



Vol. 4, No. 2, 2015

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Traditional Religion and Socio-Anthropological Factors Sustaining Widowhood Configurations of Violence on Nigerian Women

ABSTRACT. The article is an ethnographic research report in response to Nigerian women's agitation for advancement and appreciation of their value in the family and society. And also, taking cue from the United Nations clarion call on regular research on customs and traditions that promote women indignities and underdevelopment indices which build up from the family, the paper directs its spotlight on widowhood institution which is characterized by configurations of violence and concomitants of women exploitation and underdevelopment. The practices of the institution are carried out in the pre and post burial phases. They have continued to resist extinction strategies. Not even surrendering to the long struggle and gains of women liberation ideas and policies that abound the world and Nigeria in particular. In the thrust of the report, the paper identifies the sustaining factors of the practices as mainly rooted in traditional religion and socio-anthropological issues, namely: the people's worldview and concept of sacred phenomenon, the people's concept of death and ancestorship; the widow's social and psychological concern for the dead; the people's idea of marriage and family system; the people's conformity to the paradigm of myth and sacred history and; the quest for re-union and group cohesion. Among other strategies, formulation of local Christian theologies and legally backed social policies would help to rescue the women from the clutches of the institution.

KEYWORDS: widowhood, women, violence, advancement

1. Introduction

In recent times, earlier conceptualization of what development and underdevelopment are: their causes and conditions have been modified. This is sequel to the failure of many development theories which aim at bringing about even development. Hence, disparity in levels of development looms large in world systems and cultures. Existing theories of development have shown weakness in addressing African underdevelopment conditions (Naamen, 1994, p. 16). Again, Anikpo, puts it succinctly that theories of development are in crisis (Anikpo, 1996, p. 6). This is

more so in the application of their principles and variables in African societies. While this crisis persist “development debate now emphasize sustainability and human-centred and gender-responsive development” (United Nations, 1995). After decades of struggle to advance the course of women, for improved conditions of living, bizarre practices of human underdevelopment, devaluation and indignities still loom large in the life of the 21st century Nigerian cultural systems.

Our method is ethnographic, with an outlay which include review of women’s encounter and experience along the path of advancement; the lived experience of women under the violent practices of widowhood institution – constituting serious negation and clog in women’s wheel of advancement and stability of the family after demise of their husbands. Next is the thrust of our finding – the factors which sustain the practices. Finally, we offer suggestions for handling the situation for both Christians and non Christian faithfuls – stressing the importance of local theology of widowhood as a strategy. In the main, our contribution is anchored on the quest for quality women development. The emphasis is on identifying and analyzing the socio-anthropological factors for the persistence of widowhood practices, as a cultural configuration, frost with variables of underdevelopment in Nigerian communities and families.

2. United Nation’s Roadmap and Nigerian Women’s Long Walk on the Lane of Advancement

This section of the study is a literature review to trace the history of women’s quest for fair treatment and quality life. The aim is to further advance the rationale behind this paper’s effort to bring to limelight the factors regenerating and sustaining widowhood practices in the present time. Women have come a long way in the struggle to asserting their humanity and agitation for fair treatment and improvement of their lot. Understanding Nigerian women’s perspective requires tracing the struggle from the global trend and source. Hence what obtains in Nigeria is a derivative and adaptations from the global framework. It has been a mixed experience of exploitation, silence, conformity, resistance and even payment of supreme prize.

It was about the early 15th century, through the debate and writing of the French woman, Courtier, Christine de Pizan (1365-1430), that the lives of women in the world, beginning from Europe started to receive

transformation, for good. Christine's arguments received the support of some other European women like Marguerite de Navarre, Marie de Gournay and Anne Marie van Schurman. In the New World, the Mexican nun, Juana Ines de la Cruz (1651-1695) joined the crusade for improving the social location and status of women in the world. Cruz specifically focused attention at attacking men's misogyny, while advocating the education of women. About the end of the seventeenth century, women (especially the educated), began to experience improved recognition and better treatment (Okoh, 2012, p. 32-36).

