

## **Widowhood in Esanland**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Biblical accounts reveal that the office of the Deacon was created for the purpose of handling the benevolence ministry in the New Testament Church (Acts 6:1 - 3). By benevolent ministry we mean a deliberate action geared towards a generous care for the widow within a giving community. This office, over time, changed to "serving table" which in the present day Church has assumed diverse nomenclature: Mass, Thanksgiving, Eucharist, Fellowship Meal and Holy Communion, to mention a few. Today, the act of deliberate generous cares for the widow within the Church, particularly the Anglican Communion in Esanland, has been said to be of low priority, far from the New Testament's level. This study articulates the benevolent ministry of deliberate love and care for widows by Jesus Christ and his early apostles. This was aimed at re-enacting the New Testament model of pastoral love and care. The research examined the plight of widows among the people of Esan. Particular attention was given to Ihumudumu and Ujoelen –Ekpoma, both in Esan West Local Government Area; Uromi in Esan-North-East; Ubiaja in Esan South East and Amahor in Igueben Local Government Areas, all in Edo State. Historical, phenomenological and descriptive methods were adopted for this study. Two hundred respondents were randomly selected within the Local Government Areas in Esanland. Data for the study were collated through the use of self-developed questionnaires. The result of the study showed that the Church has not given enough priority to widows' well-being in Esanland. It is recommended that, in order to fulfil the divine mandate, the Church should be in the vanguard in her God's - given responsibilities in protecting and providing succour to widows in her midst. The study concluded that widows have not been given sufficient care whether in the traditional Society or within the Church circle. The study recommended to all to pay more attention to widows welfare while elders should abrogate all traditional laws and customs detrimental to their social, economic and political well-being in our society. The general public, private and religious organizations in various Local Government Areas in Esanland, Edo State and indeed the nation at large were called upon to practically demonstrate high sense of love and care for widows.

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Esan people, like every other people, have their history, culture and traditions. These traditions and culture are visible in agriculture, architecture, religion, arts, music, fashion and festivals of all sorts. To some people, some of these traditional and cultural heritage or endowments have positive values, while to others, negative. What some of these practices have, are negative impacts on the people. One of such with negative impacts is widowhood rites. Widowhood rites fall within the traditional and cultural endowment of the Esan people. Widowhood rites do not just relate to, but fundamental part and parcel of the tradition and culture of the people Of Esan. They form parts of the traditions the Esan people are known for.

Ifada is right, when, in an oral interview, cited by Ogbenbe (2012, 181) says: "Thus, widowhood and its rites is one of the cultural values of the Esan people whose role and sociological significance has been raised above the dynamics of time". The dynamism of the culture is located within the periphery of relevance beneficial to Esan communities. This is one of the aspects where the distinctiveness of Esan culture has been remarkably visible. The only encumbrance to this aspect of the culture is the manner widowhood rites are observed. Some of these rites practiced in some Esan traditional communities are certainly dehumanizing. some widowhood rites like confinement, defacement, disinheritance, mourning for a period of time within some specific hours, dethronement and Ostracism, do not only persist, though some of the strictest and stiffest measures have given way to soft compliance with the rules.

#### **Background to the study**

The Church of God has the mandate to practically demonstrate her skills of liberation Theology in liberating the poor widow in the same manner Jesus Christ did (Luke. 4:18). This mandate, though has no direct reference to widows, yet, it implies in His manifesto: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor...to set at liberty those who are oppressed...." In John 20:22,

He handed over this same Spirit to His disciples when He said: "Receive the Holy Spirit" to set at liberty those who are oppressed (widows inclusive). Widows in Esanland have been oppressed in the name of culture for too long.

### A Short History of Esan People

*Esan*, is one of the ethnic groups in Edo state; occupying an area best described in political terrain as the Edo Central Senatorial District of Nigeria. It is made up of five (5) Local Government Areas with Ekpoma, Irrua, Uromi, Ubiaja and Igueben as Headquarters of each of the Local Government Areas. The people are believed to have migrated at various times from Benin and its environs between 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Centuries AD, during the reign of *Oba Ewuare* in about 1440 AD (Omoriegbe, 2007:76). Esan people are predominantly farmers whose major crops are visibly displayed at Market places. Udebhulu (2014:10) attests to the fact that:

Along the roads all through the entire Esanland, agricultural products such as oranges, banana, mango, avocado pear, black pear, lime, walnut, pineapple and cashew are found. Palm and rubber trees' important for the manufacturing of plastic products- are found everywhere in Esanland. Also, yam, cassava, sweet potato, pepper, okra, cocoa, cocoyam and rice are other farm products.

Esan is blessed with cultural endowments, which are traceable to its origin. Each clan has its *Onojie*, customs, culture, and traditional institution similar in form and content-like "marriage rites, birth, initiation into age groups, death and burial etc" (Okojie, 1960:15). Marriage is significant to this study because it is a determinant factor to the success, social/economic and technological development or underdevelopment of any home, community or the nation at large. In the same vein, the home, being an integral part of the society plays socio/economic and political roles in the development and well-being of any nation. Though the conception of marriage has been altered in recent years due to the doctrine and practice of same- sex – marriage legalized by those who had earlier colonised the black Continent of Africa by de-emphasising responsible procreation and the interests of children in favour of personal fulfillment and the desires of adults, a situation where "an unprecedented number of American children today are born to unwed mothers, while divorced rates remain high and a great number of consecutive couples choose not to have children" (<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/06/us/06iht-currents06.html>? Retrieved: 21/10/2015), yet to Africans and indeed Esan people, marriage remains traditional and legal union between a man and a woman in order to live together in harmony and have children. The society suffers set back where the family life is broken into shreds by lack of unity, love, and peace.

### The Concept of Death (*Uwu*) among the Esan People

In Esan language, "death is called "*Uwu*" (a noun) and it means death itself (Esan Dictionary, 338). To an Esan person, death is not the end of life? Airoboman and Osagie (2016, 1-3) in their research work gave the concept of death in Esan as: "the cessation of life...a transition into a spirit world".

