

# Culture of Widowhood Practices in Africa: De-institutionalizing the Plights of Women and Communicating Development through Theatre

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## Abstract

Culture is no doubt ascribed as the distinctive characteristics of a society. It is the society's guiding principles of human behaviour and existence as transmitted by same society. Culture for what it stands, therefore, is supposed to bear on the auspicious wellbeing and progressive development of the society and its people. However, a critical consideration of the age-long-universalized dehumanizing and obnoxious widowhood rites culture in Africa has consistently predisposed it as impeding than facilitating meaningful rehabilitation of widows in our society. This worrisome development has continued to draw wide outcry from sundry concerned quarters, occasioned perhaps by the influence of western civilization and Christianity. However, while this dastardly practice seems to yield to these concerted condemnations by jettisoning most of its obnoxious features in some parts of the continent, it has defied every iota of refinement and remained static in most predominant others, despite the dynamics of modern society. This paper, therefore, explores the potentials of theatre in de-institutionalizing widowhood practices' inherent threats to the dignity and 'womanity' of womanhood in our various cultures in Africa; thus projecting it as a veritable development communication tool.

## Keywords

Culture, Conscientization, Development Communication, Theatre, Widowhood Rites

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## 1. Introduction

In many cultures, prejudices against women are in fact deep-rooted. Widowhood practices are among the prejudices that have consistently impinged on the dignity and rights of women in our different cultures in Africa. The *BBC English Dictionary* (1) has defined widowhood as the state of being a widow or widower. In most cultures in Africa however, widowhood practices have become the exclusive preserve for widows with accompanying elaborate guiding regulations, and not for widowers for whom the culture or tradition has prescribed little or no mourning rites. Unarguably, every enduring marriage ultimately ends with the death of either of the man or woman, or even both. However, the death of a

spouse may be the most extreme of life's crisis as this severs most of the deepest emotional bonds established in a lifetime. Ironically though, the toll of the death of a husband tends to be more overwhelming on the woman than on the man when he loses his wife. This is because the woman is mostly traumatized and disorganized by such development on account of the harrowing experiences that await her as couched in widowhood rites. Widowhood rites, therefore, describes the rites performed for a woman after the death of her husband. Korieh (2) explained these rites as sets of expectations regarding the actions and behaviour of the widow; including actions by others towards the widow; as well as the rituals performed by or on behalf of the widow from the time of the death of her husband. This paper explores the potentials of theatre in the de-institutionalization

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of these widowhood practices which have not only dehumanized and subjugated women (widows) to untold and unimaginable predicaments, but also tragi-institutionalized their plights in our various cultures. In doing this, therefore, it is aimed that through the performative platform of theatre, its invaluable role as a veritable development communication tool would be most clearly highlighted. Hence, development communication is ascribed as the use of communication to promote development in the human society. It emphasizes the recognition of the power of communication as catalyst for social development and characterized by conceptual flexibility and diversity of communication techniques used to address human problems; to which theatre is not limited (3 p.13).

## 2. Widowhood Rites and the Mythic Tinge

'*Di bu ugwu nwanyi*', which translates to 'husband constitutes honour and dignity to womanhood', is a popular traditional expression among the Igbo society of the south east of Nigeria. Thus the very moment a woman loses her husband, the woman automatically loses her prized dignity, "that intangible but definitely observable status which ... society accords to wives" (4 p.80). Also in Igbo culture is the firm belief that, "the god that owns a woman is the husband that married her", which is expressed thus: "*Agbara nwe nwanyi bu di luru ya*". The import of the above expression is the obvious deification of the man, who is the husband. Thus this apparent divinity which the culture has ascribed to him consequently necessitates the performance of certain rites and rituals when he dies: as it also draws the implication of impurity and defilement of the woman as a widow, and therefore the necessity for ablution, cleansing or purification and other widowhood rites and practices as prescribed by culture. Thus, "Myth", says Bronislaw Malinowski (cited in 5 p.385), "fulfils ... an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances and codifies belief ... it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man". Writing from the background of her Yoruba descent, Labeodan (6 p.70) observes that:

Culture has silenced many Yoruba women. We have been made to believe that our bodies and minds are to be managed by the dictates of our culture. Mystery was built around certain practices: not fulfilling these requirement[sic] is a taboo which leads to death or ostracism.

The crucial question the foregoing scenario therefore begs is: What then are those practices by which women, and indeed widows have been so much mystified, and by which they have equally been so enslaved? This is going to be the

paper's next focus.

