

Widowhood, Ojo and Mkpakanmkpa Traditions among the People of Ikwerre LGA of Rivers State: Injustice against Women in the Name of Culture

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Abstract

Ojo and the Mkpakanmkpa traditions as they are practiced among the traditional Ikwerre society of Rivers State are part of the Widowhood Rites Practices carried out at the demise of a husband. The Ojo and Mkpakanmkpa are carried out as part of the honour given to a man that has attained a particular status and age in Ikwerreland. The study probes into the reasons why these customs have been put in place, their benefits to the widow and the community and why it is mainly for women. The research employs a historical approach and uses both primary and secondary sources of data. It uses extensive oral interviews in Ikwerre Local Government Area. It is argued that widowhood practices, Ojo and Mkpakanmkpa traditions are purely gender based since they are all geared towards honouring a deceased husband and none for the honour of a deceased wife. They are put in place to dignify the male folk and dehumanize and de-womanize the female folk. The research therefore recommends among others, that the African cultures that have such motives in their practice should be eradicated; women should be educated to understand that there is no power in the spirit of a dead spouse and so should stand firm in their decisions not to do such a humiliating tradition.

Key words- Widowhood, Ojo, Mkpakanmkpa, traditions, Culture

Introduction

Widowhood, *Ojo* and *Mkpakanmkpa* traditions/ceremonies have been an important part of the profound and protracted burial ceremonies of the Ikwerre people of Rivers State. The tradition of widowhood, *Ojo* and the *Mkpakanmkpa* are celebrated during the death and burial of a man who has attained a ripe age and status in the society. While widowhood practices are found all over the African continent with so many similarities, the *Ojo* and *Mkpakanmkpa* are special to the Ikwerre people of Rivers State. In order to honour a reputable deceased husband and allow him get a place among the ancestors; sever his spirit from his living wife, children and community, such a man is buried with a complete observance of the ceremonies of widowhood, *Ojo* and *Mkpakanmkpa* without which, his spirit will continue to hover around the homestead as evil spirit seeking to harm his living wife, children and the community at large. Scholars like Tasie and Ikenga-Metu have argued that the widowhood customs are not put in place to dehumanize and de-womanize the female folk, but for the security and the safety of the widow so that they can be saved from the wicked spirit of their deceased husbands who may not want to rest until they are given the honour due to them through compliance to these traditions. It is against this backdrop that this work is set to ask what severance is it that must allow a grieving widow to go through the laid down rules in this torturous ways? What tradition will honour a dead man and prefer to punish a living woman? And why is it only for the widow to honour the deceased husband and none at all for the widower?" What import is the widowhood practices and the essence of *ojo* and the *Mkpakanmkpa* customs among the Ikwerre people of Rivers State.

Conceptual Clarification

Widowhood occurs only to couples, hence, every married persons know that one day, they will be widowed. When one of the couples die, the living couple becomes widow or widower depending on who dies first. If the man died first, his widow mourned him fulfilling every widowhood rites according to the tradition which allows him easy passage to the world of unknown.

In the African tradition, the males have no rites to obey as far as mourning of a partner is concerned, but the females have every compulsory rites to obey so that the spirit of their deceased husbands do not hunt them. Some of these traditions have exposed the female folk to public ridicule and punishment over the years without achieving any positive progress on the part of the women.

(Raj, 1993) avers that "in India, a widow becomes a focus of collective rejection and abandonment, seen as a bearer of bad luck, unclean, polluting and dangerous. She has to go through rituals-many of them humiliating and some life threatening to symbolically 'cleanse' her in order to safeguard the community from her impurity. A widow cannot avoid standing out by her noticeable clothing which the

culture demand her to wear”. This can last for six months or more as the case may be.

(Pauw,2015) reports from the Phokwane region of Limpopo that most of these rites are meant to cleanse the widow of perceived defilement related to the death of her husband and to nullify or counter the effect of ritual danger embedded in widowhood rites. The widow shaves her hair, sprinkle water treated with local herbs on her feet and hands. After the burial, the widow and members of the family participate in a general washing of hands and feet with water treated with local herb plants used to neutralize the effect of ritual danger. This is done so that the widow and the other members of the family do not constitute danger to the community.

