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**BURIAL RITES IN IGBOLAND:  
PSYCHO-COMMUNICATION CHANNELS OF  
GENDER DISCRIMINATION**

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**Abstract:**

Achieving gender equality requires socio-cultural transformation; unfortunately, this has not happened in the socio-cultural lives of most Nigerians. The cultural excesses have remained her bane as mirrored by the title of this current scholarly effort. This current study explored the burial rites in Igboland as psycho-communicating channels of gender discrimination between man and a woman with a view of ascertaining the psycho-social cum theoretical underpinning of differences in the widowhood and widower-hood practices and its personal, religious and cultural implications on the bereaved using the

Igbos of South-Eastern Nigeria as our case study. After conceptual and theoretical appraisal of their cultural reality, there is evidence that a wide range of discrepancies abound in the burial rites with male gender at an advantage. The authors are of the opinion that without practical gain in promoting equitable socio-cultural practices, the national legislative efforts towards the abolishment of all forms of gender discrimination and the promotion of gender affirmative will remain a mirage; the very reason for various discrimination against women in many cultures across Nigeria are unfounded.

**Keywords:** burial rites, communication, discrimination, gender, widowhood and Igboland

## **1. Introduction**

In Nigeria, like in most of other African countries, women are yet to attain their full potential essentially because the status of women has remained a second fiddle. The source and cause of this socio-cultural inequality can readily be witnessed in unequally socio-economic development, political involvement, decision making process, literacy level and career pursuit limitations placed on women's preferences, liberty and autonomy (Anyoha, Chikaire, and Nwakwasi, 2015). There is evidence as Omonubi-McDonnell (2003) suggested that the greatest disparity lies between women in the industrialized countries and their counterparts in the developing nations with the later more discriminated and abused than the former. In many cultures of the world, this socio-cultural inequality is usually man-made (Kemi, and Jenyo, 2016) and it is the leading cause of discrimination, abuse and exploitation against women.

In Igboland (comprising of 5 South Eastern states of Nigeria), there are typical instances which have perpetuated gender discrimination especially against women. Cultural practices have not only mortgaged the potentials of women but have in essence dehumanized womanhood in some pitiable instances. Ezenwa-Ohaeto (2015) contended that without fighting patriarchal system in most Nigerian

cultures, the fight against women abuse will amount to exercise in futility. Gaining insight from Kemi, and Jenyo's (2016) assertion, Ezenwa-Ohaeto's (2015) contention, and the fears arrayed by Anyoha, Chikaire, and Nwakwasi (2015) a conclusive premise is possible; cultural foundation of the native Igboland has systematically enthroned gender inequality against women and has been well communicated through certain cultural practices like burial and widowhood practices. In the authors' views, due to cultural impositions, women are unnecessarily seen and treated as subordinates to men who are entrusted with decision making of their affairs and in some salvageable situations (salvageable because most of the situations and practices are lacking in rationality) are dehumanized and abused as outcasts under the auspices of culture.

It is in the instance of the above that the authors are in contention that the position of certain cultural practices in Igboland other than being a solution to man have unknowingly become mechanisms of communicating gender discrimination in our society. This aberration has left many to question the rationale behind most of these cultural practices; their efficacy in providing solutions to numerous societal problems and their positions in advancing freedom, liberty and justice. Against this backdrop, the authors have arrayed their fears that other than supporting the bereaved, the Igbo socio-cultural burial practices especially rites of observed by the deceased widow has become mechanisms of communicating discrimination against women.

In a typical African society, the most important events in one's life are the day of birth, marriage and burial. While one can control the day of marriage, the days of birth and death are in the hands of the creator. Marriage and subsequent relationship forged from the union of a couple therefore comes with lots of

excitements and expectations. One of such expectations is that the marriage lasts till death separates.

The occurrence of death "disturbs the harmony, cohesion, and solidarity in both family and community." For Okeja (2016) (in Mbiti, 2016) death is "that inevitable and, in many societies, most disrupting phenomenon of all. More disturbing is that death knows no boundaries as anyone regardless of sex, wealth, status, race is not exempted. After death comes the burial of the deceased. Burial is the act or process of disposing of a corpse. This may vary from culture to culture and from one religious or some ideology to the other. In the Igbo religio-cultural cosmology, there is a belief that death is a passage to other form of life (Madu, 2012; Okwueze, 2012). This belief is also held by other cultural societies in Nigeria for example, in Urhobo and Coastal Riverline, Adogbo (2014) and Agbegbedia (2015) respectively opined that death symbolizes a ritualized passage to new life. Hence, it is not difficult to understand the unprecedented worships culturally associated with burial the dead, a ceremony regarded as farewell and preparation for the journey after life; a last respect.

