Baobab, 2012).

This paper argues that widows constitute a sizeable social category that is highly marginalized by the Ibibio society due to the cultural factors and is neglected by social policy. While their numbers are rising astronomically, their social economic conditions are deteriorating, manifested especially by excruciating poverty. Awareness of the existence of widows ought to be vigorously and systematically created while educational approaches should be designed to promote understanding of the widowhood phenomenon while social policy should be evolved especially to address incidence of poverty among widows in Ibibio given it attendant consequences of child's labour including withdrawal of children from school and engagement in prostitution as a coping strategy.

Ibibio Marriage Custom

Among the Ibibio, marriage was exogamous and it was the man who went out to marry the woman and paid marriage compensation (dowry) on her. This payment of marriage compensation legitimized and authenticated the marriage, giving him exclusive rights over her wife, especially the right over her body. The wife had to be subservient to him in all things and had the responsibility of giving him as many children as they agreed, especially male children for the assurance of the perpetuity of the lineage. Marriage was generally polygamous (Ekanem, 1978). The man had certain responsibilities to the wife. He had to give her plots of land on which to farm. He had to cloth her, and to provide her with weekly feeding allowance. Women in Ibibio land had the right to landed properties, even in their father's house. At the death of their husband, she could forfeit her right to the land given to her by her late husband, especially if she had no male children. Women had no right to the property of their husbands only their male children had, and a woman without a male child lost out completely. Apart from subsistent farming and processing a palm fruits, women in Ibibio land were predominantly full-time house wives who were solely dependent on their husbands for everything.

A woman was married, not only to her husband but to the lineage and the extended family (Ekanem, 2002). She addressed every male adult in family and the lineage as (Ebe) "my husband" and therefore she had to accord them respect and obedience. Apart from sexual right, male adults in the family had certain rights over her. After the death of her husband, she had to go through the rite of widowhood at the end of which she would choose a brother of her late husband, to "stay with" as her husband, as the custom demands. She could bring forth children for her late husband through her late husband's brother who inherited her. Without her being inherited, life will be too difficult for her because she would be starved of both economic and human capitals. The inheritance of the wife was thus a sort of insurance policy for the survival of the woman especially in an androgynous and patriarchal society where women were generally solely dependent on their husbands for economic survival. It is this dependency of the woman and her husband's people that will render comprehensible the rationale behind the widowhood rite as not necessarily a rite of suppression but that of liberation and empowerment.

Widowhood Rites and Rituals among the Ibibio

A widow in traditional Ibibio society was a woman who had been legitimately married through customary law but who had lost her husband through death. Legitimate traditional marriage was an important factor in widowhood, because according to Ibibio customary law, a man who cohabited with a woman without performing the traditional marriage rite could not be ritually mourned by his partner if he died (Ekanem, 2002), and if it was the woman that died first without the rite of traditional marriage taking place, the partner of the dead woman would have to perform customary marriage rite on his dead partner before her funeral rite could take place. A widow was therefore a mourning woman and customary law specified the way and manner by which she had to mourn the husband through widowhood rite that spanned from six months to five years.

The Rite

After the death of a man had been made public through announcement by the appropriate authority, the wife/wives had to wail in order to attract neighbours to the compound (Ekanem, 2002). It was mandatory for women, especially the widows to wail and cry, otherwise it would be considered obnoxious to customary etiquette and a sign of complicity in the death. Other women, who were attracted to the compound of the bereaved through their wailing, would take part in the wailing as sign of solidarity and sympathy for the bereaved family. Men were also attracted to the compound of the bereaved but they would rather in sober moods, separately from the women, without shedding tears as such public display or “feminine” emotion was considered *infra dig* to manliness and culturally obnoxious.

The next stage in the mourning rite was referred to as *Nnaufokikpo*. Literally, this meant “sleeping in the room with the corpse”. This was a daily routine from the day death was announced to the day of the funeral rites. The mourning wife/wives along with other women from the extended family would remain in the room with the corpse and from time to time massage it from becoming too stiff before the funeral. And at the funeral rite, the wife/wives had to wail and cry as loud as possible to demonstrate that they were really touched by the death, any of them that treated the entire exercise of mourning and crying with levity would be suspected of complicity in the death (Ekanem, 2018). Such a widow would be inviting serious trouble to herself. The crying continued for some days after the funeral rites.

