

Widowhood Practices in Africa [Igbo] Traditional Society: Socio-Anthropological [Re] Interpretations

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Abstract: Most African [Igbo] traditional practices have been misconstrued, misinterpreted or interpreted out of context. The consequence of this hermeneutical error is the dissemination of blurred knowledge and this affects not only modern scholarship adversely but also disfigures the people's worldview and undermines their personality definitions. These overly results to revolt, libelling and avid rejection of the culture and values of the people. The worst hit of this hermeneutical error in modern scholarship is the Igbo traditional widowhood practices. Thus, the feminists scholarly slant has staked their neck in an avid condemnation of the practices as they consider them obnoxious, de-humanizing, de-womanizing and complete vitiation on the rights and personality of the women. Against this backdrop, this paper is designed to reconsider these practices within their contextual framework and historical milieu. It adopted a socio-anthropological method as its main tool. Here, the work discovers that these widowhood ritual practices among the Igbo people aim at social stability, metaphysical integration of both the physical and spiritual worlds apart. It also notes that the practices were designed for the protection and preservation of the entire community and especially the widow, who through the loss of her husband was exposed to the cross-current traffic of the spiritual and physical worlds. The paper therefore concludes that those practices serve its metaphysical needs of the traditional society as it gave sound philosophical base for the definition of their reality.

Key words/phrases: Widowhood, Africa [Igbo], Traditional Society, A Socio-Anthropological, Interpretations

Date of Submission: 16-03-2018

Date of acceptance: 31-03-2018

I. INTRODUCTION

Much of the Africa life and culture are shrouded in mystical obscurity, resulting to the grave difficulties scholars and researchers encounter in the interpretation of both the oral and literary discourse of African [Igbo] thought[s] and faith [s]. The most apparent reason for the mystification of life in African [Igbo] culture streams from the conception and interpretation of the relationship between this world and the world beyond [this life and afterlife]. Thus underlying the African philosophy of life is the idea that human life is situated within the confluence of two worlds apart, the visible and the invisible or spiritual worlds and notably, the spiritual world superintends, influences and determines the activities of visible/physical world of human existence. Hence the physical life/world is seen in African cosmology as simply an appendage to the spiritual world. Here, Okoro [2014] attempts justification of this belief when he writes:

The African [Igbo] contrary to the western/scientific understanding of life, which defines life in material sense, have unique way of understanding the meaning of life. For the Africans [Igbo People] life does not end in death, but continues to another world. Life in Africa [Igbo] is simply a continuum. The concept of life and death are mutually inclusive concepts and there are no dividing lines between human existence and the dynamic process involving the increase or decrease of power or life force of the living, and the dying and there are different levels of death [24306-24311 see also Bosch 1975:13].

Ikenga-Metu [1991] an astute professor of African religious anthropology, confirms the inseparable interconnection between the physical and spiritual worlds in African thoughts, when he avers, 'death is not the final end of man in Igbo thoughts, all men continue to live in some form or the other after death' [62]. Therefore, in the idea of Okoro [2011] the living and the dead form the one community, whose members are mutually interdependent upon each other [332-351].

This mystification of life in African socio-moral philosophy has affected the peoples understanding and interpretations of other African [Igbo] practices. The implication therefore on African social and moral discourse are multiple, most often resulting to negative attitudes towards the studying of certain African socio-

moral phenomena. These negative attitudes include but not limited to secrecy, deriding, misinterpretations, misunderstanding, libelling, revolt etc against African culture.

The most affected socio-moral discourse in the contemporary scholarship by these negative attitudes is the widowhood practices. The widowhood practice has so much been neglected, misunderstood, misinterpreted and consequently libelled in modern scholarship. Thus Ohale [2015] situates that there are many neglected issues in African literary discourse but only few are as neglected as the problem associated with widowhood across much of the continent [1-12]. It is part of this neglect that made the Women 2000 to assume that women have maintained inconsequential position in African society. In zeroing it to the widows, they observed that even statistics is quite silent about the state and status of the widows in Africa and as such summarily described this attitude in religious terms as 'sin of omission'. In their own words;

It can be said that there is no group more affected by the sin of omission than widows. They are painfully absent from statistics of many developing countries and they are rarely mentioned in the multitudes of reports on women's poverty, development, health, or human rights published in the last twenty-five years [-19].

The women 2000 also observed that before 1975 that literature on the issues of widowhood practices, with particular reference to the widows, has not been extant. However, the present work notes that even when literatures on the widowhood issues began to mushroom the African literary dome, they were based on western bias and preconceived ideas. Thus most of the practices, having been misunderstood or rather understood in their surface motif, were derogated and libelled and consequently interpreted out of context of the basic African socio-moral philosophy that gave birth to such practices. Therefore, to have a clear understanding of the meaning of certain widowhood practices in Igbo traditional society, there comes the need to understanding some major African [Igbo] social norms, the socio-cultural context and hermeneutical implications both the individual and the community attach to the rituals involved in the widowhood practices among the indigenous people of Africa [Igbo] [see Afolayan 2011:27].

It is against this backdrop that Tasié [2013] maintains that widowhood rites in African literary discourse have followed three major stereotypes. Here he maintains that the first group concerned themselves with the perceived woes of the widows, such scholars like Mariama-Baa [1981], who described this period as dreadful moment, Oduyoye [1997], who calls it extremely intense period, while Chima [2006] describes the rituals as harmful and Pius [2007] sees it as inhumanity to the humanity of the women [155-162 see also Aderinto 2000:26].

