

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN THE WIDOWHOOD PRACTICE AMONG THE YALA PEOPLE OF CROSS RIVER STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Widowhood practice is an age-long traditional religious and cultural commitment for a woman who has outlived her husband among the Yala people and some African communities. Despite the trauma and dehumanizing practices that characterized the institution, the Yala widows are still engulfed into this ancient practice. This practice is today so internalized that a traditional widow is not fulfilled until the rituals and practices are fully and completely performed. However, this work is to critically examine the continuity and changes that have taken place in a given time. But with the recent factors of change affecting every fabric of the society, it has become evident that the effect of this practice includes among others, dehumanization, disempowerments and conflict in religious beliefs and practices. It is therefore imperative that research such as this be carried out to help in not only informing but also in empowering the

victims of this practice, which will ultimately bring about true freedom for the Yala widows in the midst of the continuity and changes that have taken place. The research employed the phenomenological approach in its methodology and also anchored the work on Structural Functionalism by Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parson as its theoretical framework. It is therefore the submission of this article that the practice has outlived its usefulness and as such every element of continuity should be completely eradicated by the Yala community.

Introduction

Among the Yala people of Ogoja area, like every other human tribe in creation, certain life events are regarded as being inevitable, one that is a common denominator to all humans. One of such life phenomena is death. In underscoring this fact, the Yala has an adage which states; “Opiyaku ebe Orone” literally translated to mean that ‘death is like meat in soup’. What this implies is the fact that the phenomenon called death is not specifically for a certain age group, it is meant for all classes of people, young and old, educated or uneducated, weak and strong, sick or healthy, rich or poor death is common to all, just as both the young and old share meat during meals. Even though the reality of death is known to all, the pains and sense of loss is still very grave among the Yala people. Even with the careless manner and values placed on life in the modern-day Nigerian society with the unwholesome activities of kidnappers, organ harvesters, Yahoo Yahoo activities and ritual killers, death is still seen as very painful and devastating to the Yala people

The grave sense of loss of a dear one is most devastating to the widow, especially in unique relationship such as conjugal love through a legally contracted marriage, with pledges and hope of life-long- union. Yet, in the midst of loss of a dear one, the Yala widows, like many of her African counterpart, are subjected to certain rituals and cultural practices that can best be described as very dehumanizing and obnoxious. Though, in recent times, some of these practices have been discontinued but many more remained unattended to.

The method employed in this research is basically a Phenomenological approach and materials are sourced from the primary and secondary sources which includes, oral interview, Books, journals and of course, the researchers’ personal observations. In its theoretical framework, the research adopted the Structural Functionalism by Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parson. This theory views Widowhood as a social mechanism that maintains order, cohesion and continuity. It

also reinforces collective values and restores social equilibrium after death and regulate sexual and marital transition. This work is therefore aimed at giving a response to the increasing outcry of women, the religious organization, non-governmental organizations and the United Nations against this practice. The response from this article is therefore aimed at empowering the Yala widows to have a clear understanding of this practice and its implications and thereby, through knowledge of their rights extricate themselves from internalizing such practices, especially those areas that are still in continuity. Practically, the description of this practice, maybe classified dehumanizing and obnoxious, but it must be pointed out that in primordial times, the Yala concept and intension were not to dehumanized the widows, but was actually meant for their welfare, wellbeing and protection and even creating and opportunity to offer them levirate and opportunity to be welcomed fully into the fabric of the society as well as its institutions.

For instance, through the rites of widowhood practice, the widow is believed to have been cleansed from every evil attached, liberated from the evil that might have been responsible for the husband's death. Other benefits to the widow include the separation of the spirits or ghost of her late husband who may out of jealousy harm her or her intending lover and of course, the fact that a successful widowhood ritual clearly portrays the fact that the widow dearly loves her husband, and in the event of her surviving the rituals, it vindicates her of any suspicion whatsoever of her having a hand in the husband's death (Otuji wonah oral interv. 20:12-2011). More so, the concept of living death affords the blessings upon the widow as the rituals will be acknowledged by the late husband as a sign of love and care.