This concept leads to the idea being described in many terms, such as: *Owele or Owe'e* – he/she has slept or he/she is sleeping; *Okhin uwa-* He/she has gone home, *Obu ene kalo* – He/she has gone to join the ancestors; *Okhin eji 'agbon da bun le* – He/She has gone to where people are more in number, etc. When a person dies, the Esan people believe he or she has gone home to join the ancestors. However, these terms cannot be used for a person who dies prematurely or mysteriously. The spirit of a person who dies prematurely or in mysterious circumstances is believed to be denied admittance into the community of the ancestors.

Death, therefore, is not a complete cessation of the total person but a change of place and form- from mortality to immortality, hence it is called a transition. This conception is in line with Alli (2011:25-26), as quoted by Airoboman and Osagie (2016, 1-3), saying that "Death in Esan is regarded as a transition from one state of existence to another. Transitional rite is the last of the rites of passage that a person has to go through on earth" (<chrome-extension://mhjfbmdgcfjbbpaeojofohoefgiehjai/index.html>; Retrieved: 29/11/2016). Among the rites of passage a person has to observed on earth according to Esan tradition are, birth, puberty, marriage and burial" (Omokhodion, 2012, 7-24). Each of these rites has its peculiar ceremony and must be observed to their specifications.

It is this concept of death among Esan people that forms an integral part of what gives relevance to the institutionalisation of widowhood rites. This assertion is not at variance with Ihensekhien's, (2012, 186), presentation when he laid credence to the Oxford (1993), definition, that:

Widowhood is the actual status or time of being a widow, a social state into which a woman is translated by the very fact of her husband's death. In traditional setting, the phenomenon that occurs during this period of grief is known as widowhood rites.

The Church of Nigeria Anglican Communion, in one of her Standing Committee meetings held in Ibadan 2002, set up a committee on 'widows' plight in Nigeria'. The sub-committee that examined widows in Esan identified that widows in Esan were:

required to drink of the water used for washing of the corpse of the husband; required to shave hairs and sleep on a hard floor, in some places; forbidden by custom to join in conversation and normal social interactions; required to sit on tattered mats; required to eat with broken plates and unwashed hands; required to wear black clothes for a period of one year; subjected to holding a small pot for a period of time; compelled by culture to hold a kind of plant (*Iyinmwini*) with three or four edges (Church of Nigeria Anglican Communion, Committee Report in her Standing Committee meetings held in Ibadan, 2002).

There is no doubt that the Church of God on earth has always been in the forefront to confronting prevailing challenges from the beginning of its inauguration by Jesus Christ at Pentecost (Acts 2:1 - 4). It is against this backdrop Jesus Christ states: "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force (Matt.11:12 RSV)". Some of the prevailing challenges from the beginning of its inauguration have been manmade challenges. In the New Testament, Jesus berates the Pharisees for their injustices to widows (Mt. 23:14). St. James emphasizes care for widows as a major challenge which the Church should address (James. 1:27). Greek converts complained to the Apostles that their widows were not receiving the same treatment as Hebrews (Acts 6:1). The Violence against widows by traditional Elders and the deceit in leaders of *Now a- day Churches*, (Isiramen, 2014:62), among other factors have hampered the realization of widows' liberation in Esanland. In view of the forgoing, we identify with Ezeme, in his unpublished work; where he describes the plight of widows as "deplorable". He posited that such "social/moral stigma affects their thoughts and behaviour" (Ezeme, 2006: 15). What is therefore required is functional liberation theology. It is in the light of this Isiramen (2014:62), opined that "human liberation cannot successfully ignore religion and its massive impact".

### **The Plight of Widows in Esanland**

Discussing the concept of widowhood in Esanland, Ogbenbe (2012:187) says:

In Esan Tradition, a widow is generally called *Oron*. A term used for a woman who just lost her husband.... It suffices to say that widowhood is the status acquired by a woman whose husband has died. This status is maintained for as long as the woman remains unmarried. The meaning of widowhood among the Esan people is largely dependent on the socio-cultural practices of the people. The Esan Traditional society is basically patriarchal and so the rites and practices of widowhood are controlled by the male folk such that today, widowhood and its ordeals has become the portion of the women....

Widowhood, though a status as expressed by Ogbenbe, certainly, is not a noble one but ignoble. Aggravating this issue has its anchor on two significant principal factors: "the lost of her husband" and above all, "the Esan Traditional society basically patriarchal and so the rites and practices of widowhood are controlled by the male folk". The aftermath of this is that, its ordeals have become the portion of women. Speaking further, Ogbenbe (2012:190) cites Okojie (1960) to demonstrate the grave consequence on the widow if she refuses to perform the rites of widowhood in accordance with Esan traditional Law and custom. In his words:

A woman sank in social status like lead in water on losing her husband in the village. If she was the most senior in the village, she becomes the most junior ....

The word "sank" as used here by Ogbenbe, suggestively, seems deliberate and apt too. The word connotes "descending to a lower place or position" or "to pass into a specified state or condition" in life (<http://wordweb.Dictionary/WW5>; Retrieved: 14/12/2016). One of the areas this is in the downward movement from the status of a wife to that of a widow. The implication of this is what Ogbenbe calls "a state of cultural impurity and uncleanness". As a widow she remains a non admirable and unacceptable entity in the society (Ogbenbe, 2012:188).

A widow is psychologically depressed and socially degraded at the demised of her husband, particularly when she reflects on all ordeals she has to go through. Among the Esan people, widowhood rites are very fundamental to funeral rites. These rites are performed in different phases. Life is a continuous battle for widows in Esanland. It becomes complex in particular, when they have little kids to cater for. Other areas of challenges include, observing religious rites, obtaining health care services, life struggle and the fear of death. The fear of death is used because, whether or not it is a continuation of life yet, the process of death is painful; in some cases it could be very horrible. These traits of life are particularly challenging to widows due to persistent patriarchal oppression in the name of culture and tradition in different shapes and in different communities.

