

The Alienation of Nigerian Women in Widowhood

by

Ngozi N. Iheanacho

drngoziheanacho@yahoo.com

Senior Lecturer, Department of Religious & Cultural Studies,

Faculty of Humanities, University of Port Harcourt,

Port Harcourt.Nigeria.

Abstract

This paper is an ethnographic study of the plight of widowed women in Nigeria (especially in the eastern parts, like the Etche of the Niger Delta region) within the early period of their husbands' death wherein they are subjected to numerous rituals and practices which are interpreted to be customary and necessary for the good of the widow, the deceased husband and the entire kin group. This involve stripping the widow of her freedom, lying with the corpse in state, restriction of the widow's movement and consent in issues that concern her, dispossession of family properties and, labeling the widow as ritually dirty and dissociated from people. Hence, the practices are bizarre, dehumanizing, and constitute violence against women aspiration and human development. However, from the prism and understanding of particular worldviews and religion, the practices are conceived to be meaningful and necessary. And ironically, women are both the promoters and victims of these widowhood practices. Thus, this paper advocates for attitudinal change and mass education to rescue Nigerian women and women elsewhere in Africa from such counter-productive cultural practices.

Introduction

A woman's loss of her husband through death is emotional and burdening, especially in a matrimonial relationship that is characterized by filial and conjugal love. The sudden separation of the couple is psychologically devastating and traumatic. This is underscored by the fact that in parts of Nigeria, especially in the Eastern parts, like the Etche region of the Niger Delta region in particular, a woman has less regard when she is without a husband. Yet, in the widow's situation of agony, emphasis is shifted to bizarre and expensive rituals and practices conceived to be customary and necessary for the deceased and his widow. Against this background, the death of a man becomes a crisis situation for his widow, especially if she is young and, or childless. This brings the widow to a state of hopelessness in life which many hardly survive. Besides, some of the practices create chance for people outside the matrimonial home to encroach into the rights and affairs of the widow. Consequently, she is scorned, unfairly treated, debased and obsessed, which in all culminate into her alienation. Many modern minds 'cry-foul' to the practices, (Iheanacho 2005).

The problems and implications of the widowhood practices reflect more when we juxtapose them against the backdrop of the aspirations of modern society, especially on such topical issues as advancement of women. Thus, the contemporary society has always aimed at only those things that would improve the standard of living and worth of humanity, towards the realization of human true being – personality and dignity, premised on the social concepts of liberty and self-actualization. Following the quest for these ideals, women have lamented on their being treated as inferior and sub-humans in contradistinction to their male counterparts. Widowhood institution is characterized by a myriad of cultural practices at which accusing fingers are pointed. Even as Nigerian women joined their counterparts all over the world to celebrate the 2014 Women's Day, the practices of the institution still loom large amongst the female folk, especially in the rural areas.

The rest of my report is laid out in five main sections. Conceptualization of key words (widow, cosmological foundations and alienation) is followed by literature review and methodology. The pre and post interment practices are discussed next, as prelude to spotlighting the variables of alienation inherent in the institution, as discussed in the last major section of the essay.

Conceptualization of Key Words

A widow is a woman who has outlived the man she married; especially when such a woman has not remarried, (Webster 1973:2090). This definition is in accord with what the Etche and some Igbo dominant cultures of Eastern Nigeria call and understand as *Ishimkpe*. *Ishi* means head while *mkpe* is the cultural name for mourning. The literary understanding is that *Ishimkpe* is the head of mourning.

The changes and practices which characterize the life of a woman on the demise of her husband create and subjects her to *mkpe*, which usually last for about one year. The experience is a major milestone in the life of a widow. It shakes the totality of her being, to its foundation. The situation is both traumatic and apprehensive, (Ulendu Evelyn, interview, 12 Feb., 2005; Okeregwu Monica, interview, 16 March, 2004; Anum Mabel, interview, 2 March 2014). The widow is depressed and weak, especially at the early stage. She is unable to take care of herself. Worse still, she is gripped with fear and entangled in a state of obsession, isolation and in dire need of assistance to pass through the rituals of the institution and reform her life to normalcy. Therefore, she is in a transitory period. To swiftly and successfully come out of the period, the widow must co-operate with her matrimonial kinswomen whose function it is to carry out the rituals and supervise the practices.

The concept of alienation is multidisciplinary. This is why it has remained problematic to posit an all-encompassing analysis of it. It is a substantial area in contemporary thought, often, used as a lens to viewing and explaining variations of social and religious situations and behaviours in the society. However, it was through the celebrated analysis of the alienated spirit (Lichtheim 1968:264-5), of the German philosopher Hegel, that alienation as a concept entered into modern sociological discourse. But the works of Karl Marx, especially on alienated labour, contributed to its transformation from the earlier ontological purview to being a “powerful diagnostic tool for sociological inquiry”, (Coser and Rosenberg, 1976:395).

The meaning of alienation to Karl Marx is that man does not experience himself as the acting agent in his grasp of the world, but that the world (nature, others and himself), remain alien to him. These stand above and against him as objects, even though they may be objects of his own creation (see Coser and Rosenberg, 1976:395). Yet, Marx specifically speaks of alienation in political and religious institutions as well as alienation from fellow men, all based on economic orientation. In his own conception, Erich Fromm (in Mitchell ed. 1979: 5) defines alienation in close relation to that of Marx. In his words, “Alienation is that condition when man does not experience himself as the action bearer of his own power and richness, but as an impoverished thing’ dependent on powers outside of him”.

