

BURU DI BURU OGORI IN IGBO CONCEPT OF WIDOWHOOD AND PHILOSOPHY OF FAIRNESS

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Abstract

Widowhood as a socio-cultural phenomenon evokes huge emotions and is easily grossly misunderstood within the society. It is an existential condition and traditional rites associated to a woman who losses her husband. In most African societies, widowhood is often allegedly linked to grief, intimidation, accusation and abuse of the widow by her husband's relatives or by the cultural demands of the community. The concept of '*buru di, buru ogori*' which in literary terms means 'be a husband and a wife to yourself' is a situation whereby the widow is allowed just after four days her husband was buried to go about her normal businesses so as to fend for her family. This is done to widows whose children are still very young at the time of the husbands' demise in fairness not as a right. Rather than considering fairness as rights from a human rights perspective, the paper instead examines it as procedural rights, attached to a widow by virtue of her good behavior, goodwill and for having a very young family—justice in social

cooperation. The paper hermeneutically argues that ‘*buru di buru ogori*’ is a social justice system that not only considers the widow and her deceased husband, but also the children which by extension are the responsibility of the community. The research discovered that there is a feminist’s tinge in the Igbo concept of ‘*buru di buru ogori*’ since it is championed by the women in the community. The study recommends that other communities should emulate this humanist gesture so as to ameliorate the plight of widows. This paper is bounded by Umunze Igbo judicial procedure in relation to widowhood and is not exhaustive in dealing with the issues regarding widowhood concept in Igbo.

Keys words: *widow, feminism, widowhood, fairness, Igbo*

Introduction

As the saying has it that everything living will someday die, has never been disproved in any human history. Death is experienced among the living irrespective of age, status or gender. The death of a man in the family is usually seen as a monumental loss to the entire community but more especially to his wife and children. This explains the Igbo aphorism *onwu ama eze* (death has no regard or does it know who the king is). *N’etiti ndu, anyi no n’onwu* (life and death are mutually inclusive). Once death struck, it touches the fabrics of both the human person and the society. So, thinking about death requires taking into cognizance both its personal and public dimensions.

This, in turn, allows the meaningfulness of death to emerge as a comprehensive structure, reflecting Heidegger's analysis of Dasein as inherently social. Although Heidegger stresses the personal significance of death for each individual, he also emphasizes its significance with respect to the social nature of Dasein. Both aspects must be addressed in order to provide an overall metaphysical model of the relationship between life and death.¹

From the personal dimension of death Heidegger maintained that death "is the highly personal nature of death – death always belongs to a specific Dasein, it "... lays claim to it as an individual Dasein"². Strictly speaking, "no one can take the Other's dying away from him"³. In this sense, death individuates Dasein, emphasizing its uniqueness and its radically individual nature.

The second factor is the social dimension of death, comprised of the prevailing attitudes towards it in a particular society. These attitudes usually express an attempt to deny death by cultivating an attitude of indifference towards it or bracketing it as irrelevant to life. Such tranquilisation encourages a "... constant *fleeing in the face of death*."⁴ The social attitude to death therefore, alienates Dasein from its unique relationship to its finite existence by discouraging an existential understanding of it and therefore makes Dasein inauthentic.

Widowhood Practices in Igbo Land

The customary culture of reverencing the dead is worse on the side of the women folk in Igbo land. The womenfolk are prized highly in Igbo land, yet a woman in Igbo culture is not accorded full social and cultural recognition no matter her status in life unless she is married and bears children or at least a child. Igbo women remain women of substance and relevant as long as their husbands are alive. If an Igbo woman loses her husband to death, her story changes. Automatically, she becomes a murder suspect (especially if her late husband had properties) in some places because death in most parts of Igbo land is never deemed a natural occurrence. “In some Igbo cultural areas, the widow 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.”⁵

According to Catherine Oreh, “... a woman becomes a widow when the man with whom she had planned the present and the future life is no longer available to share, shape the hopes and the dreams of years ahead. She becomes helpless as she commences a lone journey full of uncertainties of life. She is seen as a liability, powerless, voiceless and vulnerable.”⁶ Also, a widow according to the *Encyclopaedia of Death and Dying*, is a woman (young or old) who formally contracted her marriage under the Customary Marriage Act or any religious Act and lost her husband to death but did not re-marry.⁷ Catherine Oreh in her inaugural lecture further observed that:

Widowhood involves a physical break in the family relationship and it is ranked by widows as the most stressful and devastating event in life. This is because widowhood does not only involve the loss of the role of a wife to the husband but also the loss of a person most supportive of the woman, the person who has played a central role in the woman's life, the father of her children, the family breadwinner and the companion of the woman. This transition from wifeness to a widow happens so suddenly and swiftly that in one minute a woman who is a wife transits to a widow. It is at this moment that she starts to experience all the widowhood practices under discussion.⁸

Almost every society has its own peculiar cultural rites given to the dead, which affect the wife of the dead and the children in some cases. In Igbo land, this unique stage of life is accompanied by definite socio-cultural practices which Nwoga referred to as "... sets of expectation as to the actions and behaviours by the widow, actions by others towards the widow and rituals performed by or on behalf of the widow from the time of death of her husband. Later phase of these practices may include issues of inheritance, the state of the widow and marriage or remarriage of the widow."⁹ Catherine Oreh corroborated Nwoga by expressing "... that widowhood practices can be seen as socio-cultural practices encompassing burial rites, mourning rituals, inheritance rights of the widow, her expected behaviour towards

others and other people's behaviour towards her arising from the death of her husband.”¹⁰ In some Igbo land, “... if an Igbo 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 and materials used for burial rites of the husband.”¹¹ These practices as it were according to Nwaogugu, “... are culture-bound because they reflect the prevailing values of a given socio-cultural milieu.”¹² These practices as mentioned above are not universal in Igbo land. Umezinwa noted that:

Although widowhood practices are common phenomena in Igbo land, the intensity is not the same in every town. These cultural practices he further explained have portrayed the Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria in Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States in a very bad light, particularly regarding the treatment of women who have lost their life partner, breadwinner, confidant and husband, all rolled into one.¹³

In Igbo culture, widowhood practice is exclusively preserve for widows, not widowers. Agumagu observed that a widower has no traditionally laid down laws governing his mourning rites.¹⁴ This may be true because the widower is not seen wailing and ululating like the widow who weeps as a result of grief or perhaps to either arouse sympathy from onlookers and the husband's relatives or to prove her innocence from having any hand in the cause of her husband's death. This period which is supposed to be a quiet and private time as the widow

strives to accept her loss has been turned into a period of agony, anxiety, pain and insecurity for the widow in Igbo land. This is because it is usually a period the widow is subjected to psychological, social, physical and emotional torture as a result of her bereavement. In as much as this is true in some part of Igbo land, it is not true in all circumstances, at least the idea of *buru di*, *buru ogori* has come to challenge the age longed impression of blanket marginalization of widows in Igbo land.

The Notion of *Buru Di*, *Buru Ogori* (Be A Husband and A Wife to Yourself)

In Igbo land, death is seen as a physical end but not the ultimate end. “The belief is that bodily death is not the end of one’s life, for the soul lives on in a different plane of existence.”¹⁵ They also believe that the spirit of the dead still hovers around the village pending when all the necessary burial rites are completed which includes but not limited to widowhood rites and practices. In the olden days in my town Umunze-a town in Orumba South LGA of Anambra State, if a woman loses her husband (in most cases they are usually more than one because of polygamy) she automatically becomes *nwaanyi ajadu* or *nwaanyi isimkpe* (widow) and is expected to carry out her widowhood rites religiously. These rites as demeaning as they appear must be done without complaining (of course who do you complain to).

From the moment she loses her husband, her movement is restricted. She is proscribed to relate with the living for she is seen as unclean and unholy and isolated and

barricaded with palm frond (omu) and Costusafer (Okpete). Even her children are not allowed to freely relate with her. If she has a suckling child, a cleansing ritual is performed before the child is permitted to suckle her mother's milk. The hairs on her head are ritually shaved (Isimkpe or Ajadu) and the shaved hair given to her to dispose in the evil forest. On her way to and fro the evil forest she is mandated to be wailing; this is to ward off both the living and the dead which are not supposed to meet with her face to face because she is defiled. She is also culturally commanded to splash ashes on her head every early morning for twenty-eight days (Izu Asaa) on which she is not allowed to take her bath.

