



# Mitochondrial Eve

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## Misogynist Tendency: A Case of the Widowhood Practices in Igbo Land

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### Abstract

Every culture in Igbo land has a way of viewing the issue of widowhood. Some culture place widowhood to an extreme of dehumanization while those who have undergone social and moral civilization treat the case of widowhood in a moderate manner. Widowhood has become a contemporary and sensitive global issue of discourse because of the ugly practice associated with it. Widowhood is a social issue which one can't sidestep. It befalls a man or a woman but it is generally used in reference to females. In some extremist communities, concerted efforts have been made by scholars to counsel the custodians of culture to discard and abolish all the obnoxious cultural practices that enslave the women especially the humiliation and dehumanization being meted on the womenfolk at the death of their husbands under the pretext of culture. The researcher was able to use a rich secondary method with relevant books, journals, dictionaries, commentaries, lexicons, online materials to develop this work. The researcher therefore recommends that any culture that does not promote equality and social justice is not acceptable. The researcher advises that women should be given equal footing with their male counterparts in the aspect of widowhood. The researcher was able to find out that if all will come to their senses and see the selfish interest of misogynists in the cultural widowhood practices being meted on the womenfolk, this heinous practices will be eradicated. The researcher concludes that efforts should be made by the custodian of our culture to discard and abolish all these obnoxious cultural practices that have enslaved our mothers in Igbo land.

**Key Words:** Misogynist, Tendency, Widowhood, Culture, Igbo land

### Introduction

Culture is the beliefs, customs, practices and social behaviors of a particular people. The identification of an individual in a community is therefore defined by his relationship with the cultural life of the

community. Culture there plays a very important role in the life of every individual in a society. However, there is no doubt that there exist exploitative cultural practices in Igbo society and people seem to be content living in such oppressive situations probably

out of fear of the unknown. This is because a typical Igbo man strives not to disassociate himself from the spiritual community by violating the taboos or by involving in any 'nso' act of behavior. He believes that cultural norms are dictates from the gods and their violation brings down the wrath of the gods which may manifest itself as strange incurable element or even mysterious death that could only be averted by a very expensive sacrifice.

Hence, despite our much acclaimed civilization, people still allow themselves and their loved ones to be enslaved spiritually, socially and psychologically under the pretext of culture. It is also common knowledge that Igbo women in this millennium are giving active and responsible fight to project their image and status from traditional marginalization, in spite of potential traditional cultural bottlenecks. The social discrimination culturally inflicted in the Igbo women, can be deciphered from Onyenuchie (1995, p. 172), who notes that in Africa, women suffer untold discrimination and marginalization despite their outstanding, contributions to their communities. Igbo women have played prominent role in the economic and social transformation of their communities by

engagement in trade, farming, cultural festivals and development geared projects.

Widowhood practice in this research entail the traditional agonizing conditions widows are subjected to as their husbands die. It is restricted to social subjugation Igbo women who lost their husbands undergo before burial.

From the background of Igbo culture, the researcher stated some concepts like culture, misogyny and widowhood. The researcher also discussed some of the problems the widows undergo during the mourning periods. The researcher applied the implications of these problems to the social, economic, psychological and emotional strata as a panacea.

### **The Notion of Culture**

An understanding of culture requires an understanding not only of language differences, but also differences in knowledge, perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors.

Etymologically, culture (from the Latin cultura stemming from colere, meaning 'to cultivate') generally refers to patterns of human activity and the symbolic structures that give such activities significance and importance.

Culture can be understood as systems of symbols and meanings that even their creators contest, that lack fixed boundaries that are constantly in flux and that interact and compete with one another.

Culture can be defined as all the ways of life including arts, beliefs and institutions of a population that are passed down from generation to generation. Culture has been called “the way of life for an entire society”. As such, it includes codes of manners, dress, language, religion, rituals, art, norms of behavior, such as law and morality and systems of belief.

### **Manifestations of Culture**

Cultural differences manifest themselves in different ways and differing levels of depth. Symbols represent the most superficial and values the deepest manifestations of culture with heroes and rituals in between.

### **Symbols**

Symbols are words, gestures, pictures or objects that carry a particular meaning which is only recognized by those who share a particular culture. New symbols easily develop, old ones disappear. Symbols from one particular group are regularly copied by others. This is why symbols represent the outermost layer of a culture.

### **Heroes**

Heroes are persons, past or present, real or fictitious, who possess characteristics that are highly prized in a culture. They also serve as models for behaviors.

### **Rituals**

Rituals are collective activities, sometimes superfluous in reaching desired objectives but are considered as socially essential. They are therefore carried out most of the times for their own sake (ways of greetings, paying respect to others, religious and social ceremonies, etc).