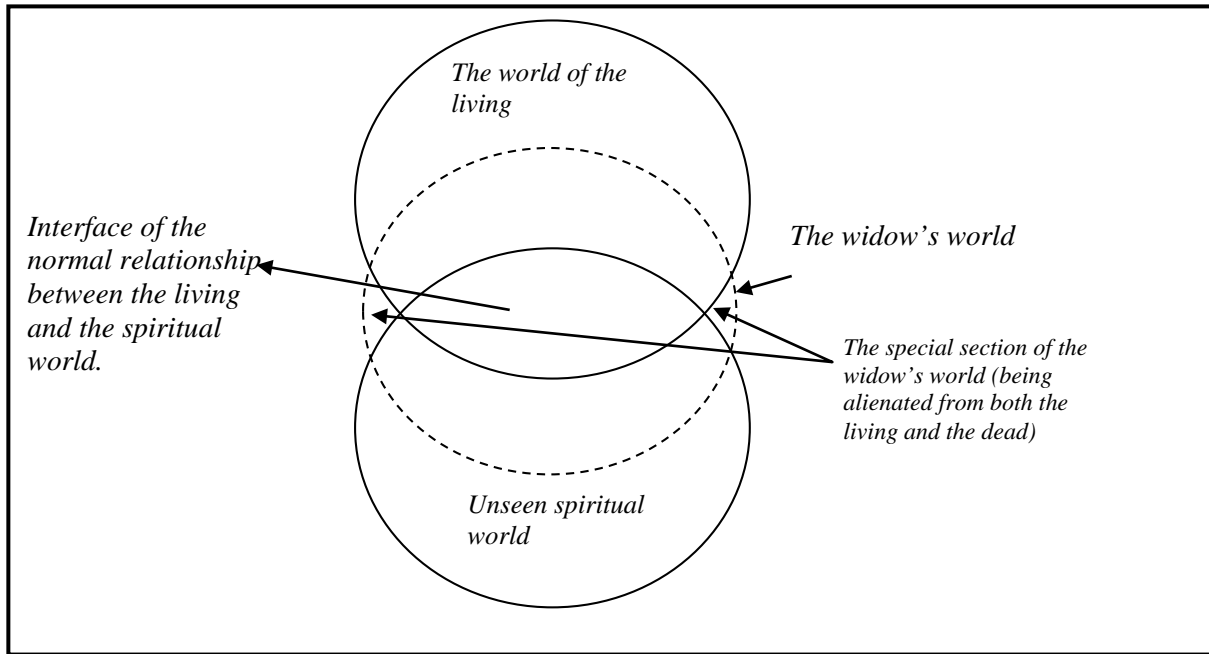
To clear the vagueness and obscurity which for Melvin Seaman (1976) exists in alienation literature, he sets out to operationalize and measure the variables, through recasting the various dimensions in which it has been used. Seaman identified alienation as meaning powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation and estrangement. For Gregory Baum (1975:45), “Alienation then refers to the structures of separation which prevent people from enjoying their powers, from living up to their destiny, and from participating in the uniting forces of love and truth operative in their midst”. This definition by Baum gives brighter light to our focus.

However, all the conceptions of alienation in the humanities and social sciences revolve around human relations. This is specifically about the investigations of the ‘unattached’, ‘the marginal’; ‘the obsessive’, ‘the normless’ and ‘the isolated’ individual in social systems, (Seaman, 1976:401). Therefore, for the purpose of this study, we specifically conceive alienation as that state in which an individual becomes estranged from his group, social interactions and capabilities. He becomes lost in himself; alien and detached from personal drive of intrinsic and extrinsic values of his being, and no longer being the master of his destiny. The alienated loses all these to other people or objectivized phenomena in life. This situation of alienation can be obtainable in different dimensions of living as we have analyzed with the widowhood institution in Nigeria, with emphasis on the Etche people of the Eastern cultural extraction.

The People’s Cosmological Foundation of Widowhood Practices and Alienation

The widow’s mourning of her deceased spouse is a special period, characterized by a cycle of practices. Widowhood is a transition period which the widow enters via rituals of separation and comes out via rites of reintegration. The foundation of this tradition is the belief that, at death the deceased continues to exist in the hereafter as a spirit, acquiring more power. And, that at the early stage of mourning, the widow is being dragged by the living and the dead, (Nwachukwu Akajanwa, interview 2 March 2014; Iheanacho Florence, interview, 1 February 2004). This belief and situation of the widow can be figuratively illustrated, thus:

Figure 1: World view on the widow's existence¹



Source: Personal configuration from ethnographic data collected

Given the widow's precarious social and religious location, the rituals and practices, especially those necessary to liberate her from malevolent action of the spiritual world are zealously performed, even in conditions of deprivation, exploitation and pain. This is the platform of the widow's abstraction, obsession and estrangements, as we have systematically elucidated in the subsequent sections of this paper.

In the main, we note that the people are conscious of corporate life and identity. They live and depart from the physical world in the company of others. The individual does not exist alone, but only guaranteed by his membership to his groups. The emphasis on group and communal solidarity prevails both in joyful and sorrowful moments. And, the Nigerian peoples' traditional idea of community includes the departed ancestors, spiritual beings and the unborn. In other words, the corporate existence of the Etche and other Nigerian cultures have spiritual dimension. Thus, the rituals and practices of widowhood are believed to be necessary for the maintenance of the bi-polar worlds' interaction and to ensure the stability of the ontological harmony. Anything contrary to this is believed to attract the wrath of the spirits on the living. Again, such contrary actions to stop the widowhood rituals are matched with sanction and ostracism. This is a living death; such that reminds and equates with the punishment of outlawry in feudal England. Every female abhor this situation, as it alienates the widow like "a planet off its orbit and meaningless" (Onyewuenyi 1978:252).