Women's struggle for advancement and improved existence continued in the 18th century. After the 1789 Declaration of "the Rights of Man and the Citizen" in France, women activists sought similar rights for the female gender. They even explored the spirit of the French Revolution to inspire all women to shun unjust tradition and conditions that concerns them (Anderson & Zinssor, 1990, p. 351). The agitation continued rising in popularity, geographical scope and tempo, to the 1902 meeting of Governments in the Hague where issues concerning marriage, divorce, trafficking in women and children were discussed. In 1923 the Pan American Union meeting in Santiago agreed to discuss on the way to eliminate legal and constitutional impediments to the exercise of women's political and civil rights. Meeting at Havana in 1928, the Inter-American Commission of Women, examined the status of women in Latin America in preparation for advocacy of equality for women in civil and political activities. The Inter-America Commission's work led to the adoption in 1933 of the first International Treaty to proclaim the equality of the sexes in matters of nationality. The League of Nations endorsed the Montevideo Resolution (United Nations, 1995, p. 9-10).

The UN Charter signed on 26 June, 1945, among other things set out to protect the fundamental human rights and freedom of everybody, as well as the equal rights of men and women and outlaw sex as a basis for discrimination. Between 1945 and 1962 was the period for establishing legal frame works for promoting equality of sexes. From 1963-1975 was the period of recognizing women's role in development, leading to the proclamation of 1975 as International Women's Year and an International Conference on women affairs. The Mexico City Conference defined a society in which women would participate in a real and full sense in all ramifications of life. Sequel to the recommendations of the Mexico City Conference, United Nations designated the years 1976-1985 as the Decade for Women. Among other highlights of the Decade was the

attraction of greater attention to women affairs. In 1979 was the Covenant on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Again, there was a refocused conception that development in human history is a holistic activity which cannot be realized without the full participation of women. "The under valuation of women was identified as both a cause and an effect of underdevelopment" (United Nations, 1995, p. 35). Accordingly, Governments (including Nigeria), were directed to ensure pragmatically that women were not discriminated in any form towards guaranteeing, exercising and enjoying human rights and fundamental freedoms on equal basis with men, both in political and legal spheres, marriage, the home and family life, or in private or public life. United Nations also adds that governments may be responsible for acts of violence on women, if they fail to act with due diligence to prevent violation of rights, or to investigate and punish acts of violence and provide compensation. That custom, tradition or religious beliefs should not be invoked as a basis for obligation to acts of violence. The issue was further emphasized in the 1993 Vienna Declaration. Put succinctly, the Vienna Declaration advocates for the eradication of any conflict which may arise between the rights of women and the harmful effects of certain traditional or customary practices, cultural prejudices and religious extremism (United Nations, 1995, p. 56). It is against this backdrop that one becomes worried over the persistence of violent traditional practices of widowhood institution in the 21st century Nigeria, especially as the country is a signatory to the UN Conventions, covenants and policies towards improving the lot of women and the family system.

The 1995 Beijing Conference focused on how to advance women's course through empowerment, against the backdrop on strengthening and actualizing the resolutions of the earlier conferences. The Conference aimed at proffering strategies to eradicating obstacles to women opportunities. But years after the Conference, in which Nigerian women featured prominently, obstacles like widowhood practices continue to hamper women empowerment and development, like a chronic pathology, especially as threatens the stability of the modern family of the death of the man. Again, since 1996 the emphasis of United Nations and the world has shifted to gender mainstreaming – a strategy which is aimed at integrating the aspirations of men and women into one grand design for human development, devoid of inequality against any sex. Accordingly, the gender mainstreaming project adopted the strategy of identifying areas where gender constitutes a risk, for a violation or abuse of human

rights: "mainstreaming gender in the human rights system requires the system to revisit not only institutional practices but also cultural views and beliefs" (OHCHR, 2000, p. 5). Here lies the justification for our study – the need to identify sustaining factors of widowhood social pathology on women advancement from the source.