In traditional Esanland, religion and tradition are inseparable twain and they play major roles as they are used as instruments of implementation of widowhood practices. The way and manner these two are practiced could keep someone in suspense. They are not just instrument of implementation but tools for victimization of widows even in their grief. It is most disturbing to find some 'enlightened' men who, with their experiences in life should enlighten the elders of the community and show good example, align with them to advocate for strict compliance with widowhood traditions and culture.

In traditional Esanland, widows are treated as outcast. An outcast is a person rejected from society or home. Nobody in particular cares about the needs of an outcast. She does virtually everything by herself without any assistance from love ones. At the time of ailment she suffers it alone as many would have gone their own way; under such condition help may never come. Things become worse where she is suspected to be responsible for the death of the deceased spouse. This is because it is often believed that the surviving wife could be responsible for her spouse's death, either through adultery committed unknown to the spouse or through magical spell. In some cases, whether or not she is responsible for his death, the traditional people would like to impose it on her. Consequent upon this, she must observe all rituals pertaining to that status as a widow. Victoria Aisuegbehien (Oral interview: 20/06/2016), a Christian widow, in an interview, admitted that:

The first Seven days, with effect from the day of interment when the corpse arrived from the Morgue, a piece of yam was roasted which I was told to consume in haste. This I did amidst tears. Though very hot, I could not refuse it. During the wake-keep, I was locked up in a room like someone in prison. I was warned never to come outside, except to ease myself. Fire, with fresh, pleasant aroma leaves on it, was kindled and placed at the middle of the room where I was kept. There was smoke everywhere, emitting from the fire for seven days. I was marked with charcoal on my hands, feet and forehead with black clothes to match. I was given foam to sleep on, separate dishes for eating, spoon and cup for drinking water. On my left hand was a palm frond which was always with me all the time. On the eight day I was told not to step outside the room. At the expiration of the eight days ritual, I was given freedom to move about and do whatever I feel I could do. The expiration of the eight day saw the beginning of other set of rituals which lasted for three months (Oral interview, 2016).

According to her:

I was given a three-sided plant, known in Esan as *Iyimwin* or *Ikhire-Ihimin*, this I held in my hand both in the day and night to wherever I went. For three months, I wore black, which I washed often when necessary. I was instructed to take my bath very early in the morning before dawn. This I did for a period of three months. At the end of the three months, I was told to sleep with the children of my choice. (a proverbial statement which means, to have sexual intercourse with any man of her choice within the *egbe*- family). But I refused. I was told to provide a live goat to those who were junior to my late spouse: this I did to avoid the wrath of the gods. Before the disposal of those clothes used for the three months, I went to my immediate senior brother, who ritually gave me a piece of Cola nut and I ate it at his instruction.

This is corroborated by Edeawe Omono (Oral interview, 16/12/2016) and she says that the used of *Iyimwin/ Ikhire-Ihimin* is an integral part of widowhood practices. It is held by the widow with her hand, both night and day, whether on a journey or not, in the Market places or in the farm. It must be held in such a manner that people can see it. This practice however, has been replaced with a copy of the Holy Bible for Christians. For the non-Christian widow, the triangular plant must be sorted for from the elderly women or widows. Mrs. Edeawe says further, that the only material that has not been substituted is *Irialo*, or *Urialo* (the *hoya-plant*) (<http://davesgarden.com/guides/pf/go/53915>:Retrieved:16/12/2016). *Urialo* is a kind of *hoya-plant* with climbing tendencies. Its leaves are scraped off while the rope is bounded round the waist (like belt), of the widow unnoticed, Edeawe Omono (Oral interview, 16/12/2016).

On the point of sleeping with the children of her choice, a proverbial statement directing her to have sexual relationship with any male member of her choice within the family- *egbe*, as alleged by Victoria Aisuegbehien (Oral interview: 20/06/2016), Elimimian attests to it that it is the practice in Irukep in Ekpoma, and in some parts of Esanland. He added that on the ground that the widow refuses to have sex with any male member, she has the option of going into a nearby bush, where she holds a tree and masturbates. According to him, this is done by non-Christians, young or old; on the contrary, Christians are exempted. But they must undergo a period of counseling in the hands of a Priest or elderly women who are Christians. One of the functions of this rite is to prevent the spirit of the deceased husband from appearing to her in the dream (Elimimian I.O. 15/12/2016, Oral interview).

In fact, in the remote places within Esanland, some quarters or families do not know whether a widow is a Christian or not, as some of the elders of the land do not care to know. In such an environment, widowhood practices cannot be said to have changed. On the use of utensils, a little decency has been brought in. Her eating utensils like, dishes and clothing are now thoroughly washed. Another issue that has changed with modernity is the use of foam for sleeping during the widowhood period. In the past, the widow was not permitted to sit on foam rather on traditional mat spread on the floor. The number of days and months has not changed. In some places, for the first seven days she remains in-door *incommunicado* like a prisoner who must have committed a criminal offence, while for the period of two or three months she could go about on black clothes with *Iyimwin: Iyimwin* or *Ikhire-Ihimin* in her hand (Victoria Aisuegbehien (Oral interview: 20/06/2016)..

For C.O. Imade(though not Esan couple, but both lived in Esanland), her case was worse. She admitted:

My husband's family forbade me from touching any of his property, not even his corpse. I could not take a pin out of the property we own together. At the grave side, I was told to swear if I have knowledge of the

where about of any of his properties. When I refused to comply with their devilish request, they attempted lynching me. But my Christian brethren helped me to escape, (C.O.Imade: Oral interview, 13/09/2016).

