

Widowhood, Patriarchy, and Gendered Power in Orodo, Southeast Nigeria.

Bright Ikenna Uwandu, John Nzubechi Iwuajoku
Imo State University

ABSTRACT

In most patriarchal communities in Igboland particularly Orodo, the act of widowhood is not just about death or burial, rather it is the start of a very serious tough moment for the widow. This is due to the patriarchal formations in the communities and how she will be subjected to series of inhuman treatments. This research explores the ordeals and challenges of widows in Orodo, a prominent community in Imo State, Southeast Nigeria. According to the findings, widowhood practices in Orodo goes beyond mourning and other ritual performances, widows are expected to abide to strict customs and traditions that sometimes influences their style and color of dressings, public appearance and general behaviour. The study discovered a more nuanced reality: Women (umuada) sometimes are at the forefront of enforcing these norms which shows how deeply rooted these cultural expectations are within the general community.

Keywords: *Widowhood practices, Gendered power, Patriarchal structures, Igbo society, women's agency*

Date of Submission: 10-09-2026

Date of Acceptance: 20-09-2026

I. INTRODUCTION

Orodo is an Igbo community in Mbaitoli Local Government Area of Imo State, Nigeria. It is situated between Owerri city and Orlu town. Orodo has borders with Ogwa, Mbieri, Afara, Ifakala, Umuaka, Amurie Omanze and Amandugba. Orodo shares boundaries with Umuaka and Amurie on the North; Eziana Obiato, Umunoha and Ifakala on the East; Ubomiri and Mbieri on the South; and Ogwa on the West. It has a vast arable land sloping gently towards the bank of the Okatankwo stream, snaking through the rain forest vegetation of southeastern Nigeria. The Okatankwo stream formed a good drainage network within the vast acreage of farmland. The stream served as the main source of water supply both for drinking and other domestic usage for the people of Orodo, but recently the proliferation of borehole water around Orodo had turned the stream into a recreational arena

The bereavement associated with widowhood causes emotional and psychological stress that requires time to heal from. This is further complicated by the inability of family members and society to assist the widow through the bereavement process. In their study of the various methods in which the Ozubulu Women's Organization in Anambra State, an association of Igbo women, ameliorate the marginalization of women in Igbo society, Ilika and Ilika (2005) highlight the exact conditions these women confront by sharing the testimonies of victims: The first case was that of a widow accused of not taking good care of her husband while he was sick, therefore, the community insisted that she killed him and should drink the water used in bathing his corpse in order to prove her innocence. Another option was for her to crawl across her husband's corpse. If she refuses, she will be ostracized and dragged along the street to her father's compound. The widow's relatives who were present at the funeral resisted these conditions, and conflict ensued (67-8).

Also, widows across Nigeria are often denied possession of their late husbands' properties. Their hairs are forcefully shaven by women in their husband's communities. They are mandated to wear black or white clothes for the period of mourning, which can last up to one year. They are expected to sleep and sit on a mat or the floor for the first week of their husband's exit and they are not allowed to go out of their house or attend to their businesses while in mourning. These practices demonstrate that in Nigeria, and other such patriarchal countries, women are regarded as appendages to their husbands Afigbo (1989). Although scholars like George I.K. Tasie (2013) argues that widowhood rites in African communities at large do not constitute patriarchal attempts at dehumanizing or subjugating women, the experiences of Orodo widows suggest otherwise.

Widowhood practices in many traditions involve the mourning of the loss of one's spouse. This period of grieving is characterized by life-changing events. A typical Orodo widow is by tradition expected to endure severe agony, seclusion, exclusion, anxiety, trauma, insecurity and pain. As Ilika and Ilika observed, in Nigeria,

“It was a taboo for a widow to laugh or look cheerful when her husband has not been buried”. These experiences have damaging social and health implications for the widow.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many African scholars have carried out exciting research on widowhood in Igboland and it has continually pointed that widowhood is shaped by deep gender inequality and patriarchal norms. Works such as Afigbo, Adiele. *Widowhood Rituals and Practices in Igbo land* (1989) and Okoye, U.P. *Widowhood: A Natural or Cultural Tragedy* (1995) explain how widows are often subjected to strict mourning rituals, denied property rights, and placed under social control after the death of their husbands.