In the world of Christianity, education and globalization, some of these ritual practices are today being challenged, and not only challenged but gradually obliterated, despite the continuity of some aspects of this practice. The modern scholar's today instead of appreciating the good will of the primordial Africans, nay, the Yala people in their rites of widowhood practice rather view the ritual/rites as moment of contempt, dehumanizing, traumatic, instead of a period of comfort and consolation in the life of the widow.

Furthermore, many disciplines have in various ways and manners explained the implications of these rites such as, the fact that most of the widow end up in destitute homes because of psychological trauma, that these rituals equally exposed the widow to dangers not only on health

ground, but on evil intent which could lead to afflictions both physically and spiritually from in-laws, who for one reason or the other may ordinarily not like her.

This focus had become one great aspect of debate, be it in symposia, conferences, research work and NGO submissions as regard gender studies. This is a topical issue, indeed all over the world, on the rights of women in the midst of patriarchy. Therefore, these presentation aims at explaining widowhood practices among the Yala people of Yala Local Government Area with a view not just putting forth the primordial values of these practices among the Yala people, but also evaluating same in the light of modern value as well as globalization and noting carefully, the continuity and change that have taken place.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

1. Onyoku: This term is used for a woman who had lost the husband to death). Literally it means the wife of the death; simply put a woman who has outlived her husband.
2. Ajiriku: This refers to the act of expressing the loss of a dear one. Literally a period of mourning.
3. Opa Onobi: In literal sense, it means black cloth: this refers to the official uniform that will be worn by the widow throughout the period of 'ajiriku'.
4. Yakpa oku: This refers to the local treasury of the deceased, often translated as the box of the Dead; this box often contains things he has reserved, kept to be inherited.

WIDOWHOOD

Horby (2000; 1460) defines a widow as a woman whose husband has died and who has not remarried again. In one word, a woman who had outlived her husband and is not married. This definition above is also collaborated by Agbugba (1989:80) who sees a widow as a woman who has lost her husband by death and had so remained unmarried.

Widowhood as a concept does not apply to just any relationship with a dead man, either through cohabitation or any other conjugal relationship that is not properly contracted, but a widow is one who is traditionally, culturally married, with the agreement of both parents and family, with full conjugal rights and such a woman is still living in their matrimonial home with the husband to

the point of death. In affirming this, Agbugba (1980:81), affirmations is true to the Yala people. He states thus;

Such marriage must have been contracted under customary law or ordinance with full conjugal rights. Customs and tradition hold it that at the demise of one of them, certain mourning practice has to be observed by the living to show love and honour to the departed spouse. The practice is age long and has apparently become compulsory.

That a woman becomes a widow at the death of the husband is never in doubt what is of primary concern is what is and what the state of the widow becomes within a specific period during and after the death of her husband. It is a common knowledge and fact of life that all enduring marriage ultimately ends with the death of either the husband or the wife or both. The death of a spouse may be the most extreme life crises because it separates some of the deepest emotional bonds established in a lifetime.

Ngozi Iheanacho Nneji (2003:70) writing about widowhood among the Etche people of Rivers State rightly opined, what is true of the Yala widowhood when he affirmed thus:

In order words, in a matrimonial relationship characterized by filial and conjugal love, the sudden separation of couples is psychologically devastating and traumatic. Yet, in this situation of agony, emphasis is shifted to expensive rituals and practice conceived to be customary. With this, the death of the man becomes a crisis situation for his widow, especially if she is young or childless. This brings the widow to a state of helplessness in life and many hardly survive it. Besides, some of the practices create opportunity for people outside the matrimonial home to encroach into the rights and affairs of the widow. Consequently, she is exposed to public scorn unfairly treated, debased and obsessed which culminates in her alienation.

The disorganizing and traumatic experience, which accompanies death of a husband, tends to be greater on women than that of men when they lose their wives. Daniel Ilegas as cited in Chris Ejizu (2007:174), has pointed out that universally, men whose wife are death are far too less subjected to rituals as compare to their female counterparts. Whereas the wife immediately becomes the primary suspect for her husband's death, the man is immediately offered an appropriate substitution to comfort him upon the loss of his wife. This fact has contributed to the attribution of widowhood practice to patriarchy. Writing on these, the guardian Newspaper of Jan. 26, 2002:16 write:

The differentiation between men and women's role in Nigeria as with other societies is of complementary and superior relationship in favour of the men. It involves a hierarchy in which men are given greater leverage over decision making and resource than women. The result is a cultural setting that invariable promotes male dominion and female subordination.