Aransiola and Ige,(2018) argued that “widowhood practices are observed among the Yorubas for the purposes of protecting the widow from being harmed by the spirit of the late husband, for the woman to prove innocence of the death of her husband and for her husband’s family to ascertain if the woman had been pregnant as at the time the husband died so that they can take care of her”

Odimegwu. (2000) has averred that gender ideology, sex differences and sex roles expectations impact on the individual practices in Africa, and within the Igbo widowhood framework, the rites represent the traditional belief about death, inheritance, feminine roles, family structures and family relationships. Chidili (2005) opines that widowhood rites among Africans are simply the effect of the unrestrained yearning of the married daughters of the land who insist on avenging their brother’s ill-treatment of his widow. Some others attribute the practice to the greed and poverty among the deceased brothers who want to enrich themselves through inheriting their late brother’s wealth mostly if he was wealthy. Ikenga-Metu and Izunnwa,(2015) agreed that the whole essence of the practice is to grant the dead a successful admission into the guild of ancestors. Adeyinka Aderinto, (2000) reveal that the patriarchal nature of many African communities and indeed, the culture, is applied in a way that perpetuate and sustain this practice.

In Igboland, Emezue in Onwuka, (2005) avers that, among the Igbos, mourning consist of prohibitions and exemptions from certain luxuries and activities. These range from abstention from bathing to prohibition of sexual interaction for a specified period. The exclusions are certainly heavier on widows than on widowers. The reason for this is that Igbo men are polygynous, so it would amount to needless violations on the rights of other women to bar a man from fulfilling his sexual roles because he lost one of his many wives. For this singular reason, there are no laid down rules of mourning, no traditional pattern of severance of the spirit of the wife in the Igbo culture from the widower like it is for the widow. But Tasie argued that;

the overall aim of widowhood rites in Isiokpo traditional community are to sever the ties between a dead husband and his living wife because it is believed that at the immediate aftermath of death, the ghost spirit lurk around the homestead to haunt the living and to continue to perform his duties to his living relations.(Tasie, 2005)

As he argued, “some aspects of the traditions are meant to equip the widow with the necessary courage and bravery to cope with the life of self-reliance which she would soon begin to face as a result of the death of her husband”. The men do not obey widowhood rites because of the socio-cultural constraints of the people. In Ikwerre like many African cultures, it is the men who request for sex from their wives and not the other way round. This unchangeable carnal requirement is carried over into the spiritual. Thus, it is unusual for the ghost spirit of a deceased wife to make sexual advances to its living husband. For this reason, the culture does not dictate the mourning procedures for the man because he is a man, the one who demands for sex and so does not go through these rites.

Again, the Africans attitude to life and death explain the practices that are carried out. Africans celebrate life which comes through birth, but death is seen as great and unredeemed tragedy even when it occurs in extreme old age, it is still greater tragedy. Unlike birth, death is never considered as a full natural happening. Africans believe that all deaths would not have come except through the maneuvers of some enemy, and whether deserved or not they attempt to revenge themselves on those who are deemed instrumental in causing it. (Talbot, 1926) opines “when the death in question is that of a young person all restraints are thrown overboard and explanation sought in witch craft, juju or bad medicine”. The bereaved family go through divination to find out the cause of death which will be followed by many other deaths- of those who are forced to undergo an ordeal on the accusation of witch-craft. According to him, there is no death that the Igbo man accepts as natural and biological end. In whichever way, the widow is severely molested, intimidated as well as humiliated. Humiliation of the widow all over the world has been described as inhuman, unjust and wicked and the Ikwerre community is not an exception.

Afigbo,(1986) affirming the above avers that the immediate or remote cause of death is sought in the wicked plotting of a human enemy or of a malevolent/vindictive ancestor ghost or juju” Hence in Igboland, the primary purpose of funeral is like establishing who or what evil spirit caused the death. In this kind of atmosphere, nobody is considered as manifestly beyond suspicion- father, mother, brothers and sisters, husband, wife, friend or any known but invisible force. All had to be put through ordeal to be very sure that the murderer is not among them. Basden,(1938) explains that “at the end of the burial, more *omu* (fresh palm leave) is deposited on the grave with closing remarks over the grave, “*Follow and fight the one who killed you*”. Proving that the dead person is still alive and strong to give a revenge to the one suspected to have caused his death. This practice is not restricted to the death of husband or wife but is applied to all and sundry. When the enquiry party returns and the lot falls on any of the deceased wives or kinsmen as the case may likely be, the accused is expected to claim his or her innocence. Thus, in the village setting, this common practice can go a long way to determine who the evil person is and who is not. It also allows people to keep their hands clean of evil knowing that one day they will be exposed.