Nigeria's traditional societies are not places where an individual woman can easily detach herself from the societal web or corporate existence. To underscore this social structure which promote sustenance of widowhood practices, Eliade (1959:34) makes it lucid that: "it is not possible for one to dissociate from the sacred events upon which his community exists". Ironically, it is the widow's attempt to perform the prescribed practices and rituals toward realizing their manifest functions that their latent functions (in the light of modern values and human development imperatives) entangle her in a web of alienation.

Sociologically, the manifest function of a practice is the intended, desired or apparent purpose that it serves. On the other hand, its latent function relates to the unintended or disguised real outcome that the practice generates which may be quite often unknown to the persons involved, (Ahonsi 1997:32).

Review of Earlier Scholars' Spotlight on Widowhood Practices in Africa

The subject of widowhood do not feature prominently in the anthropological works of early scholars on Africa (Ikwechegh & Afigbo 1989). However, some widowhood practices received attention and reference in some of the works on Africa. Thus, G.T. Basden (1966), reports of the great feeling of empathy and wailing of the widow in parts of eastern Nigeria. He records that in some cases, the widow rush out of her house in serious emotional grief heedless of direction, waving her arms and beating her breast as she wails loudly. In another account, C.K. Meek (1931), writes that among the Jukun people of Sudan², the grave diggers for the burial of a man would strike the roof of the house where the female mourners are sleeping. That, at each strike, the females led by the dead man's widow or widows would burst out into wailing. Among the Fon, Parrinder (1969) records that when a man dies, he is washed by his widow and friends. And, in Yoruba land, he further notes that a widow is taken out of the village (within nine days), by a marked *Egungun*³. The widow takes a yam as the last gift she could expect from the deceased. After about one week, the *Egungun* visits the widow's house at night. While all lights are put-off, the *Egungun* calls on the name of the dead and a hidden one replies in the tone of the deceased. An offering of items is then made to him and he blesses the women and children as if he were the deceased himself. This practice among the Yoruba cost the widow some money as she try to provide the offering items. The people conceive this practice to signify need for proper observance of the widowhood rituals, as one way of maintaining good relationship with the departed and the spiritual world.

In parts of Kenya Ndu (in Kemdirim 1995), reports that one of the widowhood rituals require a widow to have sexual intercourse with a man outside her husband's lineage to liberate her from the links with the deceased husband. And, at Ihiala, Nigeria, soon after the burial of the dead, his widow ritually wash her hands four times (with ritual shrubs and herbs), at her hearth, so as to absolve herself from her husband's death. Until the widow has performed this ritual, she would not be allowed to eat anything, (Ilogu, 1974).

In 1939, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the Roman Catholic Missions (RCM) in Onitsha, Nigeria acknowledged the challenge of widowhood practices to the female folk, and made joint effort to end the suffering of widows in the area. They noted that widows without children suffered customary dispossession, hence a widow without a male child could not inherit her late husband's property. That, this was contrary and conflicting with the right of inheritance under the English Marriage Ordinance adopted by Christianity and by the colonial government operative in Nigeria. In a communiqué issued at the end of the joint conference of the CMS and RCM representatives on December 22, 1939 under the theme: "Conflict of Marriage Ordinance with Native Law and Customs", the delegates upheld that widows with adult male child(ren) had no problem of inheritance; that, the widow shall be free to carry out her, and her children's Christian duties and responsibilities; that the widow is entitled to live in the premises of the deceased husband, while she remains a widow.

The people objected to this proposal. In response, the traditional ruler of Onitsha, Obi Okosi II wrote a protest letter to the District Officer (DO); stating that, the views put forward by the CMS and RCM are not acceptable to his people. Soon, people from neighbouring districts joined in the protest. Consequently, the proposal of the joint conference was revoked in line with the non-confrontational approach of the colonial government. Thus, the Resident in Onitsha wrote the District Officers in Udi, Awgu, Nsukka and Awka to stop them from enforcing the joint proposal, (National Archive Enugu, NAE: OP 1301 – ONDIST; 12/1/844). This objection signify the die-hard nature of African traditional practices, especially of the widowhood institution. Tradition resist extinction, more so, when it is aimed at an abrupt and quick end. Consequently, the early attempts to stop the suffering of widows failed and widowhood practices have continued to be a perennial problem in the life of women, in Eastern Nigeria.

One of the early books entirely devoted to the issue of widowhood in Africa is probably that of Michael Kirwen (1979). The focus of his work is on the plight of widows in levirate union and the application of church doctrines and teachings. In his work which is limited to four Tanzanian tribes of Luo, Kuria, Kwaya and Sukuma, Kirwen argues that levirate marriage does not contradict any church law, hence the church should accept it. He went further to argue that Catholic church's objection of such union pose serious problem to widows' practice of their faith.

