



WIDOWHOOD AMONG THE IGBO OF EASTERN NIGERIA

by
Chima Jacob KORIEH

Thesis submitted for the Degree of Master of Philosophy in History
University of Bergen, Norway
Bergen Spring 1996.

- [Chapter I Introduction](#)
 - [Chapter II Igbo Widowhood Rituals and Practices.](#)
 - [Chapter III Widows in Domestic and Affinal Relationship](#)
 - [Chapter IV Widows and the Economy](#)
 - [Chapter V Disadvantaged or Privileged? A Conclusion.](#)
 - [Appendix A](#)
 - [Appendix B](#)
 - [Bibliography](#)

 - [Contents](#)
-



For further information please contact:

Chima Korieh
Department of History
Central Michigan University
Mt. Pleasant Michigan 48859
Tel: +01 989-774-2667
E-mail:korie1cj@cmich.edu

World Wide Web publication by [Arne Solli](#) June 1996



THESIS - Contents

- [Chapter I Introduction](#)
 - [1.1 Background and Objectives](#)
 - [1.2 Theories and Methodology of African Women's history.](#)
 - [1.3 The Setting.](#)
 - [1.3.1 The Igbo- General background:](#)
 - [1.4 Central Problems and Framework.](#)
 - [1.5 Sources and method of data collection](#)
 - [1.5.1 Oral sources.](#)
 - [1.5.2 Demographic Features.](#)
 - [1.5.3 Archival sources and court records.](#)
 - [1.5.4 Previous Research](#)
- [Chapter II Igbo Widowhood Rituals and Practices.](#)
 - [2. Widowhood Rituals - Igba Nkpe](#)
 - [2.1 Rituals at Death and Funeral](#)
 - [2.2 Ritual Seclusion -Ino na Nso:](#)
 - [2.3 The Sociology of Widowhood Practices](#)
- [Chapter III Widows in Domestic and Affinal Relationship](#)
 - [3.1 Igbo Marriage System: An Overview.](#)
 - [3.2 Marriage Among the Igbo: Rationale.](#)
 - [3.3 Igbo Traditional Forms of Marriage](#)
 - [3.3.1 Widow Inheritance \(Levirate\)-Nkushi](#)
 - [3.3.2 Widow Remarriage](#)
 - [3.4 Widowhood and Polygamous Marriage](#)
- [Chapter IV Widows and the Economy](#)
 - [4.1.1 Agriculture](#)
 - [4.1.2 Inheritance](#)
 - [4.1.3. Customary Right to Land](#)
 - [4.1.4 Land Ownership.](#)
 - [4.1.5 The Spiritual Value of Land.](#)
 - [4.1.6 Other Problems for Farming Widows](#)
- [4.2 Trade](#)
 - [4.3 Kin Group and Communal Assistance](#)
 - [4.4 New Possibilities](#)
- [Chapter V Disadvantaged or Privileged? A Conclusion.](#)
- [Appendix A](#)
- [Appendix B](#)
- [Bibliography](#)





Chapter I Introduction

- [1.1 Background and Objectives](#)
 - [1.2 Theories and Methodology of African Women's history.](#)
 - [1.3 The Setting.](#)
 - [1.3.1 The Igbo- General background:](#)
 - [1.4 Central Problems and Framework.](#)
 - [1.5 Sources and method of data collection](#)
 - [1.5.1 Oral sources.](#)
 - [1.5.2 Demographic Features.](#)
 - [1.5.3 Archival sources and court records.](#)
 - [1.5.4 Previous Research](#)
-

1.1 Background and Objectives

The study of women as a vital and autonomous social force, as well as the treatment of their weal and woes as an intrinsic part of overall social dynamics, is a child of very recent birth indeed (Afigbo 1989:7). M. I. Finley (1968:129) drew in the, *'The Silent Women of Rome'*, attention to the fact that 'The Roman World was not the only one in history in which women remained in the background in politics and business'. The women of mid-Victorian England were equally without rights, equally victims of double standards of sexual morality. Equally, they were exposed to risk and ruin when they stepped outside the home and the church. C. Obbo (1980:1) referred to the invisibility of African women in any serious study of history and society; in spite of the fact that anthropology has not been an exclusive male preserve.

If the state of African women's studies is as bad as these and other authorities suggest, it is not surprising that even now when the world appears to be waking to its responsibility in this regard, there are still segments of the field which continue to be in a state of some neglect. While topics such as marriage and family, the economic role and political rights of women have received a fair measure of attention, a subject like widowhood practices remains largely neglected. Many of such books have no entry whatever under the term 'widowhood' in their indexes. For the most part what passing references made to the institution are made under such subjects as 'burial' or 'funeral rites' and 'death'.

Although widows constitute a large proportion of the adult female population in many African communities, Betty Potash confirms that systematic investigation is missing (1986:1). The result is that much of the scanty information we have on widowhood practices is what may be described as raw or unprocessed information. Attempt has not been made to explain the practice in their sociological and cosmological context (Afigbo 1986:8). For the same reason of lack of analytical approach, comparative studies of widowhood practices appear to be conspicuous by their total absence. The great fact of the bewildering plurality of cultures in Africa suggests that we are entitled to expect a wide variety of widowhood practices not only as whether a local group is patrilineal, matrilineal, verilocal or exorilocal and so on. In Igboland[1] for example, which will be the focus of this study, we are bound to find significant differences between the different sub-cultures that are found within the ethnic group. These are likely to be the result of various influences ranging from historical contacts with their neighbours as well as western influence.

There are also absence of dynamic diachronic studies aimed at showing how widowhood practices have evolved or changed over time. This may be explained by the impact on indigenous African cultures of the two great world religions- Islam[2] and Christianity in addition to colonialism. We do not have yet any clear idea about the changes which these religions have brought to this institution. It is obvious however that in many cultures of Africa today what widowhood practices exist are amalgams of traditional usage, and usage traceable to Islam or Christianity or at times both (Afigbo *op cit.*: 8).

This brief reference to the state of research on widowhood practices has been made for the purpose of warning the reader of the danger of easy assumptions and generalisations on the basis of little or no evidence, or even on the basis of evidence drawn from a small locality. Variation would appear to be the hallmark of African cultures even when the culture in question has very limited geographical coverage. Taking the case of the Igbo, for instance, scholars have distinguished between at least six cultural sub-groups with marked differences in their ways of life.[3] And indeed,

closer study will still reveal further differences within each sub-group.

To draw attention to the great fact of differences is not, however, to deny that there are perhaps similarities. Among such similarities are the asymmetry in the duties and privations expected of widows. It is a fact that widowhood throughout Africa is a period of hardship and deprivation. It includes varying degrees of physical seclusion, and a state of ritual contamination or impurity calling for purification. Another similarity that should be taken into account is the fact that African peoples carried substantial elements of their cultural practice, including widowhood practices, into the two new world religions which they embraced. The result is that widowhood practices in Africa today are a bewildering and confusing mix of traditional African practices and practices borrowed from Islam and Christianity.

Present day Igbo society is what may be regarded as a 'transitional society'; a society characterised by a discontinuity of cultural perceptions arising out of the juxtaposition of mentalities formed by external influences and variables. Some of the most pervasive influences on the Igbo people and their society have come from outside Igboland. These include the slave trade, colonisation, amalgamation of present northern and southern Nigeria in 1914 by the British administration. Others include external economic and social relations (trade, missionaries, education), the First and Second World Wars, independence and the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War from 1967-70. Contemporary Igbo society is undoubtedly a transitional society in the above sense. Although the Igbo have been regarded as very receptive to change, certain customary practices have survived this transition. Widowhood as shall be shown here is among them. It should therefore be noted that many cultural beliefs and practices surrounding widowhood ceremonies have seemingly survived largely unchanged in modern Igbo society. As we go into this thesis, I must mention that although this topic is concerned with Igbo tradition, it is necessary to bear in mind the macro-context within which these traditions have had to operate.

To do this work therefore, it will be necessary to examine some of the theoretical and methodological constraints associated with the study of women's history and women's studies in Africa.

1.2 Theories and Methodology of African Women's history.

When it comes to studying the history of women in most parts of Africa, many road blocks prevent the historian from producing a coherent narrative. The lack both of evidence and the appropriate questions posed by scholars hamper such effort (White 1988:58). Many of the travellers' accounts that described trade, state formation, and warfare in detail give biased account of women. A survey of Arabic texts reveals reports on West African women that tell little or nothing about their lives. Where they are available, the reports are held up against standards that make them appear to be uncivilised. These accounts in particular seem most concerned with whether or not women were appropriately dressed. Such accounts share much with the biased and sexist account of Europeans in later centuries. Deeply rooted western attitudes complicate the approach to third world women's history. The nineteenth century equation of the west with progress and modernity, the rest with stagnation and tradition still colours much of the discussion of women in third World Studies.