The second group of scholars occupy themselves with unearthing the socio-ethical and gender desiderata that gave birth to the seeming obnoxious widowhood practices among the African [Igbo] traditional people, which they consider as subjugation and oppression of the women in general and widows in particular [see Tasié 2013: 155-162]. Accordingly, these group of scholars are consistent in their postulations that African widowhood rites are the intricate part and overt outgrowth of a patriarchal society. Thus widowhood rites are notched against the women as a means of maintaining the patriarchal structure and system. Prominent in this group are Odimegwu [2000] and Chidike [2005]. Here, Odimegwu argues that gender ideology of sex difference and sex roles expectations impart on the widowhood practices in Africa. He further asserts that, 'within Igbo widowhood framework, the rites represent the traditional belief about death, inheritance, feminine roles, family structure and family relationship [see Tasié 2013:155-162]. Chidike [2005] worth a place in this group, when he argues that widowhood rites among Africans is simply an outgrowth of the unbridled desire in the married daughters of the land to insist on avenging their brother's maltreatment of his widow [see Tasié 2013:155-162].

Within the third group are such scholars as Sofala, Ahanso, and Chidiluli. These unequivocally maintain that widowhood rites in Africa are barbarous, criminal and uncivilized. The opinion of these scholars represent the feelings and emotions of many people, both African and non-Africans, more especially those within the feminist bent. Undoubtedly, many researches on widowhood practices in Africa have been undaunted of this position resulting to stigmatization of widowhood practice and by extension all other African traditional practices. However, the present work argues that these stereotypes or archetypes of scholarly opinions as good and reasonable as they may be, are bedevilled with certain hermeneutical missing link in the understanding and interpretations of basic African [Igbo] cultural practices. The present work therefore offers a new perspective, as it takes socio-anthropological and philosophical milieu of the traditional Africa seriously.

II. BASIC AFRICAN [IGBO] PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

Africans, with particular reference to the Igbo people of eastern Nigeria, understand life more as a mystical/or rather spiritual reality than a material combination of elements as in western ideality. However, due to the mystical nature of life, Africans consider it as integrated in nature, coalescing between the material and spiritual worlds. Kalu [2002] among other scholars of African religious anthropology underscores this basic element in the African conception of life when he opines that life is the pivot of African traditional cosmology, the highest values in the people's perception of reality and well integrated in the cyclical perception of time and

space [350-362]. On this note, Tasie [2013], underpins that the African person and particularly Africans of Igbo extraction, consider life [human beings] as an embodiment of the dualism of material [flesh --*anuaru*] and the spiritual [*mmuo*]. While noting that the spiritual aspect comprises the *mmuo* [the person's real essence and the *inwe*, which is the breath] he asserts that the *mmuo* is often seen as the soul, the essence, which bestows the individual with the true human attributes [155-162].

According to Tasie [2013], *mmuo*, though a spiritual entity is seen as occupying the heart [*obu*] of the man. Hence, Okoro [2014] maintains that it is this African stereotype of life that differentiates the African conception of life from the western conception. Within the province of the following African stereotype, life is considered as not ending in death but maintains a continuum even after physical dissolution [24306-24311]. Hence, in African ontology, the concept of life and death are mutually inclusive concepts. In another work, Okoro [2013] notes that the Igbo people of eastern Nigeria do not have a clear cut categorization of man as body and soul as in the western thought, rather the Igbo people see man [humanity] as comprising the body, the shadow and the breath. Here breath is taken to be the overt manifestation of the alter-ego, which is the essence of life itself. Breath, though mortal does not correspond to the ideology of the soul as in Euro-Christian theology [87-112].

The integrated nature of African philosophy of life makes it difficult for scholars of African studies to clearly differentiate between the role and nature of the different constituent of human life, the breath, the body, and the shadow. However, there is a consensus among scholars of African studies, that in spite of the notion of the integration of life in African thought, there is still a clear level of independence within the constituent elements that make up the human life. Hence when the body and the shadow diminish in death, then the real man, the man himself or the little man [the breath] lives on. This man [human essence] was formally hidden behind the perceptible manifestation of the man [see Ansah 2000: 1-47 and also Okoro 2013: 87-12]. The paradox of interconnectivity as well as the individuality of the constituent elements of the human nature [life] is figuratively expressed in such African epithet as, 'in everything, there is another' 'In every man there is a little man'. Accordingly, death does not end life nor the personality of the individual rather it causes a change in the condition of existence [see Anderson 2012: -8].

Therefore, Okoro [2014] opines that Africans conceive life in such a holistic scheme as they maintain that life is such a whole that not even death can disintegrate it. Thus, death does not mark the termination of fellowship among those who had been in communion on this side of the grave [244306-24311] in consequence thereto Raboteau [1980] writes:

Those who are dead are never gone. They are in the thickening shadow. The dead are not under the earth, they are in the trees that rustle, they are in the woods that groan, they are in the waters that run, they are in the waters that steep, they are in the huts, they are in the crowd, the dead are never gone, they are in the breast of the woman, they are in the child who is wailing and in the firebrand that flames. The dead are not under the earth, they are in the fire that is dying, they are in the grasses that weep, they are in the whimpering rocks, they are in the forest, they are in the house, the dead are not dead [3 see also Okoro 2014:24306-24311]

It is this underlying ideology of life that created, sustained and gave vivacity to African ancestral institutions and veneration. Here Okoro [2011] notes that the belief is very strong in African traditional society that ancestors are alive elsewhere. This ideology makes the presence of ancestors quite real among the Igbo people of eastern Nigeria that they do not complain of their interference in their personal and community affairs, nor complain of their punishment in the case of dereliction of filial obligations on the part of the progenies [331-350 see also Iwuagwu 1998:100]. Through the institution of ancestors, Africans [Igbo people] maintain an interpersonal relationship between the dead [ancestors] and the members of the family, who are still alive on this side of life. Overtly, the Igbo people regard their ancestors as senior members of their families, though they are already dead. At this sphere of existence, the ancestors become both spiritual members and elders of the family, kindred or/and clan, which they belonged while alive on this sphere of existence [see Okoro 2011: 331-350]. In consequence, Awolalu and Dopamu [1979] define ancestors as 'the living dead' [274]. Dopamu [1999] further distinguishes between the ancestors of a community from the deities/divinities. While the deities and divinities are distinctly out and out of super-sensible world, the ancestors are related to the living community. Here ancestors are regarded as heads and members of their earthly families/communities [29]. It is in this connection that scholars of African studies maintain that both the living and the dead form the one community, whose members are mutually interdependent. According to them, it is through this unbroken relationship between the living and the dead that the ontological harmony, which nature needs to move freely is achieved and sustained [see Okoro 2011:331-350, Dopamu, 1999:21].