About eight market days after the funeral rites, the rite of widowhood took place. Elderly women of the lineage, most of whom themselves had gone through the rite, gathered at the backyard of the widows hut. She paid the initiation fees and presented other traditional sacrificial items like goat, chicken and yams after which she was ritually bathed with cold water. Then she was made to sit on a mat that had been placed on an open space. She was naked. The most elderly woman who presided over the initiation shaved her head with *Uriong*, a special traditional fabricated razor-like object, while other women members of the lineage formed a circle around her (the initiate), singing dirges. After the shaving of the head, the initiate lied down on her back, with her legs apart. And the woman shaved her pubic hairs, after which she was rubbed with (*idout*) camwood. One piece of wrapper was tied round her waist, just to cover her nakedness. The pubic hairs were disposed according to the custom of the lineage. Some would bury the hairs in the bush or near the grave of the late husband while others would burn them. At the end of the rite, the widow *awaanakpa* (mourning wife), as she was then called, had a brief ritual outing at the village market; she again went through ritual

ablution and sacrifices were offered to the gods of the land and the ancestors, soliciting for protection throughout the period of the mourning, because for a widow to die in mourning was considered an abomination and she would not be given proper burial as it would be construed that they had sexual intercourse during the period of her mourning (Ekanem, 2018). She went to the market bare-breasted, apart from a piece of cloth which was tied around her waist. Her entire body was covered with (*idout*) camwood. People gathered around the section of the market where the ritual took place, muttering some prayers as sign of support and solidarity. At the end of the rite in the market square, the widow from the receded to the peripheral existence demanded by her status, with absolute austerely, taking on a life of penance and denial, and cutting herself off from all sensual pleasure and personal hygiene. She would take her bath very sparingly, not more than once every sixteen market day (two customary weeks), and she would do that during the night. She wore the same loin cloth to the market, to the farm and to stream. From this time onward, she neither cut or plaited her hairs and could not do that until the preparation for the outing rites.

The real essence of the status of a widow began to emerge after about two months. Her started to overgrow, the dirt on her body showed signs of cracking the offensive smell emanating from her body started polluting the environment, as she acquired the status of a widow polluted. Since she was pollute by her condition; she had to abstain from sexual intercourse throughout the period of mourning, otherwise she would have committed an abomination. As a polluted woman, her movement was very much limited to as not to cross the boundaries of the sacred. Therefore, she was forbidden from crossing the shrine of Ikpaisong, the earth deity and other spaces.

The Outing Rite

After his austere period of peripheral existence as a widow, she would undergo the outing ritual ceremonies, comprising of sacrifices, rite of cutting off all type of relationships with her late husband, shaving of her pubic hairs and other hairs on her part of body, robbing her body with (*iduot*) camwood, dancing in the market and feasting. The outing ceremonies usually corresponded with the memorial service of the death husband. This is what used to be erroneously referred to as “second burial” in Ibibio traditional society. The fact is that burial was always done once and for all. But memorial was an indispensable rite for the dead since without it the dead would not have a settled life in the underworld and could not be an ancestor. He is what is called the rite of ancestorisation of the death (Ekanem, 2002, 2005 and 2018).

Thus, the rite culminated in an outing ceremony. Early in the morning, masquerades went round the village and cut down palm fruits. These items, along with others were carried to the Ufok Nduongo (a counterfeit house) with members of the lineage in attendance. After the sacrifices and the feasting, and the dead has been given a final resting place among the living dead, all in the lineage went to the market the following day and gather around the section belonging to the lineage of the dead person. Sacrifices were offered, guns were shut, and the widows with bare body danced around the market, along with members of the village community (Ekanem, 2010).

After this, the widow was escorted to her father’s house where she spent about one week after which her son or a male member of her family would go and take her to her husband’s family

for the separation of the spirit of her ritual husband from her through ritual performance. This ritual consist of a symbolic return of the dowry that her late husband paid on her head to her father by either the brother of the late husband who would inherit or her son whom she would stay as “wife”. The name of her late husband would be mentioned and then her new husband would say: “This is the dowry you paid to marry your wife. From now on, she is no longer your wife but mine. Therefore, go away from her do not come to sleep with her in the dream. Leave her alone to live with me peacefully as a wife. A small amount of money will be dropped on the floor and then a live fowl was swung seven times over her head, and private part respectively. The rite was concluded with some prayer and pouring of libation to the ancestors after which the widow would go back to her late husband’s family. At this point the woman was considered liberated and the reversibility of her status complete. She was no longer polluted. The inheritance by the member of the family reincorporated her into the lineage; she would have access to the family and the family properties including the land, and more so, recapture her right that age lost during the period of widowhood.

