

MOURNING RITUALS: CASE STUDY OF WIDOWS IN EZIMO COMMUNITY

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Abstract

The paper studies the rituals that surround the mourning of husbands in Ezimo community of Nsukka cultural area of Igboland. The study ascertains that these ritual practices have been misrepresented by some Christians and some advocates of westernization as an evil practice against widows. This work contends that such disposition may be misleading and diversionary from the realities of the people's tradition. The rituals express Igbo ontology and cosmology, and also ensure safety, respect and protection of widows, which aim to achieve cordial relationship between the widows and the supra mundane, and equally maintain peace and morality in the community. The research discovered that some Christian widows of this recent time interpose Christian and traditional practices in the mourning rituals. This indicates that the people of Ezimo or Igboland in general have not fully accepted the Christian mourning rites because it contradicts the people's concept of death and belief in the socio-religious significance of the traditional mourning rituals.

Introduction

The consciousness and attitudes of the people of Ezimo and other Igbo people to burial, mourning and funeral rites show the significance attached to death. From the socio-religious aspects, the importance of the morning rituals is observable from the strict, unconditional commitment of widows to its performances, which suggests the people's unalloyed attachments to the ancestral beings. Every widow is always conscious not to go contrary to the traditional mourning rituals.

However, in the recent time, some Christian widows in Ezimo are at a loss on what to do when their husbands die. They sometimes find themselves in a dilemma because of the difference in what they feel are their obligations to their late husbands and some of the Christian teachings against such. The widows are aware of the traditional dictates of their obligations. Secondly, the traditional beliefs state that death rites, which include mourning rituals, determine the place and position of the dead in the spirit world. Thirdly, there is also the belief that the ancestors can punish persons for violation of death rites.

It has been observed among the Christians that the traditional apprehension of the world unceasingly manifests in their thought, behaviour, practices and even their belief system. Ejizu (2002) noted that, "The worldview of most Igbo professing Christians remains that which is inherited from the traditional religion. Certain traditional beliefs ... still persist in the minds of many Christians today" (p.212).

It is a general belief in the Igbo cosmology that death is a medium through which the living joins their ancestors in the spirit world from where they can still interact, protect, intercede

and even punish the living. And to show that the ancestors do these things on behalf of the Supreme Being, Quarcoopome (1987) wrote, "Against this criticism, it must be noted that in the traditional cosmology, the ancestors dispense these things on behalf of God. The ancestors are the immediate representatives and intermediaries of God, and so to the living they are sort of big brothers" (p.131). In Ezimo, after a death, there are some rites that follow which include burial, mourning and funeral. These rites are performed by the living for the dead, and its non-performance can attract punishments.

Discussing the importance of mourning in Igboland, Onuh (1992) said, "The most prominent rite of this stage is the mourning of the dead, whose duration depends on the closeness of the relationship between the mourners and the dead person" (p.159). According to the Ezimo tradition, the most important rite that requires the wife of the deceased as the closest person is the mourning, and therefore she has the highest duration of the mourning period.

The choice of Ezimo, a community in Nsukka cultural area of Igboland for this study, is to ensure a smaller scope of the study, which is suggested for a new direction to the study of African traditional religion. Onunwa remarked this impression and reflected on Turner and said:

A reinterpretation that can be African religion in African scholarship should take note of Harold Turner's call for the re-examination of the study of religious phenomena within smaller units of a larger complex society as a new direction to the study of African primal religion. (p. 226).

The study which centres on Ezimo out of the Igbo larger society is a result of the sensitivity of the ritual in the area, and also to ensure an in-depth study.

Izokpo Aria (Matching of Calabash): An Ontological Dimension

In the Igbo traditional religion, the Igbo ontology is a life force in a vertical and horizontal relationship with other forces. It is the relationship which exists in form of force between the supra mundane and the mundane. Metuh (1981) explained the Igbo ontology thus:

Man, ontologically, is best viewed as a living force in active communion with other living forces in the world. Every person is a nexus of interacting elements of the self and the world which determines and is determined by his behaviour. Thus, the true concept of man is lost if he is considered in isolation (as it is done in the Western world). He is all the time interacting with other beings in the universe to which he is linked by a network of relationship. Man, in Africa Religious Philosophy, therefore, is best studied as a life force in the mildest of other life-force. (p.193).

Mbaegbu (2012) agreed with Metuh thus:

Igbo metaphysics or ontology, on the one hand, restricts its enquiries to the Igbo man and his presence in the world and worldview. The topics that constitute a special field of study here include: the nature of ultimate reality for the Igbo, the nature of beings or "forces according to Tempels, in the Igbo universe, the relationship between the sensible and supersensible beings, that

is, their interaction; others are hierarchy of beings in the Igbo universe, laws, and vital causality (p.120).