Tasie explains that in traditional Isiokpo community, as it is the custom of many rural societies in Ikwerre, the most effective way of establishing truth is through oath taking. The nature of the issue in contention and the gravity of the crime determine the type of oath to be administered. For instance, the heavier cases like adultery with another men's wives attract oath taking to prove a man's innocence, but if a man's yam is stolen from his farm, it just attracts the pouring of libation to track the thief. However, on serious matters such as death, one of the most effective means of truth detection as the IKwerre people believe, is to ask the accused, whether man or woman to drink a little of the water used in washing the corpse.

With this singular act, it becomes obvious that the Ikwerres of Rivers State believe in life after death. They believe that the spirit of their dead ones still live among them after joining the ancestors for greater power. They believe that the dead can revenge himself of his death. Therefore, to sever this power of the dead from the living, these practices come to play out in ceremonies termed cleansing and rituals to sever the spirits of the dead so that they will not have power over their loved ones. This accounts for the protracted burial rites of which widowhood practice is a part among the Ikwerre people. In view of this therefore, examples will be drawn from women, except on the areas where references will be made to men.

Reasons for Widowhood Practices

As one travel from one community to the other, one sees different reasons for these obnoxious practice. Kalu, (2002) posit that the whole essence is to allow the spirit of the dead to be accepted in the cult of the ancestors since the Ikwerre people believe in the life after death. Izunnwa, 2015 has avered that such rites if not well carried out makes the spirit of the dead to return as evil spirit wandering about and seeking for vengeance. Other reasons adduced by Waga are that:

- The culture demand such respect for the dead;
- To humble the widow;
- To prove to the widow that the honour and respect that her late husband accorded her has been thrown to the ground;
- Her nakedness shows that her husband has taken the better part of her and nothing is left for other men.
- To allow the spirit of the dead to rest in the world beyond.
- To protect the widow from all the trouble of the spirit of the dead who may hunt her.

This tradition has been in existence before the white men came to Africa. In the precolonial days as Waga explained no woman resisted these cultures that brought tranquility to our communities. Every woman obeyed and carried out these traditions because of its implications for the living widow, family and the community.

Widowhood rites are compulsory for every woman. It is a practice geared to honour the deceased husband all over Ikwerre land. As Omeha, interviewed (21/7/2018) explains "if a woman refuses to honour her husband at death through the widowhood rites, there would be repercussions: the woman begins to experience some odds such as water coming from her genitals like her *nso*(monthly

periods) even if she has reached menopause and this may not stop all through her life time” unless a diviner uses herbs after consulting with the gods. Waga also explains that the important reason why a woman must obey the widowhood rites is because of *indiowa* (spiritual husband, transmigration, or re-incarnation). According to Waga;

Our fathers taught their male and female children that when a woman dies, she returns/re-incarnates again in her family or her husband’s family. If such woman committed any evil such as starving her husband, or talked too much, or she was a truant/walkabout or had bad character, or refuses to mourn her husband, the husband will place a curse on her which will make her not to be married in her next world. It is believed that such curses followed the woman whenever she re-incarnates in the next world. To reverse the curses placed on her in her last existence, her parents would have to seek the powers of a divination/soothsayer who will reverse the curse through sacrifices.

Confirming the above, (Elechi Amadi, 1966) in his book, “The Concubine” portrayed that in Aluu Community, such a woman must be redeemed from her curses by the diviners before she could be freed from the spirit world. For instance, Ihuoma was married to the sea king. She re-incarnated to real life as a beautiful woman, but the sea king was jealous of any man coming to take her as his wife in the real life, this was why Emenike her first husband died and Ekwueme, the second husband to be died before the sacrifices that were required to appease the sea king were concluded. With all the impending punishments that go with disobedience of the widowhood, these traditions are observed with utmost alacrity.

Reads, (1970:196-7) writes that widowhood practices are acts that are 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.

Widowhood as Waga, Ejiowhor, and China have narrated go with a lot of physical torture as follows. The widow:

- Must not eat with a good plate
- Sits on the ordinary floor/ground
- Stays in seclusion for eight days, 28 days respectively depending on the community involved.
- Goes on barefoot all through the one year mourning period.
- Shaves her hair once her husband dies but does not shave again until one year period of mourning
- Must not comb her hair when they are grown
- Must not eat from the same plate with any one, must not touch any one
- Must walk alone along the road with partial nudity, holding a small knife/stick to ward off evil spirit
- Must go to the farm by mid-night alone to carry fire wood with bare head
- The widow ties black wrapper that goes down to half-length all through the period.
- Washes her wrapper without soap

As Ejiowhor, 25/7/2018) describes, “When we were small, we ran away at the sight of widows. We thought that they were mad women in the communities because of the way they looked. “Tattered, shabbily dressed, unkempt hair, with very black wrappers that were never washed with soap, and they were never talking to anyone around”. All these were done in the name of culture of the land and honour of a loved dead husband.

