

## Violence against Women: Widowhood Practices and the Church. Towards the Construction of a New Culture of African Womanhood

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### ABSTRACT

This study is an attempted overview of the African oppressive structure against women, with special reference to widowhood - all in the name of culture. We shall envisage the journey so far towards their liberation thanks to Christianity through inculturation. This paper therefore proposes an unrelenting upgrading of this liberation scheme in favour of the African female folks, aligning the scheme with the contemporary situation of women in the wider world. This proposed insertion of the African woman into the broader global picture would however caution African women against losing their identity in the process and thereby being isolated from their African roots. Our basic method in this study is critical, explorative and analytic.

### INTRODUCTION

One can say without fear of contradiction that the African cultural ambience was dominated by male hegemony. In such a setting women were isolated and confined to domestic life where they were expected to achieve self-worth through submission to their husbands while becoming a sort of factory machines for the 'manufacture' of children to populate their kinship. Quoting Wasike, Mbefo (2009) proffers the following remark:

*The woman was looked upon as the vessel of life or a fertile field in which a man planted his seeds. The more children she bore, the better for the man; the more wives (fields) the man had, the more children he was likely to beget.... The barren woman was (therefore) considered a dead - end and useless to the community. In some communities she was scorned and at times labeled a witch.... Whatever other qualities, gifts and talents a woman might possess, the inability to procreate reduced her to the status of a non-person. (55)*

This picture of childlessness resulting in apparent nonentity of an African woman is just a glimpse at the horrible experiences of the female folk right from birth. The upbringing of a female child already set her aside for these unacceptable but unfortunately tolerated degrading burdens against women. Like her mother, she was to patiently accept as normal her privation of freedom and self-determination. In the past she would not be allowed a say in matters concerning her education or even choice of marital partner. She could even be "given out"<sup>1</sup> in marriage the very day she enters the world or at a very tender age. One of the disastrous consequences of such forced marriages forms the following headline of the CNN News. Noura Hussein, a Sudanese teenager, has been sentenced to death for stabbing dead a man she was

<sup>1</sup> In Annang culture of Eastern Nigeria, baby girls were sometimes "married" to certain families at birth. According to tradition, this was done to substantiate the friendship between the two families. By simply tying a yellow palm frond to the wrist of the future spouse- the baby girl- the deal was done.

forced to marry at the age of sixteen. The late husband is said to have raped Noura while she was being held down by the deceased relatives. *CNN News, via Skype, Nairobi, Kenya; 11.49 GMT, May 11, 2018.*

All these are nothing compared to the plight and prolonged ordeal of widowhood, an additional agony at the passing on of the male partner. In addition to the irreparable loss, created in her life at the death of the husband, the widow was, and still is (in certain parts of Nigeria) subjected to terrible emotional and physical stress. Levirate marriage, which often follows the burial of the husband, is another conundrum especially with the resulting women warfare if the new "husband" is already a couple. In majority of cases, the widow is a major suspect in the husband's death and therefore subjected to unimaginable inhuman treatment, as we are going to see, as a way of declaring her innocence. This study accredits a great deal to Christianity in an effort to alleviate the insurmountable horror of the widows on the African continent. However, our position is that it should go further to eliminate totally the awful oppressive schedule associated with widowhood, for as it stands the widow seems caught in the web of conflict between allegiance to an inhuman custom and a not-fully fulfilled liberation scheme of Christian culture.

### **AFRICANISM AND THE CULTURE OF BONDAGE**

As with other cultures, the African people's way of life flows from their world view, the heritage of African culture, which has become a value of an inestimable worth – a source for discovering the primordial mindset of Africans. This involves their collections of folktales, myths, proverbs and customs that predated European intrusion which nonetheless have preserved the African primitive (in the sense of original and originating) mind, a treasure that would have been lost in the non-literate culture if not for the expatriates' work. These collections have become reservoir of native wisdom; independent, primal African vision of reality. In addition, the above structure also harbours the kinship relationship, which is a form of social organization flowing from African culture based on blood and marriage. From this perspective, traditional African womanhood as a dimension of African culture was manifestly polygamous. It also betrayed other alternatives as early marriage, widowhood, levirate marriage and divorce. Looking at polygamy as a cultural tool, John Mbiti (142-143) observes that it helps satisfy the African's quest for many children which increases the sense of corporate existence and is a source of labour force and economic asset. It provides the necessary manpower needed in providing security and safeguarding the integrity of one's fatherland. Polygamy, it is argued, also reduces the tendency of marital infidelity in husbands. He also acknowledges the existence of its inherent negative aspects namely, the inter wives rivalry, quarrelling and fighting. However in our judgment, in the above situation, women are always the scapegoats and the enslaved.