The ancestral institution and system in Igbo traditional society is thus the opsis for the eschatological vision of the people, hence the firm belief that death is not the end of life. In the ideas of Onunwa [1990] the Igbo people are of firm conviction that 'death is not the total annihilation of life but a transition from one state of life to the other or a portal to the wider world beyond. Thus one's relations include the living, the dead and the unborn' [96 see also Okoro 2011: 331-350]. It is therefore this people's eschatological vision that

established the ancestral institution and system and this in turn defines the burial rites accorded to the deceased members of the family/community. In the ideas of Izunnwa [2015] 'Africans are particularly known to think of the next world when they inter their deceased members in the grave with those normal house hold utensils that she /he used in the present world [1-37 see also Ukagba 2007:27].

In the same vein, Kalu [2002] notes that pertinent to achieving an ancestor-hood or ancestor status is a complete funerary rites accorded to the deceased during his/her burial. Therefore, anybody who did not receive complete burial rite will not be accepted in the cult of ancestors in the afterlife. And as such he/she becomes a wandering spirit without peace and abode [350-362]. Izunwa [2015] succinctly expressed the consequences of the inappropriate, haphazard or outright neglect of any or all burial rites on the deceased when he avers;

It is widely known that where a burial ceremony is not fittingly organized, the spirit of the dead person precisely as being unsettled and furiously wandering would continue to hunt the living members of the family. The dead person, one improperly buried, the spirit would be unhappy and would probably return as evil spirit for vengeance [1-37 see also Kalu 1979:62, Appiah and Tores 1979: 15].

Therefore, the normative precision with which burial and funeral ceremonies are undertaken in African [Igbo traditional society. Kalu [2002] opines that such funerary rites are thought to transpose the individual life here on earth to the status of spiritual existence in the land of the living dead [350-36]. In consequence thereto, Nwala [1985] asserts that the institution of mortuary among the Igbo people is very elaborate and illustrates much of the Igbo philosophy of life [41]. Nwala further notes that the belief in an unending existence in the next life leads to the elaborate burial rites to ensure an honourable place for the dead in the spiritual world [42]. Accordingly, the performance of the rites as prescribed for the status of each deceased person enhances his/her potentiality of joining of the cult of the ancestors immediately after burial. Notably, most of the burial rites are aimed at the following; -

1. Granting the deceased an honourable place in the next world
2. Effectuating a somewhat ritual of separation between the dead and the living members of human society as to avoid undue interference
3. Through the burial rituals a new form of relationship between the dead and the living are arranged and fostered

It is against this backdrop that this paper considers some of the widowhood practices among the [African] Igbo traditional society.

III. SOME WIDOWHOOD PRACTICES AMONG THE IGBO PEOPLE OF EASTERN NIGERIA

Africa [Igbo] concepts of life and death found their definition within the general concept of African '*Holism*'. Holism as a socio-metaphysical concept defines human and natural existences within an integrated metaphor. Thus among the Igbo people, life is a continuum and as such death does not cause its cessation, accordingly, life transcends beyond the grave. Davis [2008] enunciates on this ideality when avers that in some African cultures, death does not end a marriage [18]. While Ohale [2012] reiterates the same ideality in the following lines:

The Igbo people have unique cultural trait, some of which are embedded in their basic belief and world views and can be said to form the core of their existence. The Igbo base their conception of reality on their actual experience and their imagination. They believe in life after, in their ancestors and reincarnation. Central to the Igbo traditional religious thought is the concept of deceased ancestors continuing to play active part in the lives of their descendants [62].

Thus to the Igbo people, the world of the dead, the world beyond the grave is so real and near and its forces coalescence and influence the material/physical world. Hence the Igbo people consider a complete human community to be made up of the ancestors [dead] the living and the unborn [see Okoro 2011 321-350 and Ohale 2003: 62]. Accordingly, Osadebe [2000] underscores that these three [3] dimensions of existences intertwine to make up the one sequence of human existence [17]. The Igbo people also have firm belief in concept of reincarnation as a means of perpetuating their names and lineage in this material existence. Here Ohale [2003] situates that the idea of reincarnation explains their deep-rooted belief in the ever present link between the dead, the living and the unborn kins [63].

The implication of these complex Igbo people's ontology is that the dead person must be accorded some honour and not treated as mere material [a thing] without consequence to the living. For the people, it is only when the dead is accorded a burial rite befitting to his/her social status while alive that his/her journey to the great beyond and acceptance into the guild of ancestors would have been done. Conversely, if the dead is not properly buried or buried according the rites and rituals befitting the dead social status, he/she turns into a restless or evil spirit and begins to hunt for the living members of his/her family [see Okoro 2011:323-350].

It is upon this ontology that the widowhood practices in African [Igbo land] found their definitions. Here we note that generally, the Igbo people believe that death is an ill-wind that blows no one any good, as it is

always a shocking experience of anyone closely related to the dead person, the age of the deceased notwithstanding. Against this backdrop Sossou [2002] describes death as an awful event that challenges the emotional and spiritual understanding of every individual [201-209]. Zeroing the traumatic experience to the women, Sossou [2002] notes, 'For the women, death of a husband or a partner has an extra significance because it represents not simply the departure of a partner, a friend and breadwinner but also results in radical change in the woman's social status and life style' [201-209].

Death, though traumatic experience however, every society has made some philosophical and ritualistic attempts to make it acceptable, less fearful, absolute and with an air of resignation and to providing opportunities for expressing grief and also showing respect for the dead person. Therefore, the Igbo funeral and mourning rituals are designed to accommodate the irreconcilable conflicts inherent in death. Here Sossou [2002] maintains that in many traditional African societies, mourning rites possess important cultural values, however, she underscores that the behaviours that surround the mourning rituals are inherently gendered [2001-209]. In her own words:

...Rituals are more to do with exalting the position of the dead man than allowing a real outlet for widows' grief. The widow is expected to grieve openly and demonstrate the intensity of her feeling in formalized way. Far more restrictions are placed on a widow than a widower. It is the widow not the widower, who must endure the most humiliating rituals in relation to dressing codes, eating food, personal hygiene, and sexual activity [201-209].