The history of women in Igboland in particular and Nigeria as a whole has not been adequately studied. In the past, such neglect reflected the general state of African historiography. Focus on visible political institutions, diplomatic events, and intellectual current of the high, as opposed to the popular, culture long confined the field of inquiry to upper class males at the expense of studying the roles those of another class or gender played in the historical process (Tucker 1985:1). But even now as a new generation of historians in Africa and the West direct their attention to the social and economic history of the region and begin studying the history and culture of social classes such as peasants, urban craftsmen, casual labourers whose history and culture remained obscure and irrelevant to the African historian, women have not received adequate attention.

Part of the problem surely springs from basic misconceptions about women's history and its relation to social and economic history as a whole. Women have always been numerically important in human population, a sufficiently compelling reason perhaps to explore their past. But full significance of the study of women lies elsewhere. The history of women demands an immediate awareness of a multitude of forces, institutions and activities which elude analysis at the level of official political overview; rather the world of informal networks, popular culture and the basic forces of production and reproduction define the arena of women's activities and therefore women's studies (Tucker 1985:1)

B. Awe (1991:211) has noted that while building up their own picture of African society, as distinct from Western nations' picture of that society, African historians seemed to have inherited a certain degree of western bias, in that they have perpetuated in their writings the masculine-centred view of history. Explaining human experience in Africa, they have accepted the male experience as the norm while African women in consequence become anomalies. Thus Awe argues that the eight volume *General History of Africa* published by UNESCO in 1981, which summarised current

significant knowledge in African history says nothing about female contribution to that history. Following the same pattern Awe maintains, *The Groundwork of Nigerian History*, the standard text on the history of Nigeria made no particular mention of the role of Nigerian Women in the development of their different societies.

The presentation of African Women in historical writing according to I. Imam (1988:30), has been characterised by four approaches. In the first (and most obvious) case women have simply not been presented at all: In the second, they have been seen as inferior and subordinate to men. The third trend has been a conception of women's roles as equal and complementary to those of men. Finally there has been a movement towards seeing women as active agents in the historical processes.

That the presentation of African women through history can take so many forms demonstrates what by now should be a truism: that facts are not neutral and immutable natural objects but part of theoretical and conceptual constructs (Imam 1985:30). G. T. Emeagwali (1980:95-110) points out that, historical reconstruction is influenced not only by primary sources but also by the researcher's speculative philosophy of history which is itself affected by his or her own value system and the intellectual and socio-economic environment. A world view that relegates women to the background has obvious implications for the treatment of the role of women in historical reconstruction. Women will be accorded scant and superficial attention and thereby rendered absent from history.

The non appearance of women can be most clearly highlighted by considering studies on issues in which women might be expected to play a role. Adam Kuper's study of bride wealth in Southern Africa in his book *Wives for Cattle*, (1982), for instance, implicitly discusses the role played by women in maintaining the corporate structure of various societies, but women as a group received only superficial attention. As Margaret Strobel (1983:38) points out in her review of Kuper's book; Kuper only occasionally reflects upon the extent to which women exercised power or not in the context of bride wealth. How women fared as recipients, negotiators or objects of bride wealth is of little concern^[4].

Similarly although Esther Boserup (1980) has pointed out in her book *Women's Roles in Economic Development* that Africa is the region of women's farming per excellence, Agboola's study of *Agricultural Changes in Western Nigeria 1850-1910*, totally ignores the changes in the gender-based division of labour that resulted from establishment of cocoa as a cash crop. E. Njaka's study of the transition of Igbo political institutions during the colonial experience in discussing Igbo political institutions, mentions women's organisation on fewer than 20 pages of a 669-page thesis. While Kaneme Okonjo (1976:45) in "The Dual Sex Political System in Operation : Igbo Women and community Politics" in *Women in Africa* refers to a dual-sex system in Igboland and Judith van Allen (1972:165-81) refers to a more or less stable balance of male and female power, Njaka (1975) sees women's organisation merely as one of four minor counter balancing agents. His attitude towards women can be seen from the following words: "Despite this power, however, the *Umuada* (patrilineal daughters) are said to be like mothers-always lenient and not as fierce as it sounds (Njaka 1975:260).

The second theme in the presentation of African women through history typifies them as oppressed and totally subordinate to men. The main works of this type are not historical texts as such but ethnographic and anthropological monographs such as the work of the Ottenbergs and that of Evans Pritchard. These studies assert that the African woman has a position and status that is in many ways definitely inferior to that of man in spite of the fact that she does most of the hard work of supporting the family. They maintain also that the greater number of indigenous societies (in Africa) reserve for women a place which is clearly inferior, approaching that of a domestic animal. They focused on such issues as childhood betrothal, polygamy, or the lack of divorce rights (Imam 1988:33).

These views are influenced, as several commentators have pointed out, by the two prejudices: male bias and western ethnocentricity. The influence of male bias may come both at the point of the primary sources and at the point of the researchers themselves (usually himself). Evan Pritchard's *Man and Woman Among the Azanda* for example, might more accurately have been entitled *How Azanda Men View Women*, for, Imam contends, it consists of Azanda men's comments on women collected by other African men and compiled by a European man. No where in the book do women present their own view point. The point according to this author is that very often data on women and their roles are merely male informants' views, and this -male version of reality is accepted as the group's reality.

The issue of ethnocentricity in anthropology has been the subject of criticism also among anthropologists themselves. However, it is sufficient here to point out that many researchers came to their subject matter with pre-conceived assumptions about the superiority of European culture and were only too ready to dismiss customs that were different from their own as barbarous and degrading. Iris Anddreski's introduction to *Old Wives Tales: The life Stories of African Women (1970)* for example shows a totally negative attitude to and lack of understanding of Ibibio society and culture.

In direct opposition to the above presentation of African women's inferiority is the theme of women's complimentary role to men, equal but different so to speak. According to this framework, while African men were dominant in some

spheres of social life, African women were equally responsible for other areas of influence. That is male and female roles were complimentary and issues of super or subordination did not arise. Practices such as levirate, polygamy, female seclusion or clitoridectomy are therefore simply cultural practices which have been misunderstood by ethnocentric westerners (Imam 1988:34). This is also evident in studies of the political roles of women in Africa. Annie Lebeuf (1971:63) states:

In general, the profound philosophical ideas which underline the assignment of separate tasks to men and women stress the complimentary rather than the separate nature of the task. Neither the division of labour nor the nature of the task accomplished implies any superiority of one over the other, and there is almost always compensation in some other direction for the actual inequalities which arise from such a division.

Evidence from societies such as the Igbo shows that not all women were without defence against any harsh treatment of women. Igbo women developed effective women's self-help and mutual protective associations during the pre-colonial era which could carry out public ridicule and even group punishment of men who seriously mistreated women. (cf. membership in lineage, age set, society wide puberty rites, secret societies, women's interest groups, dance groups etc.). In fact, Nina Mbah in her book *Nigerian Women Mobilised: Women's Political Activities in Southern Nigeria 1900-1965*, (1982) argues that in pre-colonial Southern Nigeria, the women's world is not subordinate to that of the men but rather complimentary.

This approach to African women's role is part of what Imam has described as the concept of "the Golden Age of Merry Africa" in which pre-colonial Africa is seen as a land of peace and harmony, free from conflict- something like the garden of Eden before the serpent. It owes its genesis to a number of factors. On the part of African researchers, the impetus is very much that of the anti colonial feeling generated in nationalistic struggle and the resurgence of interest and pride in African indigenous institutions that came with the philosophy of negritude, especially felt in the writings of such Francophone authors as Houteto. For American and European researchers, the influence of the Black civil rights movements led to interests in Africa's past glories, while the women's movements heightened interest in women's activities. However, as Hafkin and Bay (1976:4) put it:

In this period some of the literature that emerged was romantic or historically inaccurate. In a search for greater glories to counteract a past that had ignored and distorted the history of women and of Africa, writers described great queens, Amazon and matriarchy. These writers see the present subordination of women as caused by colonial policies, in particular the bourgeois male chauvinist assumptions of European colonial administrators, which were reflected in colonial legal structure, formal western education and Christianity.

The fourth and most recently developed trend in the presentation of African Women's history explicitly sees women as actors in the social process rather than passive recipients of change. Here, however, there is a recognition of the social structure and mechanisms that constrain women and place them in subordinate positions, but the approach focuses on the way in which women have been active in attempting to establish their authority and independence nonetheless.