These widowhood rituals, that is often referred to as ordeals vary from place to place, but the fact that widows are dehumanized is still true in various tribes, nations and continents to a certain degree. These rites of widowhood are in stages, the pre-burial and the post burial. In most African tribes, as we will later turn specifically to **Yala** practice of these rites, the pre-burial which is the moment that news of the husband's death is made known to her, includes among others, the woman changing into tattered clothes, she looks haggard, loosen her hair, plaited or dressed and left it unkempt, never to be washed or combed, no jewelry, no headscarf and made to sit on bare floor by her husband's corpse.

The post-burial rites are primarily the cleansing or sanctifying rites or ritual. This stems from the concept that the widow is unclean. Such sanctifying rituals include shaving of the hairs on the head, the pubic region and armpit, also the putting on of the 'Opa Onobi'. According to Ngozi Iheanacho Nneji (2003: 78), this is done on the belief that the widow is defiled and dirty through her husband's death. Of course, the last rites which could be regarded as the last rites, is the one that last between 1-3 years after the death of her husband. During this period, the widow is not expected to have any sex; any attempt could raise suspicion from her husband family as regards

their suspicion of the widow having a hand in the death of their brother. According to Dr Denis Ogar and Barr Adebe (oral interv. 5-12-2025), These rites carry a lot of rituals and rites in primordial times. The widow is not allowed to go to the market, look happy or cheerful, attend social functions or even visit friends. According to the duo, the end of the rites is usually like a festive moment. Family and friends are expected to come along with foods and drinks to celebrate the final rites of the Opa onobi.

The Punch Newspaper (online) of 18-5-2013 had carried a report on the Church, Community and family battles for Chinua Achebe's Corpse: In that Newspaper report, it was reported that, the wife of the lenient Prof, Chinua Achebe, she herself a Professor is very reluctant of coming home because of the widowhood rite of shaving her hair, making her drink of the water which had been used in bathing the corpse etc. though, family had assured her that theirs is of a Christian family and that such rites had even been outlawed by the Anglican Church in Ehime Mbano, few years ago, it was to the consternation of the parish priest, to discover that the rites of shaving of the widows hairs was not even carried out by the community, but by members of the women fellowship of the particular church the woman belong to. This prompted the church to proscribe and prohibited all members from participating in such rituals or allowing themselves to be subjected to such rituals (Oliver Iwuoha, 21-3-2025).

As regards formal lamentation for the dead man among the Jukuns of Western Sudan C.K Meek (1931:226) writes:

The widow is kept by the female relative for a period from three to six days. It is practiced for the female mourners to sleep in hut of deceased. Each morning, large quantities of beer (Local beer) are sent to them by relatives and friends. women give expressions to loud cries of grief every day at sunrise when relatives and friends come to salute them.

Among the Igbo of Nigeria according to Nwanna Nzewunwa (1997:97, Daniel Ilega 2007;175), the practices here include the widow not touching anyone or be touched by anyone who is not a widow, to being forced to drink water used for bathing the corpse as well as sleeping with the corpse on same bed. As pointed out earlier, either among the Igbos, the Ikwere or the Okirikas of Rivers State, the men are never subjected to such ordeals (Arnaduine 1987:81, Dikibo 2001:127).

Iyabo Olojede cited in Solomon Akinboye (2004:131), has attributed the dehumanizing widowhood practices not only to culture, but that it is embedded in power and that these has subjected women to three dimensions of inequality-namely, discrimination, exploitations and oppression. That is why today widowhood practices, its rites and rituals, though with the primordial noble intentions is today seen as a tragedy which befalls a married woman by the timely or untimely death of her husband; Bolaji Owasanoye in Ahonsi edited (1997:122).

