

## **African Widowhood Rites: A Bane or Boom for the African Woman**

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### **Abstract**

*Studies on widowhood rites in Africa generally bemoan what scholars consider as unpleasant treatment of widows, ranging from denial of basic hygiene, outlandish costumes and dress code, to intense public display of grief. Consequently, the studies tend to urge widows to reject such negative and harmful practices and assert their rights and womanhood. This study, on the contrary, argues that widowhood rites in Africa were not primarily designed to de-womanize African womanhood, or impoverish and oppress women; or are they part of the so-called male chauvinism. Rather, the rites are generally intended for the overall good of the widow.*

### **Introduction**

Studies on widowhood rites in Africa follow three clearly defined stereotypes. First, are scholars whose primary concern is to catalogue the perceived woes of widows. For these scholars widowhood marks a new beginning in a woman's life. Ba (1981), describes this period as a dreadful moment for African women and Oduyoye (1997), calls it extremely intense period. The rituals attached to this transition have also been variously described as harmful (Chima, 2006), odious (Pius, 2007), as well as, inhumanity to the humanity of women (Chidili, 2005). For this category of scholars widows, to borrow the caption of Adeyinka Aderinto's work, are no more than "Wives of the Graves" (see Adeyinka Aderinto, 2000).

The second category of scholars, however, seemed to be more preoccupied with the search for the possible factors that give rise to widowhood practices and the subjugation of women generally. In a relatively recent study, Adeyinka Aderinto (2000), sought explanation for the pervasiveness of widowhood rites within the culture and the social structure. His findings, among others, reveal that the patriarchal nature of many African communities and indeed, the culture, is applied in a way that perpetuate and sustain this practice. Similarly, Clifford Odimegwu (2000), notes that the gender ideology of sex differences and sex role expectations impact on widowhood. Within Igbo widowhood framework, Odimegwu argues that the rites are tied to traditional beliefs about death, inheritance, feminine roles, family structure and family relationship. Within this category of scholars, there are still some who are mindful of the impact of the social structure and culture on widowhood rites but nonetheless feel strongly that vengeance and a strong desire to get even are at the very root of the practice. Effah *et al* (1995), for example, have argued that widowhood is a time for settling scores, especially where the widow was never favoured by her late husband's family. In almost the same way, Chidili (2005) posits that widowhood rite is the unbridled desire in the married daughters of the land to insist on avenging their brother's maltreatment on the widow, or actuate a vendetta on the widow so as to get even from the hurt they incurred from their own part of the world.

The third category are those scholars who hold vehemently that widowhood rites in Africa are barbarous, cruel and uncivilized, and need Christianity and western civilization to purge them of these impurities. Thus the cardinal aim of Chidili's study of Igbo widowhood ritual was to see how it could be nuanced and updated with biblical messages (Chidili, 2005). Studies in this category often stigmatize African widowhood practices as inferior to those of Christianity and as a crude and an undeveloped system to which Christianity must refine and teach the right attitude.

Generally, widowhood studies in Africa bemoan what they considered as unpleasant treatment of widows, ranging from denial of basic hygiene, outlandish costumes and dress code, to intense public display of grief. Consequently, the studies tend to urge widows to reject such negative and harmful practices and assert their rights and womanhood. This paper, on the contrary, argues that widowhood rites in Africa were not primarily designed to de-womanize African womanhood (Zulu Sofola, 1998); or impoverish and oppress women (Ahonsi, 1997); or are they part of the so-called male chauvinism. Rather, the rites are generally intended for the overall good of the widow.

The aims of this paper, therefore, are double-fold. First, to show that African widowhood rites are the products of the instinct of self preservation which society has created to protect and safeguard the widow against the vengeful ghost spirit of her deceased husband. James Frazer in his *The Fear of the Dead in Primitive Religion* (1933) had produced a convincing argument to support the claim that a deceased person is believed to be more malevolent to his living descendants than he was during his life time. He also noted that the greatest danger seems to be those of the living who had been closest to the deceased. Second, the paper attempts to demonstrate that other aspects of the widowhood rites are efforts to prepare the widow for the arduous task of self reliance since death has claimed the bread winner and the head of the house-hold.