No doubt, the efforts of United Nations and member countries like Nigeria on women advancement have impacted positively in many dimensions of life. However, experience and records show that much still need understanding, towards finding the strategies to handling cultural configurations of underdevelopment which affect the women and the modern family. Thus, there is still a yeaning gap between what should be according to law, treaties, covenants, declarations and policy statements on the one hand, and what is observed, on the other hand. According to Zanden "A. 1993 United Nations Human Development Report reveals that there still is no nation that treats its women as well as its men" (Zanden, 1996, p. 231). All over the world, different cases of ill-treatment, violation of rights and gross injustice are meted out on women, especially on their rights in the family.

In Nigeria, in spite of the establishments and policies put in place to herald and realize the world's advocacy on women, customs and cultural configurations, such as widowhood practices provide platform for women's ill-treatment and underdevelopment tendencies. For over two decades now, discussion on the plight of women under the institution of widowhood practices has been featuring prominently in gender workshops, conferences and government reports, etc. For instance, during the era of the military government of Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida, it was the subject of investigation by the office of the First Lady, Mariam Babangida, under the Better Life Programme for Rural women. This was followed up by the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs. Even with the increasing voice of women in the affairs of the society and, occupation of more public offices through the 35% Gender Affirmation project and agitation of Nigerian women widowhood practices are still enforced in Nigerian communities and families. Why have widowhood practices in Nigeria resisted the modern onslaught on it? This is a question to be addressed herein. The Better Life report outlined a number of strategies to end the practices and the violence on women and the modern family. The report and clarion call for end of the practices is also promoted by many churches, NGO's, CBO, academics, etc. (Osuji & Kanu, 1990; Osakwe et al., 1995) Yet, bizarre and violent widowhood practices still persist.

3. Widowhood Practices and Negation of Gender Responsive Development in the Family System

According to Webster, a widow is a woman who has outlived the man she married; especially when such a woman has not remarried (Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary of English Language). In Nigerian communities and families, this situation subjects the widow to a myriad of practices, which include rituals; restrictions; denial and violation of rights and privileges based on custom and patriarchal structures. Widowhood practices in Nigerian communities and families come in two phases of pre-burial and post-burial practices. Some of the pre-burial practices include the following: wearing of tattered dress, sitting on the bare floor beside the corpse lying in state, and or being secluded and locked-up in a room or fenced barn. The widow remains completely mute, till her husband is buried. She is not allowed to eat until interment of the corpse, while the women ritual actors eat sumptuously at her expense. But in some cultures the widow is served with light refreshment in discarded plates. The widow is conceived to be unclean and defiled hence she is ostracized from her siblings, relations, children and groups. For every ritual item and practice, the widow pays heavily to the women responsible for the particular ritual. Yet, the women ritual executionists act treacherously in their dealings with the widow, accusing her of having contrived her husband's death. The impression often is, if the wife served her husband faithfully and satisfactorily, why should he die prematurely? This popular taunting question leads to trial by ordeal. Worse still, the widow is never given a chance of defence (Iheanacho, 2004).

The post-burial practices include ritual shaving of hairs on the head and the pubic region. In some cases, the women responsible for this practice use blunt razor blade or broken bottle for the ritual. There is also ritual washing of hands and ritual bathe. The widow's movement remains restricted, while she must continue to wail loudly and hysterically throughout the period of one year mourning. Concerning this practice of compulsory wailing in parts of Africa, Nasimiyu (1990, p. 190), reports 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".

Again, the widow must abstain from sex until her levirate husband is decided by her husband's kinsmen and women, towards the end of her

one year mourning. During the period of the mourning, the deceased's assets are declared and dispossessed of the widow.

The widow is virtually stripped-off her human worth, debased and obsessed with bizarre rituals and, contemptuously dispossessed and disempowered of her potentials and family properties:

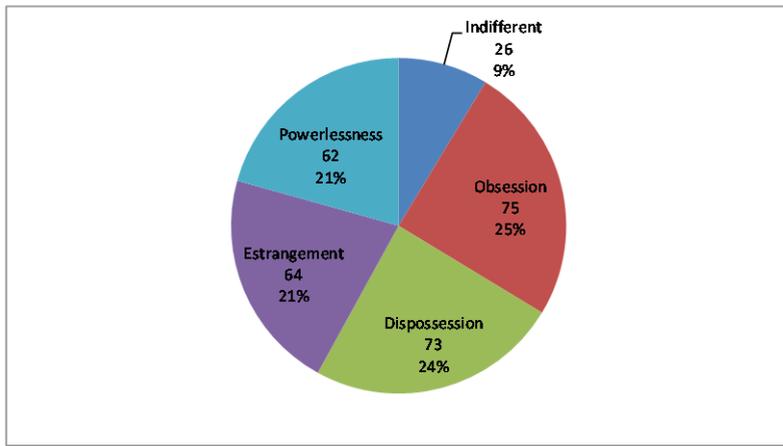


Figure 1. (%) of disempowerment in widowhood practices

Source: The Pie Chart is adapted from my doctoral dissertation in Sociology. University of Port Harcourt. The dissertation is unpublished.

The above chart summarize women's experience in the institution of widowhood. The human underdevelopment implication is family instability, as the widow finds it difficult to take over from where the husband stopped.

Why do widowhood practices persist at this point in history, in spite of its human underdevelopment variables in the family and society at large? This is more worrisome considering the enormous efforts of the United Nations towards women development currently at the stage of gender mainstreaming. What is more? The institution poses a more surprising tendency when we acknowledge the fact that the main catalysts and principal actors of the practices are women themselves. Women in serious grief and agony perform the rituals and practices amidst difficulties. It is even more puzzling that the same women who eulogize the crusade for renescent feminism, women advancement, empowerment and gender equality are involved. This is a paradox considering the centrality of the status of women in the twenty-first century human development

vision. This is pathology of development, hence it has often been repeated that the status of women is the measure and taste of any civilization (Iwe, 1979, p. 175).

The main summation of scholars is that harmful practices of widowhood institution constitute violence against women and the family system (Bolaji & Ahonsi, 1997). That the institution also promote inequality and discrimination against women (Akintunde, 1998; Olaosabikan, 1998; Chukwuma, 2004). Ironically, some widows who have the opportunity of evading the practices do not do so. This incongruity with modern gender principles and the lived experience of widows call for urgent investigation. Therefore, an indepth understanding of the socio-anthropological factors which hold women sway and perpetuate human relics and indignities of widowhood practices in the contemporary time require exposure, through indepth analyses. The task of filling this academic lacuna is the contribution of this paper. This is necessary because the Declaration of MONDIACULT UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies, emphasize that development programmes and policies, should be strategized and designed to be rooted in socio-cultural realities (Salim, 1994, p. 13). Thus, our study will provide a baseline data for articulating synergy between modern development and widowhood practices and for the formulation of local theology for the Christian folk amongst the people. Thus, effective treatment of a pathology require accurate diagnosis.

4. Factors Sustaining Widowhood Configurations of Violence Against Women and the Family

4.1. Sacred Phenomenon

We acknowledge that in Nigerian cultures, the strands of religion permeate and influence all dimensions of life. In addition to this, religious phenomenon loom large in such practices as widowhood institution. Writing on religion in African cultures, Wilhelm Dupre, underscores this finding, noting that: "There is no African tribe whose life is not surrounded and penetrated by rites and rituals. Such events as birth and death are freighted with symbolism, finding visible expression in the accompanying cults and customs" (Dupre, 1975, p. 68).

Also, in line with this rightful assertion, Ekarika further makes it succinct that: "What is constant in all rituals as religious phenomena is

a relationship to the gods, spirits, deified ancestors, as sacred objects. An object becomes sacred by virtue of the special relationship which an individual or group exhibits towards that object" (Ekarika & Edet, 1984).

The widowhood institution, with its cohort practices is a sacred phenomenon which find express support in the expositions of Gennep, that mourning is characterized by an aggregate of taboos and practices that separate the mourners from the society and put them in a complex phenomenon of sacred, impure state (Arnold, 1960). This may sound ridiculous to fanatical faithfuls of other religions. But suffice it to say that such thoughts would be erroneous and misleading, if we concede that what constitutes the distinguishing feature and aura of religion, especially symbols and meanings of religious ideas, depend on the human mind and the cultural context. It is in the light of allowing the traditional religion to speak for itself that one can honestly concede that widowhood practices in Nigerian communities and other African societies are sacred practices which manifest the people's faithfulness to a part of their religious wisdom and cosmology. This underscores the reasons why the practices are jealously guarded in the aura of awe and reverence. The figure below captures the people's worldview and conception of the widow's status in human existence.

