

THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF MOURNING: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF WIDOWHOOD AND BURIAL PRACTICES IN NKEREFI, NIGERIA

Dan O. Chukwu, Ph.D

Department of History and International Studies
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria.
Email: do.chukwul@unizik.edu.ng Tel: 08063305781
&

James C. Chukwu

Department of History and International Studies
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria.
Email: jc.chukwul@unizik.edu.ng Tel: 07069408307

Abstract

This study is an ethnographic exploration of the cultural politics of mourning in Nkerefi, a rural community in southeastern Nigeria. It examines traditional burial practices with particular attention to the experiences of widows during the burial and mourning process. The study finds that these practices are shaped by a complex interplay of cultural norms and expectations that often privilege the interests and needs of men over those of women. It also reveals that widows in Nkerefi face significant social, economic, and emotional challenges during this period, including loss of property and livelihood, social isolation and stigmatisation, as well as emotional trauma and distress. Using a qualitative research methodology involving in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with widows and other stakeholders in Nkerefi, the study uncovers the complex and often fraught nature of burial and mourning practices in the community. It argues that the cultural politics of mourning in Nkerefi are informed by patriarchal ideologies that reinforce the subordination and marginalization of women. The study concludes that the experiences of widows in Nkerefi are shaped by intersecting cultural, social, and economic factors, and that these experiences have significant implications for understanding the broader cultural politics of mourning in rural Nigeria.

Keywords: Cultural Politics, Mourning, Exploration, Burial Practices, Nkerefi, Widows.

Introduction

Man is the only creature known to bury his dead. Consequently, burial practices are an important aspect of cultural and social life in many African societies. In Nigeria, burial practices vary across different ethnic and cultural groups, reflecting the country's rich cultural diversity. One of the most significant cultural practices in Nigeria is the burial of the dead, which is often accompanied by elaborate rituals and ceremonies.

In Nkerefi, a rural community in south-eastern Nigeria, burial practices are shaped by a complex array of cultural norms and expectations. The community is predominantly Christian, but traditional practices and customs still play a significant role in shaping the lives of community members. One of the most important cultural practices in Nkerefi is the burial of the dead, which is often accompanied by elaborate rituals and ceremonies. It is practised right from time immemorial not only in Nkerefi but all over the world. Every man at one time or the other will eventually face this life crisis situation. It is inevitable and because man must maintain a balance between him and other hierarchical or higher beings, a series of death rituals are performed to guard against unpleasant consequences.

The burial of the dead in Nkerefi is a complex and multifaceted process that involves a range of cultural, social, and economic factors. According to C. Wahl, funeral rites symbolised continuity into the afterlife.ⁱ The process typically begins with the preparation of the body for burial, which involves washing, dressing, and laying out the body. This is often followed by a wake-keeping ceremony, which involves the gathering of family and friends to pay their respects to the deceased.

Burial and funeral ceremonies are practised even though the mode of practice differs from community to community. In Nkerefi, physical burial *iyi ozu* is often accompanied by funeral ceremony *ikwa ozu*. The focus of this work will be on the experience of widows in burial and funeral rites in Nkerefi. Nkerefi people prize their womenfolk, yet a woman in Nkerefi culture is not accorded full social recognition no matter her status in life unless she is married and bears children or at least a child. Nkerefi women remain women of substance as long as their husbands are alive. If any woman loses her husband to death, her story changes automatically, she becomes a murder suspect in some places because death in most parts of the community is never deemed a natural occurrence. In pre-colonial Nkerefi, the widow is seen as unclean and unholy; as a result of people's perception of the widow, certain harmful widowhood practices were meted out to her. These practices arise from the culture

of the community. The Nkerefí culture includes various customs, practices and traditions of the people. It comprises archaic practices as well as new concepts adapted into Igbo culture either through evolution or external influence.

A. O. Odimegwá submitted that in Igbo cosmology, community life embraces the living and the dead, and it is for these reasons that widowhood practices are put in place. The Igbo culture makes it incumbent on the living to respect the wishes of the dead, while the dead are compelled to protect the living. Widowhood practices are therefore integral part of the funeral rites accorded the dead. These funeral rites are aimed at guaranteeing the admittance of the dead people into the abode of the ancestors, who, they believe, will ultimately reincarnate into the community of the living.ⁱⁱ

Widowhood is a significant life event that drastically changes a woman's social status, economic stability, and emotional well-being. Widowhood is considered the most stressful transaction requiring adjustment to lossⁱⁱⁱ Widows face numerous challenges that are caused by religion, cultural beliefs, and traditions. There are many issues that intersect and affect the life of a woman.^{iv} Widowhood issues are entangled in traditional culture, patriarchal beliefs, and religious practices.^v Widowhood rites are cultural rituals that any surviving spouse undergoes to honour the dead spouse.^{vi} These widowhood rites are embedded in culture and traditions. The widowhood rites are seen as a passage rite for widows.