Agreeing with our observation above, African women theologians see polygamy as a part of the broader scheme of African oppressive system against women, constructed primarily for the interest of men. These theologians say that the polygamous social structure confers on men more than women, social, political, economic and even sexual gains. Polygamy denies women the human right to conjugal love with husbands, for while the wife cannot share her love with other men, the man can share his with as many women in the system. Polygamy turns women into an appendage, a property of the man - one of the man's labourers. (Odooye: 189-191).

### **The Marginalization of Women**

As a popular saying goes, a woman is called *in union with man* to represent humanity and to develop both herself and humanity in as complete a manner as possible. From the above statement a woman is defined and conceived of only in connection with man. The book of

Genesis reads: "This at last is the bone of my bone and the flesh of my flesh, therefore she shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man" (Gen. 2:22-23). However, it must be noted that the man-woman paradigm is inconceivable without each other. From the beginning of history, the two beings were inseparable though they can hardly co-exist without rancour. "Male and female he created them." This issue of the distinction between man and woman hinges on an essential and foundational dimension of our personhood as sexual beings. This all-important dimension of our being as either male or female involves our self-awareness and self-expression: the way we are, the way we think and behave in the world as masculine and feminine. Its primary importance and objective consist in the fact that it is sexuality which divides humanity into two opposite though complementary compartments. McGrath et al. also have the details:

*Let us look at something we all know well, the crowd of people at the market place or the stream of people walking on the main street of the town. The first thing that strikes us is that this large group is made up of two kinds of people: men and women. We notice that we are all alike but different. Alike in having a body crowned with the head, with its eyes, ears and nose and mouth – a body with arms and hands, legs and feet. Yet they are also different from the body of woman. We know that in our bodies every part has its work to do for us (9).*

My immediate and only reaction to the above is that the writer is speaking philosophically. In reality what attracts our attention first in a market place is something else other than the distinction between the sexes, unless our attention was initially drawn to it. Such is taken for granted in all cultures and does not spontaneously captivate us. However, the important thing in the above is that we are either male or female; otherwise we are not human. I do not believe in hermaphrodites. Therefore being a man or a woman is neither a punishment nor a privilege. None is superior; none is inferior to the other. Oduyoye (1990) vehemently defending women's right to self-determination avows that: "By nature we are male and female; there is no intrinsic hierarchy here" (40).

Since our write-up concerns widowhood practices in Africa, the female folks are directly our main focus. As a member of the female *homo sapiens*, a woman has characteristics, talents and potentials peculiar to her. These are qualities totally different from yet complementary to those of men. This male/female partitioning is essential as a matter of distinction. But trouble crops up only when this essential distinction turns into artificial opposition. This artificial dichotomy is the main focus of our research and is worth the condemnation similar to the classification of races into superior and inferior here written off by Udondata and Ekanem (2013): "Races are unique and different not superior or inferior; the idea of racial or tribal superiority or inferiority is a delusion" (18). Yes, the idea of a particular sex being branded superior or inferior is a delusion. Hence a woman is a woman and she should remain a woman to the fullest, realizing all her potentialities; she cannot be a man and was not meant to be one. She should not want to be or strive to become a man.

However, before a woman can justly be said to be marginalized or violently treated by a particular culture, many related issues must be considered; otherwise such judgment cannot be objective. The role of a woman in society ideally includes actualization of all her talents to the fullest. It is when she is roughly prevented from performing these nature-assigned functions freely and without interference, that violence against women can be evoked. Hence when inquiring about the role of woman in society, one must ask: "Which Woman?", "Which Society?" and "Which Epoch in History?"