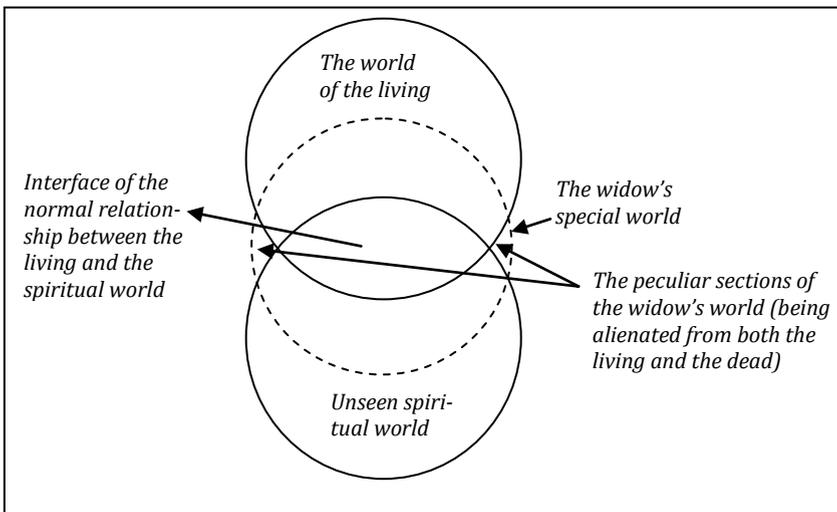


Figure 2. Widowhood worldview

Source: The figure is crafted from my ethnographic field data. It is used to illustrate the Etche and other Nigerian cultures' traditional religious worldview and conception of widows in their mourning period.

Widowhood institution and its associated practices are obviously the peoples' way of concretizing symbols and meanings, which in the words of Mircea Eliade, are the *hierophanies*, that is, manifestations of the sacred (Eliade, 1959, p. 7). The sacred manifestations of the rituals of widowhood institution in the ideological frame of Otto, open the bridge delineating life and death on the one hand and between the reality of the world and its beginning and end on the other. Yet, while it opens a gap, it also fills it by touching and fascinating the human mind as its only true centre (Otto, 1964, p. 8).

4.2. The Concept of Death and Ancestorship

To Nigerian peoples, death is not the end of one's 'existence' and interaction with his family and relations. Rather, death is a process of change to 'another being' in the spirit world, different from the world of the living. The unseen spiritual world and the physical world of the living immerse into and link each other in a web of sacred, social and cultural interactions. At death, Nigerians say that one 'has gone back home' or departed, hence he is thereafter 'practically' felt by his survivors. This is the people's background of the idea of ancestorship. Since the 'dead' can still participate in the affairs of the living, the people show concern and strive towards establishing cordial relationship with them. Here lies the manifest function of some of the widowhood practices.

The burial and funeral rites of a departed (mainly the responsibility of his family, the widow and his children), must be completed before ancestorship is guaranteed. Until this is done, the ghost of the departed is believed to hover around his family and farm lands. It is therefore unsafe to encounter it, as it could instantly harm any person, especially his survivors, of which the widow stands at a higher level of vulnerability. This lends further credence to the functional essence of the practices, especially as it underscores the need for the liberating rituals like the ritual washing of hands, bathe and severance of conjugal relations. Hence, the ancestors are both loved and feared in the people's tradition and family system. To mitigate this fear for the widow, all the practices of the institution required of her are conceived functional, to send-off and, settle the spirit of the departed among the legion of ancestral spirits.

On another perspective, there is the belief that at death, one goes to the spirit world with his level of affluence or poverty, hence the unseen world is also conceived to be stratified. Marriage is considered to be part

of wealth and, one way of manifesting this after a man's death is through his widow's commitment to carrying out all the practices required of her. This is to grace and dignify the departed as a married man who should be honoured, respected and placed at a high stratum in the spirit world. This manifest function of widowhood practice is linked with the widow's formal and earthly social and psychological concern for her departed husband.