For R.O. Edosa, who lost her husband in 2006, has this to say:

My name was taken to many diviners by my husband's family to find out whether I was responsible for the death of my husband. They found out that I was innocent of his death. They never told me, but I heard of it. They told me not to touch their properties. They said my husband was late and that as a widow I must kill a goat if I must be allowed to touch their things. But prayers were later offered by my Pastor, (R.O. Edosa, 13/09/2016, Oral interview).

On the question of her experience as a widow of a late Priest, Mrs. Edosa R.O.says:

As a widow of my late husband who was a priest in the Anglican Communion before his demise, life has not been the same again. It has been characterized by pains. At times contemplating on the position my husband would have occupied by now in the midst of other clergy, gives me pains and sorrow and it makes me lose focus. This is often the case whenever Clergy wives are meeting. This thought keeps coming each time there is a diocesan programme or meeting. I feel pains because seniority in ordination means a lot. Year of ordination and preferment are used in dispensing any given assignment. No one is against the use of seniority in any given assignment but it is painful when those you ought to boss are now your bosses. This is truly painful.

The implication of this is that as a widow, her position among the ranks and files of clergy wives has not only been tamed due to the demised of her spouse but also has no honour. Those whose husbands were far junior to her spouse when he was alive are now senior to her and would command more respect. This again is indeed painful.

On area of sexual abuse, directly or indirectly, she says:

No Clergyman from the Anglican Church has ever demanded for sex from me. But there was one Pastor who came from another denomination but he was disappointed. He came from Benin City, but I never yielded to his evil demand because of my Christian background and as a clergy wife.

The question was asked: Do you receive any assistance from the Church at all?

Her response was: "Yes, I do! For instance, two of my children's school fees are paid by the Church. When I had no job, the Church was paying me the sum of N10, 000 monthly; occasionally, some members of the Church do assist me with provision of some food items".

On the question of whether such kind gesture is also extended to other widows within the Church, she said in affirmation, Yes! She reemphasised the fact that "widow's commitment to God and Church activities plays a role in determining whether the Church would give attention to such a widow(s) or not". She supported her point by saying that "The Church gives out rice and tomatoes to widows during Easter, Christmas and New Year periods and sometimes clothing materials are given out to us by some persons in the Church. On the question of whether she would like to recommend a more systematic method to be adopted by the Church to address the issue instead of this random or selective approach, she said: "That will be nice, especially for those who are not working or have retired" (R.O. Edosa, 13/09/2016, Oral interview).

Elimimian I.O. posited that the Church is not doing badly in caring for widows. According to him:

Dora Ovbiagele, lost her husband (a Priest by vocation) over ten years ago, till date she lives in a house given to her by the Church, during the time of A. A. Agbajie (RIP). The children of Edosa R.O. are sponsored by the Cathedral of St. Andrew, Ekpoma; even when Imade, C.O. lost her husband some years ago, the Diocese retained her as the secretary to women fold and was properly cared for through T.A.Imaekhai (wife of the Archbishop and President of the Mothers' Union and Women's Guild). Others like, Idiahi, Odalo and Abu are widows of clergy men. Once in a month, the Priests in St. Paul's and St. Luke's Churches, go round to administer the sacrament of the Lord supper to them, ask about their welfare and the welfare of their children. During annual, Diocesan Conferences, annual harvest and end of year parties, they are all remembered as gifts of cash and food items are given to them. Regularly we take welfare offering to pay their hospital bill when sick (Elimimian I.O. 15/12/2016, Oral interview).

The above claim is confirmed in our study where 70% of the total respondents (200) demonstrate that the Diocese of Esan and the various Parishes are doing much in caring for widows both in the Church and the Community. We are therefore compelled to observe the immense contribution of the Anglican Communion in the Diocese of Esan to the welfare of widows in her midst. It is on this note we will like to place on record as we commend the kind gesture of the Cathedral of St. Andrew, Eguare - Ekpoma, All Saints' Church in Obodeko-Amahor, Our Saviour's Church in Idumowu- Ebelle, All Saints' Church in Ubiaja, St. Paul's Church in Uromi, St. John's Church in Ukpenu-Ekpoma, St. Paul's Church, Iruokpen, St. Paul's Church in Ukpoke, St. David's Church-Irrua, St. John's Church in Idumebo-Ekpoma and St. Luke's Church in Abia -Iruokpen, all in Edo State,

that have in a bid to fulfill this Christ's given mandate, give out some food items, clothing materials and cash to widows annually (particularly during Harvest) and by some individual like the Archbishop, the Most Rev'd F.J. Imaekhai, Mrs. T.A. Imaekhai and others (not known to us) who on yearly basis offer food items and cash to widows. In some Parishes scholarship are given to the surviving children of late Priests. These kind gestures will, like the balm of Gilead heals psychological and sociological bewilderment caused by life threatening isolations. This, no matter how little, goes a long way to solving some immediate challenges.

It may not be completely correct to say that the Church of God on earth, represented here by the Anglican Church, has not demonstrated her mandate in the care of widows. You will also agree that it may not also be correct to say, the Diocese of Esan, Anglican Communion, has not done enough in caring for them. What may be correct is that the various parishes and Archdeaconries within need to improve on the existing gesture vis-a-vis the population of widows which has increased significantly in recent times due to increase in death rate of old and young men.

What may also be mentioned here is that the above accolades are not enough to feel satisfied. This is because challenges confronting widows on daily basis are not food and clothing alone. There are cultural and traditional challenges, social injustices, political and gender marginalisation, just to mention a few. Christ models of comprehensive, functional and feasible options for widows are the only lasting solutions to this menace. [www.mhjfbmdgc.fjbbpaeojof.ohoefgiehjai/index.html](http://www.mhjfbmdgc.fjbbpaeojof.ohoefgiehjai/index.html). Retrieved: 22/09/2015).