### **Which Woman?**

Whatever positive or negative cultural attitudes there are towards African womanhood are further concretized and complicated by the kind of woman one is thinking of. The following are some of the several kinds of women in Africa and their roles are variedly affected: the westernized educated woman, the locally-educated woman, the illiterate woman, the rural woman, the urban dweller, the *élite* woman, the common folk woman, the married, the single woman, the married child bearing, the married barren, the single woman parent, the single childless woman, the divorced woman or remarried woman, the widow, the working woman, the home maker, the professional (lawyer, engineer, medical doctor) the non-professional, the non-Christian, the Christian woman, the professed religious woman, and the non-professed. "The role of woman will differ according to whether she is young or old, educated or uneducated, rich or poor, single or married, with her husband or divorced, childless or with fifteen children, searching for husband without finding one etc". <https://sedosmission.org/old/eng/umorem.htm>

### **Which Society?**

Coming to the society one must ask: is the society primitive or modern? , Rural or urban? , agricultural or industrial?, under-populated or overpopulated?, at peace or at war?, in an era of penury or affluence?, of social chaos or orderly?, with parochial family system or egalitarian?, or in which women are of high or low self-esteem? Is the population of such an environment educated or illiterate? We must also note that the social role in sexual matters derived from one culture can quickly become antiquarian in interest and applicability in another since specific roles must be constantly reanalyzed in relation to existing circumstances. According to Oduyoye:

*The denigration of women is the creation of human culture ... the culturally defined duties and attributes we call gender are human creations not to be turned into idols.... What we call women's place in one human culture is also men's place in another.... There is nothing permanent about human beings as culturally defined (40).*

### **Which Epoch in History?**

Human society evolves with time because it is dynamic. That means that principles, worldviews and customs of a particular place may become refurbished to the point of non-recognition according to a particular era. Others may equally become redundant. What is women's work in a particular age may turn out to be a man's work in another. Certain acceptable and even prescribed modes of behaviour of the past may become aberrant to the present generation and thereby become a violation of basic human rights of citizens. For instance in some African communities, twin mothers were either ostracized or killed while their babies were thrown into the evil forest in accordance with the tradition of the forefathers. This practice became outlawed thanks to European missionaries such as Mary Sellsor. As I have also mentioned elsewhere, primitively in some areas slaves and even most beloved wives, were buried alive with their dead masters (Umoh, 2015: 94). Such abominable practices that would shock and traumatize people today as barbaric were carried out strictly in conjunction with the traditional norms and regulations prevalent during such periods.

### **Patriarchal Culture has its Blame**

Right from birth, the initial early childhood upbringing of a baby girl followed strict local cultural norms and stipulations completely different from those of boys. At any rate this was normal because boys are not girls. However, in most African societies even today, girls are not supposed to be extroverts or even outstanding. Such would not send good signals to the society. They should hide in the crowd not sticking out their necks. They should proudly and virtuously be withdrawn and in a way shy – an attitude that eventually relegates them to the

background, classifying them as second-class citizens. Such was normal but unfortunately had an untold negative impact on their self-esteem and personality development.

In a not-too-distant past I think the required cut-off points for girls in some examinations in Nigeria, were normally lower than those of boys. And the female folks were happy for being recognized as the weaker sex – though intellectually. They did not complain of inequality. In some cultures that concession would trigger off demonstrations for an insult against women. However, it should be noted, this derogatory attitude towards women is not peculiar to the Nigerian culture. It is welcome in many Muslim countries, even by the female folks themselves. In Saudi Arabia, I think it was only in 2017 that women could go out to cinemas and were officially permitted to drive.

The above childhood upbringing of girls was in complete contrast with what obtained in boys, who were called to be courageous and even outrageous; characteristics that would qualify them as brave warriors, fearlessly ready and poised even to shed their blood in defense of their families and their fatherland. This is the process of enculturation which molds people according to the dictates of one's culture.

*This enculturation process has both cognitive and emotional elements. The girl child who later becomes a woman learns and internalizes both. This learning-to-become is comprehensive in the sense that one learns and internalizes both the derogatory and positive concepts, judgments and attitudes towards womanhood. This learning takes place through example, direct teaching and in patterns of behaviour, in songs, proverbs, wise sayings and folktales. What is learnt directs towards corresponding patterns of behaviour. <https://sedosmission.org/old/eng/umorem.htm>*