In sum, the earliest scholars had a shallow understanding and restricted analytical spectrum of the implications of the widowhood practices and configurations. Thus, the implications of the practices and their interplay with social facts and changes in the society are missing in their reports. African Traditional Religion and Culture scholars view the practices of widowhood from the prism of religious conviction and phenomenon. For them, it is a cluster of practices through which Africans exercise a dimension of their traditional religious perception and conviction. The practices are presented as necessary for resettling the departed in the spiritual world and for the widow to severe relationship with the departed husband, hence for them, life continues in the hereafter. Little wonder why Okaba (1997), argues that the practices of widowhood are of functional essence to traditional Africans, especially against the backdrop of their world view and patterns of social relationship. Christian theology biased scholars' approach to widowhood studies is oriented in pastoral anthropology. That is, how to articulate and situate their religious teachings, as possessing conditions of succor and way out of the traditional religion founded patterns of life, (Kemdirim 1995; Falusi 1991; Ejizu 1989; Kanyoro 1995).

Affirming the persistence of harmful widowhood practices in parts of present day Nigeria, Bolaji and Ahonsi (1997:10), writes that inspite of the type of marriage contract and love a woman enter into with a man, on demise of the husband she is "subjected to variety of arduous and degrading rites whose intensity vary in different states and local government areas". Accordingly, they state that the harmful practices of the widowhood institution facilitate gender inequality against females. And that the practices can only be phased out in a social atmosphere that is characterized by equity. Among the Yoruba's, Akintunde (2001) writes that inspite of many humiliating treatments, the widow is restricted from eating certain foods and would have to remain indoors for about forty days or more. In a related account, Anele (1999), writes that among the people of Okirika in Rivers State, (the Niger Delta area), the widow is regarded as a wicked and selfish woman who has killed her husband to inherit him. And, that amidst sorrow and pain she is subjected to dehumanising treatments. It is indeed a period of despair, regrets, guilts, fears, emptiness, acceptance and tolerance of the unknown future. He adds that it is because the widow is suspected to have contrived her husband's death that she is dehumanised with bizarre practices. Similar practices abound in Etche waiting for exploration. And, it is in view of the dynamic nature of the society that the paramount ruler (*Onye-Ishi-Etche*), has called for the phasing out of all unprogressive customs in Etche land, (Adekunle and Azuh 1992).

The case of the Hausa-Fulani widow contrasts with the situation in the Middle Belt States, Yoruba speaking States; Igbo speaking States and the South-South States of Nigeria. Thus, a Hausa-Fulani widow may only be secluded for about five months characterized by ablutions, regular prayers and restriction from attending social gatherings. After this, she is immediately free to re-marry if she so desires. However, there is a variation in the Moslem Hausa approach to widowhood practice and Islamic ideals.

Thus, Osakwe et al, (1995) reports the findings of the Nigeria chapter of the International Reproductive Rights Research Action Group (IRRAG), that the main reason for the spatial restriction of the average Moslem widow in parts of Northern Nigeria (for three months after her husband's death), is to ascertain whether she is pregnant or not. Mahdi (1989) also report that the rights of inheritance provided for females in Islam (where a woman receives half of what an equivalent man receives), are often disregarded. For him, the reason for this is founded on the influence of patriarchal indigenous Hausa practices and norms.

Need for the present Study

In view of the existing literature on widowhood practices in Nigeria, the present work is an attempt at exposing its latent function of alienating widowed women. No attempt has been made at crystallizing the intricacies of alienation as a latent implication in the life of women under the practices in Nigerian cultures, and the Etche people in particular. This is the knowledge gap I intend to cover in widowhood studies. The paper exposes the latent functions of widowhood as an institution that clutches widows into a chain of alienation, negating the principles of female advancement in recent times. Our choice of this subject is premised on the growing awareness that women advancement is advancement of humanity. Again, the work is in response to the United Nations clarion call for regular research endeavour into women affairs, especially in developing nations (see UN 1995; Chen 1995). The study is also in tandem with the theme of this years (2014) women's day - "Inspiring Change".

Study Population and Methodology

Nigeria is our focus research population, but we shall spotlight more of the data on the lived experience of women from the Etche cultural extraction. Etche is one of the main upland cultures of Rivers State and the Niger Delta area of Nigeria. The people are predominantly rural dwellers and subsistent farmers. The reason for the bias is predicated on the fact that the practices are still intensely practiced among the people. References are adequately made to widowhood practices and the experience of widows in other Nigerian and African main and subculture areas. Hence widowhood practices are not peculiar to Etche people. It cuts across many cultures, but with variations in ritual and intensity.

The study is based on ethnographic method of research. The ethnographic approach is characterized by the indepth study of a society through personal contact over a period of a year or more. It normally involves participant observation by an observer who understands the custom and language of the society studied (Ranson B.H.A. in Mitchell ed. 1979:70). The study process is in naturally "occurring settings in which the account of a people's way of life and the social meanings are captured and described", (Brewer 2000:10).

I am a native of Etche and lived my over 40 years amongst the people and the Eastern part of Nigeria, in general. This made it possible for me to collect the required data for the study. In my own extended family we have over twenty widows who have passed through the practices. I was a participant observer in the negotiations and activities of the institution. I also used in-depth interview technique to derive data from cases in other communities, and cultures within and outside Etche (see interview list)

In this study I align my report to the theoretical frame work of contemporary feminist theory, with bias to the socialist feminist model of gender oppression. Thus, this is a multidisciplinary theory and methodological approach covering all aspects of life, such as economy, religion, cosmology, education, politics and culture. As Lengermann and Niebrugge (in Ritzer 1996:436) states:

First, its major object for investigation is the situation (or the situations) and experiences of women in society. Second, it treats women as the central “subject” in the investigation process; that is, it seeks to see the world from the distinctive vantage points of women in the social world. Third, feminist theory is critical and activists on behalf of women, seeking to produce a better world for women – thus, it argues, for humankind.

