

Emergent Issues on Widowhood Practices in Igbo Culture: Between the Video Screen and Reality

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Abstract

Video film has become an important and persuasive medium of expression in the African continent. It helps in the presentation, preservation and promotion of the African image. In Nigeria, the boom in the video film industry (Nollywood) has resulted in the promotion and marketing of Nigeria culture. Hence they reflect cotemporary social life and culture while exposing the old and primitive culture of the people for what they are. This paper focuses on the reflection of widowhood practice in Igbo culture, as captured by the lenses of some video film makers in Nigeria. It further attempts an appraisal on the ideology behind such portrait and points out some faulty cultural issues that were reflected in the video films.

Introduction

The society is filled with entities that are human. As living beings, people live and die. As such, death and are universal and constant features: they determine the extent of an individual's role on planet earth. In all cultures, death is regarded as a great loss not just to the family unit, but to the larger society. Hence, at such period the bereaved mourn their loss and expect sympathy, encouragement, solidarity, love, care and support from other members of the society.

Therefore, it is common for people to commiserate with a family that lost a beloved one. Of all losses, the death of a family head is the most devastating not just because such loss may affect the economic and social life of members of the family, but because it could also affect

the psychological life of the woman, on whose shoulder the family responsibility is entrusted. It is therefore natural to expect that women (the proclaimed weaker sexes) be encouraged and comforted at such moment of crisis and deep grief. Incidentally, this is not the case in some African cultures. The loss of a family head could happen in any culture and is common to every family unit or society, irrespective of the social or economic development. Ironically widowhood practice is not common to all cultures. It is one cultural practice that has portrayed the Igbo of the south Eastern Nigeria in a very bad light, particularly regarding the treatment of women who have lost their life partner, breadwinner, confidante and husband, all rolled into one. It involves a lot of anti social treatment of such a woman aptly called the widow.

Umezinwa (2007) notes that although widowhood practice is a common phenomenon in Igbo land, the intensity is not the same in every town. Hence, the ritual observance, the duration, and its dehumanizing aspects vary from place to place.

Today, video film is a mirror of the society which reflects the societal way of living film makers tend to utilize the medium in the projection as well as correction of a lot of social ills. That aside, in contemporary Nigerian society, the home video has taken over the informal evening fire-side school (Eni, 2003:107), thus it is not surprising that the camera lenses of some film makers have lent their voices to the campaign against such discriminatory, dehumanizing, denigrating and obnoxious cultural practice against women.

This paper therefore is a discourse on widowhood practice as documented in some Nigerian video films. It is divided into subheadings. The first part will discuss widowhood in reality as practiced in Igbo land. The second part will discuss some Nigeria video films with thematic focus on widowhood practice. The third part will try to make an appraisal on the video films, based on the general underlining message of the film makers, while the last part will try to point out faulty portraits or representation of the culture in some of the film before drawing a conclusion.

Widowhood practice in Igbo culture

The BBC English Dictionary defined widowhood as "the state of being a widow or widower". Incidentally in Igbo culture, widowhood practice is an exclusive preserve for widows, not widowers. This is because, as observed by Agumagu (2007) a widower has no traditional laid down laws governing his mourning rites. Widowhood is a period when a widow is expected to be grieving or mourning the loss of a beloved one, precisely a husband. It is a period that is naturally supposed to be a quiet and private time of accepting one's loss. However in Igbo culture, it is a period of agony, anxiety, pain and insecurity, when the widow is subjected to psychological, social, physical and emotional torture following her loss of a husband. At such period, in-laws confront the widow with harmful, obnoxious and dehumanizing practice like drinking the water used to bath the corpse, forced marriage to a brother in-law, depriving her of inheritance, food etc, forcing her to sleep with the corpse, shaving her hairs etc. Part of Igbo culture provide that to indicate that a widow is truly mourning for her husband, not only is she expected to wear black clothes, she will allow the married daughters (Umuada) of the community to shave her head and pubic areas with razor blades. Also she is also expected to partake in some dehumanizing rituals.

