

DIGITAL STORYTELLING, DOCUMENTATION AND INFORMATION DISSEMINATION AS A MEDIA TO UNDERSTANDING WIDOWHOOD PRACTICES IN NGOR-OKPALA, IMO STATE, NIGERIA

By

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine, document, create awareness, access and disseminate information about the various cultural practices that applies to widows in Ngor-Okpala vis à vis their ritual procedures based on the unwritten traditions and customs of the people. The newly widowed in Ngor-Okpala are meant to observe certain procedures until such a time stipulated by culture - from abstinence from certain kinds of food, to human relations, sitting, bathing, sleeping, clothing, etc. This paper is part of a more extensive observatory study conducted in the Ngor-Okpala community in Imo State, Nigeria. The research tools were piloted in Umuochere village-Ihitte autonomous community in Ngor-Okpala LGA of Imo State. This paper explains the necessity of cultural practices and rituals and how the activities interact as well as affect lives of the newly widowed without prior documented information, dissemination and access in Umuochere village. The objective of the study is to describe the intersections in widowhood cultural practices, which are often not physically aligned, recorded nor documented with the Ihitte-Okwe Customary laws. Qualitative research was used. Three widows were interviewed in this paper. Findings reveal that widowhood rites and procedures are gendered, undocumented, undisseminated and as a result, lacked physical access. The result of this research established a documented record of rites and procedures into the widowhood phase. This study contributes to knowledge in the creation of online digital access to information and documentation regarding widowhood practices in Ngor-Okpala, Imo state, Nigeria.

Key words: Digital storytelling, Information dissemination, Documentation, Cultural practices, Widowhood, Ngor-Okpala

Introduction:

The paucity of proper information regarding cultural procedures of rituals and rites par the customs and traditions of the Ngor-Okpala people on widowhood practices has brought about misinformation, poor cultural practices and tragic life experiences on some

women and their families who do not have access to the right information especially for diaspora natives. Despite various changes in the modern Igbo society, like many other traditional practices, widowhood practices have continued to exist silently or openly in spite of modernisation, (Umezurike, 2019). In spite of pains of irreplaceable loss, devastation and grief associated with death, certain procedures and practices are culturally stipulated to be observed by a newly widowed woman from the moment of her husband's demise to funerals and even till the duration of mourning(Danke, 2024; Bogain, 2023, Shumbamhini, 2020 & Fasanmi, 2019). However, information to these traditional rites, rituals, customs and practices expected of the newly widowed, amongst the Ngor-Okpala people do not have definite documents or records anywhere either in print/ hardcopy or electronic formats.

Hence, flowing from the scarcity and poor access to hardcopy documents of cultural practices and rites regarding widowhood, the Chief Mourner (the bereaved woman) is offered traditional instructions to the rites and procedures through unsubstantiated oral/folk narratives as well as physical guide from the Natives. Likewise, there is fore-knowledge paucity as the newly widowed only gets to learn what to expect at the instant of spousal demise from folks with fragments of unsubstantiated information. In general, the paucity of proper information regarding cultural procedures of rituals, rites par the customs and traditions of the Ngor-Okpala people on death, funerals and widowhood has brought about misinformation, poor cultural practices and tragic life experiences especially from the diaspora natives who do not have access to the right information or fore-knowledge about the widowhood practices in Ngor-Okpala.

Nonetheless, in spite of the heavy reliance on folk narratives about these cultural practices only at the instance of a tragedy, coupled with the presence of technological effects of digitized content narratives on social media platforms, the problem of documentation, records, dissemination and access to cultural procedures and rites about widowhood in Ngor-Okpala still persist. This problem have resulted into strained family relationships, created family fued, negligence of traditional norms and values, apathy towards native identity, diaspora burials, and even death. The aim of this paper is to outline some of these practices,

rites and procedures expected of a newly widowed woman in Ngor-Okpala, Imo State, Nigeria. Previous studies, have not shown the availability of records, documents and access to proper and accurate physical or electronic resource(s) on bereavement, and the rites of passing of an Ngor-Okpala male adult, with the enlistment of these rites, rituals and procedures expected of the newly widowed, especially as it could help in the smooth transition process of a wife to her new status 'widow'. Widowhood can be defined as the permanent and physical loss of life of a woman's legitimate spouse to eternal death and interment of his physical his body. 'Legitimate' here implies that the deceased husband had fulfilled all cultural and traditional requirements based on the marriage customs and traditions of the people before cohabitation for a lifelong marital partnership. Some researchers define widowhood as a status for women whose husband have died and still not remarried (Danke, 2024; Eboh & Boye, 2005; Bogain, 2023 & Fasanmi, 2019)