Widowhood is associated with many stigmas^{vii} Research has found that widows live an isolated and lonely life because of the stigma associated with widowhood.^{viii} Stigma "disqualifies someone from being fully accepted in a society".^{ix} For instance, widows in Africa generally are perceived to have bad luck.^x The bad luck is then assumed to be the cause of the dead husband. Therefore, traditions and culture demand that a widow should practice widowhood rites. Sometimes widows are forced to "sleep on the floor or mats and are refrained from bathing for a number of days".^{xi}

The paper is divided into six parts. The first part is introduction. This is followed by the theoretical framework on which the work derives its analysis. The third discusses the brief history of Nkerefí, their geographical location and migration. The fourth examines the cultural context of burial practices in Nkerefí. The penultimate section is an analysis of the role of women in burial practices in Nkerefí. This section highlights the ordeal of women in burial practices in Nkerefí. The last part is the conclusion. The argument tends to suggest that the cultural politics of mourning in Nkerefí are shaped by a patriarchal ideology that reinforces the subordination and marginalisation of women. The work argues that differences in gender roles and behaviours often create inequalities. This paper exposes the underlying factors for curbing the experiences of widows in Nkerefí during the burial and mourning process.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical conception of this work is based on the Social Exclusion Theory. I. Walker and J. S. Heather stress on the multidimensional nature of social exclusion. According to them, social exclusion relates not simply to a lack of material resources but also matters like inadequate social participation, lack of cultural and educational capital, inadequate access to services and lack of power.^{xii}

Social exclusion theory refers to persistent and systematic multiple deprivation of individual or group resulting to disempowerment and alienation and the way the resultant dynamics affect the individuals or groups in the society.^{xiii} Thus in widowhood practices, widows are excluded by their late husband's relatives from inheriting their husband's property thereby plunging the widows into a sudden state of powerlessness leading to lack of material resources and inadequate social participation.

A brief History of Nkerefí

Nkerefí is a clan in Nkanu East Local Government Area of Enugu State in South Eastern Nigeria.^{xiv} It comprises of four autonomous communities namely: Imeoha Nkerefí, Ohuani Amofu Nkerefí, Ishienu Amofu Nkerefí, and Enuogu Nkerefí.^{xv} The pre-colonial history of Nkerefí was essentially that of the migration and fusion of people and rise and fall of kindred and villages.^{xvi} Various people and claims point to the fact that Nkerefí people are the descendants of Ezeokeuna – a cattle rearer from Edembarri.^{xvii} According to archival reports, "the people of Nkerefí being descendant of Ezeokeuna of Ezza at one time used to make periodic sacrifice at their ancestor's shrine at Ezza, but however, this custom has ceased for many years".^{xviii}

Nkerefí traced her origin from Ezzakuna (Ezeoke-una) the founder of Ezza, whose father Una Okpoto Okumeze came from Afikpo group of the Igbo history.^{xix} These people have been organized into something like vassal state by their possession of a common dialect (language) and culture, but in reality, there is no Nkerefí state or race.

The word Nkerefi refers more to the dialect and occupation than people.^{xx} One particular legend and oral school of thought state that when 'Ezeoke Una' the father of Nkerefi saw that his son – Ezeoke Una Junior (Ogbonnaa) has matured into manhood, he gave him few cows and some yams to start his own life and maintain his family.^{xxi} He received the paternal gifts and blessings from his father, and moved southwards in search of settlement and livelihood. He had acquired the art of cattle rearing and farming from his parents. As he moved, his cattle (Efi) multiplied and he started selling some through trade by barter (exchange of goods for goods), and people were happy with him for his clemency, industry and enterprise.^{xxii} Whenever a visitor said that he was going to the home of Ezeoke Una, people were confused it was going to be the home of Ezeoke or his father, they called him Ezeoke Una – 'Nke-na-ere- efi' which means cattle seller or dealer. This was the genesis of the name Nkerefi.^{xxiii} Further evidence to show Ezeokuna of Ezekoha Ezza in the farther of Nkerefi are: that at the burial of Ezeokona, Chukwuma Ighudu of Obuno was among the representatives from Nkerefi that participated and that Ezeokona was buried in a house with three doors each facing and directed to Ezza, Nkerefi and Onicha.^{xxiv} The above three towns are brothers with Ezza as eldest and Onicha as the youngest. Nkerefi then spread and constituted segments of other communities such as Atani in Ogburu Local Government Area of Anambra State, some others in part of Ukwuani in present Delta State and Anambra State.^{xxv}