To achieve these aims, I relied largely from the materials on Isiokpo-Ikwerre widowhood rites. My choice basically was influenced by two factors. First, Isiokpo-Ikwerre widowhood rites exemplify very clearly the type which feminist scholars and western orientated female elites describe with all unpleasantries. Second, the rites which I am about to describe are typical of African widowhood rites on the eve of accelerated modern change without much distortion and contamination from the forces of modern change.

### **Background to the Study**

Isiokpo, on which this study focuses, is an ancient village group, which belongs to the Ikwerre speaking people, situated on the north-eastern fringes of the Niger Delta of Nigeria (see Tasie, 2005:35). The climate of the area follows a regular cycle. Since it is located within the tropical rain forest region of Nigeria, it rains more or less heavily from April to October, and it is relatively sunny and dry from November to March. The topography is fairly uniform. It consists of a flat plain, threaded with fresh water rivers and streams (see Tasie, 2007:13). These features of the environment create luxuriant vegetation endowed with fertile and arable land which has had considerable influence on the socio-economic life of the Isiokpo. As a result, the people were mainly agrarian and their chief occupation was farming.

Farming, immediately prior to the colonial era, and even up to the present time, was largely dictated by the land tenure system. In nearly all cases, farmland was communally owned, and was shared out on annual basis among males and unmarried women who claim descent through the male line to the lineage founder. The basic areal unit of farmland was the *imiibi anru* which was as wide as the length of an average bamboo pole and as long as two fairly tall palm trees placed end-to-end. The number of *imiibi anru* an individual received depended largely on his age, marital status, political office and participation in communal activities. But because individual's annual share of communally owned land was hardly enough, people could reclaim land through their own personal initiative from fresh water swamp forest. Such was known as *okorgbu igbogo* and was indeed, a very arduous task. Such pieces of land were regarded as the personal property of those involved.

Farming in the pre-colonial era was an arduous task. Farmlands were often situated several kilometers away from the settlement areas and farmers had to dissipate so much energy trekking to their farms. As a result, husbands often built *oriibi* (a special hut) in the farm for their wives. The function of *oriibi* was to serve as a resting place and provide a shade from the scorching sun. It also provides temporary accommodation to farmers who might wish to spend a night or more in their farms.

Early in the traditional year, around late February, a particular farmland was selected and shared out in the manner earlier described. In farming, roles were assigned along gender lines. Men cleared the farmland, which as a result of long traditional bush fallow system, had matured into forest. This was a very demanding task and something which every married woman was often very proud of and grateful to her husband. Widows, however, relied on their lovers or grown up male children to perform this task. When the farmland had been cleared and burnt; with the first rains, the women planted crops like maize, cocoyam and vegetables.

This was followed by yam. Yam, regarded as the king of crops was thought of primarily as the concern of men. Its cultivation was very demanding. After preparing the seed yams, special holes were dug by men (*ortu aliji*), sometimes with *obi* (a special stick with a pointed end for making yam holes) for planting the yams. The yams were finally inserted into the holes and covered with mounds of earth.

A man's wealth was adjudged by the number of yam barns he had. This partly explains why a man had to marry many wives, for they were to assist him in the farm. An adult male, therefore, had to contend with the jealousies and rivalries of his numerous wives who bicker among themselves to attract his attention and curry his favour. Yam *fufu*, a special delicacy among the Isiokpo, was the staple food with which many accomplished farmers fed their wives from one farming season to the other, sometimes to the envy of many widows, who had to make do with cocoyam *fufu*, generally considered as inferior to yam *fufu*.