The core of culture is formed by values. They are broad tendencies for preferences of certain state of affairs to others (good-evil, right-wrong, natural-unnatural). Many values remain unconscious to those who hold them. Therefore they often cannot be discussed, nor can they be directly observed by others.

Values can only be inferred from the way people act under different circumstances.

Symbols, heroes and rituals are the tangible or visual aspects of the practices of a culture. The true cultural meaning of the practices is intangible; this is revealed only when the practices are interpreted by the insiders.

### **The Concept of Misogyny**

The misogyny definition refers to the fear or dislike of certain behaviors exhibited by women. Generally, misogynists hate how women behave, particularly when they exhibit their strength, independence and ambition.

The meaning of being misogynistic is someone that dislikes certain behaviors displayed by women. For example, a misogynistic male typically believes that a woman should not be in control and should not exhibit behaviors regarding strength, independence or ambition.

A misogynistic male often views himself as being superior to women. They may degrade women and believe that women should not hold roles that involve power or authority. The misogynistic male generally believes that women should hold a more traditional role such as cooking and cleaning. Although, misogyny is more common in men, it can also occur in women. A woman may exhibit misogynistic attitudes in religious groups if the woman views their role as superior or if they believe that other women are not acting as they should.

### **Sexism**

Sexism refers to the prejudice and discrimination that occurs against a particular gender, which can lead to hate

crimes or violence. Women are more often the victims of sexism compared to men. However, men are not immune to gender-based discrimination. Women are the primary victims of sexism because men are considered as being the more powerful gender. The belief that males are more powerful occurs in many communities throughout the world.

Sexism can occur in any setting, such as the work place or social settings. It can affect people who were assigned male or female at birth and people who were not assigned as male or female but identify as the opposite gender. Sexism is caused by prejudices, which are stereotypes and generalizations that are learned from others.

Sexism is not the same as misogyny. Sexism is the ideology of one gender being superior to the other, whereas misogyny is the method in which those ideologies are carried out. Sexism focuses on women as a whole, whereas misogyny focuses on certain behaviors of women. Misogyny is a form of sexism,; however, sexism isn't always misogynistic.

For example, benevolent sexism is a form of sexism that focuses on the belief that women are innocent, fragile and beautiful and need constant protection from men. This form of

sexism may not be as violent or harsh as misogyny; however, women are still viewed as being the inferior gender.

### **Misogynist and Chauvinist**

A misogynist is a person who acts aggressively towards women when they display behaviors deemed unacceptable.

Chauvinist is a person who displays aggressive and extreme patriotism. A chauvinist may display prejudice towards people who do not share the same patriotic views.

### **Widowhood**

Discriminatory cultural practices are harmful traditional practices directed against women because of their sex. One of such discriminatory cultural practices that affects the lives and standard of living of women is widowhood practices.

Odunze (2005, p. 15), described widowhood as an unwanted and horrible period that women pass through in life. A lot of stress and punishment are meted out to the woman as soon as her husband is pronounced dead. In Igbo land, hardly can a man die and his kinsmen will accept that he died a natural death. The automatic perception is usually that the wife has killed him. The widow is treated worse than a murderer. She undergoes

certain rituals in order to appease the dead husband and the spirits of the forefathers.

According to Ntozi (1997, p. 23), in Amalu (2013, p. 43), widowhood is a route that is branded by some inordinate customs and traditions, enforced melancholic lifestyles, social exclusion, denial of rights, extreme neglect, social oppression and psychological depression amongst others. Nwadinobi (2001, p. 5), added that at the death of the spouse, the widow is dethroned, defaced and disinherited. This means that in Igbo land, as soon as the man dies, the woman loses all her worth. Her dignity is believed to be the husband and once the husband is dead, the dignity crumbles. This is why Njaka (1975, p. 22), maintained that widowhood practices remains the most unjust cultural practices that affect women in Igbo land. Onuogu (2007, p. 106), observed that during the pre-Christian period, the treatment of widows differed based on the customs of their various communities. Every widow then, no matter the community in Igbo land is meant to observe the ritual cleansing.

Widowhood practice is an unjust cultural practice directed against women who lose their husbands. The effects of this long-time culture on society, especially women, are continuing even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a result

of rules, laws and regulations and cultural values that have been laid down by the ancestors and nurtured by subsequent generations. This widowhood practice were made by men to humiliate and relegate the women to the background.

Nevertheless, it is on record that Christian churches have made remarkable efforts to alleviate the plight of widows. However, a lot is still expected for the total eradication of this age-old tradition.