In aligning the study to contemporary feminist theory, I juxtaposed the rituals and practices against the backdrop of contemporary female folk’s aspiration for improved conditions of living, to posit my finding that the rituals and practices are latently oriented in the variables of alienation. Citation of other scholars’ works is partly to validate the report, or to crystallize the similarity or uniqueness of my finding respectively.

Practices Before Interment

As soon as a husband dies, his widow change into tattered dress and appear haggard; loosens her plaited or dressed hair and carries it totally unkempt and disordered. She must not put on any headscarf or jewelry. She is then led to sit on the bare floor or mat beside the corpse lying in state and, or the widow is secluded and locked-up in a room or fenced barn depending on the community variation. Besides intermittent sobbing, the widow is expected to remain completely mute. She pays a fee and gives fathoms of cloth to the deceased’s kinswomen that would keep her company.

The widow is not allowed to eat until her husband is buried. In some parts of Etche she is served with light refreshment in discarded plates. But she is not to touch the food, rather she is fed by another female, who in most cases must be an older widow who had passed through the process and cycle. Again, the widow cannot freely use her fingers to touch her body, but with a stick given to her. With the availability of modern facilities for the preservation of corpses at mortuaries, the rituals which require the corpse lying in state are suspended till the time the corpse is carried back home.

The Etche and some other cultures of Nigeria regard the widow as unclean and defiled. Except female attendants, the widow is distanced from people and, she remains so until the rituals of cleansing and purification are completed by the concerned female ritual activists. Even her children are not allowed access to her. Nobody eats with her in parts of Etche and Igbo communities where she is allowed to eat. Whatever quantity of food she leaves unfinished is thrown away. Some traditional functionaries would not respond to her greetings, while some would not even dare look at her. Indeed, the widow's period of mourning is a state of ostracism. The widow provides all the ritual items required by the daughters of her husband's kin group. Each ritual performance also cost her some amount of money, depending on the female activists at each stage of the rituals.

When a man dies, his kinswomen come in their numbers from their families of reproduction to their deceased kinsman's family for the funeral and execution of the widowhood rituals and practices. The deceased's kinswomen act treacherously in their dealings with the widow. They insult and accuse her of many things as they wish. In many cases, the widow is accused of having starved her husband to death or even poisoning him. The impression often is, if the wife served her husband faithfully and satisfactorily, why should he die prematurely? This is one of the popular taunting questions for widows in Etche and other Nigerian cultures. In some cases, it leads to trial by ordeal. Worse still, the widow is never given a chance of defence or mere response, or else she is fined or even beaten up by fellow women, in addition. This is more so, if the deceased had before his death reported to his kinswomen any case of ill-treatment on him by his wife, (Nwogu Onumelu, interview, 11 February, 2005 Eke Juliana, interview, 2 March 2014).

Practices After Interment

The first set of practices at this stage are cleansing based. There is the ritual shaving of hairs on the head, the pubic region and armpits. This is done on the belief that the widow is defiled and dirty through her husband's death. In some cases, the women use blunt razor blade or broken bottle for this ritual. One of my widow informants reports that broken bottle is rarely used in this modern time except as way of inflicting more pain on a recalcitrant widow. This is unmindful of the health implications. There is also the ritual washing of hands and of bathe.

Until these cleansing rituals are completed she cannot use her hands like normal human beings, or use it to eat in some communities where she is allowed to eat before interment of the deceased. Again, the widow's period of dissociation continues until the cleansing rituals are done. Quick or delay in the cleansing rituals depends on the widow's relationship with her matrimonial home kinswomen, ability to pay the monetary charges and provide the ritual items. Our widow informants (Umunakwe Cyrina 30 Dec., 2003; Iheanacho Juliana 1 February 2004; Nwogu Nwugo 2 March 2014; Eke Juliana 2 March 2014), reported that the cleansing can be delayed as a form of punishment on the widow, especially in communities where she is not allowed to eat if she is not ritually cleansed.

Immediately after the rituals of cleansing, the widow enters the formal period of mourning which lasts for about one year. During this period, the widow puts on black attire, which she must continue to wear for the period. Again, her movement is restricted. The widow has to wail loudly and hysterically over the death of her husband. The widow's matrimonial kinswomen supervise the quality of her weeping. A low quality one attracts a fine. However, this practice is not peculiar to Etche and other Nigerian cultures. Reporting on this practice in other parts of Africa, Nasimiyu-Wasike (1990:190) posits that:

In some communities, the widow has to shave her head in weeping and wailing ritual, the widow wails twice a day, morning and evening from eight days to six months. She must accompany one who comes wailing: even if she is eating she must stop eating and wail.

In Etche, and some other parts of Nigeria, the wailing is not expected to interfere with the widow's eating. But the obligatory wailing ritual requires that she wails early, every morning between four and six o'clock. This is the background of the popular saying in Etche that 'a palm wine tapper who has a widow in his family does not go for tapping late'.⁴ Again, the widow must abstain from sex. It is a very serious offence if she violates this restriction and worse if discovered pregnant within the period of mourning.

The deceased's assets are declared and dispossessed of the widow by her brothers-in-law. The widow is however, restricted to her personal belongings and as a custodian (not inheritor) of some of her late husband's property, as her means of livelihood. Levirate marriage is another important practice after interment. The practice is also obtainable in other parts of Africa, like in Tswana – part of the Bantu speaking people of South Africa, (Schapera 1975:1150). The Tswana practice is but one pattern of levirate marriage in Etche and other parts of Nigeria. During the period of mourning, the rituals of finding a substitute husband for the widow is simultaneously done.

