

The Catholic Church and Obnoxious Widowhood Practices in Nanka, Nigeria

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Abstract

In every society, couples get into marriage with excitement and high expectations. However, losing a partner to death cuts short such high hopes. the death of a husband not only robs the bereaved woman of expectations in marriage, but also exposes her to some obnoxious practices which seem to be a cultural norms and socially accepted practice in Igboland. These obnoxious practices are drinking the water used in washing the corpse, shaving of hair, ritual seclusion, crying at interval, disinheritance if without a male child, etc. This paper therefore attempts an expository study of some of these obnoxious practices in Nanka. it is a theoretical paper that analyses the role of the Catholic Church in eradicating these widowhood practices. the method of data collection is in-depth interview with 15 respondents who are between the ages of 50-80, and also analysis of existing literature that relates to the study area. The findings of this paper is that some of the obnoxious practices are still in existence in Nanka. The paper recommends ethical teaching and involvement of Faith Based Organization (FBO) in the fight against the widowhood obnoxious practices.

Key Words: Widowhood, practices, obnoxious, tradition and Culture, Nanka, Nigeria.

Introduction

The word “widowhood” has variety of definitions in sociological literature. Korieh (1996) defined widowhood as the condition that follows the death of one of the partners in a marriage. A widow is any female person married under native law and custom or under the marriage act or any other law recognized in Nigeria whose husband has died and has not remarried (The prohibition of infringement of a widows/widower’s Fundamental Rights Law 2001 Section 2 cited in Amasiatu 2012). For many women in the contemporary Nigerian society, losing a husband is almost like the end of the world, whereas the man does not have much difficulty in remarrying when the wife dies, it is not so with women. On this, Amasiatu (2012) explains that the woman on the other hand faces a myriad of social stigmas, traditional harassments, and maltreatment by in-laws who should actually be protecting her and her children.

Obnoxious widowhood practices in this paper entail the traditional agonising conditions widows are subjected to as their husbands die. It describes social subjugation, Nanka women who lost their husbands undergo before burial. Onyekuru, (2011) Anyanwu (1999) and Iruonagbe (2009) expressed that widowhood is a period of grief and pain, marginalization of women, accompanied by emotional deprivation, forceful seizure of property and cultural seclusion. Furthermore, Nwaogugu (1989) and Kantiyok (2000) reported in Fazoranti, and Aruna (2007) that widowhood practice places the widow in world of isolation, marginalization by relatives of her late husband, including seizure of property.

and possibly estranging the widow from means of livelihood. In Nanka, just like any other Igbo society, the traditional culture of mourning the death is worse on the side of women. If a Nanka man dies, the wife is subjected to some traditional rituals of shaving off the hair, eating food on a broken plate, exempted from taking bath for some weeks, confined in a room for about four weeks running, she is not expected to eat food or use materials associated with the burial rites of the husband. Like other Igbo culture areas, the widow in Nanka is subjected to oath to prove her innocence from eliminating the husband. In some extreme cases where the widow has no male child, she is relieved of her husband's properties, which are inherited by the kinsmen. According to Ilozue (2007), widowhood practices in Igboland seem to have harsher penalties in the fifties and sixties than the present age of modernization. The truism is that the widowhood practices although in varying degree are still persistent in Igboland, despite the embrace of education, religious advancement and social emancipation. Against the forgoing discussion, Onyejiuwa (2009) expresses that traditions, norms, and values relegated the Igbo women before male folk.

The campaign by social groups and concerned Nigerians to exterminate the widowhood age long cultural practices in Nanka is yet to yield desired results. The extant laws do not seem to protect widows in Nanka from obnoxious practices associated with widowhood. In this regard, the place of Catholic Church becomes relevant. Catholic Church is a very formidable social actor with an enormous responsibility in charting a new course for the Nigerian society. Korieh (1996) and Edekobi (2000) have pointed out the relevance of Catholic church in the context of bringing about social change in the Nigerian society. Lasebikan, (2001) argues that Catholic Church should come out of its docility to mobilize its members for positive transformation of the society. Orebiyi (2002) posited that any society that is moralized by ideas, and ideas must work

through the brains and arms of good and faithful men and women”.

Obviously, Catholic Church as a segment of the civil society should be concerned about arming their brains for positive change in the country. She has to speak out with articulate voice on moral failures within Catholic Church as to reflect positively on the country's transformation agenda to an appreciable extent, (Erinosho 2000). As such, Catholic Church has to carry out its missionary and prophetic mandate to the Nigerian society, particularly Nanka in Orumba North Local Government Area, Anambra State. Against this background, this study examines the role of Catholic Church in eradication of obnoxious widowhood practices in Nanka, Orumba North Local Government Area in Anambra State.