4.3. Social and Psychological Concern for the Dead

Our findings is that some of the widowhood practices are done for the manifest function of symbolic or practical representation of the widow's psychological feeling and social concern for her death-separated husband. For example, the psychological concern is demonstrated by the wailing rituals and the entire mourning activities. Socially, the society would want the widow to create the impression that she was really in a loving marriage relationship with her 'dead' husband and, indeed, it is a part of the deceased's honour. The only way the widow can prove this, according to the people's understanding is by performing all the widowhood practices, conceived to be a continuation of matrimonial responsibility to her husband, especially as it mattered most in resettling him in the hereafter. Anything contrary to this, is interpreted as a betrayal of marriage love and concern. Again, it would adversely affect the widow's future relationship with her extended family members and relations in-law. United Nations (1995, p. 23), indirectly captures the situation as it reports that: "In many traditions, concepts of honour are linked to a woman's sexuality. Violence against women is often justified by the argument that honour has been violated by a woman's sexual behaviour. Such concepts of honour also find collective expression in many societies. In this context, violence against women also is seen as being the property of the males in a rival social group becomes a means of defiling the honour of that social group. Female sexuality has been a battle ground in feudal and in modern vendettas where male prestige and honour are challenged".

In many cases, recalcitrant widows are considered to be wicked and, that they must have contributed to their husband's death. In short, widowhood practices bring a widow to unfair public test. Her failure would mean much to her husband's kinsmen and indicative of the way her marriage contract would be re-aligned in the family.

4.4. The People's idea of Marriage and Family System

In Nigeria and other African cultures, marriage is conceived as the concern of the whole extended family and community. A woman is conceived as married to the entire lineage of her husband. Ndu captures the wisdom in levirate marriage in Africa. He asserts that: "The result is that the obligation and relationship entwining a woman and her children with her husband's lineage do not cease automatically with his physical death. Indeed, she is able to continue in the lineage as a functioning wife through the ministration of her brothers-in law in a levirate union" (Ndu, 1995, p. 17).

This rightful assertion is the sociological reason and manifest function of levirate marriage practice in widowhood in Nigerian cultures. It is also worthy to report that one of the primary purposes for marriage in Africa vis-à-vis levirate marriage is procreation, to keep afloat the flood-gate of incarnation and reincarnation. The liberating and cleansing rituals are therefore necessary to forestall imminent danger for the levirate suitor and the union itself. The report of Kirwen, concerning the resistance of Tanzanian widows to embracing the Catholic Church's position against levirate union underscore our finding (Kirwen, 1979, p. 9-10).

4.5. Conformity to the Paradigm of Myth and Sacred History

Nigerians are firm believers of what has happened in the past – sacred history or what Eliade (1959, p. 55), calls the happenings at *initia* or the *illo-tempora* (i.e. happenings at pre-history). There is the desire to recreate the origin and reality of things before history, when things were developed and set in order. The widowhood practices are conceived to be profound subjects and activities which must be observed according to the paradigms set by their sacred histories. The sacred history of widowhood cultural configuration and its allied practices in Nigerian communities is not an individual's affair, but the heritage and experience of the people. Eliade (1959, p. 55) would further want us to understand that anything that lacks an explanatory model is 'meaningless' hence it has no reality.

Writing on the "Nri Myth and Igbo Life" Uzukwu, explains that the ritual attitude towards spiritual entities, recognized and established by the forebears is an agreement. And, that, this ensures a healthy continu-

ity with the primordial act of the founding ancestors to all the possibilities for life hidden in any situation (Uzukwu, 1988, p. 94-96). It therefore becomes absurd, if not impossible for a widow or group of women to disengage themselves from the founding creative act which sacred history describes as its life without being anathematized by the society. This accounts for the curiosity of the widow to complete all her traditionally required practices, to recreate the sacred history's paradigm that instituted them. This is why corporate identity and community spirit are major factors for social cohesion in traditional African cultures and, more so in Nigerian families and communities.