### The Girl child mentality

The Church must begin in the area of mental re-orientation of the individual girl child as well as the general public. The traditional Esan girl child is born into a world whose belief is that of complexity. What this means is that there is an environment made up of a people whose belief and mindset about the female child is amazingly frustrating. Everything surrounding a girl child is never accepted as good enough as whatever she does or says is never respected. Otanwa (2015) says that the girl child is:

taught to believe that as a woman she must not be "too ambitious" else it will scare men away. She learns to stoop for the fear of dwarfing others, she is taught to often keep quiet when men are talking because she is a woman. This same girl child grows up respecting the 'values' she was taught; sometimes, she ends up falling short of her God given potentials. (<https://www.Bellanaija.com/2015/08/meg-otanwa-the-choices-of-the-african-girl-child/>; Retrieved :29/09/2016).

This is the mentality of the average Esan girl-child. She is surrounded by a culture that does not believe in the training of a girl child. Only the boy child that should obtain the western education while the girl child education ends in the kitchen. This is coupled with visionless patriarchal leadership from birth to death. The Community believes that her education does not only end in the kitchen but revolves round women harem; the society believes her only role is to give birth to children as many as the husband could care for. She grows up with this mentality that the end result is that she sees herself and plays the role of an inferior being while the male child is believed to be superior. This is driven into her psyche covertly or overtly by the society so much that whatever she does is seen and received with nostalgia and suspicions.

Imhonde and Izibili (2003:51), presented a true picture of the situation when he said, "The female child (of the deceased) is...not given the status of a child as it is with the men folk" This is because the girl child is deprived of being the heir or deprived of the right to inherit the father's property even if she is the first child; the offense she commits is being a female. She is seen as an inheritable entity. Okojie (1960) asserts that it was a basic "Ishan law and custom that when a man dies his property and all he possessed were inherited by his children – the first son..." (Okojie, 1960:29). The first son has the right to share the inherited properties with his siblings as customs demands. In a situation where the deceased is married to two or more wives, the first son must ensure that the first sons of the junior wife or wives (*Ukhuede, ie, figuratively every door, meaning every first son of each of the wives*) are given their portions in order of seniority. There are several cases where the next of kin set aside tradition, denying others the share from their father's property.

The girl-child mentality has engulfed the totality of the femaleness not only among the Esan people, Nigeria and indeed the black continent known as Africa. The final editing of this study was still ongoing when a message through the popular network-[NAIJ.COM](http://NAIJ.COM), states: "Buhari who is on a state visit to Germany reacted to the interview saying, I don't know which party my wife belongs to, but she belong to my kitchen and my living room and the other room". This is the kind of mentality we are talking about, where everyone sees the girl child, the woman as belonging to the kitchen and the bedroom (An interview granted BBC Hausa service: 14/10/2016). That the comment emanates from the President of the nation Nigeria indicates the height of our insensitivity and low mentality in all that concerns women. Dame Patience Jonathan, former first lady of Nigeria. and wife of former President Goodluck Jonathan, disagreed with Buhari, by calling on all Nigerian women and girls to stop limiting themselves, go out of the shadow and expand horizons"(BREAKING NEWS. [NAIJ.COM](http://NAIJ.COM). Retrieved: 15/10/2016).

This action contradicts the legal framework in Nigeria, which clearly forbids traditional practices that are not in conformity with the Country's human rights obligations. In addition there are state institutions which have mandates that allow them to handle and control widowhood practices. Their efforts, however, are still hampered by traditional values. It is, therefore, our suggestion that in order to fully implement international human rights standards, activities especially those aimed at sensitization and creation of awareness in the minds of the people, must be stepped up by the various Government and non- governmental Organizations to eradicating all forms of gender discriminations.

### **The Inheritance Right of the Girl Child**

On family inheritance the Bible speaks on the aspect of inheritance by a girl child as an heir. There are several examples of family standard of inheritance in the Bible. One of such interesting standard is that daughters would have right to their father's possessions if there were no sons to carry on the father's name. When the five daughters, for example, of Zelophehad asserted that they had a right to a share in their father's future possessions (in this case, land in Canaan) even when he had no sons, God agreed with them (<http://www.biblestudy.org/question/family-inheritance.html>: (Retrieved: 07/05/2013). The demand for their right in accordance with scriptural injunction was granted.

You shall give them (the girl-children) possession of an inheritance among their father's brothers and transfer the inheritance of their father to them. And you shall speak to the people of Israel, saying, 'if a man dies and has no son, then you shall transfer his inheritance to his daughter (Num.27:7 & 8).

Another interesting example is the one which involves Naomi, the mother-in-law of Ruth. Naomi received the land of her husband when the husband and her sons had died. The problem was that when she wanted to sell the land she could not because anyone who would buy it, needed to inherit or redeemed Naomi the wife of the late Elimelech (Ruth 1:5). She had to sell it to a family member who also had to marry Ruth the wife of Mallon, Naomi's son (Ruth 4:10) and to have children by her in her dead husband's name. A close relative turned down his right to buy Naomi's land because he would endanger his own inheritance. As a result, it was Boaz, a more distant relative, who accepted to redeem (bought back) willingly, Ruth as his wife in the process (Ruth 4:3 - 11). As the custom of the Jews demands, the land belonging to Naomi's husband was therefore inherited by Boaz. This custom prevented a few elites' groups of people from possessing most of the landed properties in agricultural economy in Israel.

It is on the strength of this we are saying that the Church of God should not fold her hands and allow the injustices done on widows to persist. The leaders should not keep quiet in such a time as this. The Church should not be overwhelmed by the myriads of challenges ranging from lack of funds to lack of committed personnel. The Church should demonstrate consistently, comprehensively and sufficiently too, its true mandate to be the mouthpiece of widows, address the injustices against same and adequately harness their potentialities.