Within this approach two currents can be identified (Imam 1988:36). The first trend is to concentrate on the activities of women as leaders (of women's organisation in particular). These writers share with some of these writers of the "Merry Africa" tradition, a conception of historical processes in terms of the leading personalities of social groups (and usually of the dominant social grouping). Personalities such as Queen Amina of Zauzzau^[5] or Madam Yoko of the Kpa Mende are prominent, but the analysis tends to be silent in terms of the generality of women. Similarly, *Nigerian Women in Historical Perspective* edited by Bolanle Awe adopted this approach by discussing individual women except for Nina Mba's "Heroines of the Women's War" which attempted to discuss women's role in the war of 1929 from a general perspective.

Agnes Akosua Aido looking at Asante Queen mothers in government and politics in the nineteenth century concludes that these women had great personal strength and ability, that they were most effective where they were free from ritual constraints and there were no effective male leadership. She also states that Asante Queen Mothers derived their power and support not from "female power" but from all effective sections of Asante society. Okonjo (1976:45), on the other hand, considers what she terms "the dual-sex political system" in Igboland, where women had political spheres of authority that were parallel to those of the men, although "as elsewhere men rule and dominate". As with those who present pre-colonial African woman as being complimentary rather than subordinate to men, writers in this current attribute the decline in women's status to the patriarchal Victorian ideology of colonial administrators. Okonjo concludes that the absence of women from significant political representation in independent Nigeria can be viewed as showing the strength of the legacy of single-sex politics that the British colonial masters left behind.

The second current within this approach of seeing women as active agents does not focus on individual women but on

women as a group and the socio-economic ideological conditions within which they have acted. For example R. Roberts (1984:229) argues that patterns of household relations (including gender relations) are directly influenced by changes in the larger political economy which the household embedded. He concludes that it was the combination of the increased influence of Islamic ideological practices and of the market forces that heightened the tendency of Maraka households to be patriarchal.

Once again the position of African woman is seen as having deteriorated through the colonial experience, but here it is attributed not simply to the ideological positions resulting from the imposition of capitalist underdevelopment. Judith van Allen's analysis of Igbo Women's political institutions, however considers only political and administrative reforms based on Victorian male ideology (Imam 1988:37).

In my study, I shall adopt the fourth approach. I justify this because we will need to understand if women enjoy a higher status in Igbo society. Are there noticeable changes in customary and ritual positions at any stage of the Igbo woman's life? At what time is the woman independent and what circumstances permit exploitation within and outside the family. These are some of the questions that will inform the approach adopted in this study.

1.3 The Setting.

The field work was carried out at Mbaise. Mbaise is a colonial creation (*see* figure I & map 3). It means five clans which were brought together by the British Colonial administration for administrative purposes under the Owerri division. Although Owerri had become important in the twentieth century by reason of its being an administrative and judicial nerve centre of the British administration, there is no evidence of its having any dominant position vis-a-vis its other neighbours prior to the establishment of British colonial rule (Ekechi 1989:8). Before 1902 when the Aro expedition was carried out by the British to stop or subdue the Aro slave trading oligarchy, Mbaise as presently constituted and indeed Owerri had not come into British scheme of things. By 1935 some twenty-five to thirty different towns were brought into the vortex of Owerri political and judicial authority.

The history of the establishment of British authority in Mbaise, Owerri division as in other parts of Nigeria is basically the story of conquests and fusion. Indeed beyond the immediate environs and the village boundaries, government authority was virtually non-existent. But by 1905 however, the Ahiara Expedition[6] had brought the full impact of British colonial control on the present Mbaise people. At the conclusion of the operation in April 1906, the present-day Mbaise consisting of three local government areas (Aboh, Ahiazu and Ezinihitte) was effectively brought under Owerri jurisdictional authority.

In order to keep the whole clan under strict surveillance, a native court was established at Obohia in 1907. Because of political problems and pressure from Chief Nwaturuocha of Nguru, the court was transferred from Obohia to Nguru in 1909. In 1929 the Nguru court at Mbaise was destroyed as a result of the Women's revolt of that year[7]. Thereafter, sessional courts were opened at Obohia, Itu, Ife, and Enyiogugu in response to the "home rule" movement of the 1930s[8].

Fig. 1 Owerri Local Government Organisation, 1945

Group councils/group courts	Number of villages	Federal councils/clans
-----------------------------	--------------------	------------------------

Ezinihitte	16	Mbaise
------------	----	--------

Agbaja	7	
--------	---	--

Oke-Ovoro	4	
-----------	---	--

Ekwerazu	6	
----------	---	--

Ahiara	11	
--------	----	--

Oru	7	Oguta
-----	---	-------

Izombe	6	
--------	---	--

Owerri 5 Oratta

Uratta 10

Ara-Umunwoha 9

Agbala 11

Nekede-Ihiagwa 6

Obudi 1

Ohoba 6 Ohoba

Awarra 4

Umuapu 11

Isu Mbieri 9 Mbieri Ikeduru (Note:

Ikeduru 15 Approval was sought

to change the federal

name to Ogu Mbanu)

Etche 6 Ngor-Opkala

Okwe 6

Umuaro-Imerienwe 7

Obike 5

Total 168

*Source;*Ekechi 1989:179

Today Mbaise is made up of three local government areas: Ahiazu which was a merger between Ahiaira and Ekwerazu, Aboh Mbaise a merger between Oke-Ovuru and Agbaja and Ezinihitte local governments. They have a total estimated population of 800,000 people^[9] (see maps 2&3).

1.3.1 The Igbo- General background:

The Igbo speaking people constitute one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria. Located in South-eastern Nigeria between latitude 5 and 7 degrees north and latitude 6 and 8 degrees east, they occupy a continuous stretch of territory of about 25,280 square kilometres. They are roughly bounded in the east by the Ibibio people, in the north by the Igalla, Idoma and Ogoja people, in the south by the Ijo and in the west by the Edo. (see map 2). Today, the Igbo inhabit the entire Imo, Abia, Anambra and Enugu states in present day Nigeria while a significant number of them are included in the Rivers and Delta states. Population densities in the Igbo heartland are very high ranging in average from 750 to 1000 to the square kilometre. The Igbo number over 20 million in present day Nigeria.^[10]

It is the Igbo who occupy the northern half of the area which stretches into Ibibio and Ijo territory to the south who are the focus of this study. (see map 4). They form the main cultural area of the Igbo of which Mbaise is a part. The growth of vegetation is rapid in this belt, and palm forest has taken the place of the original rain forest. This indicates that this area had long been populated by people whose main livelihood was farming. This area is the most densely populated part of West Africa. A population of more than 1000 per square mile^[11] has been recorded in Northern Ngwa, Owerri

and Orlu. The Etche and Ikwere and Western Aba areas are less densely populated with 300-400 persons per square kilometre.

In the eighteenth century population movement to the south was accelerated by the slave trade and palm-oil trade with the Europeans and coastal peoples. This is the habitat occupied by peoples whom Forde and Jones called the Southern Igbo. The distinct cultural features that distinguished the Southern Igbo from the others are the marked absence of elaborate title systems and *mmuo* societies. However, secret societies occur among Ngwa and masked dances occur in the western border of this sub-culture area. The ritual slave system called *osu* is strongly developed among this Igbo group and the *mbari* temples associated with the cult of the earth called *ala* occur in the southern part (Onwuejeogwu 1987:21).

There is evidence of Nri^[12] influence in this area, more especially on the northern part. The *duru* title and Nri type rituals connected with earth, ancestors and yam cults *Ahiajoku* occur. The *duru* title is a southern Igbo version of the *ozo* title, and it is said to have been conferred in the past by Nri men who were referred to as the Umudioka (children of Dioka) in some parts of this area. Christian religion, especially Catholicism, has in recent times greatly re-ordered traditional institutions, especially the ritual and customs. This is the area that has nurtured the Owerri and Ngwa civilisation of which Mbaise is part.

To fully appreciate the Igbo way of life in relation to women in general and widows in particular, it will be necessary to outline briefly some of the features of the socio-political and economic system of the Igbo. The village is the basic political unit. Political authority was diffused among the heads of the lineage and was exercised in a democratic and informal way. There was sex differentiation in political roles but no female could be the head of a household or lineage or a sub-lineage (Mba 1992:75). Women had their own roles which sometimes acted as a check on the activities of men.

In the past people's lives was directly linked with the prevailing production and distribution schemes. No elaborate, codified social welfare policies, schemes and programmes executed according to a carefully systematised community development blue-print existed. Yet as Ifemesia (1981) has elaborated, every single routine activity of individuals and groups generally carried a social welfare overtone both for the individual, his kin-group and his community. Accordingly, social institutions of family, kinship and marriage and those of education *per se*, polity and religion, all provided social services and amenities as their customary reason for existence.