In the Ezimo tradition, before the advent of the European and Christianity, immediately a man is confirmed dead, there are some rituals that follow which are in many forms depending on the man that died. These rituals like what Metuh and Mbaegbu said are the expression of link between the physical and spiritual forces.

The rituals differ from persons to persons. For instance, the ritual that follows the death of priests, titled men, provosts and maidens of deities are different from that of an ordinary person. Basden (1983) noted:

The body is laid upon its back, and no thought is given as the position or direction of the grave. This is the customary course for normal death and burial, but there are deviations from the rule. The exceptions are governed chiefly by consideration of birth, rank and the cause of death (Pp.113-114).

Basden was trying to explain that the burial processes or rituals differ depending on the above factors he mentioned—birth, rank and cause of death. After the rituals that are performed immediately after the confirmation of the death, the next is the burial. Immediately after the burial, the late man's wife or the widow goes to the threshold to perform an important ritual known as *Izokpo Aria*. *Aria* is a calabash that looks like a plate or bowl. In the olden days *Aria* serves the purposes that plates or bowls serve today.

Izokpo Aria refers to a process whereby another older widow takes *Aria* and keeps it at the threshold, and then leads the widow whose husband was buried to the place. At the location, the widow whose husband was immediately buried smashes the *Aria* with her leg. After this, the widow goes back to the house and starts the mourning of her late husband. As she comes back, a knife is provided for her to hold. In some cases, talisman is provided and kept where the widow stays during the mourning period. The knife and talisman are symbolic of the people's traditional religion. They believe that the knife and talisman scare away the spirit of the dead husband from the widow. This attests to the Igbo ontology: the presence of the supernatural forces in the physical world.

Ogbukagu (2008) observed this practice: "The widow is made to hold *mmaekwu* (a knife) usually tied against one of her fingers to avoid it falling down" (p.295). The action of *Nzokpo aria* is simply for outsiders who do not understand the religious implications. For them, it is just smashing of the calabash. However, the meaning is beyond that. *Nzokpa aria* is very significant in the mourning ritual of one's husband in Ezimo. The ritual is symbolic. It is a visible representation of human action about the relationship between the mundane and supra mundane. It is a symbol which signifies separation of the widow from her late husband. Just like when a calabash (the *aria*) is smashed, it cannot be mended, so also when one's husband is dead and buried, the marriage between them ceases to exist and therefore their sexual relationship comes to end. So, the ritual signifies the end of the marriage. Ogbukagu (2008) remarked that:

At some point in time before the burial rites of a married man, the *umu-okpu* calls on the wife of the deceased man to perform the “ife -nso” (traditional divorce) ceremony before the dead body. It is an action designed to sever (divorce) her from all physical and other connections with him as a husband (p.287).

Danfulani (2015) noted separation in funeral rites this way: “For example, rites of separation are prominent in funeral ceremonies.” (p.194). Owete (2017) also recounts the need of rituals for separation of a late husband from the widow: “A husband is regarded as having such a stake on his wife. This fact makes it necessary for many rituals to be performed to enable the man to hands off his wife” (p.63).

Though the ritual signifies the end of the marriage, but that does not mean a total disconnect of the widow (the physical) and the dead husband (the spiritual). Igbo people believe that the physical and spiritual worlds are one and not two like the Euro-American view. Metuh (1999) wrote:

The vast number of spiritual beings does not imply the dichotomy found in European philosophy and theology between the material and spiritual world, the visible and the invisible, the sacred and the profane exist in Igbo traditional religion ... The Igbo world is one, not two. The invisible beings, the deities and spirits have no separate world of their own (p.80).

Also, Ejizu (2008) agrees with Metuh’s view:

The African perception of the cosmos, it must be recalled as well integrated and characteristically holistic. It outlines a vision of reality as a whole in which hierarchies of beings and cosmic forces are integrated in a complex web of interrelationship and interactivity (p.28). Ossai (2018), in agreement with the above authors, remarked: “For the traditional Igbo, there is an ordered vision of reality where they perceive the universe as tied structure ... and other cosmic forces co-habit this earth with man” (p.48).

The above assertions show that there is an intrinsic or web-like relationship between the spiritual and physical worlds. Ezimo people and indeed other Igbo people believe that at death, the spirit is separated from the physical body and goes to the spirit world where it joins its departed kinsmen – ancestors and continues living. At this spirit world, the dead husbands still watch and observe the activities of widows during and after the mourning. Against this backdrop, widows do everything possible not to contradict their obligations in mourning their husbands.

Following the *nzokpo aria*, the widow goes into the mourning of her dead husband. And from then, the tradition forbids her from cooking; going to market, stream, farm; attending any burial or funeral ceremonies and any other social gathering.

Gannep (1960) asserts:

During mourning social life is suspended for all those affected by it, and the length of the period increases with the closeness of social ties to the deceased (eg for widows' relatives) and with higher social standing of the dead person (p.164).