When the husband of a woman dies, she automatically becomes vulnerable to suffering the humiliating transformation into being a widow. Widowhood cultural practice is an unfair cultural practice against women especially when it hinders the rights of women. The rules and regulations guiding the Igbo communities were made primarily by men and are handed down from generation to generation. Women accepted these rules because of fear of superstitious beliefs and traditions. Most times, women contribute a lot in promoting and supporting inhuman cultural practices. Surprisingly, this practice is enforced through the activities of some women popularly known as *Umuada*. The activities of the *Umuada* are insensitive, harsh and negatively directed to their fellow women.

The thought of widowhood in Igbo society sends shivers to the spines of any woman, not the thought of loosing a loved one but that of the excruciating ordeals envisaged. The rituals of widowhood during and after the burial and funeral ceremonies of a dead husband leaves most women physically deformed, mentally deranged, socially displaced, spiritually stunted and economically bankrupt while the reverse is the case if the man loses his wife. The reasons given for performing these rituals leaves no one in doubt that misogynists have capitalized on the Igbo man's strict adherence to culture to inflict unbearable pain on their enemy, the womenfolk.

The examples given below reveal that it is out of hatred for women as a sexually defined group that some of the following widowhood practices are still being propagated in some parts of Igbo land.

### **Prolonged Mourning/ Wailing Period**

When a man dies, the woman is expected in some places, to weep at a specific period of the day. This practice will go on for days or even weeks. If she is accused of not wailing enough or not maintaining the intervals, she will be dragged out and forced to kneel on pebbles under the sun as she is called names by the relatives of the deceased husband.

However, the reverse is the case for a man who loses his spouse. The society goes out of its ways to cushion his loss by providing him every available comfort. Sometimes, he is even provided with a very beautiful maiden to keep him company while the corpse of his wife is still lying in state.

### **Dis-inheritance**

Culture in most places in Igbo land does not allow the woman to partake in the arrangement/preparations of her husband's burial/funeral. It is during such preparations that a good proportion of the man's wealth is diverted and shared among his relatives in the guise that it is used to settle debts accumulated during the burial/funeral ceremonies. The woman is denied access to her husband's property leaving her with little or nothing to cater for her children especially if she is unfortunate enough to have no grown up male child or worse still, no male child at all. In some extreme cases, she is driven out of her home and her children forcefully taken from her by her in-laws. Meanwhile, a man who loses his wife to death automatically inherits her assets while her liabilities may be sent to the wife's parents and relatives to bear. No need comments on this because the misogynist custodians of our culture insist that it is what the gods dictate.

### **Wife Inheritance**

Culture demands that a widow is a property and should be inherited by any available male amongst the relatives of the deceased spouse. In the course of the widowhood rituals, the woman is made to have sexual intercourse with the chosen man but if she is lucky enough, she may have to make a choice among the relatives. After the intercourse, she automatically becomes the man's wife. This 'culture' is not applicable to the male folk as they are free to choose among many beautiful maidens whom to marry.

### **Drinking the Bath Water of the Corpse**

In some cases, especially when the woman is suspected of having a hand in the husband's death, which is very often, she is made to undergo the bizarre ritual of drinking the bath water of the corpse of her husband. This may expose her to many diseases that may eventually kill her, thereby confirming the allegation. After drinking the water, she will be dragged about town and forced to tell the people the circumstances behind her husband's death. The question is, why is it that no man has been questioned publicly over the death of his wife? If it is cultural for one to drink the bath water of a deceased spouse to confirm innocence from his death,

why is this culture restricted to the womenfolk?

### **Ostracisation**

Widows suffer social isolation, which is a result of having removed women's ascribed social relations or at least those relationships achieved early in life such as marriage, whilst making other unavailable to them or training them to enter new social roles voluntarily. In Ebonyi state, a woman was asked to stay with her dead husband for a period of time to prove that she did not kill her husband. In Uzowani in Enugu state, a woman was chained during the burial of her husband. She was prevented from eating food and from taking baths until the funeral ceremony was over.

Widows are forced to have sexual intercourse with strange men. Having asked to sit on the floor throughout the mourning period. In some parts of Uzowani in Enugu state, the woman's hand is tied to her back like a thief and the first twenty eight days of mourning is usually the worst.

The widow is expected to cry often to signify that she is missing her husband. She is not allowed to go to the market during mourning. Widows are not allowed to shave their hair during the period of mourning in Igbo land. They are kept in an unhygienic environment.

They are not meant to look neat in order not to attract other men. According to Njaka (1975, p. 17), this is a pan Igbo custom that has been practiced for a long time. As it stands now, widows can now take adequate care of themselves such as having access to good hospital without being subjected to die at home. Mbagwu (2009, p. 11), concludes that there is no community or nation without a culture of its own.