## 3. Highlight on Widowhood Practices in Africa

In offering a general overview of African culture as it affects the rights of women in Africa, Lasebikan (7 p.18) did not mince words to observe that "in Africa, the widow is oppressed, suppressed, afflicted, neglected, suspected, and insulted". She further notes that among the Yoruba, hardly can one find a man, whether a monogamist or polygamist, who dies a natural death as the unsuspecting wife immediately turns a ready suspect. As unfortunate as the foregoing scenario appears, it is not exclusive to the Yorubas alone. The belief, according to Tei-Ahontu (8), with particular reference to Ga traditional area of Accra-Ghana, is that no matter how natural the death of a person may seem, there is definitely a cause to it.

Therefore, one of the horrendous nightmares that may confront a woman at the death of her husband in various African cultures is the oftentimes scandalous accusation from the deceased husband's relations of having a hand in the man's death irrespective of how peaceful they might have lived, especially when the woman had not been in good relationship with them. When this happens, such a widow is often times made to swear on a juju, lie on the same bed with the corpse of her late husband the night before interment, or even be subjected to drink the water that is washed out of the husband's corpse as a proof of her innocence. With the present day realities of health hazards posed by infectious and contagious deadly diseases, it is only imaginable how physically and psychologically susceptible this dehumanizing act may condition the widow.

The widow, who may have enjoyed every amount of freedom and goodwill while her husband lived, suddenly turns incommunicado as the death of her "husband heralds a period of imprisonment and hostility" for her (9). Her movement becomes restricted throughout the mourning period, "and culture forbids her to eat except with ... tattered and old eating bowls made from gourds" (10 p.72). She is not expected to be happy or laugh, chat or play with people at this period as she is supposed to be unclean and abominable and to be treated indifferently by others too; and she is mandated to continually cry and wail for her deceased husband. She is subjected to wearing mourning cloths throughout her mourning period thus making her readily identifiable as a widow and therefore stigmatized. She also faces the further humiliation of her hairs shaven off from different parts of her body. All these, (and more) opines Okoye, therefore mark her out as an outcast in the normal society of men as a creature at war with the world beyond

until she frees herself by fulfilling all widowhood rites (10 p.75).

The ablution ritual by which the widow is believed to be cleansed and reintegrated into the society from which she had been virtually ostracized since her husband's death is a widowhood rite that depersonalizes, dehumanizes, and utterly violates the right to dignity of the woman. In some places in Anambra State, as in most practicing regions, the ablution ritual is associated with sexual intercourse as the widow is introduced to a 'ritual cleanser' who will have sexual intercourse with her in order to lift, as is believed, the taboo placed over her (11). This is always at the strict enforcement/supervision of the 'Umuada', who are the daughters of the land. Little wonder why Samuel (12) has described widowhood practice as one cultural practice that has portrayed the Igbo of the south Eastern Nigeria in a very bad light. Among the Edo people of Southwestern Nigeria also, widowhood practice has continued to prove a very dreadful experience, as widows are subjected to serious health hazards besides other dehumanizing conditions (6).

Ironically, the *Umuada*, as mentioned above, who spearhead the administration of these widowhood practices are themselves women, perhaps potential widows. Amadi (13 p.69) has expressed her deep consternation in the fact that it is not only that these dehumanizing widowhood rites are enshrined in the culture and tradition of the people, but also:

That women who are daughters of the lineage (Umuada) have been socialized to accept and uphold these traditions by being administrators that administer these dehumanizing and subjugation rites to fellow women.

Ezeh (9) also shares in Amadi's deep consternation by the saddening observation with regards to his own community – Arochukwu, in the present Abia State, Nigeria that the daughters of the family who are equally wives and mothers in other families are the ones responsible for administering or supervising the administration of such ordeals to fellow women all in the name of tradition. This situation, Amadi further stresses, only creates room for the *Umuada*, who now assume the lofty status of quasi-demigoddesses, to exercise their own authority and power over fellow women and to humiliate fellow women who are widows. This development may not be unconnected with the fact that such women, as supposed custodians of culture, may have won the recognition of the males in their community, such that they want to continue to enjoy such position of power, as Atere (14) perhaps inferred. Much more saddening also is the fact that in Arochukwu, as Ezeh emphasized, "this tradition of subjecting a widow to various nerve chilling ordeals defies any change" (9 p.47). This is quite disheartening. Ode (15) has therefore described widowhood as a very unfortunate

experience for women.

However, with their indoctrination in the institutionalization of these practices in our different cultures, the African women as typified in the *Umuada* have become quite pitifully insensitive to their own future insecurity. This only reinforces the notion that African woman's line of thinking and her perception of life have been subtly directed against her by the society. Even more ironic is the erroneous belief that the introductions of these rituals are understood in the context of their protecting the widow, her family and the society as a whole. Culture and indeed society has so subtly warped their thinking and perception against themselves in the light of the above; thus the urgent need for reorientation.