Geographical, Historical, and Social Setting

Nanka is an Igbo town in Anambra State of southeastern Nigeria. It is one of the 16 major towns that constitute Orumba North Local Government Area of Anambra State. The total land mass of Nanka is 45.632 km² and its geographic coordinates are latitude 60 03' 00 North and longitude 70 05' 00 East. The area is bounded on the North by Nise and Mbaukwu, on the South by Ekwulobia, on the East by Oko, Amaokpala and Ogbu (Awgbu) and on the West Akwaeze, Neni and Adazi. The people also practice exogamous marriage system. Although a woman marries outside her patrilineage, still, she plays a vital role in her natal home through her involvement in the umuada (patrilineage daughters) institution. This social networking creates interconnectivity that enhances bonds of unity amongst the people. There are about 70 umunna (patrilineages) in Nanka, cutting across the seven villages of the town (Otinche and Nnabuenyi, 2015).

The indigenous religion of Nanka people affirms a pantheon of gods, of which the two most important members are the supreme god, Chukwu, and the earth goddess, Ala, the patron of morality. Another prominent feature of the religion is veneration of ancestors who protect the members of the family

against evil spirits and their human agents and also reincarnate to become its future members (Otinche and Nnabuanyi, 2015). From the early twentieth century Christian missionaries established churches in Nanka, a mark of the remarkable progress which Christianity had made as it penetrated the hinterlands from the coastal regions and riverbanks of Eastern Nigeria. Christian influences penetrate the Nanka community through multiple sources. Primary and secondary schools established by Christian agents have existed in Nanka for many decades. The erosion menace has brought the town to the attention of the global community, as it is one of the worst in sub-Saharan Africa. The gully erosion in Nanka has the most impact in five of the seven villages of the town: These are Enugwu-Nanka, Amako, Etti, Ubaha and some parts of Ifite villages (Onyejiuwa (2009).

Obnoxious Widowhood Practices in Nanka

In Nanka, just like other Igbo communities, the obnoxious widowhood practices are an age long phenomenon. The practice of harmful widowhood has been in existences even before the advent of colonialism in Africa (Afigbo 1989). When a man died, his wife was immediately confined to the house, and she sat there on a mat laid out on the floor. Other women of the village stayed close by her to provide support at this period of crisis. She was forbidden to sit on a stool, to impress upon her the fact that her husband's death had lowered her prestige. According to Informant 1 (personal communication, 20/03/2022), this practice reflected an Igbo saying, Ugwu nwanyi bu di ya (A woman's prestige is her husband). Informant 1 went further to explain that in the two to four days before the deceased was buried, the widow was forbidden to bathe and if she needed to eat, she should have done so outside the family compound and in private.

As soon as her husband was buried, she performed three essential rites that began a widow's observance of mourning. These burial rites, according to Informant 2 (personal communication, 19/03/2022) were the food ordeal, head-shaving and washing. When these were satisfactorily

performed, the widow entered into mourning, which lasted not less than six months. During mourning, she wore black dress, and her social and economic activities were mostly suspended. She did not indulge in sexual activities within the period nor become pregnant. Women who were old are not exempt from these regulations, but adaptations of the rites were easily made where failing strength and health demanded them, especially with regard to rituals conducted in the "evil forest." In a polygamous family all the deceased's wives fulfilled these rites. Informant 3 (personal communication, 20/ 03/2022) pinpoints that the mourning period was an opportunity to punish a "bad woman" who neglected her duties to her husband, especially while he was sick. She was punished with fines by the women's organization of her village. Any smile on her face signified to them that her mourning did not reach the heart and her penalty could be doubled.

The following are some of the obnoxious widowhood practices in Nanka, Orumba North Local Government Area

Wife Inheritance (Forceful remarriage):

This is called "Mpkuchi nwanyi" or forceful remarriage of a widow to her husband's younger brother or a close relation. This way the widow is assured that she will not be disinherited of her husband's properties or driven out of her matrimonial home. This widow inheritance is called levirate arrangement. This arrangement has its own problems. The children of the widow may not like it, and the first wife of the younger brother may feel threatened (Informant 4, personal communication, 20/ 03/2022).