Also, Okorie, M.A. *African Widowhood Practices: The Igbo Mourning Experiences* (1995) and Okoro, K.N., and Nkama, C.L. *Widowhood Practices in Africa* (2018) draw close attention to the emotional, health, and psychological burdens these practices create. Uchem (2001) also shows how colonial rule and religious influence weakened women’s traditional support systems and strengthened male dominance in many communities.

However, most of these research works focus on broad regional or national patterns and tend to treat Igbo widowhood as a single, uniform experience. They rarely look closely at how these practices actually play out in specific rural communities, or how they are negotiated in everyday life. There is also limited discussion on the role of women’s groups like the Umuada, who are not only participants in these practices but sometimes active enforcers of them. As a result, the lived experiences of widows at the community level are often not fully captured.

This study fills that gap by focusing specifically on Orodo community. It looks at how widowhood practices are experienced on the ground and how power operates not only through male relatives and in-laws, but also through female social structures like umuada.

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

The background of this study is the prevalence of unconscionable widowhood practices in Orodo, a traditional community in Imo State, Nigeria. This study explores how patriarchal cultures, like the Igbo society, perpetuate violence and oppression against widows, erasing their agency as full human beings. The researcher highlights the causes and effects of widowhood practices compounded by the inability of family and society to support the widow. This study also notes that these practices are not unique to Orodo, but is a part of a broader cultural context in Nigeria and other patriarchal societies, where women are often regarded as appendages to their husbands.

WIDOWHOOD PRACTICES OF THE ORODO PEOPLE

In his study of widowhood in Uturu community of Igbo land, Aguwa (1997) highlights that although the Uturu community received Christianity at the same time as her neighbors and has more influence of Christianity and Western cultural institutions, it is the least to change and adapt to Westernization. The study was inspired by an unusual open protest against Christian acculturation at the funeral of a Catholic man in Amidi, one of the villages in Uturu, in 1994. It happened that the associate parish priest who was accompanied by an assistant, a seminarian, demanded that the deceased’s relatives must abide by the church rules for the funeral to be carried out by the church. The rules were that the man’s widow is not to indulge in the numerous widowhood practices which were considered heathen practices by the church. The deceased’s relatives did not receive this well, so they chose to go by the traditional funeral process but not without first assaulting the priest and seminarian violently. This event therefore inspired Aguwa to examine the widowhood practices in Uturu, to provide insights into processes of social change in indigenous communities. But what can easily be lost is the role colonialism played in perpetuating male authority in Igbo culture:

Igbo women became divested of their traditional institutional power by the colonial policies, which marginalised women, perpetuated by the Igbo male elite and reinforced by the inherited Christianity [...] since those traditional structures which formerly protected women have been undermined by colonialism and Western Christianity. Igbo women no longer have a collective political bargaining power for defending themselves. (Uchem 2001).

So, there is a sense in which colonial ideologies corrupted the gender-balanced and egalitarian cultural world of the Igbo society and entrenched a dominant patriarchal tradition.

The Uturu experience is similar to that of Orodo. According to Felicia Ihebike, the oldest woman in Orodo, “When a man dies in Orodo, his wife will tie a wrapper over her chest without a blouse. She will not talk freely to anybody and will not have constant bath until her husband is buried.” After the burial, the “Umuada,” Ihebike adds, “will come to shave the widow’s hair, bath her in an open compound.” The Umuada is

made up of women who are born in certain community before they are married out to men in other communities. When they come together in their paternal homes, these women wield enormous social and cultural powers. Because of their hierarchical advantage over other women's groups in Igbo societies, the deployment of the power of the Umuada, may divide or unite the women of their communities.

Apparently, in their treatment of widows in Orodo, the Umuada use their power to marginalize the women from other members of the community. As Chinwe Ezenwa, a prominent teacher in Orodo states, the Umuada further marginalizes widows by "confronting them with questions on how and when their deceased husbands died, the circumstance that led to their death, what they did to save them from dying and the extent of her contact with the late husband's family before his death?" In situations in which the Umuada do not find the widow's explanations satisfactory, "they force the widow to drink the water used in bathing the corpse of her husband to prove her innocence," Ezenwa added.