Harvesting of maize and vegetables was carried out as the women weeded the grasses in the yam farm. Much later in the year yam was harvested. Towards the end of the farming season rumours of head hunters begin to spread around the villages and farmers became apprehensive to attend to their farms. In the remote past, such rumours were not very uncommon as human heads were often required to bury some important chiefs; cleansed the land of pollution and placate some angry deities (see Tasie, 1999). When such rumours became very rife women only went to farm in the company of their armed husbands who dangled well sharpened machete or dane gun. This is one of the many periods in the life of a widow when she most painfully remembers her deceased husband.

The socio-political organization of the Isiokpo is very much like other Ikwerre village groups, which is characterized by several levels of socio-political organization. Thus several extended families make up a lineage; several lineages make up a village, and several villages make up the village group. Each of the socio-political unit is headed by an *Owhor* holder (*Owhor* in this context is the sacred symbol of the family /lineage / village founder). The head of the village group went by the title of *Nyenwe ali*. Isiokpo is a patriarchal society. In Isiokpo reckoning, an individual is considered *epurepu* (a fully fledged member of a lineage), if he can trace his descent in an unbroken paternal line to the progenitor of his lineage and more importantly, if his father had paid the bride price or shown interest in doing so by omeshi *maya nuishi nwere*. This is an indication of willingness to marry a bride by legalizing the relationship through the presentation of a bottle of locally distilled gin (nowadays schnapps) to the father of the bride as soon as it is confirmed that the woman is pregnant. This way, the child dwells patrilocally, is admissible into the fold of lineage members and if he becomes the oldest man of the patrilineage, becomes an *Owhor* holder.

However, daughters were also respected and were given share of communally owned land to farm. Indeed, a father may prevent a favourite or only daughter from marriage. This is usually in the event of dearth of children in the family in which case a daughter is encouraged to remain at home and procreate with a man of her choice. Children of such unions dwell matrilocally and are entitled to most of the rights accruable to full members of their mother's patrilineage (see Tasie, 2007).

As regards their spiritual life, the Isiokpo see every facet of human activity and of the environment as underpinned by one spiritual agent or another. Different zones of the habitat are seen as controlled by different categories of spirits with different characteristics and functions. The individual is protected by his *Chi* (guardian angel), and by other lesser forces, notably *Ikenga* and *Agwumagu*. The settlement areas and farmlands are controlled by the ancestors and *Ali*, both of whom are benevolent but strict enforcers of the group moral codes. The forests are controlled by predominantly malevolent spirits; and the rivers are controlled by *Ngwuluo* and other fairly benevolent but morally neutral spirits. The divinities may be employed in judicial matters so that one person may ask another to swear, for instance, in the name of *Ali* over a dispute. Sometimes too, one who is wronged may solicit the support of the deities to inflict vengeance.

Turning to the spiritual underpinning the individual person, the Isiokpo believe that man is an embodiment of the dualism of the material, *anokpomahu* (flesh) and the spiritual (*nmuo*). The spiritual aspect of man comprised of the *nmuo* (the person's essence) and *inwe* (breath). The *nmuo* may be interpreted as the soul: the essence which bestows on him the true human attributes. The *nmuo*, although a spiritual entity, is believed to reside in the heart, *obu*. It is often spoken metaphorically as *nkpuru obu* (the seed of the heart). In sleep, when the individual dreams, it can voluntarily leave the body and roam about, while the individual becomes a 'thing', an unconscious immovable being, and returns after its engagement to inhabit the body.

Should the sleeping person be woken suddenly, the Isiokpo believe that the *nmuo* may not be quick to re enter the body, a situation which may spell death for the individual. To forestall this, the Isiokpo wake a sleeping man by first calling his name softly, to call back the person's essence, in case it has wandered out of the body, and then shake the sleeping man gently. Similarly, should a man be frightened in the face of sudden danger, the person's essence may leave the body temporarily and should it be long in re-entering the body, this may mean death for the individual.