The economic system of the Igbo can be studied under three major heads: Agriculture, trade, and local manufactures. Agriculture was the most important single occupation of the Igbo in pre-colonial times. Both the Igboman and woman were farmers (Eluwa 1988:65). They produced enough yams and coco yam, cassava and vegetables to meet the basic needs of the family. The surplus was sold to enable the family to buy other items which it could not produce.

Trade and barter were important aspect of Igbo economic life. Ecological differences and varied vegetation was the major reason behind the development of local and regional trade amongst the Igbo. Apart from internal trade which seem to have linked Igboland into a kind of 'economic common wealth', external trade between the Igbo and her neighbours developed. These neighbours included the Benin, Igalla, Idoma, Ibibio and the Ijo of the South.

1.4 Central Problems and Framework.

This study will analyse widowhood practices in a contemporary Igbo society. The importance of cultural traditions will be highlighted in an attempt to understand such practices and rituals. The following are central in this study:

An examination of the rituals and practices which a woman undergoes on the death of the husband.

An examination of Igbo marriage patterns, domestic and affinal relationships, its impact on widowhood practices and the widow's life.

An examination of widows economic survival strategies. The economic system of the Igbo will be examined to highlight the impact it has on widows economic survival.

This work is divided into five chapters. The present chapter, *Introduction and background*, in which the theoretical and methodological aspects of the work are discussed. This is done in relation to the Igbo and Africa woman in general. Chapter Two deals with present day widow practices and the sociology of such practices in an Igbo community seen in historical perspective. Chapter Three discusses Igbo widows in domestic and affinal relationships with a special view to understanding how marriage systems may impact on widowhood practices. Chapter Four relates widowhood to the economy. Widow's economic survival strategies as well as the economic options available to them today are examined.

The thesis is concluded in Chapter Five.

1.5 Sources and method of data collection

Three main types of evidence have been used- oral evidence, court reports and secondary sources:

1.5.1 Oral sources.

Oral sources are central to the study of history in the third world till the present day. Not only are written sources limited in certain areas of inquiry, archaeological and other sources through which the historian can decipher African history has not been fully collated and collected. In a topic such as widowhood there is little information available to the historian. Since the 1950s, when oral sources became an important aspect of the academic historiography of Africa, the study of oral tradition has gone through a considerable process of change, reorientation and maturation. Past problems have been associated with interpretation of information emanating from Africa as presented by Africanists and Africans.

I consider oral history method as central in this particular study concentrating on a limited area within the Southern Igbo sub-cultural group to decipher attitude to widows as well as the options open to them. The research on which this thesis is based was undertaken in Mbaise, an Igbo community within the Southern Igbo cultural sub-group between January and June 1995. I used interview as the main research method. For the formal interview, I created a 20 item questionnaire (*see* appendix B). Each interview took about 2-3 hours. The questionnaire was partly used as such, partly as an inspiration for free discussion. In addition to using participant observation, I collected life histories of 80 widows and interviewed 5 men to get their view of widow practices. General insight into widowhood practices, marriage, inheritance, maternal/filial ties came from these informants. My wife and mother assisted by obtaining consent from some of the widows before the actual interview took place. Two other assistants were used to conduct household census from four villages in Mbaise. Part of the statistics used here came from this census. Ages when unknown were estimated through discussion with the informant.

Privacy and the need to avoid shame is prevalent among the Igbo and was evident during field work. I experienced that some of the widows were not very willing to talk about certain aspects of their personal lives. These were especially in areas concerning relationships with the extended family and other men since the period of their widowhood. The fact that I am a man made it problematic to discuss sexual relationships. The society frowns at individuals who discuss such things let alone with some of the widows who are old enough to be the researchers grand mother. The researcher's wife and mother were of great assistance in this respect. Some were not willing to discuss the issues of inheritance for fear of repression from their kin. Some were afraid that the above information may be passed on to other people in and outside the village. Married women also do not talk too freely about widowhood for the fear of becoming widows. Widows are anxious not to give an image of themselves that could upset their kin or expose self-pity. The apparent pride of the Igbo person even at the point of desperation makes the widow hide behind a mask and wear a smiling face.

Widowhood experiences are traumatic and are easy to remember, but the widow may be distorted in memory in order to avoid reliving the trauma. Some widows were not willing to talk about their experiences at all. One of the widows put this as follows, "this is something I do not want to relive again. I do not want to talk about it". A lot of the widows see widowhood as a period of subjugation, deprivation and humiliation. Consequently, they tend to present their experiences from this point of view. The oral sources, however, provide information on the real life experiences of widows and have been used in various parts of the text as examples of what widows experienced and still experience.

A general problem associated with research in some developing countries is lack of adequate statistics. Census figures are unreliable[13]. There are no data bases from which one can get specific information about a particular group. For instance, births and deaths are not registered. In this situation, statistics may not only be unreliable but difficult to get at times. I have had to make my own statistics to give the demographic feature of my study area.

1.5.2 Demographic Features.

There is a high rate of widowhood among the Igbo. I collected census data of four villages in Mbaise community. There were 600 adult women living in these villages in 1995. Of these 169 (24%) were widows (*see* Table 1). There are two main reasons for this high rate of widowhood: It is for one, accounted for by large age differences between husbands and wives especially in traditional society. In polygamous[14] families, the age disparity for second and subsequent wives is even greater. In western societies, widowhood may largely be associated with ageing. This is not the case with Igbo society.

Table 1

Female population of four Mbaise Villages by Age and Marital Status**Marital status**

Age Group	Single	Married	Separated	Widow	Total	%	
16-30	109	132	2	15	258	43	
31-45	18	129	-	29	176	29	
46-60	-	51	-	44	95	16	
60+	-	16	-	55	71	12	
<hr/>							
Total					1273	2169	600
Percentage					21.55	0.3237	100

The second reason for high incidence of widowhood can be traced to the Nigeria-Biafra civil war between 1967 and 1970[15]. Although adequate statistics are not available, there are suggestions that over 1 million Igbos lost their lives as a result of the war and the ethnic cleansing which precipitated the war itself. The war created a large widow population.

Yet another reason may be the low incidence of widow remarriage. Of all the widows interviewed in this study, only two remarried after the initial mourning period. The statistics show that remarriage was not a popular option for Igbo widows. The economic and social reasons for this are discussed in chapter three.

30% of the widows were under 40 years of age at the time of their husbands death; 65% were under 50 (see table 2). The significance of these figures depends of course on life expectancy within the area. I have no specific data on the Igbo generally and the Mbaise area in particular, but life expectancy at birth for all of Africa was 45.9 for the year 1970 to 1973[16]. Therefore, about 30% might expect to live at least another 10 years. My study does not show a significant difference from the above. Only 14 out of the 80 informants are above 60 years. This includes 4 informants whose ages were estimated.

Table 2

Age at which women become widows

Age	Number	%
Under 20	1	1.25
20-29	9	11.25
30-39	14	17.50
40-49	28	35.00
50-59	14	17.50
Over 60/estimated	14	17.50

Total 80 100

In polygamous marriages, most second and subsequent wives are much younger than their husbands. 5 of my informants were from polygamous families. 2 were first wives, 2 and 1 were second and third wives respectively. The mean average differences between husband and first, second, and third wife are usually high. Polygamous marriages is on the decline, and this can be attributed to Christianity, changing economic activities caused by scanty resources. Instances exist also of younger women who marry older men who probably have lost their first wives. In such marriages, the determining factors for the husband may be the need for assistance in raising young children left by the former wife.

Barrenness in a marriage is also another factor which determine if a man may marry another wife. This factor as well as the absence of a male child is usually used to rationalise the need for a second wife. Most women usually will support such propositions. The second or third wife in this arrangement is usually younger and therefore stands the chance of becoming a widow at a relatively early age. No matter the reason used to rationalise this, it has its impact on the demographic pattern of the widow population in Igbo society.

In contrast to the above demographic pattern, there are marriages where the age disparity between the husband and the wife is small. In these cases, there are likely going to be a lower percentage of widows and the widows will typically be older. This is closely related to the fact that less men marry more than one wife and this is the emerging trend in the contemporary Igbo society. Men are almost as likely as women to experience the loss of a spouse.

Age disparity between spouses is not the only factor involved in demographic variations. Divorce and remarriage are also important. Enid Schildkrout(1989) uses this to shows how widowhood clusters at two different periods of the life cycle, depending on prior marital history. Hausa, women for example who remain married to their first husbands will be widowed at a relatively young age. Those who divorce and remarry may not be widowed until late in life since second husbands tend to be closer in age to their wives. The time of life at which a woman becomes widowed affects her subsequent marital behaviour. For older women widowhood may be a permanent status^[17]. However, the Igbo is not a high divorce society and widowhood reflects these changes although statistical data that would allow comparison of past and present are not available. These transformations are complex and their implications are not the object of this study.