According to Nwaogu (2006) the widow is suspected to have contrived her husband's death in order to inherit his property, or have new lovers thus, the woman is compelled to prove her innocence by either drinking water used in bathing his corpse, or jump across his coffin to ascertain whether or not she would stumble over the coffin.

Following this suspicion; it is not surprising that a widow is not given the right to inherit or possess her late husband's property except that which was given to her as an outright gift during his lifetime (Okagbue, 1996). Notwithstanding the dehumanizing nature of this practice, women tend to accept the practice as culture and tradition of the people. Okafor and Emeka (2002) opine that:

...The success and failure, conformity and nonconformity, the rights and wrongs, the acceptable and the distasteful, relating to the governing thoughts, words, deeds, by

members of the grouping are dictated by culture.

Thus, in order to maintain or sustain their membership as part of the society women accept the humiliation of some customs and traditions as approved by culture. Hence, "culture does a lot including deciding on an individual's identity as well as the people's collective personality" (Okafor and Emeka, 2002).

Egbucha (2006) notes that in Igbo cosmology, an idea that is handed down by custom and tradition must have religious approval. As it were, men seem to be not just the engineers but architects of the problems facing women because as Ranelagh (1985) observes:

Men control the world because they hold the key to power greed marked as economics. From the start, it was they who organized religion, regulated trade, decreed what were laws, set politics as a blind, announces what was history, defined the language and wrote history, defined the language and wrote literature, and having done all these publicized their pre-eminence as established by God.

Widowhood themes in some Nigerian video films

Many video films have treated the theme of widowhood this including *Yesterday*, a film produced in 1993. However, for this study we shall study four more recent films including *Widow* (2007) directed by Kingsley Ogoro & Aquila Njama, *The widow* (1999) directed by Ndubuisi Okoh and produced by Obi Madubuogwu, *Widow's cot* (2007) directed by Dickson Iroegbu and produced by Nkeriuka John and *Widow's men* (2007) directed by Tchidi Chikere and produced by Obinna Okeke.

Kingsley Ogoro in his *Widow* paints a heartrending picture of the plight of a young widow in a typical village in the south Eastern Nigerian using Nnenna as his major character, Ogoro gives an honest account of the travail and dilemma which most widows face at the death of her bread winner. It includes humiliating and disturbing acts like programmed weeping, sleeping alone with the dead husband, naked midnight rituals in a local stream, shaving of her pubic areas. A role which Stella Damascus

promptly breathed life into, which is not only suspense filled, but which climaxed to a racy end when the widow absconded with her children to protect them from her greedy in-laws, who killed her husband and would stop at nothing to ensure they kill her too. Although Nnenna's travail was initiated by her in-laws, Ogoro presents the widowhood practice as a cultural practice spearheaded by the married daughters (Umuada) of the community.

In his own narrative- *The widow*, Ndubuisi Okoh (director) explores the helpless and hopeless situation of a widow – Chinwe in a wicked society- a society where women like her live to face those who secretly plunged them into their predicament. The two part narrative is an expose of the travails of Chinwe, a pregnant young lady who was unfortunate to start motherhood as a widow. Produced by Obi Madubuogwu, *The widow* also relays evil roles of a greedy brother in-laws personified by Orji, who killed his sibling -Udoka in order to dispossess his widow of his inheritance. Just like Ogoro's widow, Okoh's film portrays widowhood practice as one man's calculated attempts at depriving another of his property. Hence less emphasis was laid on the role of Umuada. The traumatizing experiences spearheaded by umuada was absent in Okoh's narrative.

Dickson Iroegbu in yet another video film - *Widow's cot* x-rays the neo-widowhood practice and politics in a contemporary society. This video film is unique because it started out with the plight of an educated widow, before digressing to other classes of widows. Therefore, it features the expected: resistance, group consciousness, search for solidarity, and other issues such as inordinate quest for materialism, freedom and murder among widow. The four part narrative deviated at some point after the widows have formed an organization to unify and support themselves. Hence, the organization was high jacked and turned into a cult, which results in the politicization of the existence of widows. The result is that instead of being at the mercy of men and society, the widows became terror to the society as a whole, and men in particular.