1. The Widowhood Practices in Ikwerre land

Among the Ikwerre people, widowhood practices, the *Ojo* and *mkpakanmkpa* traditions have no specific date of origin, but it is believed that they started when Ikwerre people migrated and settled at their present location. As Waga, interviewed (18/7/2018) put it, “it started when people started marrying and dying, and as early as Elele people migrated from Benin and settled at Elele in the 10th century BC. The practice became a part and parcel of the culture that must be obeyed by all and sundry at the demise of one’s husband. According to Waga, it is a rule that any woman who loses her husband must take it as a duty to mourn and bury her husband. If any woman refuses to honour her husband at death, the spirit of her husband keeps hunting her, because without a befitting burial ceremonies, the spirit of the dead do not rest at a place but keeps on hovering as evil spirit seeking whom to harm. In the case of separation of the couples, if it happened that the husband died while the wife was separated from him as a result of dispute, the woman must be brought back and reconciled to enable her give her deceased husband the last respect through the observance of the widowhood rites.

2. The *Ojo* Tradition among the Ikwerre People of Rivers State

The *Ojo* tradition is not practiced among many tribes/ethnic groups in Nigeria, but is practiced among all the communities in Ikwerre Local Government Area. For the Ikwerres, the widowhood tradition cannot be complete for a man that had attained a high status and a *di ali* without the *Ojo* custom. According to Ibekwe, 19/7/2018) among the Aluu community, what led to the *ojo* was the lack of mortuary and how to preserve the corpse in those days. When a man died and his relatives were not around for the immediate burial, the *ojo* was used to dry and preserve the corpse until the time of burial. Enyia S.(2001) explains that, the *ojo* is used to embalm the body of an accomplished man. During the burial his body was laid-in-state in his *obokoro* (reception hall) on a wooden basement called *ojo*. With the corpse on the *ojo*, items such as cock, tortoise and *nkon* (a short small stick cut in an angular form at the extreme) were tied to the *ojo* to decorate it and the hand of the corpse was hung on the *nkon*. The essence of the small *ojo* was to be used to place the corpse of the dead while fire was made underneath it to dry and preserve the body. This was used to preserve the dead body before the modern mortuary came into existence. When the dead body was placed on the small *ojo*, the widow would be seated by the right side of the dead man wailing intermittently while the body of the deceased would be drying on the fire..

The *Ojolater* became part of the burial rites that a widow must fulfil when her husband dies. More especially if such a man is accomplished or a *di ali*(son of the soil). The wife of such a man must climb the *ojo*.

As Chima, 2001) explains:

The *Ojo* is of two types, the small *ojo* is built at the *obokoro* (reception hall) while the big elevated *ojo* is built in front of the man's hut. It is constructed by the *nnadi*'s (men of the man's ancestor) with a particular specie of tree called the *oturu* stick, the bamboo and they will cut the *ekete* (local twine) which they use to tie the pieces of wood and bamboo together. At the top of the plat form, a mat will be spread and local stool placed for the deceased widow to sit on.

According to Waga, the big *ojo* was to represent the last wedding ceremony/the last bed that the late husband sleeps on with his widow before his burial. The widow is meant to climb the big *ojo* that is as high as 8-9ft. As she goes to the top, she would be partially naked, covered only around her waist with a little piece of cloth while the chest area remained open, her children, sisters and older widows will then surround her as she makes it to the high *ojo*. When she successfully climbs to the top, all those surrounding her will jubilate. At this point, the corpse of the dead husband will be carried by the *nnadi*'s to the top where the widow is already seated. She will be made to wail and cry aloud, and call her late husband by all the pet names that they used while he lived. But Chima reports that in Ubima, the big *ojo* of about 25ft will be prepared around 2.00 pm and plantain leaves were used as roof. The young men will put the dead body on the long *ojo*. The widow will climb and stay by the dead husband's side and wail to show her grief for some forty-five-fifty minutes while the dead man's children and relatives will wait around and rejoice as the widow succeeds in her climbing to the top. The Mkpakanmkpa will then order the widow to come down from the *ojocorpse* will then be buried after this brief ceremony/last wedding ceremony of the dead husband and a living wife (Waga, 17/7/2018).