The Cultural Context of Burial Practices in Nkerefi

Man is a member of his community or tribe born as noble, commoner or slave living as one who must be at peace with the forces of nature and fit into the life of his community. The main difference between the god and man is that the gods are immortal whereas man is claimed by death. Death is the act of dying or the ending of life – man, animal or every living thing. In Nkerefi, death is known as *onwu*. It is seen as a passage which changes the status of a man from being a human to being a spirit or an ancestor. As it is in every other African community, death is seen as an enemy and therefore feared. It is seen as the greatest tragedy that may yet befall any living being in the clan. According to Gehman, "Every person in traditional Africa was closely related to his clan, tribe and to his ancestors. He grew and developed from birth to death".^{xxvi} Death was the final passage into the final stage of his relationship with the community when he became a living dead.

Beller opined that death is a passage to the world where there is no hunger, thirst or disease where everyone enjoys the benefits of a good life on earth after having reached his final status as ancestors.^{xxvii} In Nkerefi, only in old age is death thought to be normal as among the Akamba of Kenya. In Nkerefi death can be seen as "to be called". To Njoku, death means being snatched or taken away from life. Something evil takes a person away. Thus death is an enemy.^{xxviii} The funeral on the other hand is the burial or cremation of a dead person with the usual ceremonial rites. The burial rites and funeral ceremonies vary as the death does in Nkerefi land.

Universally, and Nkerefi in particular the death is categorically grouped into two major kinds, the nature – *Onwu chi* and the accidental death or mishap – *Onwu mberede* or *Mberegade*. Death is further subdivided into five sub groups according to natures, circumstances, time and the cause. The death during the infancy – the infantile mortality or death is called *Onwu Nwankikei*, the death at youth – youthful death – *Onwu Nwokorobia*. The duos are collectively known as *Ume n' iwi* in Nkerefi land. The death of an adult whose parents are still alive is called, *Ume Nwa Ogilinya*. The death of ebullient matured man or woman with a child or children is called the *Onwu aenya mmriri* or *Onwu Mgbuchi Obodo*. The ignominious or shameful death is known as *Onwu ifere* or *ihere* and the death of aged or old man or woman is called, *Onwu Oriri* or *Onwu aekwa okpogo (ego)*. Below are the burial rites and the summary of the aforementioned deaths.

Infantile and Youth Death

The infantile mortality comprises both the death which occurs during nursing periods – *Onwu Nwite Uduu* and the death between the age of six months to ten years – *Onwu Nwankike*. The youthful death – *Onwu Nwokorobia* is the death at the age of ten-thirty years. It is abnormal, grievous, piteous and sympathetic. It has no burial rites. The infant is buried at the forest or groove *Okeani* while the youth is buried at evil forest or on the heap of cocoyams *Igbo-ede* or nearby bush. The family (parents) mourn for one or three native weeks *Nkweluizu* or *izu n' ato* and go about their normal businesses. These abnormal and premature deaths are known as *Ume n' iwi*. In case a child who dies and comes consistently is known as – *Ogbanje*, the evil cycle death and birth, the body of the deceased child is mutilated for recognition, if it comes again.

The death of unmarried and married adult whose parents are alive is *Ume Nwa Ogilinya* or *Ume Ndidi*. The deceased adult may get some burial rites if married but not complete because it is provocative and frustrating to living parents and relatives. The corpse is hurriedly buried to avoid further aggravation. The interment will be the barn *okika* or *obaji* the outskirts of the compound or at the unanimously agreed site for the future house of the sons, at the leave of his house. The deceased is fared well with a mournful dull shaving ceremony by the parents, kinsmen and relatives.

Ebullient Man

This is the untimely death of an Nkrefi man at the age of thirty-sixty years. He may be a brave man, chief, warrior, educationist, business magnet, famous and distinguished personality. The burial rites and funeral ceremonies are terrifying one in Nkrefi.