Hereto, we shall recast some of the seeming humiliating widowhood practices among the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria. Abdulrazaq [2016] gives a conceptual definition of widowhood as a phase of life, which depicts fundamental problem or loses, which the aged and by extension, the young people experience [1-10, see also Forcino 1995:115-122]. It is a state of mourning the loss of one's husband or wife through death. Notably, the stress of widowhood is as real as those of loneliness and divorce [see Ferrer 1985:2-24]. Widowhood is considered as life event with wide range of consequences. Hence, Goldman and Lord [1985] underscore that 'mourning and widowhood are opposite side of the same coin with range of implications for those involved' [122]. Thus, Okorie maintains that the widow's mourning of the death husband is considered in Igbo land as important tradition, which the living must observe in honour of the dead. He explicates on this when he states interallia:

When the husband of a woman dies, the mourning begins at the moment of the final breath. The bereaved wife runs about wailing at the top of her voice. The prominent feature is the intensity of wailing and hysteria which death generates or is expected to generate, the children will join in the wailing with friends and relatives of the family [79-84].

In some Igbo sub-cultures, there is a marked differentiation between the period of death and the beginning of mourning which kick-starts the widowhood rituals. Therefore, in some Igbo sub-cultures, widowhood rituals begin after burial ceremonies. However, in some cultures like among the Mbaise group of Owerri sub-culture and this is often the practice in many Igbo sub-cultures, a woman becomes a widow and begins to undergo different phases of widowhood rituals as soon as her husband's death is announced.

Notably, the rituals of widowhood differ according to the level of civilization and the social status of the man, while he was alive. Goldman and Lord [1983] enunciate on this fact when they aver that while the wife or wives of an ordinary man is expected to go into traumatic wailing, beat her chest, fling around her arms and go into falling down immediately the husband takes in his last breath, with other women surrounding and restraining her from hurting herself and force her to sit down on the ground, where they sit around her. The wife or wives of titled man is [are] not allowed to go into any loud crying till appropriate arrangements have been made to inform other title men, in laws and relatives, who should confirm the death before laments take place [7-16].

Generally, it is after the official confirmation of the death of any man of any social class that the process of burial and mourning begins in Igbo land. Here, the first phase of mourning begins with the burial arrangements and ceremonies appropriate for one's social status. Izunnwa [2016] has made a distinction between the burial ceremony and the funeral rites and rituals, though he tacitly accepts that in some cultures that there is no watertight demarcation between the two phases. In his own words:

...it is not easy to isolate burial ceremonies per se from funeral ceremonies. Yet while the funeral ceremony appears to cover the entire vista of various rites, rituals and observances, whether socio-religious or psychological which functions to accompany the deceased to the world beyond, the burial ceremonies appear specified and limited to the actually symbolic observances that are immediately connected with interment, that is the ritual acts linked with committing the dead to the mother earth. Funeral ceremonies extend to include the merely socio-psychological dimension of the mourning entailments [1-31].

Generally, both phases of mourning are very important to the Igbo person as they play significant socio-religious, psychological and eschatological roles within the cultural milieu of the people. The first phase in the two interlocked phases starts with the burial arrangements, while the first step in the burial is investigation

into the real cause of the death of the deceased. This step is predicated on the peoples' belief that no death is natural, for the Igbo people every death is caused by some evil people, evil force or bad medicine. Sossou[2002] explicates on this belief thus, '...death is seen as a great and unredeemed tragedy even when it happens in an extreme old age. It is a greater tragedy when death occurs in less extreme old age. Unlike the birth of child, death is never seen as natural fully' [201-209]

Therefore, in many Igbo sub-cultures, immediately after the death of a person is announced, the family goes into investigating the cause of the death. Here certain people within the family, the neighbourhood and friends are suspected as having used magic or bad medicine to cause the death of the deceased. The first suspect is witchcraft and wizardry, which is the activities of witches and wizards respectively, then other forces. In the words of Sossou [2002]

In West Africa and other developing countries, it is impossible to discuss the matter of death without taking consideration the question of witchcraft. According to popular estimate, nearly every death, in the first instance, at all events is attributed to or associated with the accursed magic or witchcraft [210-209]

In the event of the death of a young person the family members will muster every energy, spiritual and material, to finding out the cause but this is done after the first reaction of general wailing. The explanation of such death are sought in the activities of witches and wizards, juju and or bad medicine. The first person to be accused before any other is the wife, however this depends on the wife's relationship with her in-laws, especially the sisters in law, who eventually are part of the umuada –patrilineal daughters. The reason for being the prime suspect is that she was the closest person to the deceased. Therefore, to ascertain her innocence, the woman is placed under an oath through the duration of the burial and sometimes through the mourning period, which is made up of the burial and the funeral. It is in this situation that widows are forced to remain with the body of the dead husband until interment [see Sossou 2002:201-209]. In some severe cases, perhaps, where the couple have been traditionally divorced, the suspicion becomes very intense and to prove her innocence, the widow is made to drink the water used to bathe the corpse of the deceased husband. It is this exceptional practice that Akujiobi [2016] reports when he writes, 'widows are made to drink the water used to bathe the corpses of their deceased husbands' [1-14]. Before, the decision to make the widow drink the water used to bathe the corpse of the husband, the widow is made to face what could be considered a tradition court session with immediate family members and the elders, members of the umuada group, some other relatives and any other interested party with the aim of investigating the widow. Olukayode [2015] gives a picture of what the court session or panel of investigation looks like in the following lines, '... they confront her with questions on how and when the deceased husband died, the circumstances that led to the death, what she did to save him from dying and her extent of contact with her husband family before his death' [67-74]. After the interrogation and the panel/members of the family are not satisfied with the widow's account/explanations of the situations that led to the death of her husband that she would be subjected to drink the water used to bathe the corpse of the deceased husband. However, the widow may not be the only suspect in most severe cases-the death of a young man- thus others members of the family, relatives and friends could still be suspected and placed under different kinds of oath. Some of these suspects include but not limited to the deceased brothers, friends and relatives [see Okoro 2011:323-350 and also Olukayode 2015: 67-74] in justification of this assumption, Moti and Weig[2006] writes:

Ku orun is a process by which Tiv people investigate into the cause of the death of their family members. This custom flows from the belief that death does not just occur. It is always caused by some diabolism. The process leading to the identification of the person or group responsible for the death starts with accusations and counter accusations among the dead persons patrilineal and matrilineal lineage, which often leads to customary post-mortem surgery [164]

After this first stage –the inquiry/investigation stage, other stages in preparation for the burial follow in tandem. It is from this point of preparation for burial that the widow begins to drink the dreg of her suffering and humiliation appropriate to her status as a widow. Here, the widow by the reason of her association with a deceased husband becomes both social and ritual taboo and as such becomes impure. In this state of impurity, she is not expected to have any dealing with anybody that has not experienced such state –being a widow. Ohale [2012] intonates on how a woman enters this state of impurity and the appropriate behaviour in this state of life when she writes, 'In most areas of Igboland as soon as a husband dies, culture dictates that his widow must sit on the bare floor, neither taking bath, changing her clothes...and secretly attempting to attend to her personal hygiene might attract some punishments' [1-11].

In some Igbo sub-cultures, the widow must be placed inside a house, made to sit alone, stripped naked with only leaves to cover her most sensitive part of her body. She is no circumstance allowed to go out and in any urgent situation that may warrant her going out, she must carry a calabash, which is traditionally a symbol of the deceased. In this case, she must also be accompanied by an older widow, who must be among the patrilineal daughters [umuada] [see Sossou 2002:201-209]. This period is her first seclusion, while in seclusion, the widow is also culturally forbidden from touching any object, even herself. Therefore, she is given a piece of

broken pot or stick to scratch herself with. In this period of seclusion occasioned by her impurity, her food is cooked differently with an old pot and served her in broken/worn out plates, while an older widow feeds her with left hand, using broken pieces of ceramic plate or out used enamel spoon.

Further, the widow must let out and also sustain a loud wail intermittently and at specified period of the day as specified by the culture or the umuada- morning, noon and evening and at the sight of good friend of the husband or relation of the deceased. This is done until the remains of the deceased husband is committed to the mother earth. According to Ohale [2012] this public show of grieve is to appease the deceased relatives and perhaps prove to them the innocence of the widow in the death of her husband [1-11]. In the idea of Sossou [2002]. The public ritual of wailing of the widow is to show respect for the dead and also as proof of the inconsolable sadness of the widow. In her own words, 'The fundamental social change in her life style is dramatized, emphasising her faithfulness to her husband's memory and her chastity during the marriage period' [201-209]. However, in some sub-cultures, the widow is not left alone in this marathon wailing, hence the patrilineal daughters join in in tandem. Here, Meek [1931] reports of this practice among the Nsukka people of Northern Igbo culture thus:

The formal lamentation for the dead man is kept up by the female relatives for a period from three [3] to six [6] days. It is the practice for the female mourners to sleep in the hut of the deceased. Each morning large quantities of beer [local beer] are sent to them by relatives and friends. The women give expression to loud cries of grief every day at sunrise when relatives and friends come to salute them [226].

Nevertheless, in most Igbo sub-cultures, it is the prime duty of the widow/widower to her/his deceased husband or wife to be placed in seclusion and considered socio-cultural impure. This state and condition is maintained throughout the first mourning period, which ends in the interment of the deceased. The rituals enunciated are known as the preparatory burial rituals. They also initiate the commencement of the full funeral of the deceased. Hence the funeral rites begin immediately after the interment of the deceased. The final preparatory burial rites are observed on the very day of the burial. Here the widow is brought out from the hut of her seclusion and placed in an improviser cage. This restricts the widow from any form of social contact [See Ohale 2002: 201-209]. While in the cage, any persons that comes to commensurate with her must not place any gift-monetary or material- in her hand[s] but drop it in the basket /plate on the floor close to her. On this burial day, the widow must maintain a sombre disposition and continue to let intermittent wailing and never to be seen with a sign of excitement or joy.

Then after the burial, the second phase of the burial resumes with its appropriate rites and rituals. These rites and ritual aim at purifying all members of the family, especially the widow, who hitherto has been considered defiled or impure by the reason of the death of the husband. The rites also aim at making a final separation or end of marriage between the deceased and the widow, so that the widow after the rites and ritual will resume her normal life in the society. The first ritual of purification and by extension separation starts immediately after the burial with the umuada [patrilineal daughters taking the widow to some secluded part of the compound where they cleanly shave the new widow even to her pubic part [see Olukayode 2015:67-74 and Nzewi 1981:6-7]. After the shaving, the widow takes a ritual bath and her rags are removed and she is dressed in a new mourning attire. In the case of a pregnant widow, the hairs and the rags she was wearing during she seclusion are buried on the ground, for the non-pregnant widow the hairs and rags are burnt with fire. Both the shaving and the burning of both the hair and the dress/rag symbolize the beginning of disconnection process between the deceased and his widow.

After these first set of rituals after burial, the widow resumes another set of minor seclusion and this last for about 4[four] market days totalling about 28 [twenty-eight] days. Nzewi [1981] gives a vivid report of this practices among the Mbaise sub-culture as he writes:

In most part of Igbo society, the early part of this period are usually the most rigorous. During the 28 days, the widow is not allowed to go to stream, or market or enter the farmland. Certain rituals must be performed at the expiration of the 28 days before the widow can perform her normal duties [1-11]

The major stipulation of the most Igbo culture in this period is that the widow moves from her husband's house/hut to another house or hut in another part of the compound. While here, she wears no clothes unless perhaps rags and she must sit on a block or wood and nowhere else. She must not sleep on a mat instead banana leaves will suffice. Within this period, the widow infrequently takes her bath and of course any personal hygiene [see Basden 1966: 28].

