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IN AKOKWA IDEATO NORTH LOCAL GOVERNMENT  
AREA, IMO STATE, NIGERIA**

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# COMMUNICATING CULTURAL PRACTICES OF WIDOWHOOD IN AKOKWA IDEATO NORTH LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, IMO STATE, NIGERIA

*Doris A. NWOSU*



## **Introduction**

**W**idowhood practices vary from culture to culture, especially in Africa and Nigeria, in particular. Just as the practices are varied, so are the ways these practices are communicated among the people. Even in Igbo culture, widowhood practices vary according to sub-cultures. Some of these practices are not properly communicated to women before marriage. Observers argue that by the time women lose their husbands, especially young widows, they face a lot of inhuman treatment which results in trauma (AIT NEWS, June 25, 2022). These practices and inappropriateness in the way they are communicated are conspicuously evident in the Akokwa sub-culture. Although Akokwa is not exclusively different from other Igbo communities, in terms of widowhood practices, it is believed that some specific widowhood practices may be deeply identified exclusively with the Akokwa community.

Many of these practices deny widows and their children rights to ownership of the deceased persons' estate. Some of the practices subject the widow to slavish and barbaric treatment while the relatives of the deceased husband only see the widow as the property

of the deceased and should be treated as such. This is where communication of the practices between the family of the deceased and the widow and between the community and the widows becomes the pivot of this study.

The history of widowhood practices in Akokwa is as old as the area itself, with some dotted changes due to the advent of Christianity in the area. Akokwa in the present day, is imbued with traditional religion and Christianity. Often, these two religions overlap in observation of trado-cultural practices or are parallel though in some extreme cases, they become quite dissimilar. Most often, Christians are observed to be ardent custodians and unrepentant observers of the traditions of the people just as it is in the case of cultural practices of widowhood.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Widowhood is a phenomenon that can hardly be predicted since death is unpredictable except when one is terminally ill. Widowhood results from the death of one's husband but the concern associated with widowhood is the rites and observances the widow is subjected to. In the Akokwa sub-culture of Igbo, widows are subjected to some of these rites that seem to engender trauma, deprivation and depression and in some cases, extended to their children. The point of concern is whether young girls and newly married women have been adequately communicated regarding the cultural expectations from them, in case of their husbands' death. It also questions the kind of communication that takes place between the widow and the rest of the extended family of the deceased. Since communication can either facilitate relief or induce pain in a situation like this, the need to investigate the kind of communication that takes place before and during widowhood, concerning cultural practices in Akokwa became inevitable. Investigating communication of widowhood practices among the people of Akokwa in Ideato North Local Government Area of Imo State puts this study ahead of other studies in widowhood practices.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study:

- i. Through what communication forms are young unmarried women in Akokwa given pre-cultural practices of widowhood to get them prepared for possible widowhood?
- ii. What is the pattern of communicating cultural practices of widowhood in Akokwa between the widow and other members of her husband's family?
- iii. What implication does the nature of the communication of widowhood practices in Akokwa have for the psychology of widows and their children?
- iv. How does communicating cultural practices of widowhood in Akokwa affect the wellbeing of the deceased's family?
- v. What role does religion play in communicating cultural practices of widowhood in contemporary Akokwa?

### **Communicating Widowhood Culture**

Communication is simply defined as an exchange of meaning between the sender and the receiver of a message (Akpan, 1987). In other words, for communication to take place there must be the sender, the message, the channel and the receiver. Akpan (1987) argues that communication is a transaction between the sender of a message and the receiver. The sender in the communication process can be an individual, a group of individuals or even an institution. Similarly, the receiver in the communication process can be an individual, a group of persons, an institution or even the mass of people in society. Thus,

there is what is known as interpersonal communication, small group communication and mass communication (Bittner, 1989). In the context of this study, all the categories mentioned here apply.

As a result, the community or the family will always be the sender of the message while the widow is the receiver. According to Akpan (1987), communication is a transaction of messages between the sender and the receiver. Therefore, the way this communication is handled by the sender plays a very important role in producing results, taking into consideration the particular situation of the widow. Appropriate management of communication by families of deceased husbands or widows would comfort and encourage them to get over their sorrow quickly. On the contrary, when communication by the family of the deceased subject the widow to dehumanizing treatment, such communication will certainly cause harm to the psychological state of the widow and even that of her children.