The *inwe* is the animation principle which comes into the body at the moment of birth. It gives life to the individual person by making the material body conducive for the person's essence to dwell in. At death, *inwe* ceases to function, and the person's essence completely leaves the body and begins its journey to *ali agbara* (the spirit world). The material remnant, (*anokpomahu*) is buried in the grave and there it rots (Tasie, 2007:19-20).

Although, the spirit land is normally invisible to the living, the death sometimes appears in dreams. Sometimes too, they appear in real life, assuming their material bodies and being recognized fearfully by their kith and kin. Those who have heard them speak believe that they speak in *imi mpo* (nasal tones). Generally, the Isiokpo believe that the dead are malevolent and can kill, especially when they are yet to be accorded funeral rites befitting their status. At this stage, they are believed to be living an aimless haunting existence. These vengeful ghost spirits are a constant danger to the living, especially their close agnates, and may attack them through *mba agbara*, the affliction known to western style medicine as stroke. They may stage such attack on farm roads, stream roads, at mid night when people come out to ease themselves or even when the individual is alone at home. Because of this attitude of the ghost spirit, the Isiokpo say *agbara ma ije agha*, meaning that the ghost spirit behaves irrationally. It is this tendency of the ghost spirit to harm its close agnates, as we shall see in what follows, that provides a domineering influence on widowhood rites among the Isiokpo.

### **Widowhood Practices and Interpretations**

As soon as a man draws his last breath, *oke bi inwe*, which invariably, for the Isiokpo, is taken to mean the actual moment when death occurs, an inquiry party is sent out to consult a *dibia* (medicine man/diviner) to enquire as to the cause of the death. This is usually through *ogba aha* (divination). As it is often the case, the suspects are likely to be one of the many wives of the deceased or a kinsman. The inclination to reason along this line finds impetus in the Isiokpo saying that: A man whose life is not cut short by a woman or a kinsman is likely to live to a ripe old age.

For the wives, there are ample reasons why they may likely be suspects in the event of the death of their husband. As I earlier noted, a man had to contend with the jealousies and rivalries of his many wives who bicker among themselves to curry his favour. A man, therefore, is open and susceptible to the antics of his wives which they employ to win his love. Moreover, in an achievement orientated society like that of the Isiokpo, where the strength of a man's hand was adjudged by the number of his yam barns, the wives were seen as veritable instruments to achieving this. This had made the women, in most cases; saw their husband as a slave master and looked up to him with hatred and bitterness. As for a man's kinsmen, they are considered as his backbone and source of strength. The Isiokpo often name their children *Azubuike*, a name which implies that a man's strength is drawn from the multitude of his kinsmen. Nevertheless, they are perceived as his greatest enemies. The Isiokpo say that the thorn which pierces the heart of the tortoise is likely to have been planted by a kinsman. A saying which suggests that a man may be dreaded and feared by all and sundry; it is his kinsmen who know the secret of his strength.

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. In traditional Isiokpo, as it is typical of many rural societies, the most effective and established means of truth detection is oath taking. The nature of the issue in contention and the heaviness of the crime determine the type of oath to be administered. If, for example, a man accuses another of committing adultery with his wife, it is most likely that the accused, before the emblem of a deity, would swear to his innocence. On the contrary, the disappearance of a piece of firewood from a man's farm ordinarily may attract libation to track the thief.

However, on a very serious matter such as death, one of the most efficacious means of truth detection as the Isiokpo believe, is to ask the accused to drink a little of the water used in washing the corpse.

The guilty, it is believed, will in no distant time meet with death, whereas, the innocent will suffer no misfortune. Note that this method of truth detection is not exclusively reserved for the widows. The ordeal is open to all manner of suspects; and indeed, many of my informants remember vividly that more men have undergone the ordeal than women. In fact, this method of truth detection was last administered in Isiokpo in 1975. It was a kinsman of the deceased not his widows who took the oath.