YALA WIDOWHOOD PRACTICES

Among the Yala people, there are certain rituals at death and funerals irrespective of status. Once a woman loses her husband which automatically ushers the pre-burial widowhood practices, the rituals begin immediately with 'ajiriku', though the first ritual steps begin with divulging the information to the widow, especially when it is an unexpected death. On the other hand, if the man had been sick, especially with a terminal illness for a long time, it is expected that the wife must be by his bed side until his final demise, by implications, she must always be around the husband in case of any emergency. In a situation whereby the woman is not around at the demise of her husband, she becomes an object of mockery and ridicule; she is then often pictured as a woman who cannot stand by her husband even to death. In such situations, controversy, suspicion and hatred is generated to unprecedented height between the widow and her in-laws.

In a case of a sudden death, such as accidental death, the breaking of such news will be handled with great care. This is to guide against shock which may lead to another calamity. In a situation whereby she has traveled out of town or has gone on a visitation to a distant place, someone, usually her close friend will be detailed after her, and all she would be made to know at that place is that either the husband is very sick and he is at the hospital or that there is an urgent problem at home that needs her urgent attention. The informant may pretend not knowing the details, if she is been pressed on to divulged the problem. The full scenario would become clearer as they get closer home or by the village, the symbolic gestures of onlookers will begin to send signal to her that something must be terribly wrong.

Once she is made to know, the 'ajiriku' begins. This begins with serious wailing; the widow rolls on the floor, in most cases, some of them will faint, become hysteric and run amuck. From that

moment, the attention of the large family members, friends and relatives of the deceased as well as of the entire family will be called to the effect that they have lost a relative. After the wailing, which may take up to three hours, the permanent seat for the widow henceforth is besides the husband's corpse. She either sits on bare floor or on a mat, with one close friend always beside her. Any relative, her friends, sometimes from other villages that come around to sympathize, especially in wailing, she is expected to join in wailing as well (John Inwuola oral Interv. 11-12-2012). Often times these mourners will fall on the widow, with their full strength and weight.

From that point onward, and apart from the intermittent wailing that comes with a visit of a mourner, the widow is expected to wail and cry everyday especially in the early hours of the day. Such wailing which comes between 4:30am-5:30am is heard over distant places because of the quietness of the early hours of the morning. Such early morning comes in form of greeting the deceased husband, lamenting why she should be left alone, often times she breaks into exalting the deceased and lamenting their inability to fulfill the dreams they shared together. Of course, such wailing cannot be complete without requesting that the deceased continue to watch over them and bless them. She is not to eat any food, even if she must, it must be done in secret, and she is not allowed to have her bath or to change the cloths she has put on. This is expected to be her condition and situation till after the burial and often times, long after that. According to an oral interview with Ene Ogmonya Onah (Dec 5, 2025);

*These acts are a thing of pride, a sign of a very loving wife.
It brings blessing, love, care and affections from our
ancestors. It shows the woman that is in you.*

Traditionally, Yala people do not preserve corpses in the house; rather the corpse is laid in an open place, preferable by open compound; lifted up in wooden construction and underneath a fire is set with scent leaves periodically dropped into the fire. This is to help dry up the corpse and equally to help in curtailing the odour that will be oozed out of the corpse. The highest a corpse can be preserved among the Yala people is 21 days and that is only in the case of the traditional rulers, apart from these, all other corpses are buried within 5 to 10 days, which is one to two weeks within Yala calendar. Except for modern development, whereby corpse could be preserved in the mortuary for as long as they are economically viable. For those who would want

to embalm corpses at home, the new rule among the people stipulates 14 days. Within these two weeks, it is the responsibility of the widow to sit by the husband's corpse, making sure that the environment is kept clean, flies are not allowed to perch and that the scent leaves are continuously dropped into the fire, though often times, these rites are carried out by those that comes to console with her. In the case of a traditional ruler, the widows are not expected to even see the corpse; the corpse is taken care of by a chief called 'Ogbwole', literally one who takes care of the house. Though a male, he is regarded and called the wife of the king. The widows of the traditional rulers are denied her rights, the moment the husband passed on, because even after the burial, his palace will be destroyed and even the lands he had been using will automatically be confiscated as a community land. The wives and children are left to fend for their survival. In an oral interview with Ada Otuji Ipuole (6-2-2006), Ada succinctly affirmed this practice thus:

The traditional ruler is regarded as the father of all the community, everything he has belongs to all. When he was alive, he had access to every land of his choice within the community. At his death, all the freeborn in the community are expected to share in the inheritance.