Wearing of black or white mourning outfit

Neglect of personal hygiene and the denial of many basic human comforts. According to Informant 5 (Personal Communication, 20th January 2022), in various communities in Orumba North, including Nanka, the widow may not bath or wash her personal effects for the first few days. Washing and bathing during this period calls for punishment of the widow because she is assumed to be beautifying herself (*icho mma*). In most cases in the past, as observed by Informant 5,

the widow could have only one set of mourning dress (*akwa mpke*). This is usually a black cloth which she must wear whenever she was in public. Some Nanka Christians also associate black with evil, tradition and custom and would rather wear a white mourning cloth. Whether it is black or white, there is no difference, since mourning outfits are the same because they have the same interpretation (Informant 6, personal communication, 20/01/2022).

Ritual Seclusion (*Ino na nso*):

Before the burial, and immediately after the burial, up to seven to fourteen weeks while funeral visits still take place, the widow is supposed to be secluded in a most restricted manner. This is called “*ino na nso*”. In Nanka as explained by Informant 7 (personal communication, 12/02/ 2022) the early parts of this period are usually the most rigorous. During the first 28 days, the widow is not allowed to go to the stream or the market or enter the farmland. Certain rituals like shaving of hair must be performed at the expiration of the twenty-eight days before the widow can perform normal activities. The first seven days before the man is buried she must refrain from washing, sits on the ground. Her food is prepared separately and she is fed by another widow from either a broken or an old plate. These pots and plates are used because they are thrown away after the period of seclusion. They may be handed over to an older widow who assisted the new widow during this period (Informant 8, personal communication, 22/02/2022).

Holding a kitchen knife, or broom stick

She is not allowed to touch any part of her body with her hands but must use this knife or stick. At this time, she is regarded as unclean. The knife or stick is also used to protect her from the spirits which may attack her during this period. One of the beliefs connected with this phase, according to Informant 9 is that the husband is still hovering around and still seeks contact with his wife. So, the widow, if she has for any reason to go out of the house or compound, in order to avoid contact with the husband, never leaves and enters through the same gate or door through which the man's spirit may be moving. Indeed, the

widow is given her kitchen knife or stick to hold in order to chase away the spirit of her husband if he should try any contact with her. This practice involves the widow being secluded in a most restricted manner because the widow is regarded as defiled and unclean. She does not enjoy the company of other ‘free’ human beings until she is purified (Informant 10, personal communication, 22/02/2022).

Shaving of hair

In Nanka, it is a common belief that the beauty of a woman is for her husband only. Her hair is therefore shaved to make the widow feel less complete or less womanly since her duties as a wife are no longer useful. Most widows understand it as an outward show of their grief and so majority of widows shave their hairs voluntarily. This shaving is often done leaving cuts in the scalp of the widow because it is roughly done (Informant 11, personal communication, 22/02/2022).

Disinheritance of a widow

This is a situation where a widow is not allowed to inherit any property of her husband. In Nanka which is mainly a patriarchal society in which a widow is seen as a chattel of her husband and his family. As a chattel, she is incapable of owning or inheriting a property but she qualifies to be inherited herself. The only exception is if the woman has a living male child who can inherit part of his father's property and through him the mother may benefit. It is worse in a matrilineal society where the members of the man's maternal family particularly the man's brothers, sisters and their children dispossess the dead man's biological children of their father's property (Informant 13, personal communication, 22/02/2022).

Way forward in the eradication of obnoxious widowhood practices in Nanka

It is indispensable fact that Catholic church has an important role to play in the fight against obnoxious widowhood practices in Nanka because when one considers the immense development especially in the area of civilization and education which are all traceable to the coming of the

Christian missionaries in Nanka then, one will agree that Catholic church having brought about so much development in the past is also a viable tool in fight against obnoxious widowhood practices in Nanka today. Catholic Church indeed has a lot of roles to play in the effort to minimize obnoxious widowhood practices in Nanka. Some of their roles include:

a) Christian Ethical Teachings

The ethical teachings are the rules or the doctrine that any religion map out to be guiding human society in every business and its endeavors to meet the challenges of life. According to Idialu (2012), it deals with the conduct, dealings, marriage, inheritance and mutual rights and obligations that arises from the various type of human relations. The Catholic Church's aim of these ethical teachings is to serve as a guide that will promote human right, equity, justice, harmony, reduce social ills, uplift man's mental capabilities and maintain one's body and mind in a healthy condition. It has principle of virtues, rancor, cheating and encroachment on the rights of other criminal behaviour.