Udoudo and Neku (2011) in relating gender to the work of the media, state that such representation is a depiction of society's regard for female gender. Considering this picture of societal inadequate regard for the female gender, one is likely to infer that the kind of communication that surrounds cultural practices of widowhood may not be different from the way society pictures the female gender. Roles assigned to women by society account for the kind of communication that affects them though not in all cases (Miller, 1975). This, therefore, makes it practically impossible to detach the kind of communication from the treatment a widow receives from her community. Illustrating the gap in gender with the role of the press, Udoudo and Neku (2011) add, "If the press is to be measured by the roles played by Nigerian women then critics of the press would not stop criticising the press since women's representation would always feature women in the kitchen, childbirth, petty trading domestic violence, pains etc," (p. 389). Indeed, this observation is not far from the way widows in some cultures in Nigeria and Africa, at large are treated. Many of them go through a lot of pain from society. Although the issue of gender inequality is a global concern (Armstrong, 2006), some Nigerian cultures seem to communicate the enslavement of widows in modern times.

Ordinarily, widowhood is a stage of life which a woman who has lost her husband must go through. According to Nnachi and Nnubia (2011), widowhood means the condition in which a woman finds herself at the death of her husband. A widow, therefore, is a woman whose husband is dead and has not remarried. However, widowhood in many African cultures is often looked at as a stage when a woman who has lost her husband must go through some intimidation and dehumanizing treatments. Amogunla (2021) reports that in Nigeria, stories abound of widows being forced to drink the water used in washing their husbands' corpses in the belief that the wives would die if they are guilty of the death of their husbands. In other words, this is a way of declaring their innocence before local deities. He adds that the stigma or outright rejection, a widow faces leaves her abandoned. Some women also nurse the superstition that associating with a widow can make them lose their husbands while some men also have the fear that they will die. This stigma indeed, results from a lack of proper communication among the living about the dead and the living.

Similarly, Ogbonna (2021) states that in Igbo culture, at the death of the husband, the widow is not supposed to appear in public places and events like markets, burial ceremonies, traditional weddings etc, until the burial of her husband is over. He adds that

“even after the burial, her movement in a sense, remains restricted until the expiration of six months, known as *iyipu akwa uju*” (p.191). According to Ogbonna normally, the widow is shaven by her fellow widow known as *Alutara di* and dressed in a white garment until six months after the funeral. Viewing from a religious perspective, Ogbuchi (2017) states that the high rate of widowhood rites in Igbo land is a source of anxiety and stress to the widows who struggle to adjust to the new phase of life. Earlier, Ihuzue (1972) had stated that widowhood is detestable and terrifying not as a result of the woman's loss of a companion, a friend, a bread-winner, a head of the family and father but on the grounds of indignity, degradation and poverty that are associated with widowhood rites.

Yarhere and Soola (2008) point to the violation of widowhood rights among others, identified by the UN document on Human Rights as psychological violence against women. They argue that in Ibo and Bini customary laws, a widow has no right to her intestate husband's property. This leaves the widow very disadvantaged, especially if she does not have a male child. In other words, the brothers of the deceased are customarily entitled to the intestate property of the deceased instead of the wife. Pointing to the causes of violence against women and children in Delta State for example, Oladitan and Anyanwu (2008) observe that culture and tradition which border on people's belief system and practice essentially render the victims hapless. This type of culture is not pleasant and helpful to the widow who as a result of her sorrowful situation, needs kind treatment from people around her.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study is premised on the Standpoint theory of Sandra Harding and Julia T. Wood (Griffin 2000). Standpoint theorists suggest that humans can use the inequalities of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation to observe how different locations within the social hierarchy tend to generate distinctive accounts of nature and social relationships (Griffin, 2000). Aside from the issue of gender emphasized by Griffin (2000), Harding and Wood stress that economic condition, race, and sexuality are additional cultural identities that can either draw people to the centre of society or push them out to the fringes. “Thus, an intersection of minority positions creates a highly looked-down-upon location in the social hierarchy” (Griffin, 2000, p.451). This theory applies to the study as a response to the kind of derogatory discrimination against widows by a section of society in communicating cultural practices of widowhood.