Where the widow rejects the option, she can divorce and remarry. But before this is done, her family of orientation must refund all the bride-price and wealth paid on her. And, she must leave without any property, even the custody of her children. If the children are infants, her custody of them must be on negotiation and approval of her brothers-in-law.

Alienation from Human Dignity

The word dignity has a plethora of interpretations. The endowment and origin of human dignity can be traced back to God's creation of man in His own image and likeness. This image expresses an intimate relationship between God and man, toward a marvelous paternal concern for his creation. Therefore, the period of enlightenment defined dignity as the worth of being human, hence the two concepts 'human' and 'dignity' are synonymous. To be able to say what dignity is would be to describe the fundamental meaning of being human, (Meek 1984:ix). Following this conception, human dignity becomes the source, driving force and norm by which all human actions are judged. This is why Peters, (1966:211) rightly defined human dignity as the seat of personality, valuation, decision and choices. Against this backdrop, it is clear that the dignity of widowed females in our study population are violated, hence they are isolated from the values and sanctity of human dignity. Thus, in the rituals, widows are reduced from being subjects, to mere objects. The widow's appearance, mood, subjection and alienation as she undertake the rituals and practices before and after interment of her husband, go on to contradict her natural endowments which she possess by being made human. This is underscored by Iwe, (1979:121), when he states that human dignity is a concept based on the fundamental values of justice, liberty, equality and fraternity, and ironically connected with the recognition and promotion of basic human rights and decency in standard of living.

The widowhood practices draw sharp parallel lines which separate widows from enjoying modern ideals, whose aim of uplifting humanity is grounded on human dignity and personality. Suffice it to say that the alienating power of the practices constitute a violent force toward human indignities, while they promote destruction of the personality and worth of the female folk. Furthermore, this situation paralyze the widow's reasoning and creativity. Livezey, (1991:22) seem to unconsciously underscore this plight of Nigerian women, especially, Etche widows when she writes that: It is the nature and purpose of violence to mute speech, both listening and talking, and so (widowhood)⁵ perpetuates the conspiracy of silence that has left women without recourse to help and healing.

Considering the restriction of movement and action of the widow, we further subscribe to the ideological frame of Livezey, to group the practices as institutionalized alienation, which latently focus at nullifying women's action and detach them from their rights and place in society. These include right to conscience, consent, will, self-determination and association, which are all wrapped-up in human dignity.

The forceful execution of rituals and sanctions on the widow without option is another dimension of traditional violence and alienation from human liberty, considered to be the highest natural endowment and an indispensable pivot of human dignity. Therefore, the exploitative manipulation of the human faculty of liberty as observed in the treatment and lived experience of Etche widows and elsewhere in Nigeria is an insult and debase of human dignity and personality. Hence, unwarranted suppression of the legitimate expressions of human liberty is a violent offence against human nature and human dignity which liberty symbolizes and represent, (Iwe 1990:36).

Alienation from Groups

The traditional conception of the widowhood institution as a transition period characterized by rituals and practices, separate widows from normal social relations and interaction, and posit them in a secluded realm of the world (see figure). Gennep, (1960:142) calls this seclusion sacred impure state, which no doubt is alienation. The institutionalized alienating power of widowhood defines the widow as defiled and ritually unclean. As a result she is isolated to prevent 'contamination' of 'normal people'. The demands of the cleansing rituals further estrange her, splitting the bond of human relation, especially of the female folk in a relationship of unequal powers. Consequently, the deceased's kinswomen act as superiors and dictators as they execute the rituals and supervise the practices, while the widow is the inferior and their subject. Thus, the widow is rejected by her fellow females. According to Nwaji Onugha (interview 2 March, 2014), when she was dissociated in addition to the demise of her husband, she felt that she was no longer a human being.

The interpretation of common good given to the practices override and detach the personal plight of the widow. But the traditional societies of Etche and other cultures of Nigeria, naturalize the spirit of the dead, and give it a character of sacredness and reverence. The associated practices of this aspect of the widowhood cosmology alienates the widow's personal needs and welfare from the concern of her groups. The additional implication of this alienation is slavery. Hence, the widow is controlled and wrapped-up in a life of evil servile, dependent upon culture, with fellow humans creating that dependence by hypostatizing the mourning institution and configuring actions of intimidation and violence against the widow. This alienation from groups equally sacrifice the widow to alienation from nature.

Alienation from Nature

The customary and ontological interpretation given the hypostatized widowhood practices further alienates the widow from natural phenomena. Thus, the widow is forced to turn from nature, and focus attention at the spiritual horizon of existence, in order to harmonize and strengthen relationship with it, hence it is believed to have been disorganized by her husband's death. In trying to achieve this, the Nigerian widow (especially the traditionalists), is preoccupied with divinations, sacrifices and rituals. As a result, she no longer has inner harmony between her and the natural and social environment. For the widow, nature becomes an object of mystery, fear and source of danger. Every natural explanation to events surrounding her is rejected, while her mind is occupied by fear of the situation and the desire to control and dominate it. This is the morbid fear of nature. And, sequel to this situation are exploitation, alienation and destruction of the virtues and wit of personality and dignity of womanhood. "The quarrel I had with my husband few weeks before his demise made me more apprehensive of the *mkpe* (mourning period). Consequently, I lost my human wit and courage. So I frequently sent my sisters to diviners to make inquiry about my fate in the *mkpe* period" (Agnes Ugwuzuo, interview, 31 December, 2004).