### **Inheritance Rights of Widows**

Inheritance's right of widows is the right of a widow to inherit her husband's properties at his demised. "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is a declaration adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1948 at the Pala de Chaillot, Paris. The Declaration arose directly from the experience of the Second World War and represents the first global expression of what many people believe to be the rights to which all human beings are inherently entitled. It is a declaration that grants economic, social, and cultural rights (ESCR) to the ... individuals which include, labour rights and the right to health, the right to education and the right to an adequate standard of living" ([https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal\\_Declaration\\_of\\_Human\\_Rights](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_Declaration_of_Human_Rights):29/09/2016). Speaking from the traditional perspective, Elimimian describes the agitation for the rights of women, vise- a- vise widows in Esanland as an "abomination". It is the opinion of this study that the term tends to undermined the humanness in women. It presents women whose worth is below that of slaves and not servants. Speaking further, he says that:

The rights of a woman in traditional Esanland are submerged under the lordship of the husband. It is the law of creation. Man was created in the image of God, whereas woman is a by-product of the man. She is coated and furnished with beauty in such a manner that she could look attractive to man. Man is the original specie whereas woman is made from man. Woman is weak and can easily be deceived but a man cannot be deceived easily. Man and woman were never made the same way and given equal rights at creation. Women liberation and equality with men are against God's will. It is when they get to heaven that equality will come to play, where there is neither marriage nor giving in marriage. This is the position of the traditional Esan people (Elimimian, I.O. 15/12/2016, Oral interview).

The implication of the above position seems to suggest that a woman or a widow does not have rights at all but must of necessity be under the lordship of the husband at all times and for everything. This is very true in view of the place of women in Esanland of today. The Esan widow is completely alienated and denied

the right to inherit any property jointly owned with the husband. It appears civilization and indeed, the Christian gospel of Grace (Eph. 2:8, Gal.3:28) and ethics have not yet been received in Esanland.

This assertion confirms Wiredu's claim in Ukhun and Inegbedion (2005) <http://www.ahrj.up.ac.za/ukhun-c-e-esq-n-a-i:Retieved> 14/12/2016), that, within the African context, some cultures are authoritarian because they involve the manipulation of the individual's 'will' through the process of the individual's indoctrination". It states further that "the authority of culture holds sway against the individual's independent and rational choices". Cultural authoritarianism is endemic to civilization, creativity and self actualization which are the bedrocks of social, economic and technological advancement of any developing nation. In Esan context, the custodians of Esan tradition and culture manipulate and control the rights of women with the intention to taming their excesses (Elimimian, I.O. 15/12/2016, Oral interview). What you get is a society where a widow does not even have the right to inherit the husband's property after his demise, whereas her husband can if he loses his wife. Under this trend, can the customary law be said to be bias against widows? Mondri, R. (2006:14) also alluded to this when he said:

As observed, inheritance rights like most rights are tilted towards the male gender. The cultural practices of the various constituent tribes, societal norms, illiteracy, poverty, and religious beliefs have all fuelled the continuing inequitable representation of women directly and indirectly. And even though there are laws, conventions and treaties that advocate for the equal treatment of all human beings regardless of their sex, tribe, origin and circumstance of birth, these discriminatory practices still operate today unfettered ([http://www.academia.edu/7187814/AN\\_APPRAISAL\\_OF\\_INHERITANCE\\_RIGHTS\\_OF\\_WOMEN\\_IN\\_NIGERIA](http://www.academia.edu/7187814/AN_APPRAISAL_OF_INHERITANCE_RIGHTS_OF_WOMEN_IN_NIGERIA). Retrieved:14/12/2016).

Under the Esan customary law, who inherits the deceased's property, though this is decided differently, and is not written down? It is either through "unwritten will" where the property is named after the person and a witness (es) is called to witness it or, the property is kept in the custody of a brother(s) in the same family. The brother is instructed not to disclose such information until the demised of the father. The English law, which is written down and signed in a document called a "Will", is not in vogue in traditional Esanland. It is alien to Esan culture to write a will in a document because; it is a taboo to do so. Any person that suggests this to his father or husband is taken to wish him/her dead before his/her time. This is never taken lightly with whoever suggests it.

Mondri (2006:14) wonders why "These discriminatory practices still operate today unfettered, even though there are laws, conventions and treaties that advocate for the equal treatment of all human beings regardless of their sex, tribe, origin and circumstance of birth". Why do men refused to abrogate discriminatory rules against women? Could it be because they are women or widows? When has it become an abomination to lose a husband? These are questions begging for answers.

Isibor (2007) appreciates Obi, who observed that:

Nowhere in Southern Nigeria does the customary law give a widow the right to inherit, or share in the intestate estate of her husband.... Even where a husband in his lifetime allots a farm, a house or some other form of landed property to his wife for her use and enjoyment, the latter does not thereby acquire inheritance rights in it ([http://www.edoworld.net/Women\\_Right\\_And\\_StatusUnder\\_Edo\\_Native\\_Law\\_And\\_Custom.html](http://www.edoworld.net/Women_Right_And_StatusUnder_Edo_Native_Law_And_Custom.html):(Retrieved: 07/05/2013).

Esanland of Edo State makes up what is Southern Nigeria. In this part of Nigeria, widows are inherited side by side with the late husband's property by the brother's next of kin. Where the deceased is survived by many wives it is customary the "eldest son, known as *Obhigiogbe*", (Omokhodion, 2012, iv) inherits other wives. Isibor (2007) is right when he asserts that even where a husband in his lifetime allots certain property to his wife for her use and enjoyment, the widow does not have inheritance rights on it and for that purpose she cannot sell or donate the same to another possessor. Customary law therefore is gender biased.

Proving his point further Isibor quotes Emiola, saying:

the Courts have declared that under Yoruba customary law, land allocated by the deceased to each of the wives still belong to the family because the allocation conferred no title on the women. ([http://www.edoworld.net/Women\\_Right\\_and\\_Status\\_under\\_Edo\\_Native\\_Law\\_and\\_Custom.html](http://www.edoworld.net/Women_Right_and_Status_under_Edo_Native_Law_and_Custom.html) (Retrieved: 07/05/2013).