According to O. Ugwuabonyi (Personal Communication, 15th August, 2020), in the traditional religious practice at the pre-Christian era, when one's husband dies, she is forbidden from bathing till after *izuassa* (one lunar month), which is 28 days. O. Ugwuabonyi who spoke out of experience said that in the olden days, women mourning their husbands were not supposed to appear clean or neat which was to show bereavement of one's husband.

Even though O. Ugwuabonyi acknowledges that the present practice where a widow can bathe and appear clean is better, at least for hygienic reasons, but she frowns at how some widows of these days show disrespect to their late husbands and their nonchalant attitudes to the code of conduct required of a widow.

Izu-Asaa (One Lunar Month) Ritual

In the traditional mourning rite of one's husband in Ezimo, the *izu-asaa*, which is 28 days after the day of the burial, is marked with ceremony. It is a fact that Africans are expressively religious and Ezimo people are not an exception. Leonard (1968) is one among many authors to remark this among the Igbo of Nigeria:

They are, in the strict and natural sense of the word, a truly and a deeply religious people of whom it can be said, as has been said of the Hindus, that they eat religiously, drink religiously, bath religiously, dress religiously, and sin religiously (p.429).

This ritual starts a night before the *izu-asaa* with a vigil known as *nchuuraizuasaa*.

NchuUraIzu-Asaa: A night to the izuasaa ritual, relations of the widow, her friends and neighbours assemble in her house for the *nchuura*. The purpose is to show solidarity with the widow as she has successfully completed the one month mourning of her late husband. This is because of the belief of the people that if a widow has a hand in the death of her dead husband, he (the dead husband) would strike within the *izu-asaa*.

The purpose of the *nchuura* is to show solidarity, oneness, togetherness and expression of love to the widow. In the house of the widow, the relations of the widow prepare and eat the food they provide and also take the drinks, followed by singing and dancing. They and other visitors stay with the widow till early in the morning on the day of the *izuasaa*, and then they depart to their respective homes.

Basden (1983) affirmed:

At intervals during the twenty-eight days of retreat crowds of friends and relatives visit the house and a general time of excitements prevails, with singing and dancing, drum-beating and other forms of music, and gin. Enormous quantity of food and liquor are consumed. (p.117).

The only difference between the ritual in Ezimo and the above assertion by Basden is that, in Ezimo, the ceremony is done during the *nchuura*, that is the vigil to the *izuasaa*, which is on the twenty-seventh day and not on the twenty-eighth day as noted by Basden above.

Onuh (1992) remarked that it is done on the wake, and that people provide food and drinks:

This togetherness is manifestly expressed in funeral rites and ceremonies, where practically every member of the community is expected – nay – compelled to be physically present, interrupt his daily work, provide food and drinks for the wake (depending on the degree of friendship), participate in the physical mourning of the dead (if one is a woman). (p.170).

Shaving of Head Ritual: The tradition of shaving of head as a sign of mourning in Igboland is captured by Basden (1983): “At the conclusion of the lamentation – and after the burial ceremonies have been fulfilled – both widowers and widows shave their heads as a symbol of grief and bereavements.” (p.116).

For widows in Ezimo, the shaving of head is done on the *izu-asaa* (28 days), and not at the end of the mourning which is *ofuaruo* – one lunar year (364 days).

Very early in the morning of the *izu-asaa*, the widow who is the celebrant of the ceremony in company of another older widow goes into a nearby bush for the ritual of shaving of head. In that bush, the older widow shaves the head of the mourning widow. The scraping is totally done that no hair remains on the widow’s head. Ogbukagu (2008) stated: “In case of a married man, the hair of the wife is shaved off completely after the burial by *nwada* (a kindred daughter) whose husband is no longer living” (p.295).

In the house, after they had returned from the shaving in the bush, the widow brings *abo* (local basket made of palm rachis and rope), and put the hair shaved from the widow’s head. Other things to be put in the *abo* include food (any type), meat, cola-nuts, drinks, snuff, water and any other edible things that they can add. After this, the widow carries the *abo* and another woman who must be a widow carries *aria* that contains water, and follow her to *ebe-eto* (junction where three roads join).

Ebe-Eto: At *ebe-eto*, the women drop the *abo* and the *aria*. Ritual bathing, ritual burning of cloths and some other forms are performed at the *ebe-eto*. The choice of *ebe-eto* for these rituals is because of the people’s belief that spirits assemble at *ebe-eto*. Therefore, it is believed that the spirit of the dead man is at the *ebe-eto* to receive the edible gifts and listen to the widow. The first thing done at *ebe-eto* is the performance of forms by the widow. According to Ossai (2014), “Forms are words of mouth or pronouncements that are made during religious exercise.” (p.109). In this form, the widow addresses her dead husband as if she could see him physically. Anything she wants to tell him can be said at that point.