In *Widow's men*, Tchidi Chikere exposes another angle of widowhood practice that is often ignored: wife inheritance and child abuse which equally exist in Igbo land. Onyeoma, a pretty twenty three year old widow

with a nine year old son, was under pressure to marry her old brother-in-law as custom demands. At the middle of the crisis, Onyeoma meets and falls in love with Justine, a young medical doctor, who is doing his youth services in the community. Already, Albert- Onyeoma's brother-in-law has forcefully taken away her son, and threatens to keep him in bondage unless Onyeoma succumbs to his wish. Neither the Igwe's intervention, nor Justine's with his corper friends could cow Albert, until the police were intimidated and Albert is detained.

Consequently, the boy is released to his mother. On his return from the police cell, Albert resorts to taking his life instead of standing the shame and insult of the whole encounter.

Appraisal of widowhood practice as projected on video screen

In the four films, the major characters who were the protagonist of the films, were all young women of child bearing age. Hence, most of their children are too young to protect their mothers. This suggests that Nigerian film makers believe that widowhood practice is designed to humiliate and intimidate young widows into submitting to the whims and caprices of their in-laws. Also, the deceased husbands all died in very controversial and unnatural circumstances. Chima, Nnenna's husband died mysteriously while taking his breakfast with his family in *Widow*. Udoka died after an imaginary thunder and lighting in *The widow*. Joyce's husband died accidentally, while Onyeoma's husband died after a brief illness. Most of the films were not silent to the fact that most of the deaths were mastermind by the family members who turn around to persecute the widows. This is a pointer that widowhood practice exists simply because some people cash in on such custom and tradition to exploit others- (helpless widows).

Except the widows who are the immediate victims of the brutal practice, the films portray children as the next casualties of such traditions. In *Widow's men*, Albert abused Onyeoma's son in order to force her to succumb to his whims. In *The widow*, Orji manipulated Chinwe's son with sickness through occultic invocation, after the young boy had challenged his exploitation Chinwe was forced to send the boy away from the family

and so paved way for Orji to continue his exploitation. In *Widow* Nnenna's children were deprived of good education, good meal and the loving attention they were used to. Nnenna's attempt to forestall this exposed her to the hatred of her greedy brother-in-law and mother-in-law that they began to hatch a plot to kill her. Consequently, she abandons everything and absconds with her children. This also suggests that widowhood practice thrive because most widows are willing to suffer and protect their children, than to challenge their people and culture, and so endanger their nuclear family.

Although some of the films were set in the village, and few were set in urban areas, the films all portray a common background- the Igbo cultural setting. All the characters bear Igbo names, speak the Igbo language or live in an Igbo village. Although Joyce, the senator's wife bear an English name, her husband's hometown is Umunachi. Chinwe in Ndubuisi Okoh's film lives in Umualu. Just like Tchidi Chikere's characters in *Widow's men*, Ogoro's village setting was not pronounced but actions in the rural setting were mainly delivered in Igbo language. This is an indication that all the film makers agree that widowhood practice is truly perpetuated by none other but by the Igbo culture.

Between the video screen and reality: The faulty portrait

Film is not reality in itself but a presentation or representation of reality. This suggests it should be near reality and persuasive if people must believe it. Moreover, it deals with people and event and so should reflect actions, behaviours that are true to the society or people it is portraying Anyanwu (2003) observes that:

African film is not the arts for arts sake of Hollywood. It is functional, founded to right the wrong of the black race as smeared by the western media, including cinema. The truth of film is the truth of mediated reality, a reality that has been filtered and reshaped for a more fulfilling and richer viewing experience.

As such, carefulness is a necessity in the choice of themes, dramatic

treatment of issues, visual selection, etc which a film maker should project in his film. Granted, all the films were reflecting a society which may undoubtedly be accepted to reflect the Igbo culture, yet some of the films entertained some excesses in characterization and language and so presented a relatively poor picture of the Igbo society. As such, the makers seem to be projecting bad vices in some major characters as if they were good.