Furthermore, researchers such as Izuogu, Echebima & Omeonu (2018), opines that the presence and benefits of digital technology has not abated the scarcity of records and information regarding widowhood practices, which could perhaps point to the persistent crisis amongst some families in Igboland, mostly after the demise of a married son. These crises are long enduring and have brought about confusion, misinformation and even sometimes calamities on the living relatives of the deceased. Likewise, the UN Women, (2018) stressed that the information scarcity regarding widowhood practices hinders effective interventions and advocacy for widows, especially in Africa. However, it is believed that folk narratives about some of these cultural expectations already exists amongst community leaders, age long widowed women, and elders- therefore disseminating, these information through storytelling with the advantage of digital technology could be a potent intervening approach to creating records, documentation and information dissemination media to the society (Akanbi, 2023; Chilaka, 2023; Balogun & Aruoture, 2024).

Edagbami (2025), emphasised that even the unlettered natives can through the use of technology, create stories on digital platforms using illustrative approach in content creation. Digital storytelling is the approach of instigating social engagements and reactions and

interactions from the digital public through compilations of stories mixed with text, video, audio and pictorial elements to further narrate a story. Digital storytelling makes use of multimedia elements to offer brief but relevant information on a digital space (Digital st Rolbiecki, Washington, & Bitsicas, 2021). Storytelling holds immense relevance in the documentation, information access and dissemination especially in the context of widowhood practices-given to the fact that many customary practices are unwritten and only transmitted through oral tradition,(Danke, 2024). Researchers such as UN, Women (2021), Rolbiecki, Washington, & Bitsicas (2021); Mathonsi, & Tallis,, (2022), and Hausknecht, Vanchu-Orosco & Kaufman (2019), asserts that Digital storytelling is capable of addressing the social and information challenges of widowhood by empowering them with the platform to tell their stories, awakening interventions and advocacies against harmful cultural practices, creating awareness and information access about culture and rites of passing as well as an approach to foster healing and survival in the face of difficulties.

Taking advantage of digital technology in sharing stories, experiences and narratives on digital social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, Whatsapp, Tiktok etcetera could bring the world closer with information and knowledge in just an instance. Researchers like Okwudire (2024) and Chilaka (2023) corroborates the benefits of digital storytelling; postulating that, community leaders can create informative contents about their practices, share experiences about their cultural heritage and create records for easy access and fore-knowledge about their traditions, norms, values, rites, rituals and procedures to the general public.

Likewise, Ugwukah and Ume-Ezeoke (2024) affirms that digital storytelling can be a potent information resource to womenfolk, families and the general public in enabling foreknowledge empowerment on what to culturally expunge or promote from widowhood rites and practices. Balogun and Aruoture (2024), describes the benefits of digital storytelling in promulgating the African culture as a double edged sword. Likewise, Akanbi (2023) postulates that digital storytelling and information dissemination would be the bridge between tradition and modernity in African cultures, which in turn would bring about empowerment especially for women in African societies. Digital storytelling through social

media platforms would help highlight cultural biases and antihuman restrictions against women such as feeding distasteful meals, movement restrictions, and confinement. Digital storytelling would foster records creation, documentation, access, ease of retrieval and accurate information dissemination media.

Sharing stories, procedures and experiences of cultural expectations from the newly widowed through digital storytelling on social media platforms could also be a potent approach to resolving the decades of information paucity, ignorance, cultural misinformation, insufficient documentation, and poor dissemination of critical information in the larger society (Okwudire, 2024). Conversely, digital storytelling serves as a vital bridge, translating the often unspoken and undocumented realities of widowhood into powerful, accessible narratives. Also, it could be a potent tool documentation, dissemination, advocacy, awareness, and the empowerment of affected women when they are able to access and reach records and documents. According to UN Women (2021), Documentation and information dissemination are a necessity in understanding and mitigating cultural problems. Documentation offers effective records and information piece about a process and events in order to ensure and assure correctness, consistency in practice and also, serves as historic elements for the future. In the context of widowhood practices, documentation alleviates information scarcity and secures the mental wellbeing of the bereaved based on knowledge assurance of the situation. Documentation according to UN Women (2021), can be quantitative or qualitative which involves data gathering and verbal narratives from widows. This assures dissemination and promotes access by all.