She can present to him (the late husband) her problems and the problems of the children. If there is any danger she envisages as a result of his death, she can say it and request his assistance. Also, she can ask for the man’s protection of the family. At the end, she presents

the edibles to him. This shows the people's belief that the spirit of the dead people and other spirits assemble at the *ebe-eto*.

The *abo* of the edible placed at *ebe-eto* and the forms by the widow are symbolic. The rituals signify the last food provided by one's wife to her dead husband. The second thing it signifies is the preparation of the dead husband for the journey ahead to the spirit world. The food is to give the dead husband energy for the journey. And the addition of the shaved hair into the *abo* signifies the widow's last and highest generosity to the late husband. The hair represents the head, which is the highest valued.

Dine (2007) wrote:

Isi generally means head in the Igbo context ... Here *isi* is used symbolically to signify value appreciated by all. In relation to the other parts of the body, *isi* is regarded as *ihebuuzo* (a thing that takes the lead) in any reasonable appearance. It is seen and regarded as the centre of bodily being (p.52).

So, the widow has given the dead husband the highest valued, which is the head and therefore he (the late husband) should not or never make any advances to her again. The rituals symbolize separation. Onuh (1992) remarked that and said: "Generally speaking, the major function of death rituals is to ensure a permanent separation of the dead ghost or spirit from the survivors" (p.158).

Ritual Bath: After the forms and the presentations of the items in the basket, the next is the ritual bath. Here, the widow bathes from the water in the *aria*. Owete (2017) drew attention to this practice in another community in Igboland where the ritual is performed four days after the burial: "After the fourth day, she must go to the stream very early accompanied by another widow to perform ritual cleansing. She must avoid being seen or exchange greetings with anyone." (p.59).

However, in Ezimo it is performed after one month, and it is not done in the stream, but at *ebe-eto*. Though the practice may not exactly be the same process, but the purpose is the same. It is a cleansing ritual for the widow. It is cleansing because the widow is assumed to have been unclean for the past one month of the mourning. After the bathing, the widow (the celebrant) smashes the *aria* with her leg. This particular smashing of *aria* is not known as *nzokpa aria*, even though the action and the purpose mean the same thing – separation.

After the bath, the widow then wears her mourning clothes, which are compulsorily black. Again, Owete (2017) submitted, "In the past, the widow could have only one set of mourning dress. This is usually black clothes that she must wear whenever she is in public." (p.62).

Ritual Burning of Clothes: Following the change to the mourning black clothes, the widow burns the clothes she wore to the *ebe-eto*. Note, the clothes the widow wears to the *ebe-eto* are the same clothes she has been wearing since the husband was buried; that is since the one lunar month of the mourning. This is because the tradition forbids the widow from changing her clothes till the *izu-asaa*, and the changing must be at the *ebe-eto* after the ritual bath. The changing to the mourning clothes brings the ritual at the *ebe-eto* to an end.

Visit to the Widow's Parents

In Ezimo, the tradition requires the widow to visit her parents from the *ebe-eto* to show that she has survived the *izu-asaa* mourning. So, after all the rituals at *ebe-eto*, the widow goes straight to her parents. However, in a situation that the father is late or live very far, the widow can arrange with any of her consanguineal family to stand in for this purpose. On her way from the *ebe-eto*, the widow does not look or turn back. The reason is for her not to see the spirit of her dead husband whom the people believe accompanies and protects the widow from *ebe-eto* against other spirit that may harm her.

In the house of the parents or their representatives, the widow (the celebrant) and the widow that accompanied her are entertained. This entertainment, which marks the widow's innocence of the death of her husband, is fundamental because in the people's traditional belief, if the widow contributed to the death of her husband, the spirit of the dead husband would have stricken her at *ebe-eto*. During the entertainment, the widow's father sends for the widow's children and informs them of the innocence of their mother (the widow).

The children would carry palm wine and cola-nuts to their mother's parents' house to mark her survival, and also receive her back home. However, if the widow does not have child/children or that her child/children is/are very tender, the relatives of the late husband take up the responsibility of receiving the widow back to the family. When the widow and the people that received her return to the house, there are usually merriments at her house to celebrate her survival. People come to congratulate her; some come with drinks and cola-nuts. After the ceremony, everyone retires to their homes.

Ogbukagu (2008) stated that: "On the twenty-eight days at the end of the execution of the customary '*ife-izun'asaa*' twenty-eight days of one lunar month rite, light food is served after which everyone except the mourning husband or wife finally leaves for their respective homes" (p.297).

Ise Aka je n'ekwu Ritual

After the visitors have gone home, the next thing is *ise aka je n'ekwu*. This means the ritual of placing of hands on a tripod used in cooking. The first action in this ritual is that the widow carries one of the cooking stones, called *eze-ekwu*, and keeps it at the threshold. *Eze-ekwu* is the biggest stone out of the tripod where pots are placed for cooking. *Eze-ekwu* has a bigger distance between it and the other two stands.