Immediately the death of the above calibre is announced, the whole affairs of the kindred, villages, community are thrown into confusion and standstill. Without been told you observe people running helter-skelter; children in fear remained indoors, boys and girls with their hands folded, in groups of three or four talks in low voice and fear. Women run to the bereaved family tears in their eyes with or without palm corking their breasts. One Nkrefi adage says: "When a woman runs without her breasts palm corked, there is a great danger, terrible or horrible situation". The aged and old men with their walking sticks or staff in their lackadaisical movements discuss the bravery, paternal achievements, other merits and demerits of the deceased man and his patrilineal and ancestral deeds. The faces of the age-grades look fearfully red, with their eyes full of gore; they shrug shoulders intermittently with self-talking to (soliloquies) and so on.^{xxix}

Some other obsequies of the ebullient man are the night vigil *onudu ezi*. The age grade will organise traditional wake-keeping for the deceased with the kinds of music that suits his merit e.g. Abia, music if the man was a holder of *Ohunnuji* title – an *Onyiba okaji*, *Ikpa ike*, *ebe ekwe mgbà*, *Achikolo*, war songs and flute if he was a warrior. The preparation of the grave follows in the morning. The youths and the age grades are responsible for the grave-digging. They are usually spiritually high and possessed due to alcoholic influences. They sing war songs, dance various kinds of hand music, and drink and work seriously on the grave.^{xxx}

The deceased man will be interred at sunset after the appeasement of his right hand *igwa ikenga* with a fowl and a lamb *okuko na ebune ikenga*. Immediately the coffin is raised up everywhere roars with cries and war songs; as the body is lowered into the earth, the guns boom intermittently in conjunction with cries and noise. While the man is being interred, children, relatives and lovers will be performing another important rite – *Inyote aeja n'ishi tii n'inyi* – picking earth from the grave side, cycle it above head and throw it into the grave with some utterances "whatever killed you, avenge and revenge" etc. when the interment ends, the grave diggers (age grades and youths), the relatives go to the stream to wash off the evil spirits deemed associated with the untimely death and the earth on their bodies. This is called *Iwu aehu ozu* and *ifia mmiri*.^{xxxi} The relatives especially the sisters and daughters after performing the rite – *Ifai mmiri*, the men (kinsmen) and the sons go to his house or the family general house *Ngidi* where the rite of *Itu Yokoyoaekwa* – a pretentious-like brief cry is performed. The wife or wives and the eldest son will remain indoor for three native week *izu n'ato* which expires after the shaving ceremony *ikpu ishe* and the graveside rites – oath of conscience *Igbago N'ishi inyi*. This rite is to put the wife or wives on oath for superstitious reasons e.g. to make sure that the wife, wives will mourn for one good year – *ivu ishi*. If the wife or wives die within the year, it is believed that the wife or wives knew about the death of the husband. But if she survives, she will do or perform another funeral rite known as second shaving ceremony – *Ikpucha ishi Ndugba aho*. If the family has enough money, they instantly do the second funeral or it may take place in time to come.^{xxxii}

Death of a Highest Ozo Title-Holder (Ogbuzulu)

Wealth as we know it today had few items for its recognition in Nkrefi clan: several wives and many children, a large barn full of yams, and two or more titles of the land. Polygamy was an important part of traditional ancestry because our forefathers badly needed men, women and children to help in the farms and produce food. Farm work in the crudest method was their only source of sustenance. In Nkrefi land, the distinguishing marks as emblem of rank or membership (insignia) of a title man varies – the thread or ivory, anklets, the eagle feather *Aebuba Ugo*, the red cap, the horse plume, cow plume and fan carried in the hand – but a title man is immediately recognisable, always and everywhere.^{xxxiii}

Title-taking in Nkrefi is very important for the administration of the communities. it meant responsibility first and foremost before it could mean rise in social status. The higher your title in the past, the more responsible you should become. Titled-men were therefore dedicated men of truth, honesty, justice and fair-play as well as good fellowship to all, under pain or death. They were respected in the society because they carried the stamp of authority by virtue of their vow to uphold the above genuine social principles with justice, honesty, truth and fair-play in our traditional society so that there was greater peace among them than we know it today. So the death of the highest ozo title holder *Ogbuzulu* in Nkrefi involves much activities and financial commitments for the burial rites and funeral ceremony.^{xxxiv}

When an *Ogbuzulu* dies, the death will be announced by *Ikolo* or *Tom-tom* by the beaters or the town crier. The council of elders, the ozo title holder *Ndi Ichikala* and the kinsmen shall meet to fashion the burial and funeral

ceremony for the *Ogbuzulu* (*ozo*). The whole burial rites and funeral ceremonies of the ebullient man are observed for the highest title holder. But there are some important aspects of special significance. The *Ogbuzulu* cannot for any reason be buried on ordinary days except the *Orie* day according to traditions.