In Igboland, it is misconstrued that the type of burial rites determines the transition of the deceased into the next world, hence, the trouble with the obnoxious burial rites. The extent to which this has become a problem is suffered by the deceased relatives especially the primary mourner. There is need to mention that characteristically, burial rites of the man and that of the woman take different cultural routes. For the deceased women unlike men, the burial rites are not grandiose, they are somewhat cool with moderate socio-cultural practice except where the woman is very old and has been admitted to some traditional societies which are statutory to women at certain ripe old age (for example; octogenarians).

However, with the burial rites of a man, all socio-cultural impositions are unleashed and are mandatory for observance by the widow of the deceased without similar rites performed for the burial of a woman. Equivocally and without option of doubt, the authors are certain that in this social class-inequality against women, the rationale behind certain socio-cultural practices of certain cultures has ultimately reached an anticlimax. For example, these dehumanizing widowhood practices are perpetuated under the guise of culture and are in most cases shamefully targeted towards marginalization of women with intent to make them suffer as vassals!

Taking into account the continuous observance of these socio-cultural practices during burial rites notwithstanding the under achieving promotion of gender emancipation and equality, our burial rites have succeeded in communicating that the real war against gender discrimination has not begun. The authors are of opinion that without practical gain in socio-cultural arena, the legislative efforts towards the abolishment of all forms of gender discrimination remains a mirage; the very reason for this scholarship effort.

## **2. Literature**

Scholarship attempts abound in burial rites' studies with focus only widows and widowhood practices with little or no comparison whatsoever on their male counterparts e.g. Mathias (2015); Ayodele (2014) and Idialu (2012). Most scholarly efforts have been concentrated on the experiences of widows at the exclusion or near exclusion of widowers. The focus on women may be justified by the submission of Qduyoye & Kanyoro. 1992) in Ayodele (2014) that women will continue to be valued only in relation to men (Oduyoye & Kanyoro, 1992) and may remain eternally vulnerable to being presumed guilty of their husbands' death until proven innocent by undergoing various rigorous and demoralizing aspects of

mourning. Thus, in the context of widowhood, marriage may continue to be an adventure fraught with danger and rewarded with little pleasure (Ogunyemi, 1996 in Ayodele 2014) especially for women, if research is not enabled to explain the critical connection of culture, women, and widowhood. For example; Anyoha, Chikaire, and Nwakwas (2015) emphasized through their study titled "Effects of gender based discriminatory practices on poverty reduction and women empowerment in Ngor-Okpala area of Imo state, Nigeria that women are being discriminated upon in decision making, education, inheritance (land), in employment and some of these discriminations are caused by cultural and religious laws which restrict women from fully utilizing their potentials.

From Anyoha, Chikaire, and Nwakwa's (2015) assertion, there is correlation that discrimination of women leads to increased poverty level and psychological effect such as low self-esteem and lack of confidence, subsequently affecting poverty reduction and women empowerment negatively. Such practices have also been known to be high during burial rites to the detriment of women including seizure of land, money and property by family relative at the announcement of the death of a man; not minding that the closest next of kin to the deceased are the wife and children. Such practice is inhuman, insensitive and above all discriminatory to the woman gender.

The problems associated with gender discrimination in Nigeria socio-cultural context are also not unconnected to the African misconstrued perception of patriarchy with the man being a subjugator of the rest of his family members (wives and children). This problem is the main contention of Ezenwa-Ohaeto's (2015) study which made a case for "Fighting Patriarchy in Nigerian Cultures" through children's literature and awareness. The author assumed that a new

generation of fathers as the head of the family need to be oriented from the cradle against the current practice of an all domineering father as the head of the family. Ezenwa-Ohaeto's (2015) study tried to investigate the prevalent patriarchal practices in Nigerian cultures and how it could be curbed via children's literature. For the author, Patriarchy as generally accepted and widely practiced in Nigeria has implicated several gender based discrimination to the disadvantage of women, of Ezenwa-Ohaeto, (2015) insists that its tenets have remained unprinted but have been actively governing people's lives and transactions in Nigeria over decades. These tenets which have overtly and covertly impacted negatively on the women folk and indirectly on men, also on the socio-economic and political advancement of Nigerian society in general have been effectively sustained and transferred, informally and formally to posterity, as part of Nigerian culture with unpalatable outcomes.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

