

**Transcript of the episode of Privacy Studies Podcast: Exposing Some Funerary Culture and Obnoxious Widowhood Practices against Nigerian Womenfolk: The Need for Cultural Review – Presentation by Egbule Philip Onyekachukwu (University of Delta, Nigeria)**

Hello, my name is Felicia Fricke and I am Natacha Klein Käfer, and you are listening to the Privacy Studies Podcast.

This season of the Privacy Studies Podcast follows the discussions of the symposium *PRIVACY AND DEATH: Past and Present*, which took place at the University of Copenhagen and online between October 12th and 13th, 2023. This event aimed to bring to the fore the discussions of what kind of privacy, if any, we have given to our dead in different cultural and historical contexts. We will hear presentations by historians, archaeologists, sociologists, and other experts.

Transcriptions of the episodes can be found on the Centre for Privacy Studies' website.

In today's episode, we will hear from Egbule Philip Onyekachukwu from the University of Delta in Agbor, Nigeria. His presentation is entitled 'Exposing Some Funerary Culture and Obnoxious Widowhood Practices against Nigerian Womenfolk: The Need for Cultural Review'.

That is the logo of my institution, the University of Delta. This is where we are and this is (unidentifiable word), okay. As have been told earlier, I will expose some of these, some funerary culture and obnoxious widowhood practices against Nigerian womenfolk, and I'm calling for the need for cultural revival or for cultural reform. Because of what is happening in Nigeria, especially among the widows. These people will focus on widows, that is, women that lost their husbands, you know, through death, okay.

So I have a catalog of outlines, but perhaps because of time, I will be brief on some of them. Firstly, I will look at the introduction of the work. I will clarify some concepts, some basic concepts, the Igbo people who are they, and overview. Then widowhood practice and the associated rituals in the Igbo tradition. I will also look at the factors responsible for the prevalence of these obnoxious widowhood practices in Nigeria, the implications, how do we come out of it as the way forward, the place of women education, and coping these challenges. I will conclude and make some recommendations.

Now, in recent times, the issues of traditional, you know, harmful practices and violence against women is taking the entire stage in Nigeria. And such practices are actually devastating, physically, psychologically and otherwise. This is a kind of ... a form of violence against women or another stage of gender inequality coming to play. So it is a kind of reinforcing, quote unquote, inferior status of women, which is not so, in terms of as far as human rights is concerned. So across African societies, women continue to struggle for gender equality and the human rights issues. Women are made to face dehumanizing treatments from in-laws who sometimes claim that she was responsible for the death of her husband, because any attempt for you to resist some of these rituals as a woman, as a widow, automatically you are accused of killing your husband or things of that nature. So based on that, they will succumb to those issues against their wish. Particularly the way in which widowhood rites undermine the rights of women in South to West, that is the part of Nigeria we are going to focus on, that is the Igbo people. Where this research focuses requires immediate attention.

Let me quickly look at some of the concepts. As I said earlier, a widow is a woman who has lost her husband through death. Why the term widow refers to the state or the period of being a widow. Because there's a particular period that you mourn. A widow can remarry, it's allowed in the tradition

of the Igbo people, but that period of widow that you mourn your husband. There are some issues we need to look at. That leads us to the concept of widowhood rites, as practiced in many traditional African societies. These are practices that accompany the mourning of the loss, or the loss of your spouse or your husband. So widowhood rites are culturally defined as ceremonies that is part of, that is in honor of a deceased partner. But Remember I said we are focusing on widows, the women, the men who are the widowers, I think, they are not culturally to so many practices or rituals, but we focus more on women, because of what they go through, which is quite (unidentifiable words).

Now the culture, is simply put, refers to the way of life of a group of people, the way people live. That's the culture of the people. Now, who are the Igbos? The Igbos are one of the major or the larger ethnic groups in Nigeria. We have three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. We have the Hausa Fulani, we have the Yorubas, and the Igbos. The Hausa Fulani is the largest. They occupy the northern part of Nigeria. While the Igbos, which is our focus, we have three systems that make up the Igbos. That is the south-east of Nigeria. We have Ebonyi, Enugu, Abia, Anambra, and the Imo states. So that is five states. And we have other Igbo-speaking Nigerians, and they are found in Delta states, Rivers, Cross Rivers, and Benue. But this project is more concerned on the core Igbos. These are the people of the south-eastern states. And there are many craftsmen, farmers, and traders. Igbo women remain women of substance as long as their husbands are alive. Whether they are respected or not.