The interment and burial rites involve cow, horse, cocks and cockeyed fowl and big lamb without blemish *Okuko* and *Ebune Ikenga* for the appeasement of the *Ogbuzulu*'s right hand. In the olden days, before the advent of Christianity, a lad was in use. But this had been supplemented with a horse called *Inyinya onye Ndae* in place of human being. The diviners are consulted to ascertain the cause of his death.^{xxxv}

On the day before the burial, night vigil or traditional wake-keeping is held in a special manner by co-titled men. The ancient musical groups: *Abia*, *Ikpa Ike*, *Ikolo*, *Oke Ekwe*, *Igede* and *Ufee* – the highest in Nkrefi musical institution, shall be in attendance and beat, Dane guns and cannon are fired and men dash about in frenzy by the spiritual emotions and moral invocation by the flutists, dancing and singing the war songs. It is *Ogbuzulu*'s funeral, and from dusk till dawn the co-*Ogbuzulus* and warriors came and went in their age grades. The co-titled men all dressed according to their titles obtained and with their title sword *Opia* in their hands, and the warriors all wear threaded war caps *Okpu Ugbu* with their dane guns on their shoulders and their faces and bodies painted with chalk and charcoal – *Nzu na Unye*.^{xxxvi}

Only very rich people who could afford the heavy spending and expensive ceremonies demanded by the *Ogbuzulu* title holders *Ndi Ichikala*, are usually given the title. And the respect they are accorded depended on the wealth they commanded. In the interim, two or four succulent girls with tantalising beauty are selected on the merit of virginity and placed on a special condition for merriment known as *Ino N'Usolo*, a traditional rite to mark the affluence of the deceased title holder. The girls (charming) are thoroughly prepared to be attractive. They take time and care to decorate themselves with cam wood *ufe* and indigo *uli* and plaited their hairs in a particular design to match the occasion. The *Usolo* girls' menus are yam porridge and pounded yam. They do not eat overnight food and dare not eat any meal without handful of meat or a fowl instead they eat other delicacies. The girls as a matter of importance and tradition are entertained with traditional music – *Abia* and *Ufee* every day's evening until seven native weeks – the *Usolo* period. They can get food from anybody's farm or house according to custom. When the *Usolo* elapses their cooking utensils will be washed with special ritual rites, incantation, libation and appeasement by the *Ufee* musical group: the highest music of the land.^{xxxvii}

The mourning and *Usolo* periods are the time for preparation and arrangement for the funeral ceremonies *Ikwa ozu ogbo*. The whole requirements are brought and stored: cow, horse, cocks, hen, goats, invitations and settlement of the musical groups called *Ikpu unu nkwa* etc. One of the guttural and awesome rite of an *Ogbuzulus* in Nkrefi is that the funeral procession of the *Ogbuzulus* are performed at farmland *aegu* unlike the funeral procession of young men which are performed by going through the villages, after searching for the deceased man at the market *Ichon'afia* by a selected men of incredible prowess. That of an ebullient man is a terrifying spectacle to children, women and cowards who are dominated by fear.^{xxxviii}

The most important funeral rite of the highest *ozo* title holder in Nkrefi is the village square obsequies – *oso ogbo*, *oso obodo* or *Ichifku Nkwa obodo*. This is rather a dramatic display of the people's traditional culture. Spectators come from all the villages and beyond to feed their eyes with events and entertainment. Before the requiem and final public features, 'tumult increased tenfold' drums and all musical sets or groups that came beat violently and men outburst. Guns are fired all sides and sparks flow out as machetes cling together in warrior's salute. The air will be filled with dust and gun powder smokes.

The entire villages and the communities honour courage, and gives marks of esteem to the daring and successful warriors and highest title holders of the society. But for sure and certain, Nkrefi in ancient and modern times, the military glory, hardworking and prosperity become a consuming passion, and the focus of all social values. So whenever a warrior or *Ogbuzulu* dies the war music: *Ikpa ike* and *Ufee* will be on display. The co-*ozo* title holders and warriors demonstrate skills with different cultural objects while dancing during the burial and funeral ceremonies.^{xxxix}

The Ordeal of Women in Burial Practices in Nkrefi

Immediately after the interment, the eldest son, the wife or wives of deceased *ozo* shall be placed on the mourning period of seven native weeks *izu n'asaa*. The plights of the wife or wives are dehumanising and deplorable. They are only allowed to wear ragged or tattered undies (underwear) and go out occasionally with a weeding knife and small cane *mma efu na aepipi*, whenever she, or they (wives) want to pass out urine or faeces, with an escort – a woman or a condoler.