More complex is the impact of various structural changes on the status of widows. Incidents of widow remarriage today are very isolated and so is levirate relationships. My study showed only two incident of remarriage, two cases of levirate relationships and five had lovers. Widows are therefore likely to retain this status. Today, levirate relationships are also minimal. Oral information confirms that they were very frequent in the past.

A host of structural changes may have resulted in this transformation: shortage of men in suitable age group, largely because of the civil war, new marriage and inheritance laws, the impact of Christian religion, the influence of western education, new modes of economic support, land shortages, the availability of hired labour, and new bases for prestige and status. But the manner in which widows and others respond to new possibilities and/or adapt to new constraints is complex and variable. There are no automatic concomitants of such structural changes and no uniform trends that cut across society. However, the above presentation is a general demographic pattern of widows in contemporary Mbaise society.

1.5.3 Archival sources and court records.

The second source of information was derived from reports of civil cases at the customary and civil courts concerning widows. These type of cases are usually handled by one of the following: (i) Village councils (*Aladinma*), (ii) the Eze-in-council (the traditional ruler of the autonomous community), (iii) the customary courts. I found that records are not properly kept in the case of the first two (although they handled most of such cases). The native court system which has been replaced today by the customary courts handled both criminal and civil cases during the colonial era.

Ekechi's *Tradition and Transformation of Eastern Nigeria 1902 - 1947*, (1989) with reference to Owerri and its hinterland, is an analysis of the establishment of British rule. He shows how this gave rise to the creation of native courts and the appointment of warrants chiefs; two novel institutions which radically affected the traditional systems of law and authority. As a matter of fact, their impact is still being felt. Until well after the Second World War, the native courts and warrant chief system dominated the political history of Owerri and its environs. Ekechi argues that their introduction altered the pattern of indigenous administration and created political and social restlessness. In his annual report for 1938 the DO (District Officer) at Owerri lamented the preoccupation of administrative officials with native courts and their problems^[18]. In exercising the powers granted to them, the native courts tried both civil and criminal cases and imposed fines ranging from a few shillings to a maximum of Fifty Pounds. These included matrimonial and land cases.

In Mbaise, there were five of such courts before independence in 1960^[19]. Today they have been replaced by customary courts charged with judicial functions in matters concerning the customs and traditions of the people. Most land, marriage and other matters in relation to customs and tradition end up in these courts.

A number of court cases relating to widows do exist at these customary courts. There was difficulty in identifying such

cases because the courts do not have a data base or index from which you can distinguish which case related to a widow. Only two of such cases which took place between 1988 and 1989 were available to the present researcher. They, however, provide a general insight into the influence of customs and traditions in the determination of the rights of the widow in Igbo society. Some reports were also consulted at the palace of the traditional ruler of Ihitteafoukwu- Mbaise. A case concerning a widow's right to sell land took place in 1987. This was a useful case, as it related itself to the customary rights of a widow to own or sell land, a major economic factor in a predominantly agrarian society.

Little information of cases concerning widows was available from the village council records. There are no records of proceedings and judgements in most of these cases. They are still conducted in the traditional system. That is in open courts and agreement reached by consensus. The researcher was, however, able to follow one of such cases during field work. The researcher kept his own records of the proceedings over several days. In this case, the verdict was appealed to the customary court and not yet decided at the time of concluding field work. Information from this case has been cited in parts of this work.

1.5.4 Previous Research

A number of anthropological studies and other literature has been written about the Igbo in general and the Igbo of South-eastern Nigeria in particular. Widowhood literature however is little. Mention of aspects of the practice however can be found in a few texts[20].

Although marriage is a universal or nearly universal experience for most women in African societies, African women are not necessarily involved in marital relationships throughout their adult lives. In some West African societies, for example when women approach menopause, they leave their husbands and return to their natal kin[21]. This practice has been described by Meryer Fortes (1949b) and Esther Goody (1973) as 'terminal separation', E. E. Evans-Pritchard, in his study of the Nuer of the Sudan (1951) discusses unmarried women and widows in concubine relationships. A number of studies describe divorced women who live alone for example, that of Abner Cohen of the Hausa of Ibadan, Nigeria, (1969). Kirwen in *African Widows* (1979) examined only 'Leviratic Marriage' or wife inheritance in four Tanzanian communities and the problems which that practice poses for converts and the Roman Catholic Church. Leviratic marriage is only the tip of the iceberg of widowhood practices in Africa. The author therefore falls into the same category of the norm centred bias of older literature on widowhood. A further look at Kirwen's bibliography emphasises the point made here about the lack of targeted research on the institution. In nine pages of bibliography, there is not one title, book or article which focus directly on widowhood.

But since 1979, the situation has improved; Potash's (ed.)(1989) *Widows in African Societies: Choices and Constraints*: is an attempt at a systematic approach to the study of widows lives in Africa focusing on widows themselves, their interests, the strategies they employ to realise such interest, the force that determine such strategies and the quality of their lives. Although the book is supposed to be a comprehensive data on African widows, its accomplishments are far from achieving this goal. The ten societies sampled in the book display diversity without being formally representative of even sub-Saharan Africa. These close-ups range from the matrilineal Akan and cognatic Baule of West Africa to the patrilineal Luo, in the East; from Urban Hausa and Swahili to Rukuba subsistence cultivators on the Jos Plateau of Nigeria. These were anthropological studies conducted between 1975 to 1982 but still provide useful information on the subject.

S. Omiyi found in her article '*Women and Children under Nigerian Law*' that the legal status of the widow depends on the type of marriage she contracts. This examines the position of the widow under customary law marriage, Islamic law marriage and statutory marriage. This applies to the Igbo as well. It is a useful piece of work on a widow's property rights under the law in Nigeria both in the traditional and contemporary society. She concludes that the position of the widow under customary law has not changed a lot yet.

In 1989, I attended a workshop on widowhood practices in Imo State. The workshop provided me the first opportunity to appreciate the subject. The monograph *Widowhood Practices in Imo State*, is a collection of papers which appeared after the workshop. It is probably the only material which is currently available on the subject among the Igbo from this region. Among the papers presented were A. E. Afigbo's 'Overview of Widowhood Practices in Africa'; I. D. Nwoga's examination of 'Widowhood Practices' in Imo State Nigeria. Although Imo State is small in space, it contains several cultural and ecological zones and this fact is reflected in some cultural differences in widowhood practices. It is not, for example, to be expected that matrilineal societies like Ohafia would have the same practices a patrilineal community like Mbaise. Another article was Nzewi's '*Widowhood Practices: A Female Perspective*'. Her paper compares various Igbo communities in Imo State and included her own experience as a widow. Eze and Nwebo presented a paper- '*Widowhood Practices; Law and Customs*' in which they argue that the Nigerian legal system recognises a dual system of marriage both of which are mutually exclusive. These are "statutory marriage" and "marriage under customary law". The Nigerian

family law permits certain widowhood practices which are discriminatory and oppressive to the women *vis-a-vis* their male counterpart. On the other hand the customarily married woman is even more disadvantaged and oppressed when compared to her statutory married counterpart they noted. It is their view that the fate of the widow is a direct consequence of the nature of marriage she contracts and the rights that accrue to her thereof. These papers generally concentrated on the negative aspects of widowhood practices among the Igbos in Imo State. I observed that the workshop was mainly aimed at highlighting what the organisers regard as discrimination against women. The papers presented however informed my initial interest in this area of inquiry. These papers provide a basis for discussing the topic in historical perspective.

My study however is that of a local community of which I am a member. It is also a study in which I know personally many of the informants and in which I have witnessed some of their experiences. As distinct from any previous study, my research is therefore based on a different approach. It is based on an intimate knowledge of widows experiences some of whom I interviewed twice during field work in 1995 and 1996. Concentrating on a small area, I was able to cross-check information from my subjects with information from others who knew my informants well.

[Map 1:](#) *Map of Nigeria*

[Map 2:](#) *Map of Igboland*

Source; Eluwa et al. 1988:

[Map 3 :](#) *Map of Eastern Nigeria showing Mbaise*

Source: Ekechi: 1988.

[Map 4:](#) *Map showing the Ecology of Igbo Culture Areas*

Source; Onwuejeogwu 1987.





Chapter II Igbo Widowhood Rituals and Practices.