If an Igbo woman loses her husband to death, her story changes. A lot of things change. So the widow is seen as unclean and unholy as a result of people's perception of the widow. Certain harmful widowhood practices are made out on her. Now, I want to look at briefly, this is a map of Nigeria. I will not describe Nigeria as much, because my brother Dr. Lucky did that yesterday. I will just show us. In Nigeria we have six geopolitical zones. We have the north-central, north-east, north-west, we have the south-south, south-west, and south-east, which are our consign. We look at this area, we have the north, we have the north-central, the north east, the north west, and we have the south west. And we also have the south-south. This is the south-south. We have our systems. But where we are concerned now is the south east. You can see Anambra State, Enugu State, Ebonyi. We have Abia and Imo. This is the area, the scope of my study, the south eastern part of Nigeria. So this is a sketch map of Nigeria. And if you look at this map of Nigeria, I think nobody can see very well. We have two rivers. Quickly. That's the information. We have two major rivers. We have the river Niger. You can see the river this way. And naturally, the river divides the country into three parts. And before the coming of the whites, the colonialism, these various regions or groups, they have their own pre-colonial system of administration, which was actually, you know, okay for the people. But when Nigeria, when the whites, the British came to amalgamate us many years ago, actually in 1914, I guess it's because of administrative ease that the then military administrator, Lord Lugard, Sir Lord Frederick Lugard, you know, amalgamated the south, the west, the east of Nigeria, and came up with the name Nigeria. And today it has not been so easy for us. The amalgamation, or will I say premature what look, you know, bringing people with this diverse religion, diverse culture, diverse administrative system and all that together. But then you have heard so much about crisis in Nigeria in terms of the Boko Haram crisis, militancy, insurgency, and all that. I just want to let us know. Me, personally, whenever I look at the Nigeria map, I see that naturally, the map has, with this river, these two major rivers, Niger and Benue, Nigeria is a kind of three nations. And once again, it's like a nation of many nations. Okay? But let's leave that for now.

Now, let's continue. Let's look at some of these practices. These archaic and barbaric practices that is still observable in Nigeria in the Igbo traditional system. Widowhood practices and associated rituals. For instance, the first one eating only food cooked at home. That one will be okay. But refrain from bathing for a number of days. In some culture, it could be seven days. The woman will not take her bath because she's mourning. I'm not condemning mourning, but I'm looking at some of these practices that are encroaching into the right of these women. I feel bad. When I was going through this, I was so emotional. There were some things I discovered because of this study that I never knew it was. I had to ask, are you sure this is obtainable in this present age, in this 21st century? I said yes. But it was bad, actually. Seeing the late husband's corpse, they will be compelled. You must come and go through your husband's corpse. You must look at the corpse before the burial. Come and ... Shaving of hair, even some other parts, like the private parts and all that, the hair will be shaved, and other parts of the body, I think the body is admitted there. Okay?

So, I will show you some pictures. Only very few of some of these things. They cry at all times to prove innocence. If you are innocent, maybe 12pm or 1am in the morning, you have to come out. Sometimes you will be compelled to (unidentifiable words), to cry alone. With so many rules. Don't look back. Don't say another thing. You must cry this way and not that. So, that's so, so, it's so, you know, unfortunate. And forced marriage. Sometimes the widow, if she's young, may be forced, may be compelled, or coerced to marry a relation of the dead husband. They will tell her, you must marry from your dead husband. That one of the uncles, or one of the younger ones, or whatever. I know this is against women, you know, the right of women. Forced marriage. And, most cases, they were compelled to sit on the floor, during the period of the late husband's burial. This burial can take weeks and months. You can't bathe. You sit on the floor. There's some specific food that you must eat. And the worst part is compelling the women to drink the water used in the washing the corpse of the late husband's body. They will put the husband in the basin, and they will bathe him. The water used in bathing him, they will compel the woman to drink that water to prove her innocence. If you're not responsible for the death, sometimes we do ask ourselves, why would a wife or a woman kill her husband? Is it because of work, or because he's looking for another man? I don't know. The kind of mentality and reasoning that we made them to assume. I think that is a very wrong assumption. That the woman must be responsible for the death of her husband. If you are not responsible for the death of the husband, you must prove innocence by drinking the water used in bathing him.