4.6. The People's Concept of Community

Nigerian traditional societies are very conscious of corporate life and identity. The people live and depart from the physical world in the company of others. The individual does not exist alone, but is only guaranteed by his membership of the wider group. The type of community relationship that is referred to here, is lucid in the words of Mbiti (1969, p. 108-109); thus: "Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own being... Whatever happens to the individual happens to the group, and whatever happens to the group happens to the individual. The individual can only say; I am, because we are, and since we are therefore, I am".

It is because of the primacy of the extended family and community plight that Chinua Achebe asserts that among the Igbo of Nigeria, "no man however great can win judgement against the clan" (Achebe, 1958, p. 139). Nigerians place more emphasis on the solidarity of the group and on the communion of the members than on the autonomy and interest of the individual. This idea of communal solidarity prevails both in moments of joy and of sorrow. The web of the extended family and community tie does not exclude the departed ancestors and other spiritual beings, including God and the unborn. This means that the corporate existence of any of the people's cultural aggregation (groups and social formation), has ontological inclination and link. Thus, the rituals and practices of widowhood are necessary to restore harmony of the bipolar world's interaction and to ensure the stability of the "spiritual republic" (Onyewuenyi, 1978, p. 252) or the "ontological equilibrium" (Echema, 1995, p. 63).

Death and its elaborate rituals concern every member of the family and kin group. There is therefore the need to perform the widowhood practices, especially those that deal directly with the deceased's rites. The denial of these rites to the departed, which implies denying him entrance into the ancestral pedigree and stratum in the people's web of interaction, is believed to arouse the anger of the spirits against the world of the living. Therefore, any action to stop the widowhood practices aimed at settling and averting the wrath of the spirit world on the given community is matched with sanction and ostracism. The punishment is a living death; such that reminds and equate with the punishment of outlawry in feudal England. No widow would want such situation that would estrange her like a planet off its orbit (Onyewuenyi, 1978, p. 252). This is the essence and justification for the peoples consciousness to overseeing the proper execution of rituals and sanctions, including those of widowhood institution. Concerning ritual practices among the Igbo, Ilogu posits that: "it is due not to sadism or urge to torture their fellow human being, but to the genuine belief that unless proper rituals and punishments are enforced, all the people would suffer as unbearable evil would befall the community" (Ilogu, 1974, p. 127).

This purported wisdom fits into the context under study. In Nigerian communities, an individual woman cannot detach herself from the societal web or corporate existence. Denying the traditional dictates of the community is denial of life itself. Furthermore, the force of corporate identity in ensuring the continuity of widowhood practices is also substantiated by Eliade, when he says that it is not possible for someone to dissociate from the sacred events upon which his community exists (Eliade, 1959).

4.7. Re-Union and Group Cohesion

The death of a man brings his kinsmen and women together. In such gathering, dialogue is possible. The negotiations and bargaining for widowhood ritual charges and practices facilitate increased interaction among the living. Again, the living join voices together to talk to the departed. The interaction is necessary because the living recall for the departed, memorable events and experiences shared with his widow and sanction him to remain benevolent to her as an ancestor. This is but one functional essence.

Again, the blood of the animal victims of the ritual practices are symbolic bonds which reaffirm the widow and other kinsmen and women's commitment to the deceased and for the maintenance of the values of the group and lineage. This also provides the widow opportunity for the renewal of her marriage contract. To the kinsmen of the departed, sharing the flesh of the ritual victims (animals) is like being fed by one mother with one dish and spoon (Iheanacho, 2004).

This finding is similar to the views of Emile Durkheim, that, ceremony and rituals are essential to binding the members of a group together. This is why rituals are found not only in regular situations of worship, but in the various life crises at which major social transitions are experienced, for example birth, marriage and death. In virtually all Nigerian traditional societies, rituals and ceremonial procedures are observed on such occasions. Collective ceremonies reaffirm group solidarity at a time when people are forced to adjust to major changes in their lives. Funeral rituals demonstrate that the values of the group outlive the passing of particular individuals and, so provides a means for the bereaved people to adjust to their altered circumstances. Mourning is not the spontaneous expression of grief, it is only so for those personally affected by the death. Mourning is a duty imposed by the group (Giddens, 2000, p. 443).