In most cultures, the inheritance system which also discriminates against women (daughters) by their exclusion as heirs to the property of their natal families extends to widows also as they are precluded from inheriting their deceased husband's property, especially landed property. Such property only devolves to her late husband's male relatives. However, with the modern world teeming with civilized and mature minds, widowhood practices, like several other gender injustices directed against women, have "quite become anachronistic (16); and thus deserves increased concerted efforts for its complete extermination. Again, to consider Opatá's (17) humanistic definition of culture as emphasizing evaluativeness rather than anthropological descriptive concerns, with regards to those values and ideas that enhance human welfare, the various widowhood rites practices as highlighted in our different cultures in Africa, are quite incongruous with being conducive to human welfare and the progress of the society. It is the position of this paper, therefore, that the theatre is a potential instrument in not only debunking the prevalent belief in these obnoxious practices, but also in galvanizing the society, especially women into action at their complete extermination.

#### 4. Theatre: An Effective Tool for Socio-cultural Transformation

Evidence abounds regarding the works of theatre practitioners who have through their works demonstrated the potentials of theatre in the reorientation of the society regarding the obnoxious widowhood practice in our different cultures. One of such works is Uche Ama-Abriel's *A Past Came Calling* (18), which was first performed as an advocacy for women and children fund raising initiative at the Muson Centre, Lagos, Nigeria in 2004. This development perhaps is also in response to the solemn clarion call for

women to rise to the occasion and speak out against the several injustices and oppressions against women in the society (6; 19). In his foreword to the play, Femi Osofisan has identified “the continued, apparently custom-sanctioned brutalization of widows in Nigeria” (20 p.iv) as one of this theatrical piece’s multi-thematic preoccupations. It is this *custom-sanctioned brutalization of widows* therefore, that is the major concern here. He noted the poignancy of the situation in “the confrontation between mother and daughter, both severely damaged by unhealed wounds from their past-wounds that perhaps could never heal again” as primarily triggered by the unbearable plight of this custom-sanctioned experience in which TEMISAN found herself as portrayed in *A Past Came Calling*. Why does this experience become that significant in resulting to such confrontational milieu between mother and daughter, and in such scar-ridden circumstance, that turned it so poignant? TEMISAN was unarguably pushed to the walls by tradition, the culture of widowhood rites which she must perform to absolve herself of the accusation of causing the death of her husband; since his family members insist that: “Only a man whose wife is a witch, or whose wife sleeps with another would pass away in his sleep” (18 p.7). Therefore, TEMISAN laments:

From dusk to dawn, I was hounded to confess to killing my husband, so his wandering spirit would find its way back to the world of the gods. Every inhuman treatment imaginable was meted out to me. Every single property we acquired during our union was “inherited” by his brothers a week after his death. (18 p.7)

She further informs her daughter, ROSEMARY that “they (her husband’s family members) swore to make me confess publicly to killing their brother or I’d know no peace” (18 p.8). TEMISAN’s nerve chilling ordeal of mockery, battery, torture, humiliation and dehumanization that climaxed with her gulping down the bath water of her husband’s corpse is further re-enacted in this emotion filled flashback. It was such a dead night, with the buzzing of mosquitoes and chirping of crickets as her only companions, perhaps consoling her in her grief with their nocturnal melodies:

*(With just a piece of black cloth on her chest and another on her head, Temisan sits crouched in a corner of a small thatched roof hut, beside a fire place. From a fairly wide opening on the wall, light filters in. She’s covered in ashes. Her hands, blackened with layers of dirt. Totally alone in her solitude and misery, head on her palm, face tear stricken, she gazes listlessly into nothingness. A rotten orange flying through the opening on the wall and landing squarely on her head, snaps her out of her mind bending reverie. Another follows it. Trying to scramble out of harm’s way, she’s stopped momentarily in her tracks by a hose protruding from the opening. Begging for*

*mercy, Temisan tries to dodge it, it follows her every step of the way. Running around the little hut in her bid to escape the water, she slips and falls on the now slippery muddy floor. Someone’s mechanical laughter applauds her fall. She tries to get to her feet, failing woefully, she falls again. Staying right where she is, she cries her heart out. Very forcefully, the door swings open. Two men and two women rush in. The men are armed with whips. One of the women bears a large cup and the other holds a twine. Pouncing on her, they drag her around the room, creaming and begging).* (18 pp.9 – 10)

FEMALE 1: *(Slapping her)* As we bury my brother, so your peace will be buried.

OTHERS: Amen!