### **The Biblical Slant**

The Old Testament presents woman as both equal and yet subordinate to man. It was through woman that sin entered the world, though man was at last to bear the blame (Gen. 3:1ff). However, her role as mother gave hope of redemption. In Israel, women had no priestly role or official participation in the religious cult, though this would not prevent them from being prophetesses. This was the case with Miriam, the sister of Moses ((Ex. 15:20) or Deborah (Jdg. 4:4). This ambivalence between equality and subordination is displayed in the book of Leviticus when both the adulterer and the adulteress were, according to the law of Moses, to be put to death (Lev. 20:10). However, in practice, women were numbered among other possessions of their husbands. In fact, they had no status. Despite the above law, what obtained was that a woman caught in adultery or an unmarried pregnant woman was to be stoned to death, while nothing would happen to her male counterpart. This was the issue in the story of Susana (Dan. 13).

This discriminatory attitude did not stop with the Old Testament. Instances abound in the New Testament where women were not regarded as human beings or at best were treated as very inferior to men. In the case of a woman caught in adultery, the scribes and the Pharisees brought only the woman and would have stoned her to death but for the dramatic intervention of Jesus (Jn. 8:1ff). They misquoted the Law of Moses cited above to support their prejudiced plan of action. Even during the miraculous feeding of the four thousand, St. Matthew gives the impression that women and children are not human beings: “...those who ate were four thousand without counting women and children” (Matt. 15:38). This ambivalence is well spelt out in St. Paul. On the one hand he affirmed the equality of the sexes before God (Gal. 3:28) and preached the restoration of the dignity of women in Christian homes (1Cor. 7:3; Eph. 5:25; Col. 3:19). However, Paul prescribed strict norms and regulations which were to unilaterally govern women's behaviour in public religious assembly. When they pray or speak in public

their heads were to be veiled, for man is the image of God while woman is the image of man (1 Cor. 11: 4:16). He continues that women were not permitted to talk in Christian assembly, they were to keep silence (1Cor. 14:34-37). Women were forbidden to teach. Rather they were to listen and learn in silence and in humble submission. Whatever they did not understand they were to ask their husbands at home (1Tim. 2:9-15).

Most widows in biblical history were poor, defenseless, vulnerable, pitiable always oppressed and therefore in perpetual need of assistance, justice and pity. The only exception that comes to mind here is Judith the wife of Manasseh (Jdt. 8:4ff). For this reason God was and still is always on the side of widows and orphans. Therefore the reproach of widowhood found in (Isaiah 54:4) and (Ruth 1:13) may be because for these authors death before old age was considered as a punishment from God. Hence priests were forbidden to marry widows (Lev. 21:12). Passages abound warning against ill-treatment of widows and orphans. In the book of Exodus we read: "You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you do afflict them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry and kill you... and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans" (Ex. 22: 22-24). Similar warning are carried by the following Old Testament passages: (Is.1-17, 23), (Job 22:9; 31:16), In the prophet Jeremiah God is presented as protector of widows. (Jer.: 49:11). Israel was warned not to exact her clothing or other property in payment of debt (Deut. 24:19-21). At harvest grains, some fruits of olive and grapes were to be left behind in the field for widows.

In the early Church, during the apostolic era, widowhood among other things was noted for indigence. This is what led to the appointment of the first seven deacons whose duty was to cater for the neglected Hellenistic Jewish widows in Jerusalem (Acts 6:1). Widows were also noted for their industriousness and generosity. In Joppa, widows grieved over the death of their generous colleague, Tabitha, who during her life time was the supplier of their needs by her industry. They were over joyful when Peter raised her from death (Acts 9:36-41). Under the pretence of offering prayers for widows, the Pharisees enriched themselves by "devouring the substance" of these defenseless women (Mk. 12:40; Luke 20:47). Paul's advice that widows should remain unmarried was not binding (1Cor. 7:8-9, 39-40). He later admonished them to remarry if their loneliness tended to lead them to behave in a way unedifying to the Church and win them disrespected in the early church. He later constituted them officially into a group of widows. Members were to be women of high esteem and of at least sixty years, given to prayers and good works. They should have no intention of remarrying; must be hospitable to the poor (1 Tim. 5:3-16).