EZE-EKWU



EZE-EKWU

It is the *eze-ekwu* that is being carried out to the threshold and then replaced with another one. The replacement of *eze-ekwu* is done by the widow's first son. However, if the widow has no son or that the son has not grown, the closest male relative to the widow's late husband can do the replacement. This action is symbolical.

The action also symbolizes separation of the widow and the husband. By the tradition of Ezimo people, it is one's husband that provides the three stones that form the tripod stands for cooking. Sometimes, husbands go as far as another town in search of those stones. Carrying the *eze-ekwu* out to the threshold implies that the widow has rejected the stone and by extension the late husband who provided it. What this action indicates is separation of the marriage as a result of the death of the husband.

It is after the *eze-ekwu* is replaced, that the ritual of *ise aka je n'ekwu* can be performed. The procedure of this ritual is that an elderly widow invites the widow who is celebrating the *izu-asaa* to come to the kitchen. When she enters the kitchen, the elderly widow draws her (the widow mourning her husband) hand and place it on the new *eze-ekwu* that was replaced. She then makes pronouncement to her, that; she can now start to cook food as she has satisfactorily completed the *izu-asaa* mourning periods.

According to the tradition of the people under study, after the ritual of *ise aka je n'ekwu* the widow is free to cook food, go to farm, go to the stream, go to market and attend social gathering. However, despite the fact that the widow can do all the said things, that does not mean that the mourning is over. It continues till *ofu-aruo* - one lunar year (364 days).

What this means is that there are still some limitations to the widow. For instance, it is against the tradition for a widow to have sexual intercourse within the one lunar year of mourning of her dead husband. It is worse or more offence for her to become pregnant within this one

lunar year. Even if the widow wants to remarry, she must wait at least after one lunar year of the mourning period before she can do that.

Significance of the Mourning Black Cloth

The black mourning cloths which widows wear during the mourning periods of their late husbands has socio-religious significances. From the religious perspectives, the people believe that the mourning black cloths serve as identification before the super sensible forces. For insistence, the people of Ezimo believe that benevolent spirits identify widows on black mourning cloths and bless them in their endeavours. For example, gods responsible for farming identify widows on black mourning cloths and bless their farms with prosperous farm produce, also the gods responsible for trading identify widows on mourning cloths who are traders and ensure success in their trading. The people also believe that benevolent spirits identify widows on black mourning cloths and give them more protections against evil people.

In Ezimo community, it is against the tradition for men to seek for love or sexual relationship from widows during the period they are mourning their husbands. So, from the social viewpoint, the black mourning cloths serve as means of identification of widows against men who may make love or sexual advances to them during the mourning period. And, as a result of that, widows are expected to avoid sexual intercourse during this period. Ilogu (1974) remarked this and said:

A widow having sexual relationship while still 'wearing' for her late husband mourning cloths. She is considered to be in ritual danger until she had performed 'the cleansing rite' normally after one year, such sex relation is regarded as spreading pollution (p.126).

Any man who sees a widow on black mourning cloths and make love advances to her is seen as *onyearuru ala* – violator of the tradition of the land. And the implication in the people's traditional religious belief is that the spirit of the widow's late husband and other ancestors would attack men who make such advances.

Also, from social angle, the mourning cloths serve as means of favour. In the olden days and even today, some good people show favours to widows when they identify them with the mourning cloths. For example, the cost of commodities in the market especially food items are reduced for widows when they are identified with mourning cloths.

From the above points, one can understand and justify the traditional belief and sense in the widow's mourning cloths and the timing of the cloths. We can observe that, it is because of these identifications that widows start to wear the black mourning cloths after the *izuasaa*, when they become free to move around, to trade, farm, attend social gathering and do other things.

Social Change and its Effects on Mourning Rituals

According Achebe (1986):

Change is a prominent feature of the Igbo world. Change may be positive, negative; happen sooner or later, but it is sure to occur. Any conception of lack of change is

merely a sign of impatience. For change, there must be, in one's circumstance when the time is ripe. (p.21).

The coming of Christianity in Igboland around 1854 brought the introduction of an alternative worldview to the indigenous traditional architecture of the Igbo people. Since then, the foreign religion considers the Igbo traditional religion as barbaric therefore continues to relegate it to the background especially its traditional rites. Quoting Ohadike, Madukasi (2018) reminded that:

Europeans have tried to use Christianity to establish a pattern of domination over the people of Africa and to exert a deep on African culture and institution. By and large, the observers of indigenous religion viewed African culture as primitive and associated African ritual rites of passages with paganism (p.216).