When the cause of death has been established and the culprit identified then begins the elaborate widowhood rites whose two fold aims are severing the marital and conjugal ties between the deceased and his widow and preparing the widow for the arduous task of self reliance. As soon as it is confirmed that a man has drawn his last breathe, the normal life pattern of his wife is suspended and immediately replaced with innumerable restrictions. She is forbidden to attend to her farms or go to the stream to fetch water. For it is believed that the ghost spirit of her husband is lurking around to bring harm upon her. She is also prohibited to cook her food and those of her household. The Isiokpo say that to cook is an expression of merriment and joy. More importantly, one of the cardinal duties of a wife to her husband is to prepare his meals. Now that he is no more, this important duty should be proscribed, howbeit, temporarily.

When the funeral proper begins, the widow is confined to a room under the protective watch of the *ommiriya* (daughters of the deceased's patrilineage) and her conventional dress code is replaced with mourning attire. This consists of a little piece of wrapper which is tied round the waist of the widow and then passed in-between her thighs covering only her pudenda and leaving her buttocks bare. She wears a pad, like menstruating women do, and her entire body is painted with kaolin. Placed beside her or at the entrance of the room where she is confined is an old blunt and disused machete. Attired in this fashion, the widow appears extremely unattractive and unpleasant. This mourning attire of the widow is a deliberate design to make her appear distasteful and repulsive to the ghost spirit of her deceased husband who, it is believed, would still want to perform his marital and conjugal duties to her. The pad which the widow wears at this stage of mourning is part of an attempt to prevent the ghost spirit of the deceased sexual access and to hood-wink him into believing that his widow is menstruating. The old blunt machete placed by the widow, or at the door, or inside the room where the widow is confined is aimed at scaring the ghost spirit away from the room where the widow is confined.

When the corpse has been washed, attired in the finest clothes and laid out in state, the widow is called upon to sit on a mat by it. With a piece of george wrapper in hand, she wards off flies from the corpse, as she eulogizes her deceased husband in speeches and songs. As a rule, until this phase of mourning is over, the widow is expected to eat with her left hand and from disfigured plates or even in extreme cases from coconut shells. The reason is to prevent the hovering ghost spirit of her husband from sharing in the meal. For, it is dishonourable for an accomplished man to eat from disfigured plates, much more, coconut shell. The use of the left hand is a show of affront and disrespect, all aimed at dissuading the ghost spirit of her late husband from joining in the meal.

Every early morning, for the first eight days of mourning, when the ghost spirit is still believed to be lurking around the homestead, the *ommiriya* wake the widow up to weep for her deceased husband. As she weeps, a lamp is lit to inspect her face to ascertain if she is truly shedding tears. Should a widow pretend to weep and not shed tears, this is taken to mean that she never loved her husband; or that she is inwardly rejoicing at his death; or most dangerously, that she had a hand in his death. For the Isiokpo, the shedding of tears is considered the peak of emotional distress and a means of assuaging grief.

On the second night after interment (i.e. the third night since the funeral was declared open), the *ommiriya* gather the widows of the deceased man for the *ogbuiwo* rite. In this rite, the wives of the deceased and their children recount to the *ommiriya* and other sympathizers his good deeds to them. The rite follows the pattern of eulogizing the deceased. The aim is to pacify the ghost spirit of the deceased that his widows are not rejoicing at his demise but are terribly pained by his death and, that he is greatly missed in his good deeds to his family. On the eight day since the start of the funeral, the head hair of the widows is completely shaved. This is a mark of respect to the deceased and a symbol of mourning for the widows.

For widows of a religio-political office holder, there are additional rites which give a distinctive character to the funeral. Thus at the end of the first eight days of mourning, the widows enter into a period known as *mgbugba*, during which they are restricted from moving out of the homestead for *eke asa* (seven native weeks). At the end of this period of confinement, a special rite is performed in which the widows mimic some economic activities.

For instance, they are directed to attend to their farms in the middle of the night alone. They are expected by custom to harvest some of their crops and finally bring home a bundle of firewood.