Though exact trustworthy documentary evidence on the post-apostolic evolution of the status of widows is lacking, it seems probable that widows were regularly chosen as deaconesses, although the distinction in terms of duties between the two was not very clear. However, deaconesses received the imposition of hands (Const. Apost. 8:19), whereas widows did not. The institution of widowhood, at least as a rank certainly survived public recognition by the church under Emperor Constantine. Canon 11 of the Council of Laodicea suppressed institution of Presbytides, precisely that higher rank of widows who had been chosen as deaconesses, but the lower rank of simple widow was not affected by this canon. The institution began to decline as an independent class with the 5<sup>th</sup> century rise of female monasticism and the elimination of the need of providing financial and religious security for these precariously situated Christians. According to Vatican11 widowhood should be accepted bravely as a continuation of marriage vocation. Cf. *Marriage and Family Life in the Modern World*, no. 167. In the same document, widows, as other Christians are called to a life of holiness: "A like example, but one given in a different way as that offered by widows and single people who are able to make great

contributions towards holiness and apostolic endeavour in the Church” is given in the following document – *The Call of the whole Church to Holiness, no. 187*.

### **The Oppressive Culture of Widowhood**

African marriage seems to be the breeding ground for abhorrent violence against women. It is here that is found the practice of early marriage which does not accord the girl the right of mature choice of life partner based on love. The pre-marital rites of fattening preparing the maiden for womanhood and marital life was another practice marked by activities which still provoke a lot of controversies even to this day. Here we are talking about clitoridectomy or female circumcision. Although male domination is always blamed for its perpetration, this culture of puberty rite is in reality promoted by the female folks themselves. And there are corresponding rites for male adolescents, often not cited in defense of women allegations. Therefore the male folks cannot actually be accused of dominating over women in this regard. Cf. Umoh (2016, 130-136). It is within marriage as well that exorbitant bride price is in vogue, which gives the impression of the woman being sold to the highest bidder, thereby reducing the woman's status to that of commodity. More often than not, this provokes a lot of tension in marital homes. There is discrimination against women during divorce, for the woman is always to blame for the breakdown of marriage and often she has no share in the property jointly acquired with the husband. In many cases, women cannot even sue for divorce. During child delivery, it is the woman who must confess her marital infidelity (if applicable) under pains of being killed by the spirits of infidelity, whereas a husband can freely engage in adulterous acts and get away with it without being divorced or subjected to public ridicule.

The entire aforementioned, are nothing compared to the abhorrent and dehumanizing ill-treatment of widows on the African continent. According to Onyekuru (2011), widowhood is the loss of the head of the family. Therefore widowhood refers essentially to the woman at the death of her husband, when she did not remarry. Akanni (2001) in turn defines a widow as one whose husband has died and has not married again. Widowhood practices affect women more than men. Hence Nwosu is right in observing that

*...the disorganizing and traumatic experience, which accompanies death of husbands, tends to be greater on women than that of men when they lose their wives. While the wife immediately becomes the primary suspect for her husband's death, the man is immediately offered an appropriate substitution to comfort him upon the loss of his wife (79).*

Referring to Annang widowhood called *Akpe*, Umoh (2015) insists that widowhood was strictly woman's affair:

*It was a rupture of alliance with the death of the husband. Since Annang culture is patriarchal, only women were expected to be initiated into widowhood. One can now see why **Akpe** was a purely women's affair and took place simultaneously with other male's ceremonies performed on the corpse or in the deceased compound. **Akpe** was an initiation of its own and was normally performed in the new widow's hut. Widowhood ceremonies are performed by older widows, usually those who have had the second burial of their late husbands celebrated. (93)*

All the above was to prove that the ill-treatment meted on the woman at the demise of her husband had no corresponding rites for the man, the widower, at the death of his wife. In terms of widowhood, women's societal status is far below that of human.

*The widow is subjected to physical, emotional and spiritual violence. She is perceived as taboo to living husbands and other males. She is subject to hopelessness, punishment, neglect, contempt, suspicion about her treachery, or lack of good care.*

*She is perceived as threatening to other couples' relationship and suspected of adulterous living. The result is that a widow is usually a neglected and deserted lonely woman (Mbefo: 56).*

In Okrika, Ahoada, Ogoni, Nembe and Ikwerre communities, all in Rivers State of Nigeria, widows are subjected to the following harsh treatments: They have to sit on the bare floor for a number of days before and after the husbands' burials. They must remain unkempt for a period before being allowed to shave and for the period of seven days or more, they are forbidden to have their bath. They must remain confined within the deceased homestead and are subjected to compulsory mourning and wailing while recounting the husband's virtuous life. Their only dress is black clothes and among the Annangs of Eastern Nigeria these are the only articles of clothing that she is allowed for a year or more; that is until the memorial service of the late husband.