The Oppressive Culture of Widowhood

African marriage seems to be the breeding ground for abhorrent violence against women. It is here that is found the practice of early marriage which does not accord the girl the right of mature choice of life partner based on love. The pre-marital rites of fattening preparing the maiden for womanhood and marital life was another practice marked activities which still provoked a lot of controversies even to this day. Here we are talking about clitoridectomy or female circumcision. Although male domination is always blamed for its perpetration, this culture of puberty rite is in reality promoted by the female folks themselves. And there are corresponding rites for male adolescents, often not cited in defense of women allegations. Therefore the male folks cannot actually be accused of dominating over women in this regard (Umoh, 2016). It is within marriage as well that exorbitant bride price is in vogue, which gives the impression of the women being sold to the highest bidder, thereby reducing the woman’s status to that of commodity. More often than not, their provokes a lot of tension in marital homes. There is discrimination against women during divorce, for the women is always to blame for the breakdown of marriage and often she has no share in the property jointly acquired with the husband. In many cases, women cannot even sue for divorce. During child delivery, it is the woman who must confess her marital infidelity (if applicable) under severe pains of being killed by the spirits of infidelity whereas the husband can freely age in adulterous acts and get away with it without being divorced or subjected to public ridicule. The entire aforementioned, are nothing compared to the abhorrent and dehumanizing ill treatment of widows on the African continent. According to Onyekuru (2011), widowhood is the loss of the head of the family. Therefore widowhood refers essentially to the woman at the death of her husband, when she did not remarry. Akanni (2001) in turn defines a widow as one whose husband has died and has not married again. Widowhood practices affect women more than men. Hence, Nwosu (2007), is right in observing that the disorganizing and traumatic experience, which accompanies death of husbands, tends to be greater on women than that of men when they lose their wives. While the wife immediately becomes the primary suspect for her husband’s death, the man is immediately offered an opportunity and appropriate substitution to comfort him upon the loss of his wife. Referring to Annang widowhood called Akpe, Umoh (2015), insist that widowhood was strictly women’s affair: it was a rapture of alliance with the death of the husband. Since Annang culture is patriarchal, only women are expected to be initiated into widowhood.

General Patterns of Widowhood Practice in Ibibio

Most of these harmful widowhood practices examined are;

- **Shaving of Hairs:** This includes even the pubic hairs, with broken bottle for shaving the hair on her head and razor for the pubic hair. In some place, there will be certain designs on her head after literally scrapping off the hairs. The significance of this is that, since the husband is dead, there is nobody to beautiful her hair for, at least for a period of time (Ilozone, 2007).
- **Being made to swear with husband's corpse:** This is the worst of the practices and violations against women: though it is meant to prove if the women killed the husband or not either with witchcraft, poisoning and the likes; the act is simply disgusting. Once a man dies, the in-laws immediately accuse the wife and ask her to confess to the killing and to prove her innocence, she must be made to drink the water used in bathing the corpse of the late husband. If she refuses, obviously, she killed the husband. Therefore, she must be punished; or the widow crosses the husband's coffin three times, if she dies before the mourning period is over, she will be thrown into the evil forest because her death confirms her a murderer (Nzewi, 1981).
- **Wearing of black/white clothes:** This is meant to indicate that the widow is mourning and to make the widow unattractive as well as to let everyone know that her husband is death (Janet, 2018).
- **Sleeping and sitting on the floor or mat:** The symbolic effect of this by a woman at the death of her husband is dethronement. Because a woman by marriage becomes absorbed into the husband's family and is recognized by her role as a wife, therefore, the loss of her position and entitlements in the family, hence, the sitting on the floor or mat. Also, this act is a sign of mourning and grief (Nzewi, 1981).
- **Seclusion:** In most parts of the African society, the early part of the widow's seclusion are usually rigorous. During the first 28 days, the widow is not permitted 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 to protect her from the spirits, which may attack her during this period (Umejesie, 2002).

To aggravate the misery of widows, every moveable items are often transported homewards by the in-laws, leaving the poor widow empty handed. The primordial nor is that, every asset in the family belongs to the husband, though this assumption is wrong in modern society in which both couples contribute to the family up-keep, but the in-law would not hear of that, this act plunged widows deeply into poverty coupled with the grief of losing a husband. These double actions result into shock emotional crack and temporary loss of sense or even relapse into a coma for days (Umejesie, 2002).

Reasons for Prevalence of Widowhood Practices

1. **Bad character of the wife:** Traditionally, this should not be a reason, but the attitude of the wife contributes to the kind of treatment she will receive from the in-laws at the death of her husband. If a woman is of no good attitude, the in-laws used the avenue (the practices) to get their own pound of flesh.
2. **Lack of respect for women-fold:** This is another cause of these obnoxious practices. Africa is being seen to be 'a man's world', due to our patriarchal background therefore, women are being treated as an article, like chattel that was purchased, which you can drop or transfer. This belief makes the in-laws to treat the wife without respect when the husband dies.
3. **Lack of education:** Ignorance, people say, is a disease. Most of the women who happens to be victims of these obnoxious practices believed in their culture and are very hard to convince. Also, there are still some sections of the country that do not strongly believe in educating girls. An educated woman would not succumb to be abused and be maltreated as a widow. Education of the girl child therefore becomes very important as it may serve as future security against various forms of violence against women especially widowhood practices.
4. **Failure of men to write a will:** Most husbands do not bother to write a will before their death and when a mere suggestion is made by the wife, this might attract a village or family council meeting on the basis that she is planning to kill the husband so as to inherit his properties. Lack of any written will pertaining to inheritance of properties will place the wife at a disadvantaged position since the in-laws would want to confiscate their brother's properties, show antagonism to the wife and evict her from the family house.