FEMALE 2: His restless spirit will haunt every male in your family and cut them short in their prime.

OTHERS: Amen!

MALE 2: *(Spits on her)* Say amen!

FEMALE: *(Grabbing her ear and twisting it)* Stubborn witch, confess or die! *(The men attack her with blows, legs, and whips...)*

MALE 1: My brother did not die a natural death.

FEMALE 1: Your harlotry sent him to an early grave.

FEMALE 2: Husband killer!

FEMALE 1 & 2: Witch! Witch! Witch!

FEMALE 1: Mourn! Mourn the man whose life you cut short...

ALL FOUR TORMENTORS: Louder witch! Louder! Mourn, mourn your husband!

FEMALE 1: You loved him, didn’t you? Prove it then, drink the bath water of your husband’s decaying body. (18 pp.11 – 13)

*(Ranting and raving all the while, one of the men grabs her legs and pins her to the floor. The others grab her hand and twist them to the back... the woman with the cup beckons to the other who immediately descends on Temisan and tries to pry her mouth open. Like one possessed of the devil, Temisan struggles to escape them and keep her mouth shut. She fails. Gulping and coughing, she downs the bath water of her husband’s corpse. Their faces aglow with sheer satisfaction, they shower more blows, and insults on the helpless woman even as she wretches her guts out in her desperate bid to rid her stomach of it’s[sic] disgusting content).* (21 pp.13 – 14)

Her elasticity of endurance was soon over-stretched, as she thus fled in the dead of the night, with her 6 months old baby, just two days before another ordeal of the “verdict of the

dead” – a process of some inexplicable demonic means whereby a corpse is made to rise up in search of the one thought responsible for its death. She was not ready to hang on and watch them do such thing to her late husband. However, the burden of the innocent child strapped to her back as she fled became even more horrible and hounding on her as it kept alive in her every memory of her husband’s family members’ monstrous images. She had to make a clean break by shedding everything that connected her to them. So was the innocent child abandoned, without the least thought of what would befall her in the numbed state she found herself. Such was the circumstance in which mother and daughter were caught up in a vicious circle triggered off by cultural obligation.

When ROSEMARY, TEMISAN’s abandoned daughter confronted her with the reality of the situation, she could only but confess: “but for the wickedness and retrogressive barbaric mourning tradition of his (meaning her husband’s) people, I’d never have gotten to that brink of insanity that propelled me to that woeful night” (18 p.44). With all that ROSEMARY passed through in the course of the play – a symbol of ruin of the result of that singular act of abandonment; raped, abused, decadent and infected by the AIDS scourge, it is only obvious that there are far more implications to the issue of widowhood practices that may just be imagined. Ama-Abriel thus utterly condemns this dastardly practice, and perhaps enjoins all women as the gender mainly affected by this cultural practice, not to relent in talking/writing about it if the society must take them serious.

With the above highlights, the very salient message Ama-Abriel is passing across is that instead of subjecting widows to such harrowing experiences in such periods of great loss and mourning, all they need is nothing but “love, support, (and) protection”, instead of the “potpourri of dehumanizing, degrading and mind bending treatment(s)” (18 p.49) which they get, all in the name of tradition. Ama-Abriel’s *A Past Came Calling*, therefore, punches holes in the continued relevance of this cultural practice in an age of vast socio-cultural advancement, especially since there abounds evidence of increasing resentment about it (21). She has succeeded in producing, in the words of Osofisan (20 p.v):

a one-acter that is not only gripping in its subject matter, but is also so finely crafted ... This is particularly evident in her use of swift-flowing uncluttered dialogue, of contrasting emotional collisions, and particularly, of effective flashback when, at a crucial moment in the play, the torture that widows undergo traditionally at the hands of their in-laws is powerfully projected to us, through the recollections of TEMISAN, as she desperately seeks understanding for her past from her embittered daughter.

## 5. Conclusion

The paper has reinforced the invaluable instrumentality of theatre as a powerful development communication tool; for as Obadiegwu opines, development communication “is recognizing the power of communication as catalyst for social development” (3 p.13). The potentials of theatre as a powerful instrument in raising people’s consciousness over the dangers associated with widowhood practices as elucidated in this study, cannot be overemphasized; neither is its presence/immediacy nature of communicative effect. Ama-Abriel’s *A Past Came Calling* is no doubt an eloquent commentary on the functionality of theatre as a viable medium in refocusing widowhood rites practice in African culture and raising the consciousness of the society towards its inherent ills, for re-evaluation towards necessary change. This again underscores the strength of the utilitarian relationship between “art” and by extension, theatre and society which Plekhanov (22) affirms must be able to promote the development of human consciousness and improve the social order.

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