In Ngor-Okpala community, documentation and records about widowhood cultural practices are not known with certainty to have ever existed as a single document. Therefore, this paper attempts to explore how digital storytelling can be used to create records, awareness and disseminate information about widowhood practices of the Ngor-Okpala people; highlighting its potential to foster social change and empower widows. Likewise, it would attempt to address information scarcity and documentation, records creation and dissemination of information through digital storytelling by itemising procedural activities and cultural

practices expected of a newly widowed woman at the demise of her husband in Igbo land amongst the Ngor-Okpala people of Imo state, Nigeria.

Death and the Rite of Passing

Death is part of life and a natural occurrence which marks the end of a person's lifetime on earth, it is believed or assumed that every person who lives must experience death and with the event of death, certain rites are enshrined by the Igbo culture and traditions to see to it that the deceased is buried and properly rested in the Afterlife. The assurance of a restful and peaceful Afterlife of the deceased is predicated on rites and a practice carried out by the deceased bereaved family members, before and after the deceased body is interred. This cultural rites of passing and practices are majorly performed and obligated from the deceased first son and widowed wife. In Igboland, there are variations of cultural practices as it regards life and living in the socio-cultural society of the people. These variations of cultural practices have to do with the peculiarities and uniqueness of each Igbo community and society. Similarly, there are repercussions and consequences to the ignorance of some of these rites and cultural practices especially as it regards the death of a spouse (Nwankwo, 2023). These repercussions are dire and sometimes have life threatening consequences. In addition, experience has shown that there are no ample and readily accessible information regarding these cultural practices and rites par the expected obligations from family members especially the newly widowed. Information about the Igbo tradition and cultural practice regarding events like marriage has become widely known, especially with the presence of digital technology.

Researchers such as Balogun and Ezekiel (2024), Izuogu, Echebi and Omeonu, (2018), Nweze, et.al., (2019), agrees to the idea that knowledge about some practices and traditions of the Igbo people has become known through digital platforms, however, information regarding widowhood practices of the Ngor-Okpala people have not taken advantage of technology to salvage women through information dissemination and documentation. This information is not commonly accessible, documented and shared but rather left as folk stories and knowledge which leaves most people, especially those in

diaspora ignorant until faced with the reality and pains of loss. The loss of life and the fulfillment of funeral rites and practices especially of an Igbo person is not limited by space and location. These brings this research to the idea of information documentation of folk stories regarding cultural rites and practices on widows during and after the funerals of their departed spouse amongst the people of Ngor-Okpala, in Imo state, Nigeria. But the question is, who are the Ngor-Okpala people?

The Igbos of Ngor-Okpala/Owerri

Media Nigeria (2022) reports that Ngor Okpala is one of the 27 Local Government Area (LGA) located in Imo State, Nigeria situated in the south-eastern part of Nigeria. Ngor-Okpala is the second largest local government by landmass in Imo State and also the second largest by indigene population density (after Mbaitoli, another local government area in Imo state, Nigeria). Ngor-Okpala is made up of two related clans which is distinguished by a divide of the Ngor and the Okpala clans which altogether are made up of 15 towns, where each town, made up of a minimum of 8 villages each altogether autonomously governed by an Eze. These cluster of villages forms an autonomous community or towns which culminated to form a local government. The Ngor-Okpala people used to be part of the Owerri North local government of Imo state before it got its autonomy to exist as local government in the state. Ngor Okpala LGA has a population of over 200,000 people, and it is predominantly inhabited by the Igbo ethnic group.

The general language of communication is Igbo with its own dialectical variation to the Owerri people. The LGA is known for its rich cultural heritage and traditional procedures and rituals regarding certain activities such as farming commencement, palm fruit harvesting, naming ceremony, funerals, etc. The lifestyle in Ngor Okpala is a blend of tradition and modernity, with many people embracing modern ways of life while still holding onto their traditional customs and beliefs. Christianity is the dominant religion of the people, however, traditional practices regarding certain events such as marriage, funerals, births etc are still revered by all indigenes of the local government

whether at home or in diaspora, because they believe that Christianity does not erode the culture and traditional practices of the people neither does technology or social media alter the language (Ugwu, 2024) which in itself preserves their lives and healthy co-existence.