### **Restriction**

At the death of a man, the widow is drastically restricted from virtually all social/communal activities. She is to stay indoors for weeks or even for months wearing the same cloth. In some places, she is to stay in ashes without having a bath throughout her mourning period. If she must leave the house, her dress and her unkempt look will identify her as a taboo to be avoided.

### **The Aja-ala Ritual**

The final stage of mourning for a widow is the cleansing ritual which in many places in Igbo land is known as "Ije na Aja-ala" that is going to the Ala-ala. According to Udogu (2023) in an oral interview, she said that the aja-ala ritual is a cleansing which purifies the widow and permits her to interact with people, men and women alike. In most



places, it entails going to a particular stream in the middle of the night with a daughter of the land, where she submits herself to different men for sexual intercourse followed by other dehumanizing rituals. Any woman who refuses to perform the aja-ala ritual is never welcomed into the society. Observations have shown that the significance of the aja-ala ritual is to purify the widow and make her fit for other men to freely have sex without the fear of attack from the dead husband.

### **Implication of Widowhood Practices against Women in Igbo land.**

The implication of widowhood against women in Igbo land is nothing to write home about. There are psychological, social, economic and health implications of widowhood in Igbo land. Saba (1997, p. 41), reported that the effects of these harmful widowhood practices fall into three main categories: social, economic and emotional.

#### **Social Implication**

Widows suffer social isolation as a result of having lost social relations. The death of a husband frequently results in family disorganization, be it nuclear or extended family.

#### **Economic Implication**

Economically, the widow is deprived of everything at the death of her husband. The high level of poverty in Igbo land can be traced to some of the discriminatory cultural practices where women are prevented from doing certain jobs or activities that can help improve the economic condition of the people. For example, when a widow who is active is prevented from carrying some economic activities, it will reduce the income generation of the women and that of the society.

According to Unabuike (2009, p. 52), the economic implications of the unjust cultural practices on women are seen in the high level of poverty. The economic hardship amongst women especially widows has forced many of them to resort to begging, sex work and other social vices in order to feed their families. Most of the time, the widow is deprived of her husband's landed property by the husband's relatives. These activities cause a lot of trauma to the widows involved.

#### **Psychological Implication**

Widowhood is a curse to education. The psychological trauma that a widow who is pursuing academic activities will not permit her to concentrate and reason accurately and some of them drop out of school because they

don't have money to pay school fees and do other academic activities.

The psychological implications of widowhood cultural practices according to Iwuh (1998) in Amalu (2013, p. 84), are seen in Igbo society where widows undergo certain trauma in the name of widowhood practices. Such psychological trauma includes the widow being prevented from taking a bath, shaving her hair, going to the farm or market or engaging in any other activity until six months after her husband is buried. The practice of widows eating food without washing their hands and many other evil practices are being associated with widowhood.

### **Emotional Implication**

Emotionally, the widow suffers stress, depression and fear because her partner is dead and the property is seized by the husband's relatives.

### **Conclusion**

The dignity of the human person as well as the attendant demand to accord the human person the right that belongs to him has informed different motives behind the formation of many charters and declarations of human rights down the history of humanity.

Any culture that does not promote equality and social justice is not acceptable. Therefore, there is need for all to come to our senses and see the selfish interest of misogynists in the cultural widowhood practices being witnessed in Igbo land. Efforts should be made by all custodians of culture to discard and abolish all the obnoxious cultural practices that enslave us especially the humiliation and dehumanization being meted out on the womenfolk at the death of their husbands under the pretext of culture. As stated earlier, the manner in which those cultural widowhood practices are propagated and the motives behind the practices confirms the assertion that they are created to satisfy the selfish interests of few strong traditionalist who hate women as a sexually defined group.

Though recently, the Church and some human rights activists have gone to an extreme to reduce the trauma widows pass through during the mourning of their husbands. According to Okoye (2001, p. 23), widows undergo horrible experiences which is blatant trampling on the rights of women of Igbo society. These horrible experiences are concealed under the veil of traditional widowhood rituals and practices. In the past, the mourning period of a widow was one year and more, depending on her relationship with

her in-laws, but recently it has been reduced to six months because of the combined efforts of the Churches and human rights activists.

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Olutayo, A. (Eds). *Issues and Perspectives in Sociology*. Ibadan: Sam Bookman Educational Communication Services.

### **Oral Interview**

Udogu, Ogechi. A widow and seamstress.  
Interviewed at her shop in Umuduru-  
Egbeaguru, Onuimo Imo State.