One of the beliefs connected with these phase of the funeral is that the deceased husband is still hovering around and still seeks to have contact with his wife/widow. So the widow in question, if for any reason she wants to go out of the hut of her seclusion or the compound must follow the back door and must never leave or enter through the same door or gate. However, the widow must arm herself with a ritual kitchen knife or stick as a protection against the intervening spirit of her deceased husband. Reporting on this practice from the Nsukka sub-culture, Okorie [1995] maintains that this period is so intense that the widow is not even expected to talk to or eat with anybody including her own children and relatives except those who are already widowed.

In this intense period, the widow will not greet anybody or respond to anybody's greeting. Within this period, the widow is homebound and largely depends on her family, friends and community for support, tending her farm and buying and selling her stuff [see Ohale 2002: 201-209]. After the period, the widow is taken by the umuada [patrilineal daughters] to the bad bush/evil forest far from residential area of the community for ritual bathing and cleansing. Often the bathing might be in the river or stream. However, in some part of Owerri, the bathing will be at the grave side of the deceased husband's. Here, the cloth she used for this period of seclusion is burnt or given to an older widow. Thereafter, she is clad with a new mourning attire. This she will wear for the rest of the mourning period, which may last between six months and one year [see Okorie 1995:79-84]

After this last ritual, the widow resumes a life of restricted liberty and maintains such state of life till the entire mourning period is over. In this final mourning state, she is permitted to talk to anybody, visit them and attend to her daily needs but she is barred from staying late into the night and sleeping outside the husband's home/compound. She might not go to the farm unaccompanied. At the end of the entire mourning period, the widow goes through the last cleansing process before she is finally admitted to live a normal life in the community. Noting that since the demise of her husband, she has been keeping a limited hygiene, therefore, the umuada and some of her friends and relatives will now attend to her by helping to do a complete clean up exercise on her hunt or room, kitchen and the entire mourning environment. When the filths are gathered and put in a basket, the widow carries the basket led by a strong umuada to the bad bush. This ritual is performed at the wee period of the morning, when nobody will see them. Nzewi [1981] notes that to avoid being seen by anybody, the Nwada [singular of umuada] will go before the widow and be shouting a warning cry [1-11]. After discarding the filth, the widow is shaved and bathe ritually by the Nwada that accompanied her. This particular Nwada must be widow. This final stage marks the final separation between the widow and her deceased husband. Thereafter, she is brought home to resume her normal life in the community. If she is young and want to remarry she is free to do that and if she wants to stay in her husband family she is also free.

IV. A SOCIO-ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND HERMENEUTICAL RECONSIDERATIONS OF WIDOWHOOD PRACTICES AMONG THE IGBO PEOPLE OF EASTERN NIGERIA

A clear understanding of any peoples' worldview is first or rather a leeway to understanding the people, their belief system and cultural practices. Here the Igbo people are no exception of this general aphorism. Therefore, the need to place some of the cultural practices and belief system in cultural context of the traditional/pre-illiterate society of the people, with reference to the widowhood practices, which is the focus of this work. This will aid our understanding and strengthen our interpretations. In adopting this assumption as a matrix, Tasie [2013] side-steps the modern popular opinion, which considers most of the traditional widowhood practices as the de-womanization of the Igbo woman akin to any patriarchal society. In his own words, 'This paper argues that widowhood rites in Africa were not primarily designed to de-womanize African widows ...or impoverish and oppress women or part of the so-called male chauvinism. Rather, the rites are generally intended for the overall good of the widow' [155-162]. It is against this backdrop that this present work is designed to make a socio-anthropological and hermeneutical reconsiderations of some of these widowhood rites as practiced by the Igbo people. The paper adopts a four [4] categories of interpretations as its model. These categories are:

- Widowhood practices in relation to maintaining community living and sound social integration.
- Widowhood practice in relation to purifying the widow and the community
- Widowhood practice in relation to maintaining social balance
- Widowhood practice in relation to effectuating separation between the widow and deceased husband
- *Widowhood practice in relation to maintaining community living and sound social integrations.*

in section three [3], we made efforts to highlight some of those practices considered by modern scholars of African Socio-Anthropological studies as obnoxious and de-womanizing. The most bemoaned practice as it were, was the ordeal of oath taking. This took various forms and borne out of different reasons but the most common reason is suspicion and the most common means is the wheedling or rather forcing the widow to drink the water used in washing the remains of the deceased husband. This practice of oath taking, the method and means notwithstanding, is anchored on the belief among the people that death does not occur naturally, the age of the deceased notwithstanding. As an outgrowth of this assumption, many group of people come under suspicion. Those suspicions range from the wife/wives who are the deceased closest agnate[s], family members, kinsmen and friends. The purpose of the oath taking at various levels is to determine the innocence of those closely related to the deceased. Thus oath taking as part of Igbo widowhood practice is not actually the reserve of the widows. Tasie [2013] justifies this assumption when he asserts:

Note that this method of truth detection is not the exclusively reserved for widows. The ordeal is open to all manner of suspects and indeed, many of my informant remember vividly that more men than women have undergone the ordeal than women. In fact, this method of truth detection was last administered in Isiokpo in 1975. It was a kinsman of the deceased not the widow who took the oath [155-162].

However, the oath taking is administered on the widow when the sisters' in-law, brothers' in-law and or mother in law, who are members of the guild of patrilineal daughters [umuada] so demand. This is done when the widow never maintained genial relationship with the members of his late husband's family, while he was alive. Thus, when she edges them out and does not permit them access into her husband house. Then the period of the husband demise becomes therefore a pay day for the bad woman, who simply made herself an atom in a society built upon the foundation of extended relationship [see Okoro 2011: 323-351]. Here Tasie [2013] citing Effah [1995] opines that the horrendous oath taking that has become part of widowhood practices is rooted in vengeance and as such widowhood period has become a time of settling scores, especially when the widow is never liked or favoured by her husband's family and relations [162]. As for Chidili [2005] the period is a period of unbridled desire in the married daughters of the land to insist on avenging their brother's maltreatment on the widow or actuate a vendetta on the widow so as to get even from the hurt they incurred on their own part of the world [28 see also Tasie 2013: 155-162]. There are also evidences that a good and well nurtured Igbo woman, who maintained good relationship with her husband's relation, were protected from such severe ordeal of oath taking.