### **Methodology**

This is a qualitative ethnographic study, resulting in the use of Focus Group Discussion and Participant Observation. Since the researcher shares the same culture as other members of the community, her observations were based strictly on her experiences as a bona fide member of the sub-culture. In addition, a Focus Group Discussion, comprising three widows, one traditional religionist, one preacher of the Gospel of Christ, one traditional ruler and four members of the community (ten discussants in total), was conducted on June 26, 2022, at Obi Akrika na Mbaoji Hall in Umukegwu Autonomous Community, Akokwa. For the ethical purpose, the participants were coded as Widow One, Widow Two, Widow Three, Christian Cleric, Traditional Religionist, Traditional Ruler, Member One, Member Two, Member Three and Member Four. Participants were purposively selected based on the discretion of the researcher to obtain optimal results. Only those who married, at least, once were qualified to take part in the discussion.



Because Igbo culture and traditions permit men and women to sit together and discuss their affairs, there was no need to segregate females from male participants. Similarly, Christianity which is the predominant religion in Akokwa does not discriminate against women sitting together with men to discuss their affairs. The six autonomous communities of Akokwa were represented by these men and women. Data from the discussion were tape-recorded and later transcribed. The communities are Umuokwara, Umuezeaga, Umuopia, Akwu, Owerre-Akokwa and Umukegwu. Akokwa is a border community between Imo and Anambra States. Within Imo State, Akokwa shares a boundary with Osina in Orlu Local Government Area, in the South-West while in the North-East, it is bordered with Umuchu and in the North-West, with Uga, all in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State. As a result of its unique geographical location, and sharing common borders with communities in both Imo and Anambra States, it is interesting that the culture of Akokwa can have some borrowings from both states. This, therefore, made this study of interest to the communities.

### **Findings**

From the focus group discussion, traditional religionists believed that a widow passes through a lot of pain and agony not only because of the treatment or actions meted out to her but also because she no longer has a husband who will speak and protect her from people who may try to infringe on her rights. He also said there is no amount of love and care given to a widow from her husband's people that she would be happy with, rather she would always feel cheated, mainly the childless ones and those who did not have means of livelihood before the demise of their spouses. "The practices of widowhood in our community are a tradition inherited by our forefathers and because of that, it cannot be modified", he added. He gave an example that a woman who has lost her husband is expected to stay in the house for at least, two weeks and she is not expected to go to the market or be seen in a crowd. She is not expected to have a bath for at least, three days, food will be given to her by her other mates until a date is fixed for the burial of her husband. "The tradition has been existing time immemorial; we grew up to meet the four market days, which are: Eke, Ori, Afor, Nkwo. These market days signify a lot to the Igbo man and that is why for us, the traditionalists there are things we don't do on some certain days".

According to him, "Widowhood in Igbo land and my community is gradually going into extinction and bastardization by the so-called church people who are neither here nor there. Before now, you hardly would see a widow who goes dressing as she wishes. From a distance, you would know truly this woman is mourning by the dressing, unlike what is done nowadays, that widows wear trousers, shorts, sleeveless and roam about without minding the dead". According to Traditional Religionists, it is because of all these abnormalities that deaths are on the increase. He believed that a woman who has lost her husband should show regard for her husband and widowhood.

Widow One said that she was asked not to step out of the house until the husband was buried. Even if it would take one year before the funeral, she was told that her mates would be the ones to feed her. She, however, added that none of the mates did, except one. She also narrated how she was scolded and almost beaten because she went close to the market to sell a bunch of plantains to enable her to get money to buy foodstuffs because the six children left by her husband, including a set of twins, were only catered for by her and the children were crying out of hunger. She was told not to have her bath for three days. According to her, that was what the tradition demanded of her. She also said that because

she took care of her husband while he was sick, she was given some herbs to bathe with for seven days; that is after the first three days without having a shower. Each night before going to bed she padded herself up with clothes. The pad was presumably believed would prevent the late husband from coming to have sex with her. Then, after the burial, she was asked to shave her hair. At this point, any time she went to market, she should not stay beyond 6 pm to show respect for the spirit of her late husband.