So, why I term this topic exposing, actually we need to expose some of these things. I don't know how we can abolish, I don't know how we can stop some of these evil practices against our people. Because when I look at the UNs, sometimes I was thinking that Africa or some part of Africa are not part of the UN. Because they should be aware of all these things that are happening. What role are they playing to curb some of these barbaric and ill-treatment methods on human beings? This is against human rights, but no one to protect them. Sometimes we look at the factors why these things continue to persist. Nobody is there. **That's why the fact that with the advent of the 70 modernization, I think some of these things are still very, very obvious and we see them every day in our people who are not there (unclear speech).**

Sometimes they will weep loudly at intervals. Then, throwing a woman out of the matrimonial home or denying her heritage. Sometimes they deny, especially if there's no child or no male child... That's why you see Africans who have many children. I think that's one of the reasons why we have so many children. Because you must be... The family must compel you. You must have a male child. That's one

thing I love about the western world. They don't care. A child is a child whether it's a male or a female. But in Africa, no. And the woman must struggle. If the woman cannot bear a male child for the man, even if the man is not interested, if the man is not able to hold his son, the family will compel him to take his second wife. Just because they need a male child. Then, forcing her to wear a particular clothes, either black or white, among other things. Initially, it was purely black. But these days, a kind of modernization in the name of Christians, but it's almost the same. So the Christians, those from the Christian family would prefer to wear white during the mourning. Then those in traditional families, will hold on to the black. But all the same, it was... Okay. Where do I press it again? Okay.

So I took some pictures. I was going to cover their faces. Some picture analysis of these practices. You can see the first picture, a widow being excluded. You see? Like, you can see she's putting on white because she's from a Christian background. You can see the second picture. They had to shave her hair completely to the lowest level. All in the name of mourning. You have no option. You have no option. You can see a widow being dragged out of the family house. Perhaps maybe she has no child or she has no...especially if you have no child. But if you have a child, maybe a girl that has grown up, okay, they may be able to fight for their mother and all that. But if there's no child at all, you leave the family house. You have no place in the family. Here is a widow being forced... You see the calabash with her? Being forced to drink water used to wash the corpse of her late husband. You see the fifth picture, a widow being dragged out of the village on accusation of killing her husband. Most cases, they accuse her of witchcraft and a lot of fetish things and all that. Especially if you refuse to succumb to some of these practices, it's assumed that you are responsible. So hence, you'll get scared. That's communicated from the village. Here is the last picture I have here. A widow being sexually harassed by her late husband's brother. These are some of the...

Let's look at some of the factors. Responsible for these... The prevalence of these perversions of widow practices in Nigeria. I think the major factor is failure of the man to write a will. Failure of the man to write a will. Because if there is a will written by the man, I don't think the family have any option than to concur to the details of what is enticed in the will by the man. But the problem is are they exposed? Do they even have the means to hire a lawyer? We are talking about poverty, illiteracy among these people. We are talking about traditional people. Some of them don't even know what it means to write a will. They don't even know what a will is all about. That is some of the problems I want to look at. Okay. Then, ignorance of the law. Ignorance of the law. Do they have knowledge of the law? Do they know their rights? Do they have knowledge of human rights? And they stand and say, oh no, I can't do this. This is my right. This is my privacy. This is my right. I will not succumb to this ill treatment by my in-laws. Sometimes because of superstitious beliefs, if I don't do this, I may die. It may affect my children. My children may run mad. A lot of beliefs and tears because of that. That is the third point. Superstitious belief. Then, poor social status of the women or the widows. They don't have the means. Even if they know about the law, how would they consult a lawyer to defend them? What are they going to say? Illiteracy. Some of them are illiterate. They can't write. They didn't go to school. For instance, the the.. what do you call that? Is it the director general of the World Trade Organization is from this part of Nigeria, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala. She studied at Harvard. You can't compel her. For instance, her husband died. If her husband died, for instance, I think both of them are in the US. You can't compel her to good (unidentifiable words). She is exposed. She is educated. Or even with my level of exposure. Okay? And my parents were Christians. My mother is a Christian. She can't go through some of these things. Who stands against it? Who resists it? But because these people in the interior they don't have access. They don't have any option. Okay? So that is why illiteracy, poverty