The widow loses her sense of humanity because of the death of her husband; she is expected to wake everyone around with her early morning mandatory wailing, which is done at the first cockcrow (that is around 4: am). This is symbolic because her weeping shows that she has lost her covering; the man that usually protects her, covers her nakedness and who brings warmth to her is no more and such she is now vulnerable. Other women around especially her fellow widows will compliment her cry as a sense of solidarity. Afterwards, her fellow widows will rush in to console her by asking her to look at them who have survived the ordeal before her.

The widow is forbidden to eat with others, she can only eat food prepared by an older widow otherwise any woman whose husband is still alive that cooked for her is customarily wishing her own husband death.

The widow is prohibited from going to the farm or to the market for any reason during the mourning period of her husband which is usually two lunar years. In my place going to our Nkwọ market is a kind of privilege and celebration where men and women showcase their wealth and farm produce. During this period, the widow wears her mourning cloth which is usually black cloth (which we call *unu*; others may call it *akwa mkpe* or *akwa ụjụ*). The wearing of white piece of cloth as mourning attire is alien to my people even though very many wear it now due to Christianity and its influences. All the aforementioned practices have been replaced with milder cultural practices since the advent of Christianity, education and technological advancements.

As these widowhood practices subsist, my people have a way they treat younger widows in fairness. If a woman of very young age loses her husband, and it was evident that she lived well with her deceased husband and is in good term with her sisters-in law; by implication the good behaviour of the widow and her age are prerequisites conditions for her to receive the certificate of '*bụrụ di bụrụ ogori*'. *Bụrụ di bụrụ ogori* is a certificate of exemption given to a widow which excuses her from most of the widowhood practices because of her age, goodwill and good behaviour and also perhaps because of the age and number of her children. Ironically, it is the women in the community with the support and backing of their husbands and brothers that champion widowhood cultural rites both the harsh and mild practices. From time immemorial, the death of a young married man elicits pain, sympathy and responsibility. It

draws the attention of all and sundry. Some are attracted to the situation out of pity for the young widow and her children while some are attracted by lust for the young widow who is now vulnerable to all manner of ill-treatments in the society. But the notion of *buru di buru ogori* will be initiated by *umuada* especially the immediate married sisters to the deceased. They usually lobby for the support of the elderly *umuada* among whom many may have lost their husbands early in marriage, so out of empathy with the young widow may allow the *buru di buru ogori* license to be given to their sister's-in-law. When the *conditio sine quanon* (*necessary conditions*) is met and the agreement reached, four days after the burial of the husband, the widow is presented to the forum of *umuada*. The *umuada* will then request the family to provide the widow on her mourning cloth (akwa mkpe). Once this is done, the eldest among the *umuada* who must also be a widow (women are very careful here not to allow a woman who is not a widow to perform this rite) will ritually shave her hair amidst singing and dancing. She will admonish her by telling her the best possible ways to live her life as a widow (a young one for that matter) and by also assuring her that widowhood is not the end of the world; even though, the society may be seeing her as a woman who has now 'resigns into a group of marginalized, powerless and voiceless invisible beings'¹⁶. Here it should be stated in black and white that no negative image of the widow's situation is presented; rather reality is uncovered for the new 'initiate'. It is always easier when the widow has a male child who automatically becomes the husband symbolically. Of course, it is typically an emotional

scenario since the widow, her sister's-in-law and relatives are seen crying for their bereavement. At the completion of the rituals, the eldest of *umuada* who is also a widow will strip the young widow off the mourning cloth and as they set the mourning cloth and the her hairs on fire, the whole *umuada* will echo simultaneously 'as you leave here now, *buru di buru ogori* (be a husband and a wife to yourself), go and fend for your family'. She will be presented to the *umunna* (the kindred) and the entire community as someone with *buru di buru ogori* license. This part of the event marks the beginning and the end of her mourning period. She can now go to the market and the farm as a widow but without any hindrances. She is also exempted from communal work and communal contributions (cash and materials) for a period of ten years from the year she lost her husband; this will enable her to raise her little children with lesser stress; even though, she is disposed to receiving help from men and women alike, but more especially from men who may want to engage her in conjugal affairs (this is if the widow consents to the gesture and it is just between the widow and the men who may want to do such), it is not customary. Here the writer is not trying to "eulogized the male assistance given to widows"¹⁷ as some female writers would see it but to present a statement of fact. In Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*, as rightly quoted by Orabueze "... her brother-in-law with the help of Ekwueme and Wakiri mended Ihuoma's leaking roof. She is protected, defended and helped in defraying the funeral expenses of her late husband."¹⁸ "For his part, Nnadi, Ihuoma's brother-in-law, concentrated on storing dried meat.