Christian Cleric, when asked, why widowhood practices are mainly a burden to the woman more than the man, said “During the creation, God created man and through the man, a woman was created and because of that a man is not supposed to sit at a place just because he has lost his wife; he needs to go out and fend for the family, unlike the woman who is the weaker sex. She needs to stay out and allow her husband to take care of her needs”. When asked what the real Igbo tradition expects of a widow, he said a widow should respect her husband's siblings.

However, Widow Two had a contrary understanding of the treatment given to a widow. She said that despite how she took care of her husband when he was sick until his death, none of her husband's siblings cared to know how she was faring with the children but upon the husband's death, they all came to tell her the “do's and don'ts” (observances). According to her, she was told to not cook beyond 6 pm. She also said that she was told not to visit her place or go there to sleep. No matter what happened, she should try and get home by 6 pm. According to her, some practices need to be abolished because of the pains widows pass through, “after all, men and women are all created by the same God”.

Member Two, in his view, said that those restrictive sanctions given to the women did not apply to widowers as some people came to tell him not to stay indoors while he was mourning his wife. He added that some men even questioned why he was still in seclusion instead of going out to look for what to fend for his children; that, he is a man and should act as one. To him, the practices are only a burden or undeserved punishment meted out to a hapless and innocent widow. He wished that such practices would be eradicated.

On general discussion which was put across to the discussants, six out of the ten said that the Church is the cause of the problem and why the widows do not observe widowhood practices as expected of them. Many deaths among young and old were attributed to alleged inadequate observance of cultural practices of widowhood in the area. On the contrary, the female discussants said the position of the other six was baseless, rather it was a way of keeping the women folk silent from speaking their minds. They believed that if such practices should be reduced, the world of Akokwa women would be a better place for everybody. According to the women, “After all, a woman who has chosen a man to live the rest of her life with came with a good intention and nobody would wish to become a widow because it is not what one should be proud of but fate has made it so”.

Widow Three who was the oldest among the widows said that the earlier those rites and practices were abolished, the better for everybody. According to her, what she went through during her husband's death should not be experienced or imagined. She asked rhetorically, “Can you imagine eating, especially 'fufu' without washing your hands for three nights?” According to her, “a widow goes through a lot of untold pains in the hands of her husband's people”. She added that she went through very unfortunate situations such as poor nutrition, unhealthy shelter and above all, vulnerability to violence from outsiders.

According to her, widows are likely to suffer not only physical ill-health but also mental stress and chronic depression because they go through a lot of grief, losses and trauma after the death of their husbands. "Widows go through rejection, insecurity, discrimination, stigmatization and harmful traditional practices based on cultural practices of widowhood, caused by the death of their husbands, which often, cannot and should not be attributable to the wives".

Asked if there has been any planned and deliberate means of letting young unmarried and newly married women know the implications and demands of cultural practices of widowhood to get them prepared for possible widowhood, all the discussants agreed that such an arrangement was unnecessary and not made. The church too, was not preparing the minds of the female faithful for such a possibility. On the part of the tradition, it would show a wish of unfortunate sudden deaths of the men folk if such a pre-emptive drill was done all in the name of preparing the minds of the wives. The discussants believed that such a measure would also put a scare in the mind of the young women. However, they believed that the tradition expects a wife to be told the observances she must abide by at the death of her husband. To them, that is enough communication that a widow needs to enable her to mourn her husband and live among the husband's family and the community at large.

### **Participant Observation**

Being an ethnographic study, my observations as a participant were valid. My observations were very much in agreement with the Focus Group Discussion, with the addition that a widow's brother-in-law may choose to openly opt to remarry the widow or surreptitiously make advances to the late brother's wife. In both situations, if the widow refuses to oblige, she may be exposed to hatred or more victimization by the brother-in-law. Similarly, the widow hardly gets consulted by her husband's brothers before decisions affecting her and the children are taken.

For instance, the choice of funeral date and the arrangement for the funeral can be done without consulting the widow. She is to accept every arrangement made by the family members. Where there is a religious service to mark the end of the mourning that has the widow at the centre, such a decision can still be made for her and her children by family members. Indeed, in communicating widowhood practices whose burden is upon the widow, the widow is only placed as the receiver of the message and most often, the communication seems to be one-way, from the family of the husband to the widow.