According to A. Ugwuezugwuorie (Personal Communication, 31st August, 2020), on changes in the culture of Ezimo in respect to mourning rituals, he said that the choice of black cloth as widow's mourning dress could be traced back to the very olden days. He said that the people of Ezimo and even other communities in Nsukka cultural area relate black to death. He recounted that even in the olden days, corps were buried with black cloths only. He lamented that the present idea of some widows wearing white cloths as mourning cloths is not in line with Ezimo tradition. According to him, this is new idea of some Christians who link black colour with Satan or devil and in extension to traditional belief. Ekwueme (1974) narrated how Christians relate traditional religious activities to devil. He wrote:

Early missionaries tagged all indigenous forms of arts as work of the devil, especially as almost invariably those associated with some religious or quasi-religious ceremonies ... The amount of damage done materially and psychologically to the culture of the Igbo ethnic group may probably ever be fully assessed (p.13).

For them, Christian widows who use black cloths as mourning dress means they are believers of traditional religion. As a result, some Christian widows decided to use white cloths which for them show purity or holiness and thereafter some traditional believers of these days who always wish to show that they too are modern and civilized people joined them. That is why today, most widows, both Christians and traditional believers use white cloths as mourning dress. Ossai (2018) remarked how traditional votaries copy Christian practices to prove that they are modern. He said; "Some traditional worshippers and even priests places the cross of Jesus Christ and statues of Virgin Mary at their shrines ... Their answers were first to make their shrines look modern and civilized" (p.252).

Widows and indeed other people in Igboland embraced Christian religion, but not necessarily out of the conviction that the religion solve or satisfy their craving for spiritual satisfaction, but to belong to what they think is fashionable. Metuh (1999) observed this "Christianity in time become associated with the modern way of life which meant adopting European names, some education, European cloths, paid jobs, enlightenment and prosperity." (p.206). Onunwa (2005) wrote in the same understanding that:

The Igbo are no religious ecliptics who embrace any form of religious change merely for the fun of it. The fact is that there is an achievement – oriented society and consequently they become keen in accepting new idea that would enhance their chances and opportunity (p.219).

This paper maintains that, despite the observable change of widow's mourning dress from black cloth to white cloth as a result of Christian or social influence, the traditional religious aim behind this practice which is Igbo ontological view is still reserved by the people. Madukasi (2018) recounted that Africa still maintain their traditional belief in the view of life, death and hereafter; he opined:

Burial rites in Africa retained their traditional panache despite the advent of Christianity. In spite of varying beliefs of the different religions on the concept of life, death, and afterlife, most of the practice, rituals and rites performed for the purpose of these concepts still have traditional attachments and implications (p.223).

The above assertion explains our position, that irrespective of the colour of widow's mourning cloth, whether black or white, its connotation is still traditional precepts. It is because the traditional religious belief and practices satisfies Igbo man's religious craving; that some Igbo Christians go out of their Christian religious practices and partake in the traditional religious exercises especially when it comes to death rites which includes mourning rituals.

Owete (2018) held this view and said that "Some Christians prefer to juxtapose Christian and traditional religious rites out of fear of retribution by deceased relations. This gives them the confidence that they are not missing proper rite." (p.61). In the same line of thought, Adibe (2009) called this juxta-pose cross-fertilization. He reflected Nwankwo and wrote:

The immediate result of the juxta-positioning of religion is a cross-fertilization of religious idea. Accordingly, in modern Igbo world, this led to making of choice in culture, dropping of religious membership for new ones, or sharing the ideas and benefits of two or more religious worldviews and practices (p12).

Today, majority of Christians in Igboland claim to have distanced themselves from Igbo traditional rites, but investigations have revealed that Igbo Christian still don't carry out mourning ritual or funeral rites without involving traditional religious practices. This is because of Igbo ontology which as was explained earlier, is the existence of relationship between the physical and the spiritual worlds. And every Igbo person, both the traditional religious believers and the Christian don't want a break of this relationship especially in death, mourning and funeral rites. Metuh (1999) noted this fact and wrote:

Many prosperous Christians would wish for traditional funeral for themselves and their relatives, and sometimes do involve themselves in traditional rites which their religion condemns. Even today many Christians as well pagans appeal to *Ala* and/or other deities for the protection of their properties (p.206).

The aim of all the changes done or being done to mourning rituals and other traditional culture in Ezimo community and other parts of Igboland and indeed other African society was/is an attempt to shift from the traditional to foreign religion. Metuh (2003) lamented this when he said; “the pulpit, bible school and catechism classes were used to persuade African to change their lives, reject their traditional religious beliefs and culture, and adapt Christianity packaged in European cultural forms.” (p.239).