In *Widow's men* for instance, the use of language as ascribe to the characters was quite alien to Igbo culture which the film mirror. Respect for elders is one of the most constant and revered norms of the Igbo's, regardless of the antecedents of the elder. However, Tchidi Chikere allowed his hero and heroine to rain abuses on Albert, simply because there is clash in individual interests. As Onyeoma submits herself sexually to Albert in order to protect her son from being maltreated by Albert. She tells him "... Take it now before I change my mind... And I'll make sure you die in it." Between Onyeoma and Justine, Albert was referred to severally as "dirty old man", "a confused old fool", who sleeps "like the tired dog that he is". When Albert finally discovers their deceit at the medical centre, Onyeoma and Justine rain insults and abuses on the elder with impunity regardless of the facts that nurses were around. The respect shown to elders in Igbo society and culture were not reflected in the video film to project the Igbo socio-cultural reality.

Perhaps, because at the beginning of the film, Onyeoma had completed her mourning rites, she was never costumed as a widow. However that does not explain why shortly after she started her relationship with Justine, she began to adorn jeans trouser and shirt, even to Igwe's palace. Even with present day civilization, it's unheard of in Igbo culture for a married woman to appear in an Igwe's palace in trouser how much more a widow. This is a faulty portrait of Igbo people and culture.

Furthermore in the same film, the major characters' sources of livelihood were unknown. Albert and Onyeoma had no occupations. They stayed home without working and yet feed well. This does not depict the Igbo way of life because Igbo are industrious; if one is not a farmer then the person is a trader and does not have to depend on people for food.

The Igbo's lives a communal life and so lives in small family units. It is unbelievable that in a village she lived for nine years and raised a son too, Onyeoma was portrayed as having no friends, peer or relations, that while Albert chases her round the entire community, no body raised an eyebrow but a stranger. If the film maker was justifying why Onyeoma practically forced herself on the youthful medical doctor of the opposite sex, he completely failed. The Igbo's have an adage that "*Echiche mmadu chere, oji magbue onwe ya, o cheghi ya otu ubochi*" meaning that suicide is not a rash decision. As such, it is equally questionable why Albert would prefer such a liability as Onyeoma (a poor woman) to his dear life.

Nwachukwu (2003) is of the view that a filmmaker has the power to go beyond "mere documenting of reporting of events. S/he has the power to prescribe just as Plato did the kind of society s/he envisages for the viewers to live in". And such a society should be a positive one, not of a negative type, because as Ogunleye (2003) observes, the audience expects to be morally educated through the stories of the video film.

Although there were several elements of cultural dynamism in the film, however issues concerning the socio cultural portrayal of the Igbo culture were ridiculously trivialized. In *Widow's cot*, the widows were again projected wrongly as if the film makers are saying that widows are accountable to no-one in the society but themselves. That also does not fit into the Igbo socio-cultural way of living. While the essence of forming an organization to protect and direct members of the *Widows cot* is understandable, the radical turn of event in their meeting were unrealistic; from the oath taking, flamboyant exhibition of materialism, nocturnal meetings, to thirst for men's blood. At this juncture Iroegbu joins the bandwagon of filmmakers who project occultism and ritual part of Igbo cultural and so project women as evil and catalysts to misfortune while Kinsley Ogoro and Ndubuisi Okoh portray women as victims of the male folk.

Conclusion

Video film may serve entertainment purpose in many homes in African, equally most film makers may see video film making from the commercial perspective. However, it is important to note that video film making is an

art, hence a source of expression. As such the thematic focus of all video films should tilt towards the projection and promotion of the cultural values of a society, because the persuasive nature of the arts makes it an important vehicle for marketing both the social and political culture of a society. While many Nigeria film makers have done good job in helping in reorientating the polity on practices that are inimical to human life, it is imperative that they understand the politics of patriotism by ensuring that only the positive aspects of our cultures are promoted in the films.

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