Apart from the rituals enumerated above, the widows are also given responsibilities during the burial ceremonies of their husband, which begins from the night vigil to the day of internment, often running over to the early hours of the next day. Such responsibilities may include among others, taking responsibilities for the care of her age-grade, the husband's age-grade, and one or two traditional/cultural troops that is expected to entertain during the ceremonies. Before the internment, there is a special moment where the 'yakpa oku' must be declared before the entire family, especially the family heads, brothers and sometimes sisters of the deceased, the children, especially the male ones and perhaps the widow. In all of the session, the position of the widow is only to answer questions and give clarifications where necessary. Infact, Ada Odama Onah had referred to this session as a moment, when the widow is put on trails on all areas that she might have been suspected; from the possible reason of the death of her husband, unto the properties she must have hidden from the family (oral interv. 10-11-2025). These ends the burial rites

In the post burial rites, the widow is expected to shave the hair on her head. Two days after the internment, a piece of cloth, is used to tie around her head, the larger part of that cloth was used by her to intern her husband. From this moment onward, she is expected to adopt as her uniform the wearing of the cloths of black colours (opa onobi). During this period, there are certain things she must never attempt to do, such as, she is not expected to go to the market, or any public gathering, she never participates in any socio-cultural dance, and of course, she is never allowed or expected to go near any man (in terms of sexual relationship), or worse still, to become pregnant within this period. This is regarded as a great taboo, and may reinforced the suspicion that she connived with the new lover to kill her husband in order for them to have the opportunity to realize the sinister motive. This period is the most trying moment of the Yala widows, because the sympathizers virtually will return to their homes, she is filled with social, emotional, psychological and even spirituals trauma with no supportive head. It is expected that the post burial rites and rituals will last for at least between one to three years.

The essence of a year or three in post burial rite is sequel to the belief of the Yala religious worldview of the sacredness inherent in the widowhood. Ada Otuji Wonah, had explain this sacredness thus;

Widows are seen as sacred being for various reasons; one is the fear of what actually killed the husband, secondly, the fear of a jealous late husband becoming a malevolent spirit to cause harm and of course, the need to allow the ancestral spirits bring a final separation between the dead husband and the widow; (oral inter. 5-2-2006).

By implication of the above statement, the widow sacredness lies in her either being suspected as the killer or a causative factor outside of her, which must be placated over a period of time, before any other man falls into the same trap. Secondly, the intimate relationship shared with the late husband is often regarded as a relationship that cannot be severed within a short period, and as such even within the first year of her husband's burial, the bond still exists and continues to manifest its relationship at least spiritually and may cause danger to any lover, who may try to woo the woman. This concept is gradually encroaching into some Christians sects, where special

prayers and deliverance sessions are conducted for a widow or widower to ward off spirit of dead spouse.

The astonishing aspect of widowhood among the Yala people is the fact, back in their father's home, they are now regarded as strangers, since they had been married out and therefore, have no right of inheritance, except in rare cases where they are of perishable inheritance, but never allowed to share in the imperishable such as land and houses. On the other hand, in their husband's home, they are equally regarded as strangers. It is worth mentioning here that traditionally, Yala married women are never buried at death in their husband's home, whether they outlive their husband or their husband outlived them, and the corpse of a woman must be taken back to her parents' home for burial. This practice is still evoked today in most families. However, because of the influence of Christianity and modernity, this culture could be negotiated between the Woman's family and the husband of the deceased if he is still alive and the children from such union. The Widower and the children will formally inform the late woman's children of her passing away and in subsequent meetings, plea will be made to the family to allow them bury the corpse of their daughter in her husband home. After much hesitation, a compromise maybe reached. Usually, a goat, a carton of drinks including palm wine will be presented to the family for such compromise (Onah Odey 6-11-2025)