- [2. Widowhood Rituals - Igba Nkpe](#)
 - [2.1 Rituals at Death and Funeral](#)
 - [2.2 Ritual Seclusion -Ino na Nso:](#)
 - [2.3 The Sociology of Widowhood Practices](#)
-

2. Widowhood Rituals - Igba Nkpe

When one looks at widowhood in most African societies, it would be possible to give an immediate verdict on the matter. This would be a one-line economic interpretation[22]. In the Igbo society as in many other societies, human greed exist in many families and the death of a male member of the family offers an opportunity to the other males of the family to increase their holding of the scarce and inelastic commodity-land. The commodity now in question can expand to other items of property. "It is acquisitiveness" writes Nwoga, "which basically controls the treatment of widows". All other activities serve the same purpose and any mystification and other rituals, superstitious sanctions are geared to the oppression of the widow. Dehumanised and humiliated by the religious rituals and other practices Nwoga continued, the widow become more amenable to keep silent over other forms of oppression which end up ultimately as economic disposition.

If we examine the comments of two widows, this would appear to be the only reason. A 75 year old widow recounts her experience when she lost her husband in 1978;

*I was ordered home from Lagos to explain the cause of his death. After I had narrated everything to them (in-laws), they asked for his pass book (bank savings book) and other valuable items which I gave over to them"*²³.

A second informant, a 35 year old widow and mother of 4, noted;

Our entire property was confiscated. A lorry was sent from home to come and pack all the merchandise in his supermarket. All his electronic items were also packed away. For the past year the house has been like a battle ground between me and them[24].

Esther Nzewi has noted that in certain zones of Imo State;

the widows ordeal begin immediately the death of her husband is announced. The in-laws demand a list of the man's property, holdings, investments, bank accounts etc. She is further required to take an oath as a proof that she has not concealed any relevant information on her husband's wealth"[25]

All we can derive from the above is a one way economic interpretation. But I think that it is a rather complex matter in most African societies. If we look at the matter in greater detail and into its various stages, it is my belief that a better understanding of the reasons for these activities will emerge. It can also give greater credibility to the past and thus, help us understand what changes are taking place.

2.1 Rituals at Death and Funeral

Nzewi in "Widowhood practices: A Female Perspective" found out that widowhood practices in certain parts of Imo State begins after the burial ceremony but among the Mbaise Igbos, a woman becomes a widow (*isi npke*) when her husband dies. It is from this point of death of the husband that a woman begins to go through the rituals associated with widowhood. However, there are a lot of similarities in the rituals undergone by widows in the different parts of Igbo society. These practices, I define as sets of expectations as to actions and behaviour of the widow, action by others towards the widow, and rituals performed by, or on behalf of the widow from the time of the death of her

husband. Later phases of these practices include issues of inheritance, the status of the widow, the remarriage of the widow and levirate relationships.

Among the Jukun of Western Sudan for example, "Formal lamentation for the dead man" writes C. K. Meek (1931:226);

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

Among some of the Jukun, a grave digger would periodically strike at the roof of the hut in which the women are sleeping. This was taken as signifying a knocking by the soul of the departed. At each of these knockings the women led by the wife or wives of the dead man, would break out into loud lamentations[26].

G. T. Basden (1966:270) described the practice among the Niger Igbos in the 1930s; "It is when the moment of death arrives" writes Basden-

that the tumult begins. There is an out-burst of wailing, the women particularly giving full vent to their grief. Sometimes a wife or a mother will rush from the house heedless of direction, waving arms, and beating her breast as she bemoans her loss at the top of her voice. Such as one will wander aimlessly for hours crying the same words, until she becomes an automation. Eventually after possibly being out all night, she struggles back to her hut, physically and mentally exhausted[27]

The practices related to the death of a man differs depending on the status of the dead person[28]. The wife or wives of an ordinary man is expected to go into traumatic wailing immediately, to beat her chest, fling around her arms and go into falling down. Other women surround her immediately and restrain her and force her to sit down on the ground where they sit around her. This is widespread among all Igbo groups and in fact many other African societies. The wife or wives of a titled[29] person in Mbaise is not allowed to go into any loud crying till appropriate arrangements have been made to inform other titled persons, in-laws and relatives who should know and confirm the death before any lament takes place. In neither case is death taken with stoicism and resignation hence intense wailing, weeping and hysteria is expected to be generated[30].

Among the Igbo, this kind of bitter wailing is expected to go on until the remains of the man has been buried. After that, the wife or wives are expected to enact a wail or two every morning between the hours of 5.00 am and 6.00 am for upwards of four days or more. Thereafter, they have to wail every morning of a feast day and recount to the hearing of their neighbours what their husband used to do for them on such occasions. Our examples can be extended by reference to the comments of some of the widows interviewed among the Mbaise. A widow noted;

It was an Orié[31] day that my husband died. The Umuokpu[32] gathered and accompanied me to my village where I was to cry and wail to inform my people of the death of my husband. After his burial, the Christian Mothers[33] shaved my hair and instructed me to cry every morning and evening for four days after which I may or may not cry again.[34]

Another widow recounted her experience;

Each mourning after the burial, my mother in-law took me out to the back of the house. I had a bath with very cold water. This was done very early in the morning when it was still very cold. As she did this, customs demanded that I must be crying and calling my husband the name I used to call him when he was alive. This lasted for four days. I stayed at home for the next three months mourning him without going out[35].

This is a pan-Igbo[36] custom which has been practised from time. In Owerri area, 'the widow is expected to shout and scream in tears on the death of her husband, otherwise she is fined or punished'[37].

I however came across a women widowed in 1979 who neither cried nor performed the rituals associated with widowhood. She said that she was a `born-again Christian'. But this was frowned upon by the women in the village. She was excommunicated from the village and no one would speak to this widow. For over a year no body bought or sold to her in this village. Recounting her experience, this widow told me;

They wanted to force me to perform the widowhood rituals which refused. They asked me if I was ready to face the consequences of my action. I accepted. They ordered that nobody should communicate in any way with me. They

even asked the spirit of my dead husband to deal with me'[38]

Although one may question how genuine sorrow can be which is programmed. Each of my informants noted that while it was natural to cry, it was a tradition of long standing to cry at particular periods of the day during the initial mourning period. This question is even more pertinent with the immediate following days before the actual burial when the wife(s) are enclosed in a room besides the body of their dead husband or in the same room with the corpse where they are supposed to wave away flies from perching on the corpse. As they are expected to sit on the ground and raise a wailing very early in the morning of every day, the quality of the crying is judged by the *Umuokpu* (patrilineal daughters).

In Igbo tradition, generally, the *Umuokpu* retains intense influence over what happens in the family in which they were born. In some cases, this means near tyrannical power over the women married by their 'brothers', particularly at the death of any of these 'brothers'. The analysis of the power of *umuokpu* here is contrary to what Njaka (1975) has described them to be in relation to their authority[39]. They usually insist on establishing that the wife has not come from another family to kill some member of their family in order to carry the wealth from their family over to her own. It is the *Umuopku* who give what they consider proper treatment to the wife of their brother along the lines they have decided she merited from her relationship with their brother. Some of my informants reflect on the above;

Initially, I was accused of causing the death of my husband because the Umuokpu and my in-laws said I was looking too healthy to have lost my husband. According to them, it did not show on me that I felt my husband's death[40].

A second informant stated;

In fact several kinds of dehumanising treatments were meted out to me. Before my husband was buried, I was locked up with his corpse for three hours with the belief that if I killed him, I would die there. I was then forced to sleep in the grave yard for two days after his burial to finally convince them I did not kill my husband[41]

Whatever the situation, however, these *Umuokpu* administer the *Igba Mpke* rules and regulations with vengeance, either out of spite for the widow, or to generate fines on which to feed fat or because they genuinely believe that it is the only way to maintain the necessary ritual balance for the good of the deceased and the living.[42]

Sylvia Leith-Ross has also left us an account of how severe and spiteful the Owerri women could be in the administration of even an otherwise purely innocuous regulation in the 1930s. A monogamous wife, she has noted;

has a poor time if her husband dies and her relations-in-law do not like her, and they are not slow to take it out on her whenever they can. For example, the usual fee for her head-shaving, which is customary on her becoming a widow would be one shilling. If there had been say, five wives, the husband's relatives who always undertook this shaving would thus have made five shillings. This they point out to her and spiteful add it was you who wanted to be alone. It was you who prevented your husband from marrying other wives. Now you can pay us five shillings. Again they might force her to go alone into her husband's room to wash the body and they might lock her in so that she fears too much and she would sit and cry 'if I ever marry again, I will choose a husband who has other wives[43]

Now the point is that each woman treated in this manner is *Nwaopku*[44] somewhere, while those who administer this kind of treatment on her are wives somewhere else. So each time a husband dies, there a few women who go home as *Umuopku* determined to revenge themselves or carry out the rituals which they have received themselves as *ndom alu alu* (married women) somewhere else.