Christian ethical principle enables us to serve God and humanity out of good conscience and out of faith without hypocrisy. With ethical teaching, according to Ilogu (1994), people can engage themselves in the universal struggle in terms of lifestyle, institutional goals and practical involvement in the issue of healing the wounds of obnoxious practices inimical in the society. Therefore, it is necessary that Christian ethical principle be used in one's search for a better society. Christianity teaches love of neighbour and the love of neighbour is the rule which it professes as the golden rule of moral conduct. Ethics is the study of good and evil, right and wrong, (Orebiyi 2002). This biblical Christian ethics is inseparable from theology because it is grounded in the character of God. The task of Christian ethics then is to determine what conforms to God's character and what does not. Christians view the Ten Commandments, found in Exodus 20 as the ideal guide to living the life that God intends.

The first four commandments guide Christians on how to love God, and the last six guide Christians on how to love others. These ten simple rules form the basic guide given by God to the full expression of Christian love. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), Jesus addresses several of these commandments and intensifies their application. According to Okwueze (2003), ethics is translated into actions. It is living according to biblical facts and principles, not just having knowledge of them. Christian ethical principle is a guide or code of conduct of Christians. Christian ethical principles are dictated in the bible which makes Christians behave in accordance with the scripture and also in accordance with the societal values. Nwosu (2007:23) posit thus:

Christianity has its own laws that spelt out how the members should conduct themselves in the community in which they are called to serve as light. Among those laws are the Old Testament laws captioned the mosaic law, that is the ten commandment and other laws or traditions of the church.

This ethical principle as contained in the bible and tradition of the church, (cf. Exodus 20:13; 15) serve as a guide for Christians thereby promoting peaceful living among humans. According to Otinche and Nnabuanyi (2015), the biblical law provides the motivational and enduring basis for spiritual and moral growth. The bible is the authoritative source of information, inspiration and guidance for Christians in their relationship with God and man in human context.

People's recognition of God as creator through religious teaching and divine image in them is very important because it will enable one to minimize obnoxious widowhood practices in one's society. The teaching and practice of Christian ethical principles in Nanka makes for increase in moral standard of which will result to reduction of obnoxious widowhood practices in Nanka. To corroborate this, Kanu and Haaga (2010:31) assert that, "the church is the conscience of the society, and today a society needs a conscience. Do not be afraid to speak, if we go wrong and you keep quiet, one day you will answer for our mistakes."

Through ethical teaching, Catholic Church helps man to realize his moral goal and pointing out the difference between good and evil and showing man how to attain a good life and how to avoid evil and harmful practices. According to Ladipo (1981) religious beliefs impel us to live in love, peace and harmony which promotes growth and development in the society.

b) Formation of Faith Based Organization

Faith based organization is any non-profit making, voluntary citizens group which is organized on a local, national or international level; task-oriented and driven by people with a common interest. Faith based organization performs a variety of service and humanitarian functions, encourages respect for human dignity, widowhood rights and fundamental human rights through provision of information, teaching and maintenance of moral behaviour. United Nations (1989) defined faith-based organization as a group of individuals united on the basis of religious or spiritual beliefs. Traditionally, faith-based organizations have directed their efforts towards meeting the spiritual, social and cultural needs of their members.

Some are organized around specific issues such as human rights, environment or health right etc. They provide analysis and expertise, serve as early warning mechanisms and help monitor and implement policies that protects widows and other vulnerable groups in the society. These organization also promote physical and mental well-being, when they discourage illegal or harmful behavior and practices, when they advocate ethical conduct, they are also indirectly promoting members health. Examples of faith-based organizations include: Girls Guide, Boys Brigade, Boys Scout, ACM (Anglican Children Ministry), Legion of Mary, to mention a few.

Aside Catholic Church roles to pray for the government and for the good of the country, the Christians have other roles to play especially in the fight against obnoxious widowhood practices in the society, particularly Nanka. In the Bible for

instance, personalities such as Saul, David, Esther, Ruth etc., are seen as crusaders of social justice who drew spiritual power and inspiration to stand against societal injustice of their time through prayers yet they went an extra mile to be watchdogs against harmful policies and practices in their society. Chuku-Okoronkwo (2015) strongly argue thus:

The church is a practical problem-solving organization. Depending on our type, we use the Bible as an instrument for personal, social or political changes, as a weapon in the battle in which we have enlisted or as a repository for our philosophical and historical theories.