is a great challenge. And finally, the challenge of gender inequality is a global phenomenon. It's a global challenge. So that is still there. Violence against women and the various forms of it.

Then what are the implications of these practices on Nigerian women? Economically. It has some economic and dehumanizing effects on them. They are compelled. Some of them are traumatized. They are traumatized because they are confined to a particular place and sometimes for a particular period of time. They can't even go out, let me go for a walk, let me go and do some other things. So it has some effects on them economically. I know that. Then psychologically also. And health effects. Think about a human being confined to a place without bathing. You can't bathe. You can't go out. You are limited. The distance. You move around the compound or the village. You are constrained to some extent. I know that. Then emotionally. Emotionally. Especially if there is no trust in the family. That is the worst aspect of it. No one to console them. They are depressed emotionally. And physically they are depressed. It can even lead to death. Some people cannot bear some of this treatment. Some can commit suicide and take their lives. And so many other things. The family may even decide. Especially if there is a kind of suspicion. Even without evidence that this woman may be responsible for the death of her husband. So she must die. We have cases where women die in the place of mourning. Okay.

Now the way forward and policy reform for widows' welfare. What is the way forward? One. Vocational skill acquisition program. These women should be more empowered. Empowerment. The government should come in. Even while their husbands are alive. They should be.. in most cases... So some of these women because their husbands are well doing. There is no need to work. A full time housewife will sit down there and the man will provide. You know. The assist to cook and give back as many children as they can. Maybe yearly or every two years. That should not help the matter. So there should be a kind of empowerment through skill acquisition program where they can learn skills. You can acquire knowledge. Not just through formal education. It can be a formal training to acquire some skills that will help them. So that in case the demise of their husband. They can take care of their children. Take care of themselves as well.

Then engaging community leaders and influentials. Community leaders who have community leaders they should be engaged. They should be kind of interactive sessions where they can be exposed to the danger of some of these cultural practices that has great effect on the life of women. I'm not completely against mourning. When somebody lost a loved one it is painful and there is need to mourn. But not to the extreme of endangering the life of the mourner. Especially the widows.

The collaborative efforts with non-governmental organizations, the NGOs and civil societies. That will also help. Then the implementation of inclusivity and respect for human rights. These are things that the government should do. Sensitize the people. Let them know the implications of these acts. Violating the rights of women. But most cases even in our constitution, it's one of the fundamental rights of people who have freedom of worship, freedom of association. But most of these freedoms are not considered by the people. Then envisioning a more protective future for Nigerian women.

So let's look at the next outline here. Raising awareness and women's education as a mentor tool for coping with challenges. Yes. the importance of education cannot be belated at all. That is why I give an example of a woman like Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala. You know? The director of the World Trade Organization. With education, some of these women... Well, I have some recommendations as you can see. And... Okay. Should I just go through the cover? Okay, okay, okay. So, thank you for listening.

PRIVACY AND DEATH was organized by Felicia Fricke and Natacha Klein Käfer with the support of the Centre for Privacy Studies and the Conference Grant of the Carlsberg Foundation.

The Privacy Studies Podcast is produced with the support of the Centre for Privacy Studies at the University of Copenhagen funded by the Danish National Research Foundation. This podcast is released under creative license attribution non-commercial share alike.

Thank you so much for listening.