There are different traditional customs and beliefs of the Ngor-Okpala people especially about natural life events such as marriage, child birth, agriculture, deities and spirits and likewise for death, funeral and widowhood. These customs and beliefs transcends religious affiliations and its practices by natives are held sacrosanct and non-negligible by the people living and the dead who become (Mmuo) the spirits of the community. These customary practices have rules and philosophies to their procedures which must be strictly observed by the natives. Similarly, negligence, ignorance or excuses due to the practice and observation of these practices especially as it relates to death, funerals and widowhood are not tolerated by ancestral forces who are custodians to the culture.

Widowhood in Ngor-Okpala

Generally, widowhood is believed to be a difficult status which often times last a lifetime, however, in Ngor-Okpala, widowhood has in its status certain expectations from the newly widowed. Meziobi and Meziobi (2011) posits that Seclusion, restrictions and confinements towards almost all normal life's routine and activities are regulated through a specific period as the newly widowed mourns. Widowhood is a transition of a woman's marital status to permanent non spousal absence. By the customary practice and norms of the Ngor-Okpala people, the newly widowed woman's activities would be strictly regulated and supervised by members of the community. Activities such as feeding, clothing, sitting, sleeping, bathing, trading, speaking, physical appearance etcetera, is expected to be carried out differently and under guided or assisted approach. Adherence to these cultural practices determines a new widow's state of well-being, longevity as well as ushers her into a new sociocultural status called widowhood.

Procedural Cultural Expectations of a New Widow In Ngor-Okpala

When tragedy of death occurs of an Ngor-Okpala man, efforts are made to preserve his family and these efforts are made to spiritual guard his family especially his widow in getting in the way of spirits negatively (as the people believe in the existence of spirits). As a result of this, restrictions, seclusions and confinements are enshrined for the newly widowed to self-preserve even until after the internment of her husband and going forward. These restrictions and seclusion is aimed at severing pre-existing ties with the deceased and as well to prevent spiritual contamination which could result to the widow's death from her deceased husband. However, information, records and documentation regarding these norms are scarce or altogether unavailable to intending wives and married women to Ngor-Okpala men. This is to say that there is no record or document to serve as a guide to families as to what to expect in the time of bereavement. This information scarcity worsens the devastation of the mourners, especially in the case of women who maybe strangers by virtue of marriage to the community's traditions and hence, rely on folk narratives and sometimes misinformation.

Restrictions, Seclusion and Confinement

1. **Feeding/diet:** a newly widowed woman is to commence a fast throughout the day of her husband's demise. Subsequently, she would no longer be allowed to make her meals herself but with the assistance of a senior widow. Her meals would lack oils, and proteins like meat such as beef or chicken, her meals should have neither taste nor appearance of savour until the interment of her husband. She is also restricted from feeding with other people, she eats her meals alone and neither would she honour invitations of feeding with anyone until certain rituals are done.
2. **Padding:** at the instance of demise of a woman's husband, she is guided by other women to pad her genitalia with sanitary towels or cloth. This is to assume a process of menstrual cycle observation in confusion to the spirit and soul of the deceased husband in order to severe spiritual ties of conjugal activity. This padding would cease after internment of the deceased.

3. **Hair shaving:** a newly widowed woman's hair would be completely shaved off by an older widowed woman at the instance of news of a husband's demise. The shaving off of hair signifies a physical appearance change of status from married to widow.

4. **Sack Clothing:** the cloth already worn by a woman on the receipt of news about her husband's demise would be discarded while 2 or 3 sets of clothing or fabrics lacking in brightness, attraction or beauty would be given to serve as her sackcloth until the end of her mourning period. One of the clothing would be worn during the day and the other at night. The wearing of sackcloth is seen as a mark of honour to the dead and it is preceded with rituals and pouring of libation which traditionally signifies mourning.

5. **Bathing:** self-bath ceases the moment a woman becomes widowed. She must be assisted to bath by a woman who has been long widowed before her. The bath is not ordinary with water, rather with healing herbs for spiritual cleansing and separation from the deceased husband. A newly widowed woman would have assisted baths for 3 days after which she can proceed to bath herself with attention to paranormal signs while bathing. The baths are done at dawn between the hours of 5 to 6 during mornings and at the set of dusk of 5 to 6pm in the evenings.

6. **Stool:** this is meant for sitting by the widow as sympathisers and other mourners commiserate with her, however, no other person including her children must share her seat. At any rise from that stool, she must turn the stool in the reverse or place an object on it to signify that it belongs to the newly widowed. This would be on, until after observance of mourning and then the stool gets discarded or destroyed or given out to another widow as a gift.