Instead of selling animals that fell to his many traps, he cut them into bits and smoked them for storage. This would provide the necessary delicacy for the huge pots of soup that would be prepared during the burial rites.”¹⁹

Burū Di, Burū Ogori and Feminism

Widowhood practices vary widely across cultures and countries in Africa. While some practices promote fairness, dignity and support for widows, others perpetuate inequality, stigma and exploitation. From the foregoing, one can observe clearly that there is a tinge of feminism in *burū di burū ogori*. *Burū di burū Ogori* nonetheless, receives its sanction from the men but it is championed and carried out by the women who empathize with their fellow women who are widows by virtue of losing their husbands. Losing someone's husband is not a sufficient condition for a widow to receive the *burū di burū ogori* certificate, but having good behaviour, goodwill and being young do. Women must be the primary agents for their transformations especially in male-dominant cultures. As we have it, most cultures of the world are male-dominated and gender sensitive, thereby relegating the female folks to the background and also at the receiving end. Michele Paludi in *The Psychology of Women* writes “I learned so much about women. Women face many issues: discrimination, sexism, prejudices . . . by society. Women need to work together to change how society views us. I learned so much and talked about much of the issues brought up in class to my friends and family. My attitudes have changed toward a lot of things. I got to look at myself, my life, and what I see for the future.”²⁰

Our women may have looked back, considered their plight and subjugation and asked themselves some pertinent questions and have started working together. In the introductory part of her three volumes work, *Feminism and Women's Rights Worldwide*, Michele Paludi quoted in Volume 1 Gertrude Stein who raised the same type of questions raised by our women. She asked "And how do you look backward? By looking forward, what do you see? As they look forward, they see what they had to do before they could look backward. And there we have it all."²¹ It is familiar knowledge that in emerging nations of Africa that women class had been held down by cultural norms, prejudice and social discrimination. It is also common knowledge that Igbo women in this millennium are giving vigorous and conscientious fight to protect their image and status from traditional marginalization, in spite of potential traditional cultural bottlenecks and taboos. Can it be said boldly that women are comfortable with most of the cultural widowhood practices in Igbo land which makes the practices to survive even in this present social media age. One of the reasons for which widowhood cultural practices has survived in Igbo land is obvious in Nnachi's study, "... that human beings social behavior are culturally and environmentally influenced." Nnachi further quoted Bandura (1977) who opined that social behavior in a community may be reinforced through imitation and modeling.²² The concept of feminism as used in this paper differs significantly from some of the feminist ideologies that believe that men are no longer important, because no real Igbo woman will openly assert that. Rather our idea of

feminism is borne out of women coming to together to fight their seemingly common enemy and see whether they ‘can unfetter their manacles.’ They want to find out whether widowhood is “self-imposed or culturally-imposed as feminists claimed in their literary texts.”²³

Why Does Fairness Matter in the Issue of Widowhood in Igbo Culture?

Human society is by its very nature subject to constant change, fuelled by the fluidity of social interactions and the randomness of their consequences.²⁴ The tension that exists between the dynamic nature of society and the static character of the cultural practices, ritual requirements, and norms creates multiple dilemmas and paradoxes for widowhood practices in Igbo culture. Widowhood practices have cultural back up and are sacrosanct. Every widow is expected to participate fully in widowhood practices for two obvious reasons. One, this is the time the widow is expected to overtly honor her deceased husband, benefactor and the father of her children; the man that made her a woman and a mother. In short, it is her socio-religious obligation. Second, the widow participates in the widowhood practices because of the cultural stringent sanctions attached to noncompliance to these practices. These practices as severe as they are have some exceptions owing to various peculiar circumstances which require fairness in consideration. Fairness requires practical considerations that most often come up in the form of three fundamental questions a society needs to answer in order to function: (1). Who gets what? (Rules of allocation) (2) How do we decide who gets what? (Rules of decision) (3) Who