Ritual Seclusion (*Ino na nso*): This practice involves the widow being secluded in a most restricted manner because the widow is regarded as defiled and unclean. She does not enjoy the company of other ‘free’ human beings until she is purified.

Programmed Wailing: The widow wails early every morning before and after the funeral to the hearing of people in the neighbourhood to demonstrate the depth of her grief over the death of her husband.

Sitting on the floor: The wife or wives shall be compelled to sit on planks, floor or the native plant *Ofu okwa* by the *Umuada* throughout the mourning period as a sign of dethronement of the widow(s) who has/have lost her/their status and pride by the death of her/their husband, with little or no food.

Sleeping or sitting next to the corpse: This practice mandates a widow to sit by her husband’s corpse or to lie down on a mat beside the corpse. This is done to accord the dead respect and to enjoy his company for the last time.

Oath ritual: The widow is subjected to this practice by being forced to drink the water used in bathing the corpse. It serves as a proof of innocence either of the widow killing her husband or hiding his property from the in-laws. The practice of oath taking serves as moral deterrent to other married women in anticipation of their own ordeal. This rite is to put the wife or wives on oath for superstitious reasons e.g. to make sure that the wife, wives will mourn for one good year – *ivu ishi*. If the wife or wives die within the year, it is believed that the wife or wives knew about the death of the husband. But if she survives, she will do or perform another funeral rite known as second shaving ceremony – *Ikpucha ishi Ndugba aho*. If the family has enough money, they instantly do the second funeral or it may take place in time to come.^{xi}

Shaving of hair: In Nkrefi clan, it is a common belief that the beauty of a woman is for her husband only. Her hair is therefore shaved to make the widow feel less complete or less womanly since her duties as a wife are no longer useful. Most widows on their own see it as an outward show of their grief and so majority of widows shave their hairs voluntarily. C. I. Oregh opines that this shaving is often done leaving cuts in the scalp of the widow because it is roughly done.^{xii}

Forced to take a bath on her husband’s grave: The widow is forced to take a bath on the husband’s grave and to run back naked inside the house as a sign of severing her relationship with her dead husband.

Stipulated period of mourning: In some Igbo communities a widow is expected to compulsorily mourn with a stipulated mourning outfit for six months or one year. This is an outward show of grief. One may wonder whether a widow ever stops mourning her husband except by being forced to do so.

Dropping of condolence gifts on the ground: Monetary presents are dropped on the ground for the widow. She is not expected to stretch out her hands to receive them because she is too unclean to receive gifts from other people’s hands. That way she is also forbidden from shaking hands with anybody.

Widow inheritance (Forceful remarriage): This is called (*Nkuchi nwanyi*) or forceful remarriage of a widow to her husband’s younger brother or a close relation. This way the widow is assured that she will not be disinherited of her husband’s properties or driven out of her matrimonial home. This widow inheritance is called levirate arrangement. This arrangement has its own problems. The children of the widow may not like it, and the first wife of the younger brother may feel threatened.

Wearing of black or white mourning outfit: Black is often associated with evil and the widow is expected to wear this outfit first to be noticed as a widow and secondly as someone who has an evil omen. The Christian mothers now insist on wearing white instead of black. Whether it is black or white, there is no difference, since mourning outfits are the same because they have the same interpretation.

Disinheritance of a widow: This is a situation where a widow is not allowed to inherit any property of her husband. Igbo land is mainly a patriarchal society in which a widow is seen as a chattel of her husband and his family. As a chattel, she is incapable of owning or inheriting a property but she qualifies to be inherited herself. The only exception is if the woman has a living male child who can inherit part of his father’s property and through him the mother may benefit. It is worse in a matrilineal society where the members of the man’s maternal family particularly the man’s brothers, sisters and their children dispossess the dead man’s biological children of their father’s property.