#### **3.1 Social Constructionist Theory of Representation (Hall, 2000)**

The socio-cultural inequalities in the traditional life of the Igbos including the burial rites related behaviors and how women are viewed can be found in social constructionist theory of representation (Hall, 2000). According to Hall (2000 in Ojiakor, 2010), the meaning is constructed by the individual users of language as things don't mean rather meaning are constructed using representational systems- concepts and signs. The translatability is not given by nature or fixed by the gods. It is the result of a set of social conventions. It is fixed socially, fixed in culture. The main point is that meaning does not infer in things or in the world; it is constructed and produced. It is the result of a signifying practice - a practice that produces meaning, that makes things mean. In the case of gender discrimination

against women as exemplified in salient widowhood practices e.g. cutting of the woman's hair, washing of the corpse and drinking the water, not eating of food used for the burial rites, wearing of the mourning clothing, 6-12 months mourning of the deceased and other types of "nso" (rites) observed by the widow, the widowhood rites are socially constructed the same way the position of a women is inferred. The experiences of being a widow or widowers is not only socially but culturally determined; in the words of Gledhill (1997 in Ojiakor 2010); social practices take place within representation and are saturated with meanings and values which contributes to our sense of who we are - our culturally constructed identities. In the case of widows in Igbo the rites serve to show the importance and the value of males over females, the man as the superior being over the woman being his compliment.

Onuma (2015) equally contended that within most societies, accepted dominant notion of gender often construct masculinity and femininity as opposites and is greatly influenced by the collective practices of institutions such as school, church, media and family which construct and reinforce particular forms of masculinity and femininity. These shape the misperception of men verses women as first and second class citizen (Oduyoye & Kanyoro. 1992). In relation to the present study, one could ask: what is the meaning attached to the different burial rites performed and experienced by widows and widowers alike, and are there differences in the meaning gender-wise?

To answer this, a look at three basic burial rites of widowhood practices vis: Ikpu isi (cutting of the widow's hair), "Nso ife ana-eri no onu" (not eating from burial food or drinks), and "Ilu uju ajadu" (longer and restricted movement during the period of mourning) in Igboland will be highlighted in relation to the



discriminatory realities of these practices. The reason for highlighting these three stem from the fact that their circumstances are calculated with spiritual and or cultural relevance to beliefs of the Igbo people, yet, they are perpetuated against women as they are relaxed and in most cases not applicable to their male counterparts. One question remains boggling in the mind; do the spiritual and religio-cultural relevance of these practices not transcend above gender or are do they not have spiritual or religio-cultural relevance at all? The basis to understanding the above questions and offering answers to them lies in understanding that in line with the Social constructionist theory of representation by Hall (2000), the practices as exemplified are man-made and imposed; something not very unconnected with the spiritual and religio-cultural lives of the people, a dominance determined and gave meaning for the purpose of discrimination and subjugation of the woman gender.

#### **4. Implications of the Study**

Without consented efforts by stakeholders to stand against obnoxious traditions and cultures which perpetually impinge on the fundamental rights women as co-members of our egalitarian society, forever people will be lurking under the guise of tradition and culture to exploit the women folk. The dangers of such exploitation without doubt are; t most of these traditions and culture against which such practices follow lack societal value, social or religious relevance. Without reconciling the religious and cultural irrelevancy of these burial rites e.g. the widow not eating cooked food for the burial rite and "nso ajadu" which communicate gender inequality, achieving Millennium Development Goal (MDG) on gender emancipation and equality will remain largely elusive in this part of the world.

## **5. Recommendations**

Children's literature has always provided opportunity for nurturing, in response, appreciation and internalization of one's and group's cultural heritage. It equally impacts on the growth and development of the children's self-perception, which results to the internal urge of transferring same to posterity. Based on the above, this study recommends that given the evident roles literature plays in character molding, that children's literature is therefore a veritable tool for expunging the negative patriarchal practices in Nigerian culture especially those that discriminate against the women and communicate gender inequality.

Practically, cultural and religious laws should be restructured to suit modern day society, equal educational opportunities should be provided to women, and skill training facilities should be provided to empower women. Also, Government should formulate policies that allows for equal right in inheritance especially land. Women should be given equal right and power in decision making, equal opportunities for women to participate in various societal activities.

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