Widows in the above mentioned tribes in Rivers State are forbidden to inherit the husband's property and should abstain from sexual acts for a year or more after the husband's burial. They are forced to confess their guilt in an event of sexual affairs during the period and must offer sumptuous sacrifice to appease the deceased husband and the gods of the land. Eventually she must present such items as a goat, fish, drinks, plantain, and yams to the elders to be allowed to conclude her mourning ordeal. Umoren <https://sedosmission.org/old/eng/umorem.htm>

In some cultures in Nigeria, widows are made to cook with broken pots and eat with unwashed hands. She is also kept with her husband's corpse to keep away flies from the body, walking about the household while wailing. This wailing is measured as adequate or otherwise by the relations of her husband. If the widow is suspected of having a hand in the husband's death, her trauma is unimaginable. In some cultures like Abakaliki in Ebonyi State of Nigeria, widows – even educated ones – are compelled to sleep on the same bed with the husbands' corpses for stipulated number of days and are made to drink the water used in bathing the corpses by way of exoneration. Soon after the post burial mourning, comes levirate marriage, a compulsory process of remarriage of the widow. She has to make her choice from among the kinsmen of the deceased. Having made her choice, she is mandated to offer specific items such as palm wine, fowl and yam tubers to the men of the family for outwards transmission to the newly selected husband. If he rejects the offer, the widow is again made to search from within the family for a new levirate husband. On acceptance, the new husband is required to offer his new wife specific items ranging from clothes to foodstuff as demanded by custom. The new wife is then officially handed over to the new husband and she must prepare banquet meals for the elders in the family. This is called the acceptance meal among the Annangs. If the man is already a husband, this is the beginning of warfare for the widow with the old wives. In line with this, Eluwa (1988) has this to add about the problem of levirate marriage in Edo State of Nigeria:

*...after the period of mourning in Edo State some widows are being subjected to psychologically frustrating experience on process of being inherited by the heir or next of kin of the late husband and any attempt at rejecting such an offer attract total ostracisation from her husband's family or limited access to her children.<sup>39</sup>*

Umoren supports this view when he observes: Another aspect of African marriage that robs the woman of her human dignity is levirate marriage, the marriage between a woman and the relation of deceased husband. Levirate emphasizes the position of the bereaved woman as the property of the husband and his family. Therefore at the husband's death she is generally expected to stay on (as property of the family) without any choice in the matter. She raises



children to immortalize the deceased husband's name. With the absence of choice, levirate is more dehumanizing than polygamy. Umoren <https://sedosmission.org/old/eng/umorem.htm>

Authors are numerous to condemn widowhood in Nigeria as a sordid practice which allocates to widows a position of societal scorn and disdain, rendering them wretched and pitiable. With such barbaric treatment, some of them meet their gory end sooner than later even before the expiration of their ordeals. Onyekuru (2011) is with us in this regard: "Over the years it has been found that cultural practices against widow have several negative effects on them and the family, the ultimate of it is the early death of the widow leaving the children as orphans and escalating poverty and moral ills in the society"(355).

### **The New Culture of Liberation**

There we are with the atmosphere that welcomed the missionaries unto the continent of Africa. But we have to observe right away that initially the missionaries were completely ignorant of those barbaric traditional norms which tended to enslave the host citizens in the name of culture. For them, everything cultural was designated pagan and was immediately thrown overboard without being given slightest thought. In the life of the Church in Africa, however the above patriarchal tendencies tacitly still found their interpretation in the exclusion of women from certain liturgical and ecclesiastical functions whereas the liberation from the above entanglements should have been the primary target of inculturation, an importation of the foreign religions. "Christianity and Islam in Africa are often said to be "guest religions." By this appellation we are to understand the obvious: namely, in Africa both Christianity and Islam, coming from outside continent, are received on the basis of convictions already arrived at by their host, African Traditional Religion." (Mbefo: 51).