A widow who took care of her husband while he was sick is expected to bathe with special herbs for seven days to dispel the spirit of the husband from coming around her. The herbs can be mixed with black soap and boiled for her bath every night. It is assumed that any violation of this measure can lead to the woman interacting with the husband in the dream and also making her sick. This agrees with the assertion of the Focus Group Discussion. Similarly, the widow is not expected to shave her pubic hair within the mourning period. Allowing the pubic hair for the period of mourning like not having a bath for three days, may not have any reason other than subjecting the widow to a slavish condition that shows deference to the deceased. She is also expected to wail every morning before Cockcrow for the period that precedes her husband's funeral. She must feign the action if she is not emotional enough to wail.



On the nature of communication about cultural practices of widowhood, a widow can only be told what she is expected to do as a widow. This is done by older women who are equally older widows. Such communication centres on the behaviour of the widow, whether real or fake. For example, a widow would be advised to sit on the floor all through the funeral ceremonies. She is not supposed to welcome visitors; she is not supposed to smile even if there is reason to do so. She does not have the right to sleep outside of her home all through the period of her mourning and does not have to appear “cheerful and glamorous” during the period of her mourning.

The widow is also expected not to attend public functions during the period of her mourning the husband. If she does, she would be rebuked even by her people because of what the people would say about her; mainly that the people would deride her as being disrespectful to the late husband. She is expected to always display a moody appearance and always be in her mourning dress all through the mourning period. She is not expected to display the true state of her free mind, otherwise, that would mean she is careless about the death of her husband. In summary, communication surrounding cultural practices of widowhood in Akokwa reveals more of what people would say (pretence) than what gives the widow conviction about what she does (reality). Unfortunately, the pretence must be enforced by the spectators who give themselves the responsibility of the custodians of the traditions. It is always a unidirectional form of communication that ignores the sensibilities of the woman.

## **Discussion**

### **RQ 1: Through what form of communication are young unmarried and newly married women in Akokwa given pre-cultural practices of widowhood to get them prepared for possible widowhood?**

Based on the results presented above, it is very clear that there is no deliberate form of communication to keep young women prepared for possible widowhood in Akokwa. In other words, communication on widowhood practices in Akokwa is strategically withheld from young women so as not to scare them before they face reality. Also, the fear of inviting death to the men is another reason pre-communication of widowhood is not encouraged.

The decision not to communicate cultural practices of widowhood to young women does not help the women to understand the situation they are likely to contend with in the event of the death of their husbands. Such a stand rather confirms Oladitan and Anyanwu's (2008) observation that culture and tradition which border on people's belief system and practice essentially render the victims hapless. In other words, the inherent rights that the widows have been made subservient to the cultural practices and traditions that cannot guarantee hope and a future for the widow.

### **RQ 2: What is the pattern of communicating cultural practices of widowhood in Akokwa between the widow and other members of her husband's family?**

From both the Focus Group Discussion and the Participant Observation, it is very clear that the pattern of communicating cultural practices of widowhood in Akokwa is forceful, haphazard, and intended to create fear in the widow without regard to the rights and dignity of the widow. It portrays the widow as a property of the husband's family or better, a weaker

vessel that must be dictated to. This agrees with Harding and Wood's Standpoint theory which states that "an intersection of minority positions creates a highly looked-down-upon location in the social hierarchy" (Griffin, 2000, p.451). A widow in Akokwa is expected to comply with whatever she is told even when the majority of these "commandments" are against her wish. She cannot argue against the ill-treatment that she undergoes because she wants to display her respect for her late husband in the eyes of the people. As stated earlier, since the flow of communication is one-way, she is only the receiver of the message. Here, communication is neither transactional nor interactional but unidirectional which is fit for bullet theory that does not apply to liberal and democratic communication situations.