For Chinazu Nzeribe, a very young widow in Orodo, there is no end to the humiliating punishment widows encounter under the cover of native laws and customs in Orodo during their late husband's funerals. "Widows are required to provide expensive items like a white goat and two jars of palm wine for purification purposes to the female members of their husband's lineage who make and implement decisions on every matter concerning the widows," Nzeribe says. "Widows are also forbidden to touch any object, including their bodies, for fear of defilement. Hence, they are given pieces of sticks to scratch their bodies, while their food is cooked in old pots rather than those normally used for cooking for other members of the family." This idea that widows in Orodo are impure and therefore should be purified before they relate with other people in society spreads across Igbo land, as (Okorie 1995) in his study of the mourning experiences of widows across Igbo cultures at the outset of colonialism. It is important to note, as Elizabeth Nwosu, a trader and also a widow in Orodo insists, that "if a woman dies during the one-year mourning period, she was perceived as being responsible for her husband's death, and therefore her corpse was regarded as an abomination."

III. PREDOMINANT HARMFUL WIDOWHOOD PRACTICES IN ORODO

Shaving of Hair

This is done using a broken bottle for shaving the hairs on widows' heads and a razor for the pubic hair. In some places, there will be certain designs on her head after literally scraping off the hair. The significance of this is that, since the husband is dead, there is nobody for her to beautify her hair for (Felicia Ihebike).

Wearing of Black/White Clothes

This particular style of dressing is used to identify a widow in the market or any social gathering.

Sleeping and Sitting on the Floor or Mat

This symbolizes the dethronement of a woman at the death of her husband. A woman, by marriage, is assumed to have become absorbed into the husband's family and is recognized by her role as a wife, the death of her husband brings an end to her position and entitlements in the family and society. Also, this act is a sign of mourning and grief. (Elizabeth Nwosu)

Not Bathing for a few Days

By forcing the widow to neglect her personal appearance and hygiene, her late husband's family creates the impression that she is unattractive in the absence of her husband and will not attract potentialsuitors. (Chinazu Nzeribe)

Being made to Swear with the Husband's Corpse

After the death of the husband, if the reason for his sudden death is unclear, automatically accusing fingers are being pointed towards the widow. To prove her innocence, the family and villagers may force her to drink the water used in bathing the corpse of the late husband. If she refuses, then, the family automatically believes that she killed her husband. Therefore, she must be punished; or the widow crosses the husband's coffin three times. If she dies before the mourning period is over, she will be thrown into the evil forest because her death satisfies their suspicion that she was indeed a murderer.

Seclusion

In Orodo, during the first 28 days of their husband's death, widows are not allowed to go anywhere. Certain rituals must be performed at the expiration of the 28 days before the widow can engage in normal activities. (Ihebike)

IV. FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR WIDOWHOOD PRACTICES IN ORODO

Poverty, male dominance, illiteracy, patriarchal influence, poor socio-economic status of women, among other factors, are responsible for the harmful widowhood practices in Orodo. Therefore, we shall clarify the effects of these factors on widows.

Illiteracy

In Southeastern Nigeria, the illiteracy status of the majority of women is a significant factor responsible for the unhealthy widowhood practices meted in Orodo. In the past, formal education for girls was secondary to that of boys. Then, women were erroneously considered intellectually inferior to men. This was most audaciously expressed in the belief then that it was unwise to invest in the education of a female child because the natural place of a woman was thought to be in the kitchen (Okoye, 1995). This severe but general discrimination and neglect of the female child's education hinders their progress and exposes them to all forms of abuse and unhealthy cultural practices like the strict observance of widowhood rites.

Poverty

Poverty is the inability to live a decent life with respect to having food, shelter, health care, and other social amenities. Poor and/or greedy relations always feel that the death of their rich relative is an opportunity for them to elevate themselves from abject poverty by dispossessing his wife. Some relatives usually force the widow and her children into emptying their deceased husband's and father's bank account, all in the pretense that a most befitting burial must be accorded their late brother. They see this as an avenue to lavish the late brother's money and to ensure that the widow does not remove any property from the dead man's house. It is therefore not surprising that the widow loses all her deceased husband's property to the male successor within the late husband's family. Poverty is also seen as the root cause of the insistence on lavish cooking and drinking as part of widowhood rites in most places. Attesting to this, Okoye (1995) confirms that in the guise of caring for the widow within the period of mourning, the women of the community bring their babies along with hidden spoons in their handbags to feed as parasites on the widow within that period. These acts have pauperized widows and added to the suffering of the immediate family.