### **Enculturation, Inculturation and the Gospel of Liberation**

Having looked at the nature of the culture of African womanhood as marginalizing, we now are to examine how inculturation, imported by Christianity, is to relate the Gospel of Liberation to the culture of bondage and, transforming it, set the African woman free, for integral development. According to Umoren (1992) "inculturation refers to the missiological process in which the Gospel is rooted in a particular culture and the latter is transformed by its introduction to Christianity. Christianity and (the) culture are thereby mutually enriched." (Cf. Ukpong 1992: 63-65). In a way inculturation is the introduction of the Christian message to a new mission land. To be successful, such a founding of the Gospel must not overlook the already well established faith of the people. Rather it must try to tactfully embrace it and in a way espouse it, converting it to the profit of Christianity. For as Umoren avers, inculturation is a two way process: it roots the Gospel in a culture, and introduces that culture to Christianity. Within the context of this study, to root Christianity in the African culture is to initiate two events. The first is to transform the African culture of oppressing women. The second is to develop the culture's latent potential towards the human development of the woman, created like her male counter-part in the image and likeness of God. The other aspect is to introduce the woman and her transformed culture to Christianity, for example by allowing the woman a meaningful place among the agents of inculturation. (Ukpong: 63-65).

It was in the above sense that inculturation was welcome to Africa under the following designations: "Adaptation", "indigenization" or "Contextualization". Later on all these appellations were found to be wanting in one way or the other and were therefore replaced with the terminology "Inculturation".

*... since late 1980's it has become fairly clear that while "contextualization" refers to the general theological approach that takes the social, historical and cultural contexts of a people as the starting point for theologizing, "inculturation" refers to the specific*

*type of contextual theology whose methodology derives from the world-view and cultural dynamics of the people. "Feminist theology" which addresses the issue of sexism in society, "Black theology" which addresses the issue of social discrimination against the Blacks, and "Liberation theology" which addresses the issue of economic and political oppression in society, are other types of contextual theology. Journal of Inculturation Theology, Vol.1 no. 1, 1994, Editorial, pp. 5-6.*

This approach is really of great importance, because it contributes to a greater understanding and appreciation of African traditional religion and culture in relation to Christianity. For one thing African traditional religion and culture form the base on which Christianity is built in the African mission land. However, I must point out the little inadequacy of the partial area covered by the objectives of inculturation up till now. Here, I am in full agreement with Professor Justin Ukpung (1994) who avers that "...this approach covers an important area of concern of inculturation theology. However, it falls short in terms of the realization of the Christian message in practical daily life for its focus is limited to the religious aspects of culture and does not extend to the economic, social and political aspects." But Alas! This is the very core area where the African widowhood ordeal is situated. And to be successful, inculturation should capture an African person in his/her integrity and in his/her day to day existence. Otherwise it must be seen as inadequate.

In the church in Nigeria today, there is no established and officially designated assignment for widows by way of engaging them and helping them to forget their "eternal loss". In some churches they are simply constituted into small quasi-devotional societies with self-imposed regulations and obligations like cleaning up and adorning the sanctuary. In the Catholic Church in the United States, for example, some of the communion helpers and sacristans are widows of high esteem. Many too are employed as parish secretaries. The condition for such engagements centers always on their probity of life, trustworthiness, devotedness and life of prayer. In Europe, in Germany in particular, old widows are employed as housekeepers to clergies. As they are well advanced in years they are glad to offer their wealth of experience in the service of priests, bishops, old nuns and other aged in old peoples' homes. The situation is different in Africa.

In the Catholic Church in Nigeria, East of the Niger, apart from the small group called St. Monica, which coordinates a handful of widows, I am unaware of other organizations specifically designated for widows to give them a sense of belonging. We must observe here that there is need for a forum where widows would not only be able exchange their views and discuss their plights, but more so encourage themselves in the light of the gospel and the Church. As we know there are very many young widows these days that are not lucky to remarry; this experience of apparently not being recognized does not augur well with their agony of losing dear ones at a tender age. In many cases the deceased were the bread winners. This is coupled with the sexual harassments from men, some of whom are already husbands and fathers. Many young widows today, who are not lucky to be remarried, are compelled by circumstances to give in to sexual advances from these men. Those who withstand these advances are persecuted and the property of their late husbands seized with impunity. Their problems may not be only financial, but it is mostly so. In the West where social security obtains, widows are able to stand up to their Christian principles without dying of hunger. In addition to that some churches organize small scale businesses, like thrash shops meant for the less privileged and thereby offering 'employment' to widows. Such keep them engaged, self-sustaining and thereby shielding them from innumerable temptations.