As they journey to their farms in the middle of the night, men may hide among the bushes, occasionally shaking the shrubs in order to instill fear into them. Should any of them be frightened, it is believed that she may fall sick and eventually die. However, in order to lighten their task, close agnates may go to their farms in the day and make ready the items they are expected to collect. They are equally directed to go to the stream and fetch water, also in the middle of the night. This mid-night fetching of water is also a trial period for the widows; and in order to protect them against untoward events, during the rites, their agnates may seek the services of a herbalist to fortify them with protective medicine.

The widows are also expected to go to the market, albeit in the day time. On a designated market day, they carry their wares, which may be a bunch of plantain or tubers of yam or cocoyam to the market. They are escorted to the market by their close agnates who are not expected to walk side by side with them, but to come behind. The widows are also not allowed to talk to any one as they journey to the market. As they reach the market, they display their wares, and sell them off to the first bidder, irrespective of the price offered.

These rites, apart from being a test of bravery and dexterity, are most importantly aimed at preparing the widows for the arduous task of self reliance. For as was made clear at the beginning of this essay, farming which is the main income earner for the Isiokpo, is an extremely arduous task where husbands play very important roles both in the clearing of the farmland, in the building of *oriibi*, in planting of yams and in providing security for the wives, when rumours of head hunters begin to go round. In interpreting these rites, it should be noted that the event of death has claimed the bread winner and the head of the household and has, therefore, rendered temporarily helpless all those who hitherto depended on him for care and support. The rites are, therefore, aimed at strengthening the widows in order to prepare them for the challenges ahead.

After these rites the widows begin the one year period of mourning. The demands of this period are very stringent for the widows and they are surrounded with innumerable regulations and taboos. These include dressing in pure black material, moving about with bare feet; wearing pads as menstruating women do and wearing their hair tattered and uncombed. They are also forbidden to sleep outside the homestead, to have photographs taken of themselves, to look at themselves in a mirror, or to take shelter in the event of rainfall catching them in a door way. The tattered look of the widows is a ploy to make them appear unpleasant to the ghost spirit of their husband who is still hovering around the homestead and who may still want to continue to commune with them. The austere look of the widows and rejection of anything that gives pleasure and comfort is also a ploy aimed at pacifying the vengeful ghost spirit of the deceased to make his widows appear seriously pained at his demise.

At the end of the one year mourning period, it is believed that the ghost spirit of the deceased has been completely ushered into the spirit world, *omecha ahu*, a rite of purification and rebirth is observed. This rite involves the widows to go to the stream in the wee hours of the morning for a ritual birth. At the end of this ritual, their head hair is shaved and the clothes used for mourning are burnt. The widows are expected to abstain from further outward show of grief. The widows, who hitherto have been outside of society, with very many restrictions, are now readmitted into society and are deemed free to remarry.

The overall aims of Isiokpo widowhood rites could, therefore, be summed up as: first, to sever the ties between a dead husband and his living wife. For, as we earlier noted, the Isiokpo believe 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. Second, some aspects of the rites are aimed at equipping the widow with the necessary courage and bravery to cope with the life of self-reliance which the death of the bread winner has exposed her to.

Quite often, feminists have asked the question: why it is that men are not subjected to these rites? Interpretation, again, has to be sought within the socio-cultural frame work of the people. In Isiokpo culture, as typical of many African cultures, it is the man, in the natural order of things, who demands for sex from his wife. This mundane sexual order is also carried into the spiritual. Thus, it is an aberration for the ghost spirit of a deceased woman to make sexual advances to its living husband.

More importantly, for the man, physical strength and biological difference between man and woman remove the psychological fear upon which the religious belief that the dead can harm a living relative hinges.

Again, man in a typical rain forest and agrarian society like that of the Isiokpo, is naturally endowed with superior physical strength than the woman, to cope with the arduous task of fending for his family, and therefore needs not to undergo any rites at the demise of his wife to acquire this dexterity.