3. The Mkpakanmkpa Tradition

The *Mkpakanmkpa* tradition among the Ikwerre people of Rivers State is a tradition that is observed for a man that farms the great crop (yam). According to Waga, when a man that has attained a higher status and farms the yam dies, the rite of *Mkakanmkpa* is celebrated to honour him. As Ejiowhor, (25/7/2018) explains, "the *Mkpakanmkpa* represent the spirit of the dead man" according to him, when the great man dies, part of his hair will be shaved, his nails will be cut, a piece of his clothe will be cut off and all these items will be tied together in a piece of cloth and tied to the front edge of the iron rod of about 5-7ft long. Beautiful George wrappers of different colours will be tied to the iron rod, a tortoise, a white fowl, and many other items that are only known to the elders would all be tied to this iron rod. To move this rod around, two *nnadis* who will rub some mud mixed together with crushed leaves in their eyes before they carry the rod (one at both ends of the rod), and the rod would be carried on their left shoulders, with one of the men in front while the other at the back. At this point, the spirit of the dead man will possess the two *nnadisto* direct the two men who will carry the rod to all his best friends' homes, his grandparents, to his debtors but will never enter the house of his enemies or those who have evil plans in their hearts. If the dead man had any land unknown to his wife and children, the *Mkpakanmkpa* would take them there to show it to them. The same people will speak words revealing events of the past and the future,

it will warn bad people on their activities. If there is something the dead man wants his wife to do for his burial, or if the deceased is angry with his widow concerning the burial rites or on how best it could be carried out, the *Mkpakanmkpa* will instruct the widow on what/how to do such a thing. All these may vary from one community to the other. When they have taken the *Mkpakanmkpa* round the whole places, then the dead man will be buried and the items on the rod would all be removed. The rod will be kept in the *obokoro* as a symbol of the dead man's spirit.

From all the literature reviewed and oral interviews conducted, it can be summed up to say that widowhood seen from the different perspectives weighs more on the negative side than on the positive sides, and it is out rightly a gender issue since there is none of these traditions that are reserved for the widower.

- *Ojo* and *Mkpakanmkpa* are all carried out to subdue and subject the widow to public ridicule and pain
- The traditions are carried out as a punishment for the widow but in honour of the dead husband.
- It elevates the deceased husband to the cult of the ancestors but dethrones the widow to a mere mad woman
- While the widow is punished in the name of culture, there are no laid down rules for the widower
- The widow can contract diseases like pneumonia and dysentery because of the unhygienic nature of the tradition, and of course many widows had died as a result of the stress of widowhood.
- She may be affected psychologically because of the belief in spirits around her and trauma as a result of the ill- treatment.
- She goes through mental and physical torture throughout the period as a result of the rites

Conclusion

In conclusion therefore, this study has looked at the origin of widowhood, *ojo* and *Mkpakanmkpa*; traditions for title holders and achievers in Ikwerre LGA of Rivers State and the ways they were carried out. It did not only discuss these traditions but also exposed the ways the widows were treated even in the midst of their pains. The negative weight of this tradition is on the widow alone, none for the widower. As the widow obeys these rules to pave way for the deceased to the world of the ancestors, there is none that is done to pave way for the women to join their ancestors. As Tasié has argued that the whole process was for the good of the widow. It will be nice to say that the widow would feel better if a better and milder methods of mourning were employed at this painful period of her life.

Recommendations

- Those traditions that are torturous to humanity should be made away with.
- Traditions should be allowed to follow the trend of things in this present time, like Christianity, education, civilization and modernization.
- The women folk should be educated on the beliefs to understand that the spirits of the dead can do them no harm.

- Culture should not be made compulsory for the women alone, the men should also be forced to obey these cultures in honour of their wives.
- Widows should form themselves into a help group where they will all meet at regular intervals to discuss about their problems and get help from each other and the government and non-governmental organizations.
- The older widows should find time also to advice and help the younger ones using their experiences.

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Oral Interviews

Waga, AjokuAgwabunma (Male, 81 years old) interview by the researcher, Elele Community, Ikwerre LGA. Rivers State. 18/7/2018

Chima, Ezekiel A. (Male, 74 years old, Elder/Chief) interview by the researcher, Ubima Community, Ikwerre LGA. Rivers State. 21/7/2018

Omeha, Florence W. (Female, 64 years, widowed for 25years) interviewed by the researcher, Ubima Community, Ikwerre LGA. 21/7/2018

Ibekwe. (Male, 58 years old) Interviewed by the researcher, Aluu Community, Ikwerre LGA, Rivers State. 19/7/2018.

Ejiowhor, ThankGod (Male, 67 years old) interviewed by the Researcher, Omuanwa Community, Ikwerre LGA. Rivers State. 25/7/2018

Unanimous (Female, 70 years old) interviewed by the researcher, Isiokpo Community, Ikwerre LGA, Rivers State. 16/7/2018.