The law as espoused in Section 34 (1) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2011 as amended, clearly states that “every individual is entitled to respect for the dignity of his person...” and goes on to say in sub-section (a) that “no person shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment”. From the foregoing, it is clear that the grundnorm that is the Constitution, which is a set of laws that other laws must bow to, enshrines the fundamental right to dignity for any Nigerian, including widows. It is unlawful therefore for a widow to be treated in an inhuman way that diminishes her person and strips her of her dignity whether in Nkrefi or anywhere in Nigeria because the Nigerian constitution protects the widow.

Conclusion

This paper examines the cultural politics of mourning in Nkrefi, a town in southeastern Nigeria. It explores traditional burial practices in Nkrefi, with a particular focus on the experiences of widows during the burial and

mourning process. The study finds that these practices are shaped by a complex interplay of cultural norms and expectations that often prioritize the interests and needs of men over those of women. It also reveals that widows in Nkerefi face significant social, economic, and emotional challenges during the burial and mourning process. Moreover, the burial process is influenced by various economic factors, including poverty and inequality, which often make it difficult for families to provide a dignified burial for their loved ones.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the cultural politics of mourning in Nkerefi and highlights the need for policymakers and practitioners to consider the complex and often fraught nature of burial practices in rural Nigeria. It concludes that the experiences of widows in Nkerefi are shaped by intertwined cultural, social, and economic factors, which have significant implications for understanding the broader cultural politics of mourning in rural Nigeria.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Policymakers and practitioners should support the development of policies and programmes that promote the rights and interests of widows and other vulnerable groups in Nkerefi.
2. Efforts should be made to raise awareness about the challenges faced by widows during the burial and mourning process, and to promote cultural change and sensitivity.
3. Support should be provided to widows and other vulnerable groups to help them navigate the complex and often fraught nature of burial practices in Nkerefi.
4. Fathers and husbands should endeavour to write wills that state clearly how their properties should be shared in the event of death.
5. Married men who still have their fathers, brothers and uncles as their next of kin should revisit and update such in view of what widows go through after the death of their husbands.
6. Women need to be sensitised more to stop being the victims, perpetrators and hindrances to change. It must be pointed out that Christian mothers are stewards that should enrich the lives of others (widows).
7. Obsolete laws on widowhood practices particularly the customary laws now require radical modifications in line with 21st century demands.
8. The larger society is enjoined to join in the fight against harmful widowhood practices against widows, especially the educated elite.

Endnotes

ⁱ C. Wahl, "Human mortality and its role in human affairs", *The Director*, 39(8) 1969, 7

ⁱⁱ A. O. Odimegwu, "Widowhood and the dignity of womanhood in Igbo land: A Pastoral Challenge to the Discipleship of the Roman Catholic Church in Igboland", being a Dissertation presented to the Faculty of Arts and History, Fordham University, Nigeria, 2010

ⁱⁱⁱ Deborah Carr, and Rebecca Utz., "Late-life widowhood in the United States: New directions in research and theory", *Ageing International*, 27(2001) 65–88

^{iv} Kimberle Crenshaw, "DE marginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist theory and Antiracist Politics", *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1(1989), 139–167

^v Vitalis Pemunta, and Mathias F. Alubafi, "The social context of widowhood rites and women's human rights in Cameroon. Cogent", *Social Sciences*, 2(2016)

^{vi} Samuel Atindanbila, Vivian Bamford, Peter Adatara, Charlotte Omane Kwakye-Nuako, and Clara Ohenewa Benneh, "Effects of widowhood rites on the psychosocial well-being of women in Nadowli District (Upper West Region-Ghana)", *The International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Invention*, 1(2014), 430–436.

^{vii} Ratidzai Shoko, and Sizakele Danke, "The Violent Aspect of Widowhood Rites in the South African Context", *Social Sciences* 13(2024), 115

^{viii} Eva Mofatiki Manyedi, Magdalena P. Koen, and Minrie Greeff, "Experiences of widowhood and beliefs about the mourning process of the Batswana people", *Health SA Gesondheid*, 8(2003), 69–87

^{ix} Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1963, cited in Premalatha Karupiah, "Stigma and widow remarriage: Experiences of Malaysian Tamil women", *Journal of Family Studies*, 28(2020), 1303–1319.

^x Kate Young, "Widows without rights: Challenging marginalisation and dispossession", *Gender and Development*, 14(2006), 199–209

^{xi} Joseph Olukayode Akinbi, "Widowhood practices in some Nigerian societies: A retrospective examination" *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 5(2015), 67–74.