Male Dominance and Patriarchal Influence:

Male dominance and patriarchy primarily influence the practices of widowhood and the inferior status of women in society. Men usually remarry shortly after the death of their wives while women mourn for months and are subject to inhuman torture.

Poor Socio-economic Status of Widows and Women

In Orodo, even wealthy women easily transitioned to poor widows. The imposition of restrictive and extensive mourning rites and the traditional barriers to access to land, capital, credit, employment, housing, and other means of livelihood ensured that widows were not economically secure. In a related manner, Chinazi Nzeribe and Agnes Ndu mentioned that during the mourning period, a widow cannot engage in any economic venture nor do any personal work to earn an income. Added to this is the outing ceremony, which is held after a man's funeral, in which a widow is expected to host an elaborate party for the outing (itopu akwa mkpe), where she will have to spend all the savings she has left, in shouldering the responsibilities. The economic effect of widowhood, as Ezenwa indicates, is that a widow automatically suffers the loss of marital support and security, especially with respect to maintaining and raising the children, which would have been the joint responsibility of the couple. This manifests in the inability of most widows in Orodo to pay their children's school fees; provide adequate food for their home; secure good accommodation for their children; meet children's other needs and maintain a decent household. The reason for this inability, according to Anyanwu (2005), was that since most women depended on their husbands' earnings, the men's death would inevitably mark the beginning of a terrible crisis for such women.

Superstitious Beliefs

There is the wide-spread belief in African societies, including Orodo, that without performing the mourning rites, the spirit of a dead man will not have rest. Instead, his soul will be wandering and, in some cases, his spirit will destroy his household and hurt people in the community. So, widows go through these practices to appease the dead (Okoro 2018).

V. EFFECTS OF THE WIDOWHOOD PRACTICES ON ORODO WIDOWS

Widowhood is an unpleasant experience. It is degrading when widows are subjected to untold hardship and maltreatment by their in-laws and by society. Widowhood practices have destabilizing effects on widows as could be seen below

Economic and Dehumanizing Effects

Widows are mostly poor and uncared for by people who are supposed to provide some help to them. Thus, many widows in Orodo faced extreme poverty, discrimination and dehumanizing treatments. They were

miserably deprived of their social security and family support. Their children too were isolated, often in unhealthy conditions, physically abused and, at times, left without any inheritance.

Psychological and Health Effects

Due to the violence widows in Orodo endure, many of them become emotionally deranged and psychologically unstable and are prone to shock, temporary or even permanent loss of memory. They are also susceptible to diseases, especially after drinking the water used in bathing a corpse. Many widows become hypertensive due to the burden of the mourning period alone.

Social Effects

Most widows, especially the young ones, were stigmatized in society as though it is an abomination to be a widow. Many of them lose friendships and some commit suicide to end their suffering. As Ude and Njoku (2017) suggests, widows in third world nations need to be empowered for them to have the “capacity to... proactively take more control of their lives and situations”

Political Effects

Many widows in Orodo and Igbo land cannot seek political offices because of their status and since men and women in the society will not respect them. However, some widows who know their rights and refuse to be suppressed in society often fight for it and as such achieve their goals in society, notwithstanding their widowhood. The example of Aba women’s riot of 1929, a colonial war against British taxation led by Southeastern Nigerian women, who were mostly widows, is an enduring testament to the power of women when they come together for a common cause.

VI. CHALLENGES FACED BY WIDOWS IN ORODO

The widows in Orodo and Igboland in general face a lot of challenges, which include:

Sexual Challenges:

Widows have sexual needs. As long as a woman is healthy, her sexual urges and abilities remain active. However, the older the woman, the less active she becomes sexually contrary to widowers of the same age. Also, the older the widows are, the more reluctant they become to accept non-marital sex compared to their male counterparts. Widows also believe that sexual activities should end with menopause and so they suppress whatever sexual urges they may have. Most widows are often anxious of taking up new sexual partners due to numerous reasons like their aging bodies, morality and other consequences of sex like pregnancy and infections.