decides who decides? (Rules of political authority).²⁵ Fairness like most concepts in Philosophy and Law has no generally accepted definition because of its multifaceted and complex nature that involves various aspects of human interaction, ethics and morality but most definitions as it were arose as a result of someone's school of thought or belief. Fairness cannot be discussed without in relation to justice. And one of the neatest ways of expressing the kernel of this notion of justice as fairness is given by P.A. Facione, T. Attig and D. Scherer in their book *Values and Society* where they say, "the basic principle underlying this sense of justice has come to be called the 'formal principle of justice'. It requires that persons who are alike in morally relevant respects be treated alike, and that persons who differ in morally relevant respects be treated differently in proportion to the differences between them."²⁶By implication, *bụrụ di bụrụ ogori* which enables young widows with the following qualifications like the age of the widow, her relationship with her deceased husband, her relationship with her sisters-in-law and of course goodwill from members of the community should be treated equally and those who fail to meet up with the qualifications should be treated differently. These are the reasons why fairness matters in widowhood practices in my town Umunze. "Fairness emphasizes the need to consider whether people are treated appropriately in comparison with others – that is, whether there are really differences between them that are relevant and so justify treating them differently."²⁷

Fairness generally is given content by the rights of the individual, but in the case of *bụrụ di bụrụ ogori* right is not considered in terms of human rights at all because it is the right and duty of the widow to mourn her husband by participating fully in all the ritual practices pertaining to widowhood. However, *bụrụ di bụrụ ogori* as fairness consists of more than the rights of the widow by bearing in mind the procedure which is also the site where we can understand the separation between fairness and rights, and how it is that rights may be balanced away in the name of fairness.

Bụrụ di bụrụ ogori as fairness in Igbo widowhood practices is a way of compensating the seeming disadvantages of the widow for losing her husband early and having to shoulder all the family responsibilities alone. It is fair and just to compensate people only for disadvantages that are the result of social forces – like in this case of widowhood practices as it affects young widows. One may rightly argue that *bụrụ di bụrụ ogori* at the long run may entrench injustice since compensation on a group basis may result in treating some individuals unjustly because it will inevitably give room for preferential treatment to some members of a group especially those whose sisters-in-law can speak for, or the widows who themselves, have not been disadvantaged, and so give them unfair and unjustified advantages. Cultural bias and prejudice may also be a challenge to *bụrụ di bụrụ ogori*. Unconscious and conscious biases can lead to unfair treatment in the administration of *bụrụ di bụrụ ogori* certificate. For instance, a woman from another tribe other than Igbo

may be treated baldy irrespective of the fact that she lived up to the required standard but because of her tribe and this at the long run will affect the original idea of *bụrụ di bụrụ ogori*.

Conclusion

Bụrụ di bụrụ ogori is not an entitlement to the widow. If people are entitled to certain things, it is only fair that they should be given that to which they are entitled. It is the entitlement of the deceased man to be mourned by her wife, so he should receive it to its fullness. But those he left behind (brothers and sisters) may decide otherwise by considering the welfare of the family he left behind and in fairness to him and his widow, his entitlement is denied of him for the greater common good. Consequential considerations may also support this approach: it is reasonable to think that the greatest improvement in people's well-being and relief from misery will be achieved by satisfying a basic level of need for all (in this instance the deceased, the widow, the children and the society at large should be considered) before using resources for other purposes.

In other to promote fairness in widowhood practices in Igbo land, education and awareness should be one of the foremost approaches to entrenching it. Women should be encouraged to send their girl child to school to acquire critical thinking and understanding that will help her live a fulfilled life as a woman.

There should also be institutional reforms as it concerns widowhood practices in Igbo land. There should be deliberate positive policies and procedures that promote

transparency, accountability and equal treatments among widows of the same estate. Communities should intentionally adjust and abolish some of unfair practices like property grabbing, forced remarriage, widow cleansing and social isolation that fosters social exclusion and marginalization. They should promote policies that treat widows fairly.

All these cannot be possible without empathy, which is the capacity to approximate the state of mind of another person by trying to partake in their feelings. Empathy and compassion should be encouraged within the communities. Women should be allowed to be part of the decision process that affects them directly. So *buru di buru ogori* as philosophy of fairness in Igbo widowhood practice can achieve its aim by creating more just and equitable society if given wider acceptance among the Igbo tribe.

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