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A table of contents for the *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

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# AFRICAN WIDOWHOOD PRACTICES: THE IGBO MOURNING EXPERIENCE

**A.M. Okorie**

*The Good News of Jesus Christ has brought salvation and hope to many who suffered in their former way of life. No greater contrast can be found than in the two different approaches to death, that of the Christian faith and that of African traditions. The Gospel liberates believers from the fear of death and fear of the living-dead. Yet the deep seated world view of African traditions persist, even in Christian communities. Dr. Okorie explores the mourning experience of the Igbo of Nigeria, as experienced particularly by the widows. He briefly mentions some of the ways in which the biblical teaching should transform the traditional approach to death. Death with all the beliefs and practices surrounding this universal experience deserves more thought in order to know how to bring complete deliverance to God's people held in bondage of fear.*

## DESCRIPTION OF TRADITIONAL IGBO MOURNING

In Igboland, Nigeria, the widow's mourning of the dead husband is viewed as a very important tradition which the living spouse must observe in honour of the dead. When the husband of the woman dies, the mourning begins at that moment of his final breath. The bereaved wife runs about wailing at the top of her voice. A prominent feature is the intensity of wailing, weeping and hysteria which death generates or is expected to generate. The children would join in the wailing together with other friends and relatives of the family. In their wailing they would regret a big loss as they recount the deceased's life achievements, his love and faithfulness, a good, honest, reliable brother, husband, father or uncle. After this stage, the wife becomes the main focus in terms of mourning the departed husband.

Much demand is made of the wife in terms of mourning to show her identification or concern for the man's departure from earth. The wife must be made to tie cloth on the body of the late husband (*ijebo di akwa*). In some part of Igboland like Onitsha, the divorced wife of the man must return to mourn the man and do posthumous reconciliation with the man in the presence of the matrilineal daughters (*umuada*), otherwise she is believed to be in danger of the ghost of the deceased man. But it should be pointed out that the wife (or wives, if he was a polygamist) of a titled man is (are) not allowed to cry or make any noise until proper arrangement is made. This means that the widow has to suppress the natural psychological grief in her for some days simply because

her husband was a titled person.

In Igboland, the patrilineal daughters (*umuada*) have great influence or authority in the family or community where they are born. They can use this power as a check-and-balance over their brother's wife. The widow's behaviour when the husband was alive and her relationship with relatives of her husband determine the intensity of her mourning. The negligence of mourning rituals may rob her of her late husband's property, and love of the community. Sometimes this can be tyrannical on the widow, especially if she has not been relating well with her husband's sisters. The *Umuada* are the enforcement agency and decide how severe the mourning should be. The *umuada* surround the widow, commanding her to make sure she obeys the rules of mourning rites. Nwoga correctly points out that:

They may sit her on a mattress with pillows and cushions around her or sit her on a plain mat or even the bare ground. They may accept that she is crying loud enough for their brother or they may sneer and jeer at her and accuse her of not crying loud enough, of keeping the tail of her eyes open for her past lovers or prospective lovers and in serious cases of dislike beat her up.<sup>1</sup>

From that moment the husband died, the widow is believed to be unclean, and likely to contaminate herself and others. Therefore, no one touches her except her fellow widows, who are equally believed to be defiled. She is given a piece of stick to scratch herself in case of natural body irritation, and oil palm chaff (*avuvu nkwu*) to wash her hand periodically in order to reduce her uncleanness. She is also not allowed to eat any food bought for the funeral ceremony. It is feared that she will die if she eats such foods. Hence, her food during the funeral ceremonies is cooked separately.

The days before the burial of the man are always horrible for the widow as she is made to stay in the same room with the corpse where she is required to be waving away flies from perching on the fast and progressively decomposing corpse. She is supposed to sit down and raise an early morning cry before anybody is awake and this continues till the day the husband will be buried. Her most painful ordeal occurs at night before her husband's burial. They make sure she stays awake all night with bitter kola (*aku ilu*) in her mouth to remind her of the bitterness of the death of her husband.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, if the widow had disputed with the husband shortly before his death, the widow will be made to lie with the corpse for many hours and in addition pay heavily in cash as a fine.