The above of course is not a universal experience for all widows in Igbo society. Although widowhood ritual must be performed, they are not spiteful always as Leith Ross as described. A widow recounts her experience with the husband's family as follows;

I count myself as being lucky with my in-laws unlike others. My in-laws automatically transferred the love they had for their brother to me and my children. I thank God for them.[45]

2.2 Ritual Seclusion -Ino na Nso:

Before the burial, and immediately after the burial, up to seven to fourteen weeks while funeral visits still take place, the widow is supposed to be secluded in a most restricted manner. Tony Ubesie described this as *ino na nso*[46]. What he described as taking place in the Awka area of

Anambra State agrees with what G. T. Basden described in the early part of this century there [47]. It also agrees with what B. N. Onah described in the Nsukka area, Talbot among the Kalabari in the Delta area [48] and what current research in Mbaise shows. (see map 4 for the location of other areas). While some of these practices show genuine reaction to the loss of the husband, others help to clear the widow of any suspicion of killing her husband.

Ritual seclusion and general isolation of the widow for a certain period from the community or village is a wide spread practice in Africa. But its intensity and duration varies. In the Islamized communities of West Africa, this period was known as *iddat* or *idda* (the period of continence between being widowed and being allowed to remarry if a widow were so minded and still marriageable) (Afigbo 1989:10). On this J. S. Trimmingham (1959:182), an authority on African Islam, noted;

According to Islamic law the widow should observe idda for three periods of legal purity, or four months, ten days during which she may not remarry. A slave wife observes half the period. If the widow is pregnant the period is extended till her delivery. Custom varies slightly. In some places, it is four moons; in Hausaland some five months, others 130 days and others 122 days. Nupe said 115 days. In the Timbuktu region it lasts five months, and fifteen days.

For the non Islamic societies of Africa, the period of mourning is much longer, generally lasting twelve calendar months or thirteen lunar months. Meek (1931:226) reports that among the Jukun in the 1930s, the moral period of mourning is twelve months. But according to one of my male informants, in traditional Igbo society, the mourning period could last as long as three years. He said his mother's mourning period lasted that long when his father died in 1921. Today, however, the actual period of mourning has been getting increasingly shorter. I did not find any rule today that the period of mourning must be more than twelve months.

In most parts of the Igbo society the early parts of this period are usually the most rigorous. During the first 28 days, the widow is not allowed to go to the stream or the market or enter the farmland. Certain rituals must be performed at the expiration of the twenty-eight days before the widow can perform normal activities. Most of the widows interviewed in Mbaise area left a description of what happens to a widow in the first few days of the mourning period. The first few days before the man is buried she must refrain from washing, sits on the ground. Her food is prepared separately and she is fed by another widow from either a broken or an old plate. These pots and plates are used because they are thrown away after the period of seclusion. They may be handed over to an older widow who assisted the new widow during this period. Holding a kitchen knife, or broom stick, she is not allowed to touch any part of her body with her hands but must use this knife or stick. At this time she is regarded as unclean. The knife or stick is also used to protect her from the spirits which may attack her during this period.

An informant, widowed in 1960, described her experience;

When my husband died, the Umuokpu took me to the back of the house. They first of all put their left and right fingers into my mouth and stretched my two hands behind my back. They removed my ear-rings and neck-lace and changed my wrapper for an old one which I was to use during the whole period before the burial. They gave me food in a broken calabash and fed me with their left and right hands simultaneously. For four days, they brought me out every morning and made a fire at the back of the house to warm my hands. After the fourth day one of the women who was also a widow accompanied me to the market for the final ritual. At the market place, I sat down and opened four different pack of green leaves that did not contain anything. As I opened each pack, I said "I have sold out evil luck and may evil and bad luck be far away from me". This was done late at night to prevent people meeting us along the way [49].

In another community, an informant, widowed in 1993, noted;

The preliminary seclusion lasted for four days and I was required to cry in the morning and at night for these four days. I remained in the house after for three months without moving out. This helped to make widowhood a horrible experience for me. At the end of the three months, the Umuokpu performed the ritual of "mkpopu ezi" (bringing out). I cooked for them after which they dressed me with the mourning cloth. I used this for the remaining seven months [50].

The practice is about the same for most Igbo communities. In Uturu Okigwe, the description of the practice in traditional society by G. E. Ube states that;

before the advent of Christianity[51] in Uturu, widows were not allowed to take a bath for about twelve days following the death of their husband's. The widows were substantially denied food during the twelve days. To mark the end of the twelve day period, the widow goes to a bad bush[52] dedicated to "evils" and scrap her hair with a blunt razor, thereafter she may take a bath and eat as she likes[53]

Ube stated further that even in contemporary Uturu society, there are certain feasts in the year during which widows must leave her husband's compound and sleep outside, example the feast of *itu-aka*[54]. On such feasts, one hears widows crying out their sorrows very early in the morning.

Among Basden's *Niger Igbos*, in the 1930s, specifically four days after the death of her husband, the widow;
moves from her husband's house to a small hut in another part of the compound. While dwelling in the hut she wears no clothes unless perhaps a rag; she must sit on a block or wood and no where else; instead of sleeping mat a banana leaf must suffice...she is prohibited from washing her body or combing her hair[55].

One of the beliefs connected with this phase is that the husband is still hovering around and still seeks contact with his wife. So, the widow, if she has for any reason to go out of the house or compound, in order to avoid contact with the husband, never leaves and enters through the same gate or door through which the man's spirit may be moving. Indeed, the widow is given her kitchen knife or stick to hold in order to chase away the spirit of her husband if he should try any contact with her.

Rationalising the whole concept of seclusion and ritual cleansing associated with widowhood, one male informants explained;

On the death of a husband, the widow is in sorrow, she has lost every thing she owns. She has to hold a knife (mma mkpe) or broom stick a protective object from the spirit world. She does not touch herself and must hold the knife for the whole period of seclusion. During this period she does not come out in the mourning to avoid meeting with the elders before they have had an opportunity to exchange greetings among themselves. This is because she is regarded as unclean during this period. After the fourth day she must go to the stream very early accompanied by another widow to perform the ritual cleansing. She must avoid being seen or exchange greetings with any one[56].

Although there were variations as to length and procedure of the ritual, there is basic agreement on the reason for the rituals. The intensity and procedure may have changed over time but the practices are still observed today. The major factors impacting on this tradition include Christianity and western education. During field work, I observed a widow holding a crucifix instead of a broom or a kitchen knife. I understood that this was a Christian symbol and was more acceptable to the Christian. Another woman told me, "the Reverend will not be annoyed if she is holding a cross". This shows the difficulty of breaking with tradition. The Igbo Christian finds herself in the dilemma of keeping with the Christian faith and keeping with the traditions and customs (*cf* Widow no. 44).

It is after this period that the second instalment of her mourning begins and runs till a one year period. During this whole period and as part of the seclusion, the widow must not have sex and should she become pregnant during the period, this was a serious breach of taboo calling for its own purification.

In discussing the seclusion and isolation of the widow generally, mention has been made in passing that one other feature of widowhood practice in most African societies is the neglect of personal hygiene and the denial of many basic human comforts. We have already seen that in various parts of Igboland, the widow may not bath or wash her personal effects for the first few days. Washing and bathing during this period calls for punishment of the widow because she is assumed to be beautifying herself (*icho mma*). In most cases in the past, the widow could have only one set of mourning dress (*akwa mpke*). This is usually a black cloth which she must wear whenever she was in public. I observed during my field work that some people use white cloth instead of the traditional black cloth. I understand that today most mourners do not use black if the deceased died at old age. Some Igbo Christians also increasingly associate black with evil, tradition and custom and would rather wear a white mourning cloth. No informant could offer any other reason for this change.

One other important practice deserving of mention is the shaving of the head which is wide-spread throughout this area, irrespective of whether the society in question is attached to traditional religion or has embraced the Christian religious practice. Among the Mbaise as is the case in other Igbo communities and cultures, this practice extends to the shaving of the pubic hair. Both types of hair are either ritually burnt or thrown into the bad bush. At Mbaise, this

practice was done after the whole mourning period. (Widow no. 1). This process takes place immediately the burial ceremony takes place. An informant said of her own ritual;

After the burial, I was taken to the back of the house by the Christian mothers and shaved. My hair including the pubic hair was shaved. It was buried in the ground because I was pregnant at the time. Else it should have been burnt[\[57\]](#).

In some cases, the practice is performed by the *Umuokpu* who are widows themselves. After the shaving, she is given a bath and dressed with the black mourning cloth and brought out as is the practice today. The shaving and bath symbolically represents the removal of all links between the widow and the deceased.