The most complex and complicated aspect of Yala widowhood practice, lies on the fact that Levirate marriage is never permitted. Complex and complicated in the sense that, the relatives who had confiscated her husband's wealth and properties are not permitted by culture to marry them and by implication, take responsibilities for her welfare. Again, the issue of remarriage is another great challenge to the widow's in Yalaland. Even though men desire to marry them, but the societal and family pressure is completely opposed to it. This rejection and opposition are consequent upon the fact that, they cannot ascertain what must have killed the widow's husband, either the woman acquired the sickness from her husband or any other natural factor. In a state of uncertainty, prevention against such unknown, which by implication; is rejection of their son offering his hands in marriage to the widow. In fact, a divorced woman is easily and readily accepted for remarriage in Yalaland than a widow. The widow is often seen and regarded as a misfortune, a carrier of bad news and a reminder of the mystery of death trailing her. Though, in

contemporary society, she is allowed to remain in her husband's home as long as she wishes to and especially if she has grown up male children, her rights and acceptance are still questionable.

Continuity and change in the widowhood practice Among the Yala People.s

As earlier mentioned, and enumerated above, the widowhood practice among the Yala people is an age long practice that have been anchored on the number of factors. These factors, over the years had made this practice to be imbibed by both the young and old. However, the factors of change, which include globalization, religion, civilization and others have raised some eyebrows over some of the practices associated with widowhood rites. These factors have therefore influenced most of the rites as earlier enumerated and even more.

We shall therefore examine which area(s) of these rites that have been modernized, changed or obliterated among the Yala community of Yala Local Government Area of Cross River State in modern times and those that are still being perpetuated or in continuity. For the sake of clarity, we shall examine these practice(s) one after the other.

- a) Uncontrollable wailing: In the Yala tradition, the widow is expected to begin wailing as soon as the husband passed on, such wailing is done early in the morning and late in the evening. This practice was mandatory by all widows. However, according to Denis Iyaji Ogar (oral interview, 2-01-2026), this was effective and enforced in the olden days when corpses were preserved at home and for only three (3) days. According to the above source, with the introduction of embalment and mortuary services, where corpses are preserved for weeks and months, even years, this practice have been obliterated and no longer enforced.
- b) Sitting position of a widow: By the traditional rites of the Yala people, the widow is expected to be sitting on a mat right from that moment till the husband is buried. According to Augustine Onah, Odey (oral interview, 8-12-2025), this practice is still envogue, but the widows are no longer limited to sit on mats, but are allowed to sit or lay down on foams or a nice wrapper spread on the foam.
- c) Wailers and the widows: in primordial times, sympathizers and mourners who come around at the demise of family members are expected to wail and even fall on the widows all in a show of sympathy and love. In fact, according to Denis Iyaji Ogar (2-1-2026), “in primordial times, such mourners will discuss along road to the deceased compound, who

will take the lead in the act of mourning, who will lead in eulogizing the deceased, who will anchor the extension of greetings to the long-departed relatives, etc.” all these are done during the mourning period. However, this very practice has been discontinued because of some seeming discomfort posed by this practice. In any attempt to enforce it, those who sit by the widow are obligated to prevent the mourners coming too close to the widow.

- d) Eating of meals: As is exemplified in any moment of unhappiness, sorrow or pain, widows are expected to abstain from food for a long time or even days in the course of the demise of the spouse. This is to express the pain, sadness, sorrow associated with such demise. According to Martin Oko (oral interview, 9-12-2025), in recent times, such practice has been discontinued, the widows are now permitted and freely so, to eat and to drink, though and often in the room and secluded place and not in the open.
- e) Shaving of hairs: This is an age-long practice among so many Nigerian communities. Even though majority of the Yala people are Christians, and this act is forbidden in scripture (Deutronomy 14; 1), the Yala still engage in this practice. However, it must be mentioned that among the people it is done willingly by the widows and not by compulsion or by coercive measure (Otelahu Iyaji, Oral interview, 11-12-2025).
- f) Public appearance: By the Yala culture and traditions, widows are not allowed to go out to public places during the period of widowhood. Public places such as attending social gatherings, markets, church or religious ceremonies, etc. Such act was usually frowned upon by the society. However, as pointed by Matthew Wogor (oral interview, 2-1-2026), the advent of the long preservation of corpse and the challenges of modernity has altered such rules, widows today are allowed to go to the market, church and attend to some ceremonies.
- g) Sexual activities: within the period of mourning, widows are expected to keep away from any sexual relationship with any man. In any case, where such is established, the widow and the strange man is suspected to have a hand in the demise of the widow’s husband. This is anchored on the belief that such amorous relationship must have been going on while the husband of the widow was still alive. Such is a great abomination in Yala-land. However, the widow maybe allowed to enter into a relationship a year or two after the demise of her husband. (John Ochelebe, oral interview, 28-12-2025).