Implications of the Practices on Widows in Ibibio

1. **Political Effects:** Politically, many widows cannot seek for political offices because of their status and due to the fact that men and women in the society will not respect them. However, some widows who know their rights and refused their being made silent in the society, usually fight and achieve what they want to achieve in the society, their status notwithstanding.
2. **Social Effects:** Widows are being avoided in the society as if it is an abomination to be a widow. Most of them lost their prestige, friends and they finally become loners and they are highly prone to committing suicide to end their suffering.
3. **Economic and Dehumanizing Effects:** The widows are poor and uncared for by people who are supposed to give them succor and help. Thus, many widows face extreme poverty, discrimination and dehumanizing treatments. They were miserably deprived of their social security and family support. Their children too are isolated, often in unhealthy condition, physically abused and at times without inheriting any property.

4. **Psychological and Health Effects:** Another unpalatable effect of these widowhood practices is that many widows become emotionally deranged and psychologically unstable and are prone to shock, temporary or even permanent loss of memory and sense. Health wise, they are prone to any kind of diseases, especially after drinking the disgusting water used in bathing their husband corpse. Many widows are diagnosed more hypertensive due to the burden they bear alone (Yvonne and Browning, 2002).

Recommendations

1. Training and empowerment programs that will include formal and informal education geared towards enabling women to come out of their shells and be productive and not just child bearers should be implemented at all levels: federal, state, local government and community.
2. Networking and convergence among women groups for their collective benefits should be encouraged. Women themselves must rise to the challenge of remaining united, focus, purpose driven, proactive and resilience in pursuit of their collective dreams and aspirations.
3. Traditional institutions and practices should be modified in line with global trends and emerging facts. The age long tradition of making women to play subordinating role in the society should be vehemently discouraged by all.
4. There is need for government to make a legislation prohibiting all the obnoxious widowhood practices. This especially will be geared towards extricating widows from all sorts of sufferings associated with widowhood.
5. Economic empowerment is advocated for women. They should find and be given viable jobs and not depend solely on their husbands. Sheppard (1989), noted that more women are taking up industrial labour in the modern times. Women are having more access to education and are becoming economically independent compared to traditional societies.
6. There is need for all sundry to show compassion to the widow and their children. Because a widow and a child of a dead man reminds us of the deceased.
7. Husbands are advised to make adequate provision for their wives and children by leaving behind a will. This will save their family from a lot of psychological, physical and financial embarrassment and trauma.
8. Women (wives) should also exhibit good conduct towards their in-laws.
9. There should be increasing assistance to widows by Non-Governmental Organisations such as Mums and Widows Association (MWA), Widows Support Center (WSC) churches and well meaning individuals.
10. The mass media can be and should be applied as an effective tool towards ensuring women's active involvement in every stratum of our socio-economic and political life.

Women should also take advantage of the instrumentality of the mass media to propagate their message against gender inequality.

Conclusion

From time immemorial, the death of one's spouse is a moment of devastation and sadness. This is usually occasioned by loss of love, care, company and livelihood, attended by a feeling of abandonment. Again, it represents not just the departure of a companion and soul mate but in most times, a breadwinner. This development could also lead to a radical change in one's social status and lifestyle. It is natural for one to grieve for the death of a loved one. Thus, in Ibibio culture, issues associated with death are often emotive. This is due to the fact that death presents a situation in which one loses the power of negotiation, since it is beyond human control.

In this paper, it is highlighted that widows are subjected to severe dehumanizing practices due to patrilineal nature of Ibibio society that is male dominated, while the customary laws of the society are also skewed favourably towards men and women are in disadvantaged from time immemorial. This explains why the society always pity men and seek to offer succor to them when they loss their spouse, while the same people suspected women as responsible to their husband's death. In our society today, civilization has created a solid impact in exposing and bringing into limelight that education, involvement in white collar jobs, Christianity and high level of exposure of the women has gone a long way in watering down most of these obnoxious practices on women. The government should promogate a law and pass same into effect, and that women should not be relegated but should be brought into the mainstream of the society, most especially the enlightened widows.

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