The Igbo philosophy behind this particular practice, has nothing as such to do with the deceased but aims at maintaining a sound community and responsible living. Notably, women are considered in Igbo socio-political arrangement as the relying point of the family members both immediate and extended. Hence, the effectiveness of extended family structure of the Igbo socio-political vista depends solely on the women [married women]. It is against this backdrop that Okoro [2013] maintains that girls were trained specifically in their duties and responsibilities as women, who were to sustain the social fabrics of the society [58-69]. Hence, married women in the Igbo traditional society are looked upon as the unifying force of all the members of the extended families through a harmonious family relationship that cuts beyond immediate biological progenies. Thus, in a situation the woman fails in this duties as mother of the family, has made herself a ridicule to the community as she has vitiated on the cherished values of the community. The community may quietly ostracize her and still wait for the demise of her husband to make the hatred manifest. It is on this note that such a woman will face the most horrendous ordeals in her mourning period. This is done to serve as a moral/social lessons to other women that may be tempted to tow the part of atomism in a society that cherished community living.

- **Widowhood practice in relation to maintaining social balance**

There is a general belief in Igbo ontology that death creates for the dead the problem of gaining entrance into the convocation or guild of ancestors of any given community. Thus, without fulfilling appropriate mourning rites by the living on behalf of the dead, the peace and stability of the entire community will be at risk/ jeopardy, with the children, property and posterity being the worst hit. Therefore, most of the rituals done this period are aimed at assisting the deceased gain entrance and comfort into the world beyond and also to make the living community have her peace and maintain a harmonious relationship with their ancestors. Here, Ikenga-Metu, an astute Professor of African religious anthropology writes, 'All practices associated with death and dying must be meticulously gone through, if not there would be considered to have been improperly or inconclusively buried and would be denied admission into the guild of ancestors' [see Ikenga-Metu, 1978:73]. While Ohale [2003] reports an interview she had with a widow in 1982 to confirm the above assumption. In her own words:

When my husband died, someone came and told me after some days that he saw my husband in dream. He reported that my husband was complaining that he is not at peace yet. By then he was not yet accepted by the dead ancestors. His sons performed certain rituals before his spirit finally rested [1-11]

Reiterating the same ideality, Reads [1970] writes

These were the acts performed by the living to cause the spirit of the dead to be settled in a place it knew. The living had certain rites to carry out on behalf of the dead, which if omitted would bring the displeasure of the ancestors upon them [196-7]

Some of these rituals include but not limited to intermittent wailing by the wife/wives of the deceased, the patrilineal daughters and other relations. The traditional rite of IwaNkita Anya or Okwukwu, the eulogizing of the deceased by his wife/wives, children and other close agnates, the killing of goat, chicken/hen or any other livestock appropriate to the deceased social status, while alive.

Notably, both the individual members of the deceased family and the community at large are involved in all these rituals. These funeral rituals are part of the manifest demonstration of mourning and irreparable loss of a close person. It is also believed that death causes dislocation of relationship both physically and spiritually, therefore the rites aim at reconnecting the dislocated relationship, though in wider portal [see Okoro 2011:323-351]. In Igbo tradition, children that have not performed second burial for their deceased parents are strictly prohibited from part-taking in any food or drink whenever such burial ceremony is being performed for another person. The person is also forbidden from part-taking in especial music/dance for the dead known in some culture as Ese and in some other Igbo cultures as Ese naUko, whenever it is play in funeral ceremony. These

rites are what are considered in Igbo ontology as spiritual gate openers for the deceased, which also accelerate the spirit of the deceased admission into the cult of the ancestors. This will in turn restore the dislocated balance in the natural order. Therefore, if these rites are not carefully performed, it will be considered as not only a neglect but as a dishonour and effrontery to the particular dead person and by extension to the entire ancestors of the community. The consequence of such neglect or effrontery has always been dreadful and fatal mainly to the deceased family and to the community at large.

Overtly, most of the funeral rites and rituals do not only aim at honouring the deceased but also to forestall the anger of the ancestors. As these rites and rituals facilitate the deceased admission into and peaceful repose in the great beyond, the living community enjoys the peace and balance which is considered a gift from the ancestors. When there is harmonious relationship between the physical and spiritual world, then the people on this side of the grave enjoy peace, prosperity and good health.

- *Widowhood practice in relation to purifying the widow and the community*

On account of this Okorie [1995] notes

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 palm oil chaff [avuvunkwu] in order to reduce her uncleanness [79-84].

It is therefore a general belief among the Igbo people that all the relations of the deceased, especially the widow, who is the closest agnate enter into a natural state of impurity at the death of her husband, father, brother, son, daughter etc. thus, till the defilement is purified, every relation, especially the widow cannot touch anything or anybody with her bare hands. This ritual practice insulates the protection of the widow from further pollution and consequent attack of the gods and spirits of the land, who guide the moral horizon of the community. With such defilement occasioned by the death of her husband, it then becomes a taboo for her to feed herself, eat from the general family dining, hence her food is cooked separately with broken pots and served with broken bowls. Here she is fed with left hand by another widow. This practice serves dual purposes, one it insulates the widow from the attacks of the gods and spirits of the community. Two it makes the widow repugnant to the spirit of her deceased husband, which is lurking around, seeking to have the usual relationship with the wife. Thus if this practice is interpreted within the cultural context that gave birth to it, it paints a picture of care-given and protection, instead of oppression, de-womanization and inferiorization of the widow. The practice shows a community with a humane face and great empathy to the women in a desperate situation [see Okoro, 2011: 323-351 and Ohale, 2003: 1-11].