Considering the force of group solidarity, ontological stability and renewal of covenants as major reasons and functional essence underscoring the perpetuity of the configuration of widowhood institution, we tend to subscribe to the assertion credited to Smith that "religion ensures the preservation and welfare of society" (Durkheim, 1976). But in spite of these cultural values, widowhood practices stand in contradistinction to the values of contemporary Nigerian family and women. The family system has changed. Therefore enforcement of the traditional and pristine practices of the widowhood institution is a negation and violence on womanhood and the family stability.

5. The Imperative of Christian Local Theology of Widowhood

The thrust of local theology is Christians' reflection on the gospel from their own purview, circumstance and cultural gabbage, towards addressing how the inherent conditions, values and circumstances influence the people's response to the gospel (Schreiter, 2003, p. 1). Local

theology study people's culture, bringing indigenous customs into synergy with church tradition and individual Christian identity. It also seek effective pastoral lee-ways to the sway and influence of indigenous worldviews and popular religious convictions.

In line with the aim of bringing the people's worldview into synergy with the realities of the present time, spiritual leaders especially in the Christian dominated cultural areas of Nigeria should articulate heart touching local theologies of the widowhood institution. This will help to sustain the faith of Christian widows and other Christian women. In some places like Owerri (Igbo culture areas), Christian women use white clothing instead of all black attire during the mourning period, use the Rosary to scratch their body instead of stick, use 'Holy water' and olive oil to wash their hands, instead of the traditional pattern of the rituals. During the early period of the mourning, the Christian women groups gather around their bereaved member to keep her company, thereby reducing the unfriendly attitude of the traditional women activists of the practices. Therefore, a sound local theology of widowhood institution rooted in the indigenous cultures of Nigeria's extended family system and communities would further spur the women to take to Christian alternatives to the practices.

6. Conclusion: Towards a Synergy between Widowhood Culture and Social Change

Today, societies are undergoing processes of rapid change. New ideologies, scientific and technological innovations and demographic changes have emerged and infused into our social system. This means modifications in the way Nigerians relate, interact and seek their goals in life; hence the social structures in society are perpetually dynamic. Against this backdrop of social change and on the concept of women development as topically crystallized, the persistence of violent widowhood practices suggest a paradox and indeed a human development pathology which yearn for urgent attention.

Therefore, giving that widowhood practices hold Nigerian women sway; in planning and implementing women development programmes and projects, attention should first be paid to studying and understanding the particular culture's heritage and values, to ensure a broad based

acceptance and integration in the people's social system. Thus, "a people does not fully commit itself to a development undertaking unless that undertaking corresponds to its deeply felt needs" (Serageldin & Taborroff, 1994, p. 10).

To ameliorate the effect of widowhood practices on Nigerian women and stability of the family, we proffer the following strategies: mass education should be encouraged amongst the people, especially for rural women. This is to enhance critical thinking in handling the challenge of violent cultural configurations and the quest for sustainable human development in the contemporary time. In other words, qualitative education would enhance women and men's better conception and thought pattern, for a more humane approach to widowhood practices towards women empowerment, self-confidence and bridging the inequality gap. We also advocate for aggressive enlightenment campaign towards mass awareness of the human underdevelopment and family instability implications of the institution. This strategy would among other things, enable women become conscious of their dignity, the dangers of the practices, their inalienable rights and, how to seek redress when such rights are violated. The various women associations in Nigeria should form surveillance groups that would be on alert to identify ill-treatment of women under the institution. This is necessary because, in the situation of sorrow and mourning, widows are disempowered of the wit and spirit of speaking-out in protest, hence they need external help. To put this strategy in motion Ministry of Women Affairs, related, Government Agencies, Office of First Ladies, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Community Based Organizations (CBO) can be very useful. Again, Nigerian women should equally remain dogged (no matter the opposition), in their agitation for the reconsideration of the cultural relics which subject them to indignities and dehumanization. Finally, given that widowhood practices are more intense among the rural poor families, we suggest that the various levels of government in Nigeria should plan effective poverty alleviation programmes.

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