The Church has an important role to play as defender of widows and orphans. The Church should preach and fight vehemently against any barbarous culture and practice imposed on her daughters who are unfortunately bereaved of their spouses. The women folks should be educated and encouraged to rise above and against any inhuman treatment in the name of culture. Sometimes those barbaric ordeals are perpetrated on women by the women themselves because of their superstitious attachment to tradition. This is paganism to the core, even though sometimes practiced by church goers.

These days many young widows are the cause of their plight. While in their conjugal homes they consider themselves prisoners very eager for 'liberation'. Now 'released' from their chains by the death of their partners, the whole universe is theirs. Such bring enormous disregard to widowhood and are deterred neither by African tradition nor by Christian principles. My humble suggestion in this regard is that elderly widows should initiate these new breed of 'mad widows' into authentic widowhood which commands the respect of the church and even of tradition. They should either remarry or stop bringing disrepute to well-bred widows who live according to the principles of the gospel.

### CONCLUSION

A mature and single woman is as free and independent as a mature and single man. In marriage both man and woman subordinate themselves to the principles of moral law. Even here, a woman's basic role may not be violated though the husband is called the head of the family. In fact, violence against women comes when they are not allowed to play their God-assigned role freely as women. The most important of these roles is concerned with her destiny as woman. Very often the agent perpetrating such violence is presumed to be people of the opposite sex – in this case the men. Sometimes this is true. But often a time women are more violent and discriminatory against their fellow women than men. When a woman decides to be wicked, she can be excessively wicked. As was evident above in the case of clitoridectomy and even widowhood, in most cases women are the pioneering agents perpetrating the much denounced phenomena. However, violence is violence whether inflicted on women by men or on men by women, or on women by women or on men by men. The tendency to consider men as the only perpetrators of violence against women arises from the erroneous type of feminism which confuses women's equality with identity. But I must repeat that man is man and woman is woman. The physical differences associated with reproduction are obvious. Discoveries in paleontology, genetics, endocrinology, physiology and pediatrics provide irrefutable evidence that identification of both sexes is absolutely untenable.

The sexual life of the female moves sequentially and rhythmically through complex changes that have no close counterpart in the male. Her earlier maturation, greater vulnerability, inescapable biological aptness for motherhood cannot be safely ignored or safely exchanged with qualities found in men. The gracefulness, tenderness and care natural to women have no close counterparts in men. Yet these do not make women superior to men in any form. Menstruation with its discomforts, moods and special requirement, defloration, pregnancy, childbirth, lactation, biological readiness for early child care, menopause with their varied and critical glandular and hormonal adjustment are typical differences between male and female. These do not make women inferior to men either. Dear readers, there are a thousand and one things a woman can do that a man cannot do. Likewise there are innumerable things that men can do that ladies cannot do and are not expected to be able to do. Therefore it is sheer nonsense and immaturity to say: "What a man can do a woman can also do; or perhaps do it better." Who is competing with whom and for which trophy? And who is the winner and in which contest? Time has come for the African women to cling on to the "gospel message" of

their full and unconditional liberation. This is the message in the battle cry of Oduyoye's poem: "Woman with Beards":

I am Woman  
I am African...  
And from this hidden strength  
Will burst forth the new Me – for  
I am in the process of giving birth  
To myself – recreating Me  
Of being, the Me that God sees.<sup>2</sup>

I think the efforts of some African women theologians preoccupied with the alleviation of suffering of the womenfolk on the continent should be sustained and compensated. Groups such as The *Daughters of Anowa* and other Women's Movements in Africa, which of late are fighting to gain back their legitimate rights, have to be upgraded. I see in their struggle something similar to that of *The Daughters of Buddha*, the *Sakyadhita*, whose objective arose from the conviction that the emancipation of women is compatible and in consonance with the teachings in Buddhism. (Rommelure: 40).

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<sup>2</sup> The Amazons, in Greek legend, were a race of warrior women living in the region of the Black Sea. They have been late with Brazil and Dahomey, modern Benin Republic of West Africa. Credit Mbefo, L. (2009) "African Women and the Challenges of Modernity" *Bigard Theological Studies* vol. 29, no.2, p. 52.

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