- *Widowhood practice in relation to effectuating separation between the widow and deceased husband*

In Igbo ontology, a wife is regarded as the closest person/companion to her husband. Thus, the close relationship binds both morally, spiritually and physically together that often if the ritual of separation is not properly conducted, the relation will crisscross to the other side of the grave. Hence even at death, the man or the woman still regards the husband or wife with jealous care and concern and often seeks to continue the normal relationship which he/she had always had when both were on this side of the plane. Therefore, Ikenga-Metu [1978] surmises, 'In Igbo culture, who could be closer to the dead man than the wife? This fact made it necessary for many rituals to be performed to enable the man hands-off his wife or wives' [63].

It is then suggestive that the unhygienic and awful personal appearance of the widow is simply a strategy or part of the overall efforts to make her look unattractive to the deceased husband [see Okoro 2011:323-351]. In the words of Tasié [2013] 'The overall aim of widowhood rites could therefore be summed up as to sever the ties between a dead husband and his living wife/wives' [155-162]. This practice is informed by the fact that there is this Igbo general belief that until the mourning period and its accompanying rituals are perfectly and fully performed, the spirit of the dead still prowls around the immediate physical environments to hunt the living and continue to perform his duties to his living relations [see Tasié 2013:155-162].

It is part of this ontological belief that warranted the widow to wearing pad and other weird ritual practice accompanying mourning in most part of the traditional Igbo society. Enunciating on this practice of wearing pad among the Isiokpo people of Ikwerre in River state, Tasié [2013] notes, 'The demands of this period are very stringent for the widow and they are surrounded with innumerable regulations and taboos. These include dressing in pure black material, moving bare feet, wearing pad as menstruating women do and wearing of tattered and uncombed hair' [155-162].

At the superficial level, these practices look bizarre and humiliating but unprejudiced contextual investigations on these issues reveal that all these are simply a ploy to inveigle the spirit of the dead man away from the widow through her unpleasant looks. It was Tasié [2013] that explicated more on these practices when he writes:

The tattered look of the widow is a ploy to make them appear unpleasant to the ghost spirit of their dead husband, who is still hovering around the homestead and may still want to continue to commune with them. The austere look of the widow and rejection of anything that gives pleasure and comfort is a ploy aimed at pacifying the vengeful ghost of the deceased to make his widow appear seriously pained at his demise [155-162].

These rituals are carried out to liberate the widow from the influence of the dead husband and reintegrate her into the society to begin a normal life. As for Okorie [1995], 'the interpretation of the widowhood practices among the Igbo people should be sought in their concept of death. In his own words:

The traditional concept of death is also an important fact in the widowhood practices...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 widows had to run very hot mixture across their faces to expel the spirit of their departed husbands [79-84 see also Nzewi 1989:21].

From the discussion so far, one fact becomes prominent and that is that mourning in Igbo traditional society with its attendant rites and rituals is meant to protect the widow, persevere the community and maintain mutual harmony between this world and the world on the other side of the grave. Therefore, besides the widow, many other relations of the deceased, the men, children, other relations and friends come under varying degrees of cleansing and purification rituals and rites. Notably, the Igbo traditional society provides norm and rules which constrain the men to mourn their wives and rigorously fulfil the mourning rites.

Then with regard to wailing ritual that accompany widowhood ritual, one notes that it is not the reserve of the widow. Thus both the sisters, children, brothers, other relations and friends of the deceased have a fair share of the wailing festival. In fact, in some occasions, there is somewhat manifest display of wailing among the deceased kinsfolks that a casual onlooker many misconstrued the entire panorama as a competition or fiesta. However, in such scenario, it is expected that the widow of the deceased will out-wail the other relatives in loudness, bitterness with touching elegies or eulogies. Further, the seclusion, rituals of purification and cleansing with all food restrictions are not the preserve of the widows, hence other relatives of the deceased at varying degrees join in tandem, so also the wearing of the mourning attire [see Nzewi 1995:24: Afigbo 1989:14]

The allegation by scholars of suffragettes' bent that widowhood rites and rituals are patriarchal manipulations of the widowhood ritual and rites against the women has been addressed by Tasié [2013] as he avers that the widowhood ritual and rites in African culture and among the Igbo people in particular is not limited to the women. However, the less stringent manner in which the men observe their own ritual is defined in Igbo sexual cosmology. Accordingly, Tasié notes that it is the preserve of the men to make sexual advances to the women in physical life existence and this belief is carried to the spiritual world on the other side of the grave, hence it will be an aberration for the ghost spirit of the deceased woman to make advances to her living husband [155-162]. Therefore, the strict rites of separation undertaken by the women/widow as against the soft one taken by the men is explained by the general Igbo cosmology. However, Nzewi [1989], notes that in her research, she was informed that a man died after about three [3] year of the death of the wife and the inquiry party reported that it was the dead wife that killed him out of jealousy. This because the widower was making serious arrangement to get married to another woman without faithfully completing his mourning rituals and rites of separation [163]. Thus, the ritual demands of widowhood are not made on the widow alone.

V. Conclusion

A clear understanding and sound hermeneutical discussions on Igbo traditional practices, especially the widowhood must be sought within the Igbo cosmology and context. It is noted in this work that the motive behind all the mourning or rather widowhood rituals and rites is the protection and preservation of the community and the maintenance of spiritual congruence between the physical and spiritual words apart. Remarkably, widowhood ritual and rites are not meant to dehumanize any specie of humanity [man or woman] as both species are indispensable part of each other and as both play important but distinct roles in maintaining the ontological harmony that nature needs to operate freely and smoothly as to attain its selfhood.

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IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) is UGC approved Journal with Sl. No. 5070, Journal no. 49323.

Okoro, Kingsley Nwannennaya "Widowhood Practices in Africa [Igbo] Traditional Society: Socio-Anthropological [Re] Interpretations." IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS). vol. 23 no. 03, 2018, pp. 42-54.