The point of argument is that "any land allocated by the deceased to each of the wives still belongs to the family because the allocation conferred no title on the women". The question is who confers a title on the women or property that belongs to a deceased husband? If tradition could confer a title on male heir apparent, what makes the wife traditionally unqualified to be an heir apparent to her husband's property, particularly if the deceased has allotted it to her? Which is more authentic, the verdict of a deceased husband who was the rightful owner before his death or the family who does not have the legal or traditional right of ownership as the time the husband was alive?



### Widow Inheritance (*Uhanmi*)

The biblical term “Redeemer” is synonymous with the concept of ‘the person who buys back’ a property. It conveys the idea of a person who inherits or next of kin’ (Ruth 4:14). This term is not new to Esan people. In Esan dialect it is known as *Uhanmi*. It is an adjectival word, which describes the process of inheriting or buying back a widow in order to provide comfort for her, her children, project and preserve the name of her late husband. Unlike Jesus Christ described as a Redeemer of the world who, through the spilling of his blood on Calvary redeemed all who believe in him, the “Redeemer” in Esanland does not spill his own blood, but the blood of a she-goat or a he-goat. When the funeral rites of the deceased person are perfectly concluded and the surviving wife had observed all the prescribed rituals, she is traditionally purified by submitting all her black clothes, beads, earrings, necklace and utensils used during the period of her mourning to a designated representative of the family, who throw them away ritually.

A live goat is presented by the redeemer-next of kin, in a traditional manner to the elders of the quarters involved. The live goat is ritually slaughtered by those designated to do so. It is distributed among the *enedion, eugene*, in accordance with the hierarchical order. Palm wine, assorted drinks and edible items—cola nuts, bitter cola, and native cigarettes (tobacco) for those who have attained a particular age, spelt out by the tradition of the people. The man and woman are blessed together by the elders in presence of the representatives of both families; thereafter, both become husband and wife. We belong to the school of thought that admires the perfect intention of this type of marriage. It is a practice known as levirate marriage in the Old Testament (Deut.25:5-10). One of the aims is to provide social economic security for the widow.

In an oral interview, Elimimian authoritatively says:

In some Esan Communities, the widow is inherited by the next of kin to the deceased husband. Where she refuses to be inherited, she suffers because she will be denied of all her privileges and rights. If she is inherited she does not only stay in the family house, she is allowed to participate in every traditional ceremony married women are involved. But where she refuses to be inherited, though she may be permitted to remain in the family house, she does not exercise equal rights with other women. According to the custom, she cannot participate in other activities involving married women. She cannot cook singlehanded to serve any married man of the same family with the late husband or join other women of the same family to prepare/serve during any ceremony. She could be served by others but she cannot serve meal, whether she is a Christian or not. The belief is that, so long as she remains unmarried to any of the family member, the possibility is that she would have committed adultery. Based on this belief, the ancestral spirits could visit their anger on the elders of the family (Elimimian, I.O.15/12/2016. Oral interview).

Ogbenbe (2012:188) asserts that the rite of inheriting a widow known in Esan language as *uhanmi*, climaxes the purification processes of widowhood. According to him, it is with “the singular view to restore the widow’s cultural identity from the alienation into which the death of her spouse has plunged her”. This becomes significant in view of the economic wellbeing and sociological reintegration of the widow. A widow who refuses to undergo this process stands the risk of being isolated.

Justifying his argument he claims that when divorce occurs between a man and a woman, it is the woman who pays back the dowry and not the man. Again, in burying the corpse of a married woman if she dies, she is buried in the premises or house of her husband. The tradition of taking the corpse to her biological home is gradually giving way. Can it be true, that the entire Esan people regarded women as slaves? Can it also be true that is why women are buried in their husband’s premise or home, when in truth; women are taken to their parent’s home for burial when they die? Can it also be true that the custom of burying her corpse in the premises or house of her uncle is gradually fading away? We are, however aware that a woman can be buried in her husband’s home because of the union as husband and wife and not because she is a slave (Obi, 12/01/2017, personal comments). She can be buried as well with her husband if the children are grown up and wish so.

### Widowhood and its Challenges

Coping with the loss of a companion whom one has chosen as a partner in marriage for life is a challenge to the widow. For instance, sadness, depression, fears, anger and loneliness are capable of destroying her future happiness if not well managed. Everything changes. Nothing will ever be exactly the same again. In a sense a part of one’s life ends on the day of the death of a spouse. The task, then, becomes that of rebuilding a new life.

For an Esan woman who suddenly becomes a widow, she is surrounded by challenges too numerous to grapple with. The challenge to stand firm and take decisions at crucial moment becomes apparent. The economic wellbeing of the family is a major challenge, particularly if she has no desire to remarry. Most of our respondents gave the same experience as they all agreed that feeding the children is their major problem.

Childless widows and those with underage children depend on the power and support of their male relatives; this situation is capable of causing strife among relatives. Our respondents reported that their

acceptance and accommodation lasted only for a few months. This was because, after they had spent six months with their father's uncle, they began to murmur and complain over food and other minor issues. Those widows with grown up children were permitted to stay in their late husband's homes, but those widows without children depended on the existed relatives, irrespective of the spoilt relationship.

The education of the children is one of the major problems the widow has to carry. One of our respondents, confided in us that it is "the Church that gave her children scholarship" (Edosa, 2013, oral interview). How many of the widows' children have such privilege in Esanland? How many widows are favoured to be in a Church blessed with the caliber of men and women in Esanland? Such Churches are few as gifted men and women are also very few. The same cannot be said of those Churches in rural areas.

What we have tried to assert here is that widowhood practices in Esanland have its social economic challenges rooted in the religious/cultural practice of the people. These form part of the reasons people tend to abhor the practices. Though there is no human endeavour without challenges, this is highly a different case. Women alone, not men suffer the consequences.