- h) Burial rites: By the tradition of the Yala people, when a woman is out in marriage, it is the “buttocks” and not the “head” (*N dutu, N dlehuni*) literally translated, “I gave the buttock and not the head”. By implications, it means that at the demise of the woman, whether she is at that time a widow or not, her corpse is taken back to her father’s compound for burial and interment. This practice is still part and parcel of the Yala community, though with some modifications. According to Ogar Obo (oral interview, 2-1-2026), Children of the woman and the husband’s family may today intercede and pay certain fines or offer certain rites to the deceased woman’s family to enable the children and husband’s family bury the deceased in her husband’s home. However, this is often possible when there is peace in the family before such demise.
- i) Bu uhu obunu (Plant the husband spirit): According to Dennis Iyaji Ogar (2-1-2026), this is one special rites by the widows that is today, almost obliterated by the modern Yala society. According to the source above, the rites involve a bamboo tree that is affixed with a piece of cloth and positioned in a particular place. The piece of cloths fixed on the bamboo tree is usually a little piece from the one worn on the head or waist of the widow during the burial rites of the husband or usually, part of the piece of cloth she used in burying the husband. Such bamboo tree is expected to be there for a period of at least a year or more. Within this period, the widow is to intermittently offer drinks, food, etc. to the husband through this effigy, often times morning and evening or weekly.
- After one year or above as would be determined by the widow, children and family, the ceremony of removing the ‘uhu’ (spirit) of the husband will be announced. It is usually a big ceremony that takes place throughout the whole day. The widow’s age-grade, some of her late husband’s close friends and associates as well as families and friends and even the community elders and Anya Alaje (Women of the land) are all expected to be part of the ceremony. Varieties of foods are usually prepared, but one special meal that must never be left out is what is called ‘ICHANYI’ -this is a special delicacy made up of ‘udu leaves’ and sometimes bitter leaves, it is usually molded with well blended melon (like melon bean-cake) and after preparation, it looks like the shape of a plantain or banana. Sometimes, it is smoked to dry or freshly prepared and usually eaten with a well-prepared sauce. During this ceremony, the widow is expected to change clothes up to four or five times, this is believed to compensate her for the years or months of not dressing properly

and decently. At the conclusion of the ceremony, the effigy will be removed permanently, the woman formally discharge herself from the use of black clothes or regular white cloths and at that point, it is believed that the husband's spirit has been separated from her and she is then free to re-marry, associate and be free. Her hair is now allowed to grow.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, we have seen the rites and rituals of widowhood practice among the Yala people. Practices include, the pre- and post-burial rites, such as denial of inheritance, they are made to shave the hairs on their heads, even when it is against their religious tenets and faith, they are denied free associations such as attending markets, social gathering, the health is also endangered by their position as they are often made to stay by the corpse, during the pre-burial rites. The unhygienic situation and circumstances also count against their wellbeing, as they are not allowed to bath, comb their hair, or change clothes. They are equally denied any conjugal relationships during the mourning period even if it lasts up to three years and of course, any attempt on their part to socialize such as joking, smiling or chatting is often misunderstood to mean demonstration of loss of love and care as well as feeling for the departed husband. Within the first one week, she is not allowed to cook for herself or given the right to choose who cooks for her, which too has raised some concerns especially in a situation where she is often the first suspect.

As earlier pointed out, the purpose for the practice of widowhood in Yala land in primordial times has great value and concern for the widows at heart. Factors of modern changes have made it inimical to widows. Today, these practices are seen and regarded as dehumanizing and degrading and to crown it all, the widows are being improvised by the same society and culture that had concern, love and care as its motive for the practice. The changes so far experienced over time including the use of white materials as against the use of black cloths is a welcome development and should be so encouraged. Therefore, it is the submission of this article that the practice of widowhood rites and rituals has outlived its usefulness and as such should be abolished by all well-meaning Yala people.

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