Soon after the interment of the late husband's body, the widow will be made to wash her hands with shrubs known as *akoro* or *ujiji* for four times so as to absolve herself from the deceased's death. She is not expected to eat with her defiled hand until this ritual is performed. Again, the husband's eldest sister or one of the *umuada* is supposed to give an order for her hair to be shaved. This time the widow is taken to the backyard where she is kept naked and all parts of her body containing hair (head, armpit, eyebrows including the privates) are shaved and sometimes buried or burnt ritually. After this, onions or some other concoctions will be used to rub at these shaved parts in order to dispel the spirit of the husband from disturbing her. The shaving is done by a member of *umuada* who also is a widow. A further reason for shaving the hair is the belief that it is a symbol of breaking off all links between the widow and the deceased husband. Also, a widow is made to shave in order to look unattractive, so that men would not "eye" her for love in that pitiful condition. The mourning mood acts as a "keep-off" sign for other men; and it attracts their sympathy instead, connoting "it is a pity." Conversely, the shaving of hair is generally believed to be a sign of mourning, love, respect, and honour for the dead.

Then, there follows the seclusion period (*ino na nso*). This is a period of deep mourning and it lasts for seven native weeks (*izu asa*), totalling twenty-eight days. At this period the widow never eats with nor talks to anybody except her fellow widows. She never greets nor responds to any greeting but if she does, she is believed to have passed ill-luck to the greeter or responder. She wears only rags, sits on a piece of wood, and sleeps on a mat or banana leaves. As usual, in some part of Igboland like Nsukka, she cannot put her hand in her mouth. She may not wash her face nor bathe. Her necklaces should be broken as a symbol of non-communication with the husband.

After this period of impurity, the widow is taken at night by the patrilineal daughters to the bad bush far from the residential zone of the community for bathing and cleansing.<sup>3</sup> The bathing has to take place on the grave of the deceased husband, especially if it were to be in some part of Owerri. The cloth which she used during the seclusion period is burnt ritually or given to the older attendant widow. She now puts on the real black cloth for the rest of the mourning period which is supposed to last for a year as a sign of grief and love for the departed. The day after the cleansing, she exercises her restricted liberty as she is received back into the family and can now cook what others can eat and have the freedom to talk to people.

Thereafter, the period of lengthy mourning follows. In this period, the widow's liberty is still restricted since she may not go to work or market. It is here that a widow runs the risk of breaking down socially, economically and

psychologically after her lengthy mourning, particularly if she has no grown-up children and if her husband's relatives do not care for her. The belief exists that any farm crops she touches at this stage of the mourning are liable to wither away. Consequently, the widow never goes to farm during the period. Likewise, she should not fight nor beat anybody when provoked, because it is believed she would transfer the spirit of the deceased to the beaten.

At the end of the lengthy mourning period, through which the widow is required to mourn her late husband for one year, the ceremonies close officially with some ritual cleansing. At this time the widow would strip off her final mourning cloth for ritual burning or burial. More rituals have to be carried out to liberate the widow from the influence of the dead husband and reintegrate her into the society to begin a normal life and if she desires, she may remarry. Some go as far as attempting to decipher the mind of the deceased husband through a fortune-teller (*dibia*), if there were some things left out during mourning which might attract the wrath of the deceased to the discomfort of the widow and her children. Thus, mourning the husband is excruciating on the wife and she suffers from inhumane cultural rituals.

In contrast, however, mourning a late wife by a surviving husband is different and less demanding. As the wife and mother of the home departs, both the husband and children break down emotionally. While the children give full vent to their grief, their father shakes his head in agony. The widower will be made to sit down on a particular place to express his grief through facial expressions. In Igboland, a man is not expected to wail openly like a woman. His facial courage is supposed to be a first aid condolence, comfort and hope for the children who are psychologically broken down. After the burial of the wife, the widower is expected to mourn for at least six months or one year. In strict traditional obedience, the man may mourn for only twenty eight days. This is based on the idea that the absence of the woman makes her unimportant to the surviving husband except through her children and kin. Henderson calls it an "asymmetrical relationship between husband and wife, for a wife's funeral duties are quite different from a husband."<sup>4</sup> Hence, it differs from that of a widow who undergoes intensive rituals at the hands of the *umuada*. But just as the woman is shaved for the man, so also the man is shaved for the woman. He is to shave off his hair, beard and wear black cloth throughout the period of mourning. Nonetheless, many widowers have not been obeying this rule strictly, unlike the widows who are forced to obey theirs.

At the end of the morning, the man goes to the nearest river and dips his feet into the water, pulls the inner pair of pants he wears and throws it away. Although the reason for this ritual is not told, yet it could likely be a rite of

purification and breakage of marital accord, since the Igbo philosophy accepts that the spirit of the dead hovers around, looking for normal life relationship. Again, the death of a spouse renders the living one impure and therefore he or she needs ritual purification. Nevertheless, after the ceremony at the end of the mourning, the man is expected to be free and may marry a new wife. Mourning, therefore, is understood as an expression of the widower's grief, love and respect for the dead. But for the widow, the process can be brutal and inhuman in practice.