**RQ 3: What implication does the nature of the communication of widowhood practices in Akokwa have for the psychology of widows and their children?**

Both the Focus Group Discussion and the Participant Observation have shown that communicating cultural practices of widowhood in Akokwa among the deceased's family members is more pain-inducing than relief of pain. Ordering a widow who mourns her husband not to go to the market to fend for the family, stopping her from going out until the husband is buried and taking over the husband's inheritance by the man's brothers will further inflict pain on the traumatised widow. Such measures are capable of rendering the widow poorer. Ogbuchi (2017) states that the high rate of widowhood rites in Igbo land is a source of anxiety and stress to the widows who struggle to adjust to the new phase of life. Ogbuchi's assertion reinforces the findings of this study elicited from the Focus Group Discussion and Participant Observation on communicating cultural practices of widowhood in Akokwa which is a sub-culture of Igbo culture.

**RQ 4: How does communicating cultural practices of widowhood in Akokwa affect the wellbeing of the deceased's family?**

Generally, communicating cultural practices of widowhood in Akokwa seems to be deliberately skewed against the wellbeing of the deceased's family. Akokwa tradition allows brothers of the deceased to inherit the intestate property of the deceased instead of the widow, especially if the widow is childless or has little children. This kind of tradition does not take the wellbeing of the deceased's family into consideration. Similarly, labelling a widow who went to sell a bunch of plantain in the local market a violator of cultural practices of widowhood is very inimical to the wellbeing of the family of the deceased. It appears to be a cultural practice that does not believe in human dignity and the wellbeing of the victim. No wonder Ihuzue (1972) has stated that widowhood is detestable and terrifying not as a result of the woman's loss of a companion, a friend, a bread-winner, a head of the family and father but on the grounds of indignity, degradation and poverty that are associated with widowhood rites.

**RQ 5: What role does religion play in communicating cultural practices of widowhood in contemporary Akokwa?**

It seems the traditional religion of the people of Akokwa plays a very significant part in communicating cultural practices of widowhood in the community. Indeed, all the observances are based on traditional religious beliefs. Any slight modification to widowhood practices is described to be the "evil of Christianity" in the area. During the

Focus Group Discussion, the Traditional Religionists were vehemently attacking the Christian religion as the destroyer of widowhood practices.

On the other hand, observation indicates that even Christianity in the area has failed to have enough influence on the barbaric aspects of cultural practices of widowhood in the area. Churches, especially the notable ones in the area have endorsed cultural practices of widowhood. In such churches, the end of mourning with all its cultural practices is observed in a special church service. However, there have been some moves, especially by the new breed churches to disregard some inhuman cultural practices of widowhood and victimization of widows in the area. These moves are yet to record significance.

### **Conclusion**

The study has shown that there is no deliberate form of communication to keep young women prepared for possible widowhood in Akokwa. It is also very clear that the pattern of communicating cultural practices of widowhood in Akokwa is forceful, haphazard, intended to create fear in the widow and unmindful of the rights of the widow. It portrays the widow as a property of the husband's family or better, a weaker vessel that must be dictated to. The study has also shown that communicating cultural practices of widowhood in Akokwa among the deceased's family members is more pain-inducing than relief of pain. Communicating cultural practices of widowhood in Akokwa seems to be deliberately skewed against the wellbeing of the deceased's family.

The traditional religion of the people of Akokwa plays a very significant part in communicating cultural practices of widowhood in the area. Christianity seems to have failed in generating enough influence on the inhuman aspects of cultural practices of widowhood in the area. However, some new-generation churches are disregarding widowhood practices, but their efforts have not yielded significant results. All in all, the study has confirmed the position of earlier studies by other researchers on widowhood practices in Igbo culture (Yarware & Soola, 2008; Ihezue, D.A. (1972)

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are made to discourage the practice of widowhood and make communication inclusive of women's sensibilities in Akokwa.

1. There should be adequate enlightenment given to young unmarried and married women on the implications and demands of widowhood in the area.
2. Churches, government agencies, None Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and youths should take it upon themselves to enlighten the people of Akokwa on the need to relax the slavish and barbaric aspects of widowhood practices in the area.
3. A widow should be encouraged by the family of the deceased husband to live her normal life after the death of her husband and exercise her rights and freedoms with dignity like every other human being.
4. Widows should speak and stand for their rights instead of giving themselves to be gagged and cowed into accepting practices that demean their dignity. They should eschew the fear that underlies threats of cultural practices of widowhood.

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