However, despite the above assertion by Metuh, this study and other attachments to the traditional religious practices, are evidences to prove that Igbo or African traditional religion may be difficult to be downplayed. Ejizu (2002) was of this view when he maintained that Igbo religion will continue its existence despite socio-religious transformation:

The traditional religion of the Igbo is far from being anachronistic in contemporary Igbo religious scene ... in line with the more generally acclaimed theory of socio-religious change; it has endeavoured to trace the major lines of continuity of certain core traditional Igbo religious beliefs practices, values and attitudes. (p.130-131).

Ejizu's position agrees with what is observable in Ezimo when widows mourn their husbands. We say this because, upon all the churches and their Christian religious practices, Christian widows perform the traditional rituals when it comes to mourning of their husbands. No doubt that some of them do not follow all the traditional processes of the rituals as it requires, but the fundamental ones are done.

It was also observed during the study that some widows who are Christians perform some of these rituals in Christian denotation. For instance, the use of white cloth as mourning dress instead of black, church outing instead of visit to the parent's house, holding of bible, cross of Jesus Christ, rosary or chaplet and other crucifix instead of knife or talisman and so on. What we can observe from these actions by Christian widow in Ezimo is the willingness of the people to obey the traditional laws, not because of compulsion, but their wish to be in congruence with the traditional belief system. Ewelekwa (1992) noted this fact and said:

Such laws were therefore happily obeyed not because the police men and law enforcement agencies were standing by to punish offenders, but because they were in conformity with wishes and desire of the people, their ancestors and God, and any violation of them might constitute an abomination (Nsoani) which not cleansed would surely disqualify a person from joining in the happy union hereafter (p.vi).

It is pertinent to note that despite these changes, the aims remain the same. It is still the same aims and objectives of the traditional rituals that the Christians profess in the changes they invented. The aim of the widow's black mourning cloths is the same with the white mourning cloths introduced by the Christians. Either white or black, it is for identification. The outing church service which Christian widows claim to be thanksgiving only, is the same purpose with the visit to the widow's parent. The purpose is to let people know that they (the widows) are innocent of the death of their late husbands. The bible, rosary, and other crucifix which widows hold in their hands serve the same purpose of knives and talisman. Like the traditional

believers, it is aimed to keep off the spirit of the dead husbands. Owete also remarked this “the widow is given her kitchen knife or stick to hold in order to chase the spirit of her husband who may try to have contact with her” (p.59).

Our position is that, the widow’s mourning ritual like other Igbo traditional religious beliefs and practices are part and parcel of the people and therefore it is difficult to remove it from them. That is what is in practice in the widow’s (both the Christian and the traditional worshippers) mourning rituals. The widows, including the Christians cannot do without involving the traditional rituals. This was the thought of Leonard far back (1906), when he remarked that:

The religion of the natives (Africans) is their existence and their existence is their religion. It supplies the principles on which their law is dispensed and morally adjudicated. The entire organization of their common life is so interwoven with it that they cannot get away from it (p.429).

However, it has been observed that code of conduct of widows and even some of the rituals are no more observed according to the dictates of the tradition which are as a result of socialization and culture contact. Today, some widow who are still mourning their husbands with the black or white mourning cloths leave in the cities with other people of different cultural backgrounds. Some of these people know nothing about the culture of Ezimo and sometimes go to the extent of making love advances to the widows and even have sexual intercourse with them.

In the same way, some widows especially those married from other communities who may not know the culture of the people and yet not properly informed of the culture can fall victims. Some of such widows out of ignorance contravene the tradition and succumb to the advances by men and have sexual intercourse with them. In fact, some of them become pregnant within the mourning period, when they still dress on the mourning cloths. However, some of them are aware of the tradition, but may decide to disregard it and misbehave.

This breach of the tradition has resulted to misunderstanding between some widows and their husband’s families and sometimes between widows and her own families. The misunderstanding arises because of people’s agitations for widows to comply with the tradition in respect to how they mourn their husbands. It is laughable to know that these controversies are triggered off by Christians themselves against the same Christian widows who violate the tradition; and not necessarily the traditional religious worshippers. Okwueze (2012) lamented this altercation between the Christian themselves on issues of traditional rites and culture. He wrote:

In the past, the conflict was drawn between non-Christians traditionalist on the one hand and the Christians on the other hand. But the recent conflicts show the Christians waging cultural wars against themselves. One finds a situation, for instance, where the Catholics in a particular town or community are divided among and against themselves on an issue having to do with traditional rites and culture (p.145).

Even though some scholars maintained that despite social change, the African are so committed to the indigenous religion. However, it is an observable fact that since the Igbo came in contact with the Christianity in European culture, there have been socio-religious changes in Igboland. And the reason for this is simple; the Igbo are broad-minded to other people's culture. Ottenberg (1959) noted this about the Igbo when he said "the Igbo are probably most receptive to culture change and most willing to accept Western ways of life than other groups in Nigeria" (p.130).