This assertion presupposes that the Christians' mission is two dimensional; spiritual and at the same time physical. On this regard, formation of Faith based organization will help to influence some policies that are against the citizens and also help in implementing widowhood Act. In Nanka, some widows are suffering because of lack of information and privileges. So, these organizations (i.e. Faith based organisations will help in passing across information to the general public and helping the less privileged of their rights and privileges, and by doing so, reduces the level of obnoxious widowhood practices in the society.

c) Involvement of Christians in Leadership

Christians being the salt and light of the world ought and should take up the mantle of leadership to show the world that all authority belongs to God, though He has put human beings on the earth as caretakers. According to Jesus in Matthew 28:18-20, we are to go and make disciples of all nations teaching them to obey God in every area of life. Christian values contribute positively to society which is needed for development and progress in the country. The Bible solutions for societal problems are a sure cure for corruption in Nigeria. It is Christians' involvement in government in the past, as observed by Aina (1998) that gave birth to abolition of slavery, hospitals, civil liberties, modern science, the regard to human life, workable system of justice, education for common people, and many more that results from applying God's principles.

Christians should showcase the goods that results from applying God's principles and the horror that results from rejecting them, (Edet 2016). As a Christian, taking up leadership positions and applying God's principles to leadership will pave way for generations of blessing. It is surprising how Christians only sit back and complain about the ill condition of the society and do nothing, and in most cases, they will even have the ideas on how to do the right thing but only remain at the background to complain. The Bible says in proverb 29:2 that "when the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice, but when the wicked beareth rule, the people mourn. According to Kanu and Haaga (2010), sacred ministers are first of citizens of a country before becoming a sacred minister. Even though he or she now has a special mission, he or she cannot deny that what happens in the society positively or negatively does not affect him or her. They are not to remain behind the altars while things are going bad, they have a role of play in the society. Christ evangelized not only with words but also with action. The virtues of justice, respect for human dignity, hard work, modesty and humility are all beacons of morality preached by Catholic Church. If Catholic Church is able to mold the character of the society, then a good society will emerge which is significant for achieving positive change, Haaga (2010). Christians must take up leadership positions to show the right way of doing things and by doing so, obnoxious widowhood practices in Nanka will be reduced.

d) Discipline and Sensitisation of Church Members

One of the ways by which the Catholic Church reacts to their members who err or go against her faith, principles and order is by enforcement or imposition of disciplinary actions which serves as a deterrent from involving in obnoxious widowhood practices. According to Eze and Nwebo (1989) punishment is a purposive activity intended to inflict pain for wrongdoing, and to deter one from doing it in future. Discipline is a training which produces right attitude, obedience, self-control and justice, often in the form of rules, and punishment if these are broken.

Catholic Church should stand tall to condemn every act of evil or harmful widowhood practices that has eaten deep into the fabrics of the Nanka. It is expected of her by God and our Lord Jesus Christ to be the light of the society and the salt of the earth, watchdog or mirror with which the society see as role models in all her dealings. Catholic Church should not allow herself to be muzzled by agents of injustice as she discharges her heavenly mandate in the society. It is her role to sensitize her members, educating them on the right way to go, teaching their members in the decision-making group in the society what is required of them and to live as the conscience and light of the society.

When Christians sin, their sin is to be confronted by the church in accordance with the pattern revealed in the scripture. The greatest moral danger to the church is tolerance of sin or obnoxious practices either in private or public and one of the greatest blessings to the church is gift of biblical church discipline. Hebrew 12:11 says "now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless, afterward it yieldth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby". Catholic Church should not relent in punishing erring members for it may lead to decline in discipline, erring members should be penalized in such a way that others will learn from them.

Furthermore, the Christians should continue to sensitize people on the consequences of obnoxious widowhood practices and inculcating the fear of God in the minds of members. According to Amasiatu (2012):

Our contention is that forgiveness should not readily come to willful wrongdoers. They should be made to atone for their sinful action before they are absorbed and granted forgiveness, that way, harmful practices might be discouraged in the society (p.25).

The above proposition suggests that punishment of erring members will serve as a deterrent for others not to indulge in obnoxious widowhood practices because from the happenings, it is obvious that low deterrent facilitates harmful widowhood

practices which can be seen in the Nanka that case will be brought up and closed in a way that is not supposed to be.

Conclusion

Widowhood practice in Nigeria generally and in the Igbo land in particular is a clear illustration of gender inequality. This inequality is shown in the inhuman treatments and injustices meted on widow but are not meted on widowers. The paper noted that some obnoxious widowhood practices in Nanka, Orumba North Local Government Area of Anambra State. In the study, widows were subjected to a lot of dehumanizing practices due mainly to the patrilineal nature of the Igbo society that is male dominated, while the customary laws of the society are also skewed favourably towards men and women have been disadvantaged from time immemorial.

However, in contemporary time, factors like modernization, education, involvement in industrial and other bureaucratic jobs, Christianity and high level of exposure of the women have gone a long way in 'watering down' some of these harmful widowhood practices.

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