Natural occurrence of death is given mystifying aura and supernatural interpretations. The awe of such spiritual projection grips the widow and sell her to nature's enslavement. According to Berdyaev, (1944:114), on self-enslavement, and as similar to the case of the traditional Nigerian widow and Etche women in particular, she periodically thirsts to return to primitive life, to cosmic life, to find not only communion but fusion with cosmic life, to enter into communion with its mystery, and to find joy and ecstasy in doing so.

Alienation from Self

The mystifying of natural events in widowhood practices further encourage self-alienation of the widow. This is based on the belief that the divine truth and harmony which she needs is outside the realm of the physical world. The widow becomes estranged, turning deaf ears to the voices speaking within her life, while eager to welcome the voice of liberation which she believe must come from the rituals and the spiritual realm. This is why it has been impossible to convince the rural women (all over Nigeria where the institution subsists), to shun the practices. This situation is slavery of personal exteriorizations and detachment; enslavement to various types of idol of human creation; and inward source of slavery, (Berdyaev 1944:130-31). Thus, the mysteries created as a result of alienation from nature must be unraveled outside the self. Consequently, the widow loses self-confidence and, her spiritual wit is broken into parts with the inward centre lost and alienated.

In this aura of self-alienation and enslavement, the widow no longer make full use of her intellectual endowment to discern issues and phenomena in her experience, consciousness and sensitivity. Rather, she sees herself as limited and empty. Therefore, she has no stand point from where to face the vicissitudes of life, hence she has lost her personal independence and courage. In the situation of alienation which separates her from her inner being and others, the widow is distanced to seek the re-establishment of the lost independence and the disorganized seat of her living, solely from the rituals and human culturally configured institutions of exploitation.

To make sure she is impeccable of any hindrance from the desired 'liberation', the widow becomes impatient, nervous and obsessed, rejecting and condemning herself while conceding all suspected obstacles as her personal fault and guilt to the dead and his kinsmen and women. In addition, she must reject herself and atone for the wrongs. Baum, (1975:45) indirectly underscore this in his ideological frame, that the implication of this situation is borne out of the negation in human life and of oneself by the widow.

Alienation from Possessions

In addition to her individual earnings, the Nigerian woman work in tandem with her husband to build up their family and to acquire some material wealth. Rather than logically being the direct inheritor of the wealth on demise of the husband, the widow is alienated from the products of her sweat and matrimonial home. This is done by her brothers-in-law and extended family members. The widow's alienation from the possessions is validated by the widowhood custom which regards the widow as trustee of her late husband's property, without the power to possess them. This is the type of alienation that worried Karl Marx most in his thought about human condition. On remarriage or divorce, she is further dispossessed of all the property she is allowed custody. This widow's alienation from the products of her labour transits her from relative luxury to pauperization. Again, she is dispossessed by women-ritual actors, activists and supervisors who exploit her to their own interest. Within the period of the widow's restrictions from movement and eating, her matrimonial kinswomen eat sumptuously at her expense.

Naturally, a child is the joint possession of the parents. And, on demise of the man, the child(ren), becomes the sole possession of his widow. But the widow who divorce or remarry in Etche is alienated from her child(ren) irrespective of their well-being. She can only be allowed to take care of the child(ren) on negotiation. This is violation and alienation from rights. Some infants die as a result of poor care by either of the deceased's relations or those of the widow. Hence, the widow in her state of anguish and dispossession gives less care to the child(ren) (Oguzie Cordelia, interview, 2 February, 2014).

Alienation from Human Rights and Covenants on Women

According to Fagothey (1976:195) right is moral power over what is one's own. This moral power would enable one exact or refuse to do something. But the human rights dimension of it are moral powers deriving directly from the personal nature of man, as consummated in the thirty articles of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In Nigeria, the Declaration is enshrined in the Constitution. But in widowhood configurations as practiced in Etche, and other cultural groups in Nigeria females are inhumanly treated, such that contradict and alienate widows from the Declaration of equality of all – a covenant by U.N. ECOSOC Commission, (U.N. 1995:44), and indeed, as the driving force of other rights.

A situation where a widow is served food with discarded plates or forced to abstain from food and sex, alienated from her groups, controlled, even in matters that require her consent; where lies her dignity and equality with other human beings? Females in this institution are also prevented from enjoying basic rights founded on human liberty and other subsequent covenants and treaties of women conferences. In sum, there is hardly any aspect of the human rights of women that is not violated in the widowhood practices in Etche and many other cultures of Nigeria, and the African continent in general.

Conclusion

We have crystallized the fact that widowhood practice among women in Nigeria and other African cultural groups is rooted in the people's world-view and cosmological underpinnings. The practices are many, having both manifest and latent functions. But the severity of the latent functions clutch widows in a chain of alienation which paralyze human development and advancement in recent time. Evaluating the practices of the institution in the light of contemporary aspirations of humanity, we note that most of them are misfits. This is why we have no option than to classify the institution as embodiment of cultural relics carried forward from the past and deposited in a new culture different from its original time.

The practices are products of uncivilized age and minds, coupled with the mystifying phenomena of rustic life which characterized the people's early habitats – sparse population, with people almost living in jungles and bushes, lack of adequate lighting equipment and corpse preservation materials. All these joined to create a mystifying aura of morbid fear which climaxed in the experience of death. This finding is further buttressed by the fact that in Etche paradigm of the practices, the manifest function of the first amount of money charged the widow is to ensure that her husband's kinswomen stay with her and the corpse, for the purpose of reducing the fear which a lying corpse evokes. Again, in Etche the first set of ritual items the females (ritual actors and activists) ask from the widow are fathoms of cloths for the manifest function of driving away flies from the corpse.