In agreement with Ottenberg, we can say that migration may be responsible for some of the socio-religious change in Igbo society which includes the mourning of husband and its rituals in Ezimo community. Migration which results to borrowing and losing of some socio-religious behaviours has caused some widows who leave in the cities to exhibit behaviours which are contrary to the code of conduct of a widow.

It is more worrisome to know that some of the people who contradict the culture and the tradition of the people are not bothered, instead they see it as "modern traditional system" which has come to replace what they call the "obsolete system". Onunwa (2005) said this "Those outside influences have in some subtle ways been accepted by later generations as part of the traditional system and have in some ways replaced the original pattern of life" (p.225).

One Year (Lunar) Ritual

In Ezimo community, one-year ritual which marks the end of the widow's mourning period is done with minor ceremony. It is important to note that this one year is lunar year (364 days). It is calculated in the lunar calendar and not Euro-American calendar. This clarification is important because of the observed confusion resulting from the disagreement of whether to calculate the mourning period for widows and widowers in the lunar or Euro-American calendar. Ossai (2016) noted this and wrote:

It has been observed in some area in Igboland that calculation of time and dates have started resulting to misunderstanding when it clashes with the Euro-American style of calculation like the issue of period of mourning for widows and widowers in some communities in Igboland (p.55).

Early in the morning on the 364 day after the burial of one's husband, the widow's head is shaved by another widow. Unlike the shaving done during the *izu-asaa* which must be in the bush, the shaving done in this one year could be done anywhere around the house or nearby bush. But the tradition does not make it compulsory to be at the bush. After this shaving, the mourning of a widow's husband come to an end and the widow become totally free. She can participate fully in every social activity without restriction by the tradition.

It is of interest to note that the resent idea of burning the widow's mourning cloth after one year was not and is not compulsory in the eye of the tradition. The widow continues to wear the mourning cloth till it becomes old. The only thing is that after the one-year ritual, it becomes optional for the widow to wear it to public places. The recent practice of burning the mourning cloth is a later development which is as a result of abundance of cloths. In the olden days when cloths were scarce, they (the widows) continue to wear the mourning cloths till it becomes old.

By the tradition, a widow who has mourned her husband for the compulsory one-year period is done with the mourning. And with the one-year ritual, the widow is re-assimilated to the society. Onu (1992) reflected this re-absorb of widow to the society thus:

It may also be seen as a symbol of the last commensal union with the deceased. The rites which lift all the regulations and prohibitions of mourning such as the special dress, carrying of shaved hair, indoor restriction etc should be considered rites of reintegration into the life of the society (p.160).

Ogbukagu (2008) also recounted this same view and said; “The next important ritual is observed one lunar year (364 days) after the burial rites ... after which the widow commences to live a completely normal life like any other person in the society” (p.298).

Conclusion

It has been discovered that Christianity has countered some of the wholesome tradition of the people. Achebe (1958) was right when he said that “The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peacefully with his religion ... He has put knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.” (p.124-125). Ossai (2014) corroborated Achebe’s view and said that “the social change has adversely affected Igbo traditional customs, beliefs and practices. The Igbo religious outlook which gives cohesion and meaning to Igbo existence is no longer there”(p.163).

However, we maintain that among the many traditional religious practices which resisted the expansive changes occasioned by colonization and Christianity in Ezimo community is the rituals embedded in the mourning of husbands by widows. This may be because of the people’s world view of the continuous interconnections and inter-relationship between physical world and the super sensible.

Research has discredited the presumptions of some people that mourning rituals are forced upon the widows. This is untrue because widows understand that the rituals aimed to protect, defend and earn respect to them; and more importantly ensure cordial relationship between them and spiritual forces. So, they freely undergo the rituals.

The people of Ezimo knew that rituals forced are not and cannot be genuine practice, therefore these rituals are not forced, but performed willingly by the widows because of their conviction of its significance. We can understand this from a personal observation by Onunwa (2002) as he narrated:

On the burial ceremony of a Roman Catholic member, I found out that despite the religion of the deceased he was given the full traditional rite deserved ... Libation and incantations were made wishing him smooth passage to the ancestral world (p.87).

Madukasi (2018) equally maintained that the traditional religion of the Igbo is still preserved by the Igbo, he reflected on Onunwa’s work and said:

The Igbo therefore had become socially enlightened but superficially converted to Christianity and their rate of absorption of the teaching of Christ

and application of the same to life is poor ... Nonetheless, the deeper spiritual roots were not greatly touched which made some traditional beliefs to be retained (p.228).

The study unveiled that despite many years of Christianity in Igboland, Christian religion is yet to provide the satisfaction which the people crave for. This result to syncretistic practices as observed in the widow's mourning rituals. When people conform to different religious beliefs and practices, an amalgam religious value system is created. Today, as a result of socio-religious influence in Ezimo and other communities in Igboland, rituals performed by widows for the mourning of their late husbands and indeed some other religious practices are an expression of religious amalgamation.

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