Inability to bear children in the family:

In Orodo and many other Igbo communities, widowhood often places women in a difficult and emotionally drained position, particularly regarding childbearing. Following the death of a husband, a widow is generally expected to observe mourning rites and remain unmarried for a period of time, even when she is still within her reproductive years. This cultural expectation can be especially painful for women who had intended to continue building their families within their husband’s lineage.

According to Ihebike, in some instances, however, an alternative arrangement may be suggested. Where the deceased husband has an unmarried brother, the widow may come under pressure to marry him, a practice locally referred to as “*ikuchi nwanyi*”. While this is sometimes presented as a way of preserving lineage continuity, it often leaves the widow with limited personal choice, further complicating her emotional and social experience after loss.

VII. CONCLUSION

Widowhood refers both to a marital event, namely, the disruption of marriage due to the death of the spouse, as well as to the subsequent marital status as unmarried and single person. Depending on gender, the individuals concerned are called widow (female) or widower (male). The study concludes that widowhood practices in Orodo represent a multidimensional structure of gendered power that combines ritual humiliation with economic dispossession.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several measures are necessary to put in place in order to reduce the harmful effects of widowhood practices in Orodo and similar communities in Igboland.

1. Community sensitization and public education should be intensified to promote awareness of widows’ rights and dignity.
2. Female education should be encouraged as a long-term strategy for reducing vulnerability and enhancing women’s capacity to challenge oppressive and inhuman cultural practices.

3. There should be a strong cooperation between the customary court and the traditional local authorities to ensure timely report, adjudication, and, possible sanctioning of individuals who engage in maltreatment and dispossession of widows.
4. Institutions such as the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and NAPTIP should be strengthened to protect vulnerable women especially the widows in rural communities.

Sources and Bibliograph

field work data

Name	Age	Occupation	Status	Date of Interview	Place of Interview	Remark
Chinwe Ezenwa	50yrs	Trader	Widow	18/05/2025	Orodo	Reliable
Chinazu Nzeribe	28yrs	Trader	Widow	29/05/2025	Orodo	Reliable
Agnes Ndu	65yrs	Trader	Umuada	29/05/2025	Orodo	Reliable
Deborah Nwafor	52yrs	Teacher	Umuada	29/05/2025	Orodo	Reliable
Elizabeth Nwosu	62yrs	Trader	Widow	09/06/2025	Orodo	Reliable
Felicia Ihebilike	75yrs	Farmer	Widow	12/06/2025	Orodo	Reliable

REFERENCES

- [1]. Afigbo, Adiele. *Widowhood Rituals and Practices in Igbo land*. Fourth Dimensions, 1989.
- [2]. Anyanwu, John. *Rural Poverty in Nigeria: Profile, Determinants and Exit Paths*. African Development Review vol. 17, no. 13, pp. 435-460.
- [3]. Meek, C.K. *Land Laws and Customs in the Colonies*. Oxford UP, 1946.
- [4]. Odimegwu, C., and Okengbo G. *Gender, Role, Ideologies and Prevalence of Violence Against Women*. Afam Reproduction Publishers, 2003.
- [5]. Okorie, M.A. *African Widowhood Practices: The Igbo Mourning Experiences*. *African Journal of Evangelical Theology*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1995, pp. 79-84.
- [6]. Okoro, K.N., and C.L. Nkama. *Widowhood Practices in Africa [Igbo] Traditional Society: Socio-Anthropological [Re] Interpretation*. *Journal Of Humanities and Social Science*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2018, pp. 42-54.
- [7]. Okoye, U.P. *Widowhood: A Natural or Cultural Tragedy*. Nucik Publishers, 1995.
- [8]. Tasie, G.I.K. *African Widowhood Rites; Bane or Boom for African Women*. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* vol. 3, no. 1, 2013, pp. 1-8.
- [9]. Uchem, R.N. *Overcoming Women's Subordination in Igbo African Culture and in the Catholic Church: Envisioning an Inclusive Theology with Reference to Women*. PhD Thesis, Graduate Theological Foundation, 2001.
- [10]. Ude, P.U., and O.C. Njoku. *Widowhood Practices and Impacts on Women in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Empowerment Perspective*. *International Social Work*, vol. 60, no. 6, 2017, pp. 1512-1522.