- xii I. Walker, and J.S. Heather, *Relative Deprivation: Specification, Development, and Integration*, London: Cambridge University Press. 2001
- xiii J. Hills, "Social Exclusion: the content behind the babble", *Social Sciences, News from the ESRC*, 37, Jan 1998, 2.
- xiv J. C. Chukwu, "Gender-Based Violence in Nkerefi Nkanu East Local Government Area, Enugu State, Nigeria, 1995 – 2014", *Iconic Research and Engineering Journals*, 5(12) 2022, 134-135.
- xv Enugu State of Nigeria Official Gazzette, no 2, Enugu – 5th September, 2002 Vol. 11, B. 20
- xvi Emmanuel N. Aninwogo and Kelvin M. Aniemeka, *A History of the Nkerefi Igbo*, Lagos: First Academic Publishers 2002 4
- xvii Gabriel O. Aja, *The History of Nkerefi (A Reflection of Nkanu People)* 1993, Enugu: The AGOP Communications and Publishers, 5.
- xviii Nigeria: NAE/2/2/ONP ROF. 8.1.4740 and UD DIV 4/1/30 and UD DIV 4/1/29 – An intelligence report on the Nara Group in the Nkanu Area of the Udi Division by S.P.L. Beaumoni, Esq. (Assistant District Officer.
- xix Chief Donatus Aniemeka, (Eze Ugo na Nkerefi), 74 years, Igwe Cabinet, Interviewed at his house in Umuokpalla, Nkerefi on 30th March, 2021
- xx Aninwogo and Aniemeka, *A History of the Nkerefi*... 4
- xxi A. U. Igwe and J. C. Chukwu, "Aspects of Intercommunal Relations between Nkerefi and Nara Unateze 1900 – 1960", *Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies*, Vol. 3, 2022, 78
- xxii A. U. Igwe and J. C. Chukwu, "Nkerefi and Anaevuna Relations in Pre-colonial Nigeria", *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. 8(1) 2022, 164
- xxiii Aninwogo and Aniemeka, *A History of the Nkerefi*... 5
- xxiv J. C. Chukwu, "Impacts of Gender-Based Violence: The Nkerefi Experience 2004 - 2014", *IJO-International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research*, 5(9) 2022, 1 – 14.
- xxv J. C. Chukwu, "Violence Against Women in Africa: A Case Study of Nkerefi in Nkanu East Local Government Area, Enugu State, Nigeria", *GLOBAL PUBLICATION HOUSE International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research*, 5(8) 2022, 20-27.
- xxvi R. J. Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in the Light of the Bible*, Bukuru: African Christian Textbooks, 2008.
- xxvii R. Beller, *Life, Person and Community in Africa: Way Towards Inculturation with the Spirituality of the Ocolare*, Nairobi: Paulines, 2001, 21.
- xxviii E. O. Njoku, "The Socio-Economic and Religious Implications of Burial and Funeral Rites in Onicha Ebonyi State, Nigeria", A M. A. Thesis, Department of Religion and Human Relation, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, December 2010, 35
- xxix Chief John O. Chukwu, 65 years, Interviewed at his house in Umunama Etiti, Nkerefi on 30th March, 2021.
- xxx Chukwu, 65 years, Interviewed.
- xxxi Patrick Chukwu, 72 years, Interviewed at his house in Nkerefi Nkanu East Local Government Area, Enugu State on the 27th March, 2024.
- xxxii Chukwu, 65 years, Interviewed.
- xxxiii Sunday Wangenede, 79 years, farmer, interviewed in his house at Nkerefi Nkanu East Local Government Area Enugu State, Nigeria, on the 26th March, 2023.Chukwu, 65 years, Interviewed.
- xxxiv Wangenede, 79 years, interviewed.
- xxxv David Ogbonjoku, (Udor Akpuenyi), 53 years, interviewed at his house in Obodo Awevu, Nkerefi on 26th March, 2024.
- xxxvi Chukwu, 72 years, Interviewed.
- xxxvii Hezikiah Ngene, 102 years, Trader, interviewed in his house at Umueze Ohas Kindred, Umunama-Etiti, Nkerefi on the 22nd March, 2021.
- xxxviii Ogbonjoku, (Udor Akpuenyi), 53 years, interviewed.
- xxxix Chukwu, 72 years, Interviewed.
- xl Chukwu, 65 years, Interviewed.
- xli C. I. Oreh, "Igbo Cultural Widowhood Practices: Reflections on Inadvertent Weapons of Retrogression in Community Development." 80th Inaugural Lecture delivered at University of Nigeria Nsukka,