7. **Use of cutleries:** cutleries used by the new widow would be restricted to her use only. Since her meals would be restricted so also would be her cutleries until the end of her mourning period.

8. Restricted movement and interaction: movement to meetings, gatherings, visiting like shopping, or even going to work abruptly ceases at the demise of a woman's husband. Her ability to move and interact would commence at the expiration of the mourning period.

9. Funeral meals and activities: at the preparation of funeral of her husband, a newly widowed woman is forbidden to eat from any meal prepared with condiments meant for the burial. She is also not allowed to engage in any activity or task of food preparation neither is she allowed to observe the rituals of animal slaughtering and meat sharing during funeral and interment preparations. Her meals are handled by one relative who procures the condiments and prepares her own meal away from that of the public. Likewise, a newly widowed woman must be attentive not to eat from left over condiments or materials used in food preparation during her husband's funeral. Left over condiments and materials such as firewood, spices, food items, vegetable oil, even to salt is meant to be distributed and shared to other members of the community in its entirety as soon as the funeral is concluded. This is done to avoid temptation of ingesting any of the items which attracts negative spiritual implications.

Completion of mourning and rituals

In Igboland, there is a stipulated duration for mourning especially by a widowed woman. This duration is observed within the first half of internment while the other is a complete observance within a full year from the internment. However, widowed women are permitted to choose the extent they would mourn their deceased husbands especially taking account the restrictions and rituals that goes with mourning observance. the following are rituals signify the end of mourning duration by a widowed woman:

Communal Feeding: a new widow is restricted from communal feeding of her own meals or that of others. However, this feeding restriction doesn't necessarily last for too long after the interment of a widow's husband. In order to commence her normal feeding patterns and models, she must cook a meal well prepared for her immediate community or neighbourhood where other women would be invited to the feast. A longer widowed woman would make prayers and libations with liquor of spirits informing both the living and the dead about the

feast which signifies the end of a widows feeding restriction and the commencement of normal feeding patter of her meals as well as that of others by the widow. The ritual of libation is meant to free the new widow of any spiritual breech and penalties which could impede her normal routine.

Sackcloth Disuse: after the stipulated duration of mourning of either 6 months or one year depending on the choice of the new widow, her sackcloth would be discarded following rituals and the pouring of libation with liquor spirit. This ritual is carried out by a long older widowed woman who informs the deceased husband's spirit and other spirits about the completion of mourning and the commencement of normal dressing by the new widow. The sackcloth if of high valued material could be bequeathed to the other widows or that long widowed woman whose role was to spiritually set her free from restriction. The sackcloth could also be discarded and ruined by ablation as well.

The stool: at the end of mourning period, the widow is no longer supposed to sit on her stool. She therefore discards this stool or bequeath it to another widow. Discarding the stool spiritually frees her from restrictions of confinement to a particular chair.

Cutleries: cutleries such as spoons, plates and utensils are discarded and never to be used by the widow or any of her family members at the end of the mourning period. At this time, the widow is allowed to make meals and feed from any kind of cutleries or utensils within her disposal. In general, after the observance of mourning, the widow is now welcomed into her normal routine and can attend functions and events as well as associate with other members of the society.

Recommendation

This article recommends:

1. Inclusive and dynamic leadership amongst community leaders, especially in adapting technology in reaching out to her indigenes through content creation of rituals, rites and activities on social media platforms.

2. Supports the creation of a digital space by each community for the sole purposes of information dissemination, records and document creation and awareness about the community programs.
3. Encourage women and widows to share their stories and experiences on digital platforms in order to foster awareness and interventions against certain harmful traditions

Conclusion

Digital storytelling has immense potential as a medium for disseminating information about traditional and cultural practices in Igboland, especially about the peculiarity of the Ngor-Okpala customs and traditions regarding widowhood practices in Nigeria. This article aimed at espousing these practices, bridging the information gap by outlining them for the purposes of document and records creation, information dissemination, exposing certain restrictive practices against women for public scrutiny and evaluation for the purposes of a possible change to a more positive cultural practice, This article aimed at creating enlightenment, awareness and cultural education on widowhood practices of the Ngor-Okpala people. It also serves as a means for empowerment, cultural preservation, and advocacy by harnessing the power of digital narratives, stakeholders can work towards a more equitable society that acknowledges and respects the experiences of widows. Future initiatives should focus on ensuring inclusive access to technology while promoting safe spaces for women to share their stories.

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