### Conclusion

In understanding widowhood rites, interpretation must be sought within the people's cosmos and socio-cultural matrix. In Isiokpo, as typical of many African societies, the male folk are not in a rivalry of domination over the womenfolk, in which the women must be subjugated and condemned to perpetual servitude. Gender and sex roles are not antagonistic and pitched against each other. Rather roles assigned along gender lines are complimentary, aimed toward achieving harmony within the family and the community at large. Thus, it is the duty of a man, for example, to split firewood; and the woman to use it to prepare meals. A practice which finds impetus in the saying: "as the right hand washes the left hand, the left hand washes the right hand" (see Obioma Nnaemeka 1998:9).

Moreover, African world view accentuates the belief that both the man and woman have the same divine origin notwithstanding that each has been endowed with special duties to perform for the overall good of society. In the light of this, Zulu Sofola, rightly observes that the African sees the human society as an organic, holistic reality whose existence and survival can be achieved only through a positive, harmonious social organization in which all members are relevant and effective (1998:53). To substantiate this assertion, Sofola draws our attention to the Yoruba *Odu* corpus of *Ifa* on its account of the coming of the first set of human beings from the heavenly abode to occupy the earth. In the course of the journey, as she noted, things went awry when men attempted to ignore the female member of the party. However, Orunmila, the *Ifa* oracular deity alerted that the female member had been ignored. Immediately, this was corrected and harmony was restored (1998:53). Similarly, in many African cosmogonic myths the Supreme Being found it expedient to entrust the creation of mankind in the hand of female deities. Take for example in the Nnewi (Igbo) creation myth; it was Edo, a female divinity and a special favourite of Chukwu (Supreme Being) who was commissioned to fulfill this task (see Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979).

In traditional Africa, the fear of male chauvinism and domination is latent. Women are not seen as mere appendages to the men. That women occupied a place of pride and were formidable force to be reckoned with in traditional Africa is attested to in the following remarks:

Quite often, when one hears the western educated African women speak in a demeaning manner about her illiterate, rural, 'traditional' counterpart, one cannot help but pity the former for her false sense of importance and delusion of grandeur. It never occurs to her that while she parrots the phrase, "what a man can do, a woman can do better", her illiterate counterpart asserts, "what a woman can do, a man cannot do". While she quotes the European saying, "Behind every successful man is a woman", her illiterate counterpart affirms: "The strength of a man is in his woman" or "A soldier with a mother does not die in the war front". While she conceives of herself as someone to be seen not heard, her illiterate counterpart says: "If the *Ada* (daughter) says that a day-old chick is a hen, so it is". While she hangs on to a wicked and bestial husband, her illiterate counterpart throws such a husband off in the spirit of the following proverb: "The burden of a husband is carried on the wife's shoulder, not on her head; she quickly drops it when it becomes too unbearable", or "it is one's child that keeps a wife in the house of a wicked husband" (Sofola, 1998:63).

If this is the pervading attitude of the rural African woman, an attitude which in itself translates for the rural woman self confident, self dignity and pride, and if women in traditional African society held sway, why then the hullabaloo about widowhood rites? Today, when writers describe African widowhood rites with unpleasant and defamatory remarks they are only affirming to the elitism and arrogance of western educated women; who indeed, are exhibiting rather flagrantly ignorance of their own tradition and world view. For this category of scholars, Africa must be judged with categories and schemes of the outside world, namely Christianity and Islam; and the only picture of Africa they desire to behold is a reflection of that which is imported from the West.

That the women themselves are the gate-keepers of widowhood rites lend credence to their deep appreciation of the import of the rites to the overall well being of the widow.

Saba, K. O. (1997) reveals that most women who went through the various rites failed to see anything bad in them, indicating that the rites are accepted as normal requirement of their widowhood status. A more recent study by Taiwo Agatha N. Onyenuchie (2000) clearly shows that 86% of the rural population in Edo and Delta states of Nigeria did not want to see a change in the rites. In observing these rites, the typical African woman does not feel that her womanhood has been violated. Writers who see these rites as subordination of African woman are products of Western intellectual tradition.

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