Today, corpses are properly preserved and dressed with modern materials. Consequently, the fear of a lying corpse is reduced. Yet, the matrimonial kinswomen extort from the widow all the material items which would be better taken care of by modern facilities, and improved human relations. No exception.

The supervision and execution of the practices in Nigerian cultures are entirely females' palaver. Many females see it as an opportunity to exploit a widow to their personal benefit. Matrimonial kinswomen use the period and process of executing the widowhood practices as a chance to clamp-down on, and humiliate a sister-in-law whom they purportedly envy as one who had displaced them in their patriarchal social structure and supposed right of enjoying their patriarchal heritage, brothers' and kinsmen's companionship. In this situation, peace evaporates from the widow's mind, matrimonial home and neighborhood while conflict sets in, militating against meaningful development and empowerment.

As earlier mentioned, the principles of female empowerment, gender mainstreaming and advancement as advocated in recent times are negated in widowhood practices. Therefore, as long as the practices remain (especially as it concerns inheritance and dispossession), women in the cultures like Etche where the practices are intense (especially among the traditionalists), will remain dis-empowered and troding behind their counterparts elsewhere, in the world. However, there is a feeling among the educated to abolish, or at least refine the bizarre and debasing practices. But, the 'die-hard' nature of the practices and the urge for vengeance has continued to repress the female folk taking commensurate action. In any case, the practices are in some communities and instances executed haphazardly, especially among the working class females. This class of women use money to buy over the female ritual actors and supervisors to either avoid, gloss over or reduce the intensity of some of the rituals and practices. This means that it is a human duty to bring about the desired change in present time.

To facilitate the extinction of violent widowhood practices and ameliorate the plight of widows, we recommend the following: to inspire change as the theme of this year's women's day, there should be greater emphasis on mass, free and compulsory education, especially for females. This will dispel ignorance and facilitate creativity, especially among the female folk in rural communities. Widows should be organized for the purpose of instituting an endowment fund to be used to alleviating their plight and provision of legal services and; there should be enlightenment campaign against cultural configurations of female alienation and underdevelopment. Churches should also intervene against their converts being subjected to such dehumanizing practices. Finally, it is believed that with the implementation of these strategies, widows in Etche and other cultures of Nigeria, especially the rural dwellers, would experience some relief and respite. We also call on other scholars interested in African studies to investigate the factors sustaining such practices in this age of human development.

Notes

¹The illustration is configured from my ethnographic field data. It is used to demonstrate the Etche and other Nigerian cultures' traditional religious worldview and cosmology of widows in their mourning period.

² Sudan is the pre-colonial name used by the early European explorers to Nigeria, to identify and refer to the people and cultures of the middle belt region of the country's territory.

³ *Egungun* is an ancestral spirit symbolized in a masquerade. The meaning of the appearance is a confirmation of the deceased's transformation into a 'living dead', yet caring for his family.

⁴This is an Etche proverb which underscores the early rise of palm wine tappers. Thus, palm wine tapping is an early morning business, hence tappers rise early. Since the widow under the regulatory mourning period is under obligation to wail very early in the mourning everybody within the neighbourhood would wake up early from sleep.

⁵The word 'widowhood' in bracket is mine. It is added for the purpose of aligning the related widowhood practices in Nigeria to Livezey's work on violence against Asian women.

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S/N	NAME	AGE	DATE
1.	Amadi Eunice	50 year old widow	13/02/05
2.	Amadi Nwugo	63 year old	15/02/05
3.	Anele Urslar	42 year old widow	16-02-5
4	Anum Mabel	50 year old widow	2/03/05
5	Chikwendu Hakara	44 year old widow	2/03/05
6	Egbulem Uganwa	69 year old widow	31/12/13
7	Eke Juliana	63 year old widow	02/03/14
8	Hemenachi Ngebeuka	64 year old widow	11/12/05
9	Iheanacho Florence	65 year old widow	1/02/04
10	Iheanacho Juliana	68 year old widow	1/02/04
11	Munonye Edith	42 year old widow	09/02/05
12	Nwachukwu Akajanwa	91 year old widow	02/03/14
13	Nwaji Onugba	55 year old widow	2/03/14
14	Nwakom Uluma	38 year old widow	10/03/14
15	Nwogu Nwangbala	70 year old widow	10/03/14
17	Nwogu Nwugo	96 year old widow	02/03/14
18	Nwogu Onumelu	77 year old widow	11/02/05
19	Nwokogba Ngebe	59 year old widow	27/02/05
20	Oguzie Cordelia	48 year old widow	2/02/14
21	Okeregwu Monica	74 year old widow	16/03/04
22	Okerekpe Nmaku	61 year old widow	13/03/05
23	Onukaogu Ukachi	46 year old widow	10/03/14
24	Onukwuru Nwaulo	52 year old widow	21/03/05
25	Otamiri Janet	58 year old widow	21/03/05
26	Ugwuzuo Agnes	60 year old widow	31/12/04
27	Ulendu Evlyn	32 year old widow	12/02/05
28	Ulokanjor Esther	40 year old widow	10/03/14
29	Umezurike Hakara	56 year old widow	15/02/05
30	Umunakwe Cyrina	83 year old widow	30/12/13

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