### **Persistence of Widowhood Practices in Esanland**

Abulu Felicia, Ojo Onojelu, Victoria Aisuegbehien and R. O. Edosa (all widows), are among so many who are living testimonies to the persistence of widowhood in Esanland. They all confirmed that widowhood practices in Esanland still exist. Some of the factors responsible for the persistence widowhood practices in Esanland according to them include the following:

Funeral rites are aimed at guaranteeing the admittance of the deceased person into the company of the ancestors, who ultimately reincarnates into the community of the living dead.

Widowhood practices are indicative of deep sense of love and loss, at such, the intimacy and love shared while alive are precious moments that can easily disappear from the mind of the spouse. Mourning period is a time to express such emotional feelings of irreparable loss. Failure to observe the traditional rites attracts negative comments and condemnation from in-laws and elders. For this obvious reason, no woman or widow wants to set precedence detrimental to traditional practices (Omono Edeawe, Oral interview, 16/12/2016).

Widowhood practices assert, reveal and reminiscence the existing connection with the primordial custodians of cultural heritage since violating them results in devastation and of grave repercussions. For this and some other reasons, Esan women are therefore careful not to fall into the hands of the elders of the land by disobeying the tradition and culture of the people.

Widowhood practices are both Cultural and Universal identification; by these practices, where and who the people are, are known. During funeral rites, the widow dresses in complete black. When she passes, you do not need any interpretation to know who the person is. Again, it will be dangerous for any individual or family to kick against such symbolic antiquities and monumental tradition (Omokhegbe David, Oral interview, 16/12/2016).

Widowhood practices are as old as the history of Esan people. It is the view of this study that this has contributed immensely to the phenomenological persistence of the various widowhood practices in Esanland. It entails a segment of values of Esan culture enshrined in the heart of the traditional people. It would need twice the number of years of its emergence on the soil of Esan people to be erased if it will be possible.

### **Some Merits of Widowhood Practices**

Widowhood practices mean various things to various people. To modern day generation, widowhood practices are negative and evil. There is nothing good about it. But to traditional Esan people, it is evil not to observe them. Ifada (2011, oral interview) in, Esan People:

Our Culture, Our Faith quoted by Ogbenbe (2012:180), says that "Widowhood and its rites is one of the cultural values of the Esan people whose roles and sociological significance has been raised above the dynamics of time".

By the words "cultural values of the Esan people" best speaks of an emotional, social and economic investment assigned to a conservative practice-widowhood. The value of this sociological duty, traditionally, cannot be overestimated and replaced. Based on traditional understanding, they assume the position of ethics and morals for the good of widows and the community at large.

To the traditional Esan people, widowhood practices assert, reveal and reminiscence the existing connection with the primordial custodians of cultural heritage. Violating them can result in devastation and of grave repercussions. Widowhood practices are acts aimed at purifying the widow from "a state of cultural impurity" (Ogbenbe, 2012:193) and the land from the wrath of the gods. Such cultural exercise, instead of being a physical torture and dehumanizing undertaking, the Esan understands them as cultural innovations for spiritual protection and cultural preservation in its original status.

### Demerits of Widowhood Practices

Under the demerits of widowhood practices, we highlight some of the reasons people are against widowhood practices. For very many reasons individual and group of persons have called for the abrogation of all forms of widowhood practices particularly in Esanland and its environs. The following are some of the demerits or reasons:

It has been said that widowhood practices are against the universally accepted models of human rights. It is against the fundamental human rights of association. For a woman to sit on the floor for a period of seven days is a deprivation of the right of the person to move out freely to any place of her choice and engage in any legal and meaningful business.

Again, the above point is bound to have social, economic effect on her and members of the family. Paul says, "If anyone will not work let him not eat" (2 Thes.3:10). On the strength of this, it is therefore suicidal to keep someone down for three months without working, particularly when all sympathizers would have abandoned the widow and the children after the funeral rites. Its practices negate the Law of justice as the executioners of traditional Laws and customs in Esanland do so selectively.

Esan as a society, like most society in Nigeria, operates 'Patriarchal system' of leadership in which the father or eldest male is the head of the household, having authority over women and children ([http://members.metro.com.au/hubbca/our\\_patriarchal\\_society.htm](http://members.metro.com.au/hubbca/our_patriarchal_society.htm)) (Accessed: 4/9/2015). ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Esan\\_people](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Esan_people):Retrieved:9/4/2017

Men are in control of affairs and they dictate the tune of the society instead of a joint venture. It may also include titles being traced through the male line. Patriarchy is a social system in which males hold primary power, predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property (<https://www.google.com/search?client=opera=patriarchal+system>) (Retrieved: 07/09/2015). The tendencies for it to be abused cannot be detached.

## II. CONCLUSION

As we conclude this chapter and in view of the available facts, part of which are based on life experiences in the cause of pastoral ministration in Esanland and beyond, this study is of the opinion, that widowhood practices in Esanland has changed significantly. By this assertion, it means that the various practices relating to widowhood have abated courtesy the advent and spread of Christianity as well as civilisation. In the distant villages however, widows, still observes virtually all the rules and regulations spelt out by tradition. What has only changed in these areas, are some of the materials widows use (Mrs. Edeawe, Omono, oral interview; 12/12/2016).

The Church, no doubt, is aware of her pastoral responsibilities to widows within her domain. The Church, as an embodiment of theological, philosophical and pastoral acquaintances responds holistically to the heart-breaking yearnings and aspirations of widows. Where this fails, the revelation of the Holy Scripture is in great jeopardy. Most widows of clergymen in Esanland are within the productive age, unfortunately, they found themselves in a situation where they are neither fully clergy nor non-clergy. To compound their problems, their full acceptability or reception into the clergy fold is always with sinister. This study is a clarion call for the abrogation of all forms and shades of traditions of dehumanization and gender discrimination in Esanland and a wakeup call for women emancipation. Widows in Esanland must be freed. For this to be actualized there is the need for more pressure on the relevant authorities in Esanland to set the women free from all forms of arbitrary traditional rites. In this way women will be fully integrated into the society.

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