### **CONTEMPORARY EVALUATION OF TRADITIONAL IGBO MOURNING**

In an attempt to articulate the plight of a widow in Igbo community, various persons and organisations have reacted to the matter. Eze and Nwebo jointly observe that "discriminatory oppression of our women (including, and in particular widows) under our laws and customs, in terms of status and rights, is dehumanising and debasing to womanhood, unjust and unconstitutional."<sup>5</sup> Additionally, Nzewi condemns the Igbo concept of death as being responsible for the wrong concept of mourning by saying:

The traditional concept of death is also an important factor in widowhood practices in the state. Since traditionally it is believed that the dead continue to participate in and influence the lives of the living,...we saw in one area where the widows have to run very hot mixtures across the face to expel the spirits of their departed husbands.<sup>6</sup>

This leads to spiritual bondage on the part of the Igbo community for being enslaved to superstition, mythology and antiquated tradition. Following a similar viewpoint, Okereke and Eke-Agbai call for the "removal in our society, of those cultural practices which, in the context of man's development, as we know it today, do not add to our dignity and respect for life...culture is a dynamic phenomenon that should always change to accommodate advances in life."<sup>7</sup>

Some of these cultural traits were without attack when Igbo community was isolated, but civilisation has come with its own enlightenment and belief systems, including Christianity, whose teachings have won and eaten deep into the fabrics of the people's hearts. As a result, one does not need a radical refusal of the total tradition and culture, but a change of the oppressive ones and modernisation of crude ones. Now the issue arises as to how the change can be affected for the better. Afigbo succinctly writes:

My prescription is knowledge. Not knowledge of how to read and count, but the kind of knowledge which frees a man from the powers of darkness by showing him how he and his every thought, word and deed fit into the scheme of creation... Africa is not only underdeveloped materially, but also spiritually. Our spiritual underdevelopment is most manifest in the way we react to death.... Our widowhood practices advertise our immaturity.<sup>8</sup>

From the various foregoing reactions and analyses, it is clear that the widowhood practices with respect to mourning are unethical. The church, consequently, should continually educate its members and the Igbo community at large (about 15 million people) on what should be the Christian understanding and approach to death. Such Christian education should shape the ways and modes of mourning the dead.

For example, I Thessalonians 4:13-18 allows Christians to mourn the dead, yet it condemns the expression of despair which leads the mourner into superstition, with its inherent rituals that do not glorify God. The real Christian mourning is a time of introspection, a time of spiritual quest for righteousness. That is the moment when the mourner thinks about his or her own spiritual state and worthiness to meet the Lord at the moment of death.<sup>9</sup> It is a period of concentrated reflection on the mourner's relationship with the Lord Jesus and his or her future abode after death.

This article, therefore, submits that in widowhood practices, the Igbo mourning experience is dehumanising, discriminatory against women, antisocial, unlawful, oppressive and pagan. To that effect, Christians are to avoid submitting totally to Igbo traditional mourning and its consequent danger to personal economic, social and ethical life. Mourning the dead spouse for Christians should be a time of prayer, meditation, recollection, memorial, affection, honour, gratitude, confession, empathy, surrender, and anticipation for the life of the one who has slept in the Lord.

<sup>1</sup> Nwoga, I.D. "Widowhood Practices: The Imo Experience," (Owerri, Multi-Purpose Hall, 6 June 1989) (Mimeographed), pp.3-4.

<sup>2</sup> Nzewi, E.N. "Widowhood Practices: Female Prejudice," (Owerri, Multi-Purpose Hall, 6 June 1989) (Mimeographed), p.8.

<sup>3</sup> See also John S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1969), pp. 145-146.

<sup>4</sup> Henderson, Richard N. *The King in Every Man*. (London: University Press, 1972), pp. 229-230.

<sup>5</sup> Eze, O.C. and O.E. Nwebo. "Widowhood Practices: Law and Custom" (Owerri, Multi-Purpose Hall, 6 June 1989) (Mimeographed), p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Nzewi, E.N. "Female Prejudice" (Owerri, Multi-Purpose Hall, 6 June 1989) (Mimeographed), p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Okereke, Emma and Oby Eke-Agbai. "Poor Treatment of Widows," *The Statesman*, 7 June 1989, p.1.

<sup>8</sup> Afigbo, A.E. "Widowhood Practices in Africa: A Preliminary Survey and Analysis" (Owerri, Multi-Purpose Hall, 6 June 1989) (Mimeographed), p.29.

<sup>9</sup> Stringfellow, William. "The Joy of Mourning: On Grief and the Meaning of Resurrection," *Sojourner*, 3 (1982), 32.