Some of my informants noted of the other expectations during the pre-Christian period. Before the 1920s some informants noted that widows were expected to keep food for their dead husbands in their former rooms. The dead man's door must be kept open for a period of about seven days. He is expected to come and eat the food at night. This signifies that his spirit was at peace with his household. His rejection of the food indicated anger and disapproval of the burial rituals.

At the end of the '*nso*' period the widow goes through a ritual cleansing. The detailed description by some of the widows shows how old and similar the process is. The ritual cleansing as noted involved the widow and her environment. All the dirt collected in the place where she had been secluded is now thrown into the bad bush as was done in the past. A graphic image of the process is that a strong *nwada* (daughter) comes very early in the morning before cockcrow, sweep up the room and the ashes and puts them into a container which the widow carries as they move before they can be seen to the bad bush. Even that early, to avoid the chance of being seen, the *nwada* proceeds the widow, shouting a warning, till they complete the journey. After the widow has thrown away the dirt, including the rags she has worn all this while, into the bush, they move to the stream where she is washed and shaved if it has not been done before. She is then brought home and continues the mourning till the second burial ceremonies. At the end of the one year mourning period, the mourning cloths are burnt and the hair cut again. The widow is at this time free to re-enter normal life.

The above is a brief description of what constitutes the widowhood practices in Igboland. Before we go on to discuss the sociology of these practices, it is necessary to emphasise that the mourning was not left for widows alone. Consequently, many other persons, men and women related to the deceased came under varying degrees of ritual cleansing and mourning. Men are also expected to mourn their wives, although the expectations would appear rather low-keyed. But wailing on the death of a man was not limited to his widow. His sisters and other relatives (men and women) as well as friends joined in. On occasions there was an undeclared competition to see who would wail longer and more bitterly than the other. However, there is no doubt that his widows were expected to come out top in the competition. Among the Igbo, the widow is more or less regarded as the "owner"[\[58\]](#) of the corpse, and the Igbo say that a sympathiser does not cry more than the owner of the corpse.

Similarly, seclusion, ritual pollution and cleansing, restrictions with regard to food, bathing and washing were not limited to widows only. So also the wearing of black mourning cloth and shaving of the head. However Talbot's (1926:474) view of the 1920s was that "widows have a very unhappy lot". Afigbo (1989:14) notes of the 1980s;

Among the Igbo widowhood is a byword for defencelessness. Thus when you assault one who manages to fight effectively, she would taunt you saying that, perhaps, you thought you were dealing with a widow.

There is also the saying that why should a man who goes to his widow concubine be in a hurry to depart! Is it that he does not know where her husband has gone to? This implies that this lover has nothing to fear since the woman has no husband who may protest or harm him.

This perceived weak position and defencelessness of the widow comes out most prominently in the fact that as we shall see in chapter 4, she has no legal rights to property of her husband. In the Islamized communities of the Western Sudan studied by Trimmingham (1958:182), he noted that while the heir cannot turn a widow out of the house of the husband during the period of official mourning, he owes her neither food nor raiment, a practice that is said to run counter to the injunctions of the Sharia. It was perhaps because of this universally acknowledged weak position of the widow that most cultures permitted her to remarry at the expiration of the official mourning period. That this practice has continued over time calls for some comment on the sociology of the practice. Why some of these practices have survived in spite of the impact which western influences have had on the Igbo will be our

concern in the following section:

2.3 The Sociology of Widowhood Practices

It is only in the context of the social values, norms and beliefs from which they derive that we can begin to understand how widowhood practices came into existence and what functions they performed or still perform. When I first heard of widows in Mbaise having to scratch their bodies with sticks, I was horrified. But after I learnt that in Mbaise, like in other parts of Africa, a widow is seen as being in a state of ritual impurity and that until such defilement is removed, a widow cannot touch her body with her hands, the practice began to wear a different outlook. Whereas at first I thought the practice was a sort of physical punishment or torture, I now came to understand that it was actually for the protection of the widow from further pollution. She could not of, course, feed herself in such circumstance. The same reason may explain the practice of a widow being fed by another widow (usually an older widow). Whether the thinking behind the practice was correct or not, the practice looked somewhat more humane.

Furthermore, one factor fundamental to an understanding of widowhood practices in Africa is the people's attitude to birth and death. While birth is seen as an occasion for joy and as a natural happening in all circumstances, death is seen as great and unredeemed tragedy even when it happens in extreme old age. If it happens in other than extreme old age, it is a still greater tragedy. Also unlike birth, it is never considered as fully natural. On this point, many anthropologists who have made a study of this matter are agreed as a few quotations will show. After investigating this matter, A. G. Leonard concluded around the turn of the century that;

it is impossible to discuss this matter of death without taking into consideration the question of witchcraft according to popular estimates, nearly every death is, in the first instance, at all events, attributed to or associated with the accursed magic (1906:174).

"There is" according to Talbot's 1920s study,

a strange contradiction in the minds of the people. Death should be and often is, accepted with equanimity since nearly all recognised that the gods, jujus and over-soul only permit its approach when the person has earned it, yet they are liable when it touches them personally, to believe that it would not have come except through the machinations of some enemy, and in any case, whether deserved or not they attempt to revenge themselves on those who are deemed instrumental in causing it[59]

Where the death in question is that of a young person, he continued, "all restraints are thrown overboard and explanation sought in witchcraft, juju or bad medicine. According to him, "one of the first acts of a bereaved family especially among the semi-Bantu, is to procure the services of a diviner and ask him to find out the cause, with the result that it is often followed by many other deaths-of those who are forced to undergo an ordeal on the accusation of witchcraft

[60]

"I have not" wrote E. Ilogu (1974:40), "come across any death that any Igbo accepts as a natural and biological end". Afigbo concluded in this matter that almost in all cases,

the immediate or remote cause is sought in the wicked machinations of a human enemy or of a malevolent ancestor, ghost or juju[61].

Following from this attitude to death is the fact that, in Igboland, a funeral is much more than ensuring the repose of the soul or disposing of the earthly remains. Indeed, on many occasions, these two otherwise primary purposes of a funeral take the second place to the need to establish who or what evil spirit caused the death. In this kind of atmosphere, nobody is considered, as manifestly beyond suspicion-father, mother, brothers, sisters, husband, wife, friend or any known but unseen force. All had to be put through some kind of ordeal to make assurance doubly sure. "When the burial is finished", reports Basden for the *Niger Igbo*s, "more *omu*"[62] are deposited on top of the grave. The closing words said over the grave are *sokwu onye bulu-i* (follow and fight (kill) the one who killed you) or *imala onye bulu-i iso ya* (you know the one who has killed you, follow him)[63]. This is still practised today among many Igbo communities if there is any suspicion irrespective of who is involved-a man, his wife or even a child.

A widow noted;

When I refused to perform some of the rituals associated with widowhood because of my Christian faith, the community implored my husband's

spirit to revenge me if I had any thing to do with his death[64]

In this kind of atmosphere charged with superstition, the regime of denials and privations brought on the widow and widowers to some extent constituted a means of placing them under oath for the entire duration of the mourning. In 1938, Basden reported that should a widow die during this period, "no people of the village will touch the corpse. The reason for this repugnance may arise from a belief that a woman dying shortly after her husband is thereby proved to be guilty of causing his death". Basden maintained that in certain situations a widow or whoever is involved may be expected to drink the remains of the water used in washing the dead man's corpse as a way of proving ones innocence[65]. It is expected that if one caused the death of such a person he would die within a certain period-usually one year. In Mbaise, it may involve crossing the coffin of the dead person. If one in such a circumstance fails to comply with all these rituals he would be considered guilty of murder.

Some other practices were explained by other aspects of the people's beliefs. Africans tended to have an overpowering belief in the ability of the ghost of a dead person to come back to dispute his former property and all kinds of things with them. For one who was the priest of a local deity for example, a special ceremony had to be performed to "remove his hands" *sepu ya aka* from the priesthood. The same had to be done for an *Ozo* man[66]. This is to remove their link with the as title holders since someone else must take this position. A husband is regarded as having such a stake in his wife. During my field work, a man died in one of the villages. It was alleged that he was killed by his wife who had died about three years earlier. The story was that the former wife had killed him out of jealousy because he had married a new wife. The remains of the former wife was exhumed and the skull ritually burnt to keep her spirit at rest. There was the fear that she may also attack the man's widow or the children. The people felt that perhaps there were certain rituals which would have permanently separated the man from his wife which were not performed. This goes for a woman too when the husband dies.

In this culture who could be closer to a dead man than his wife? This fact made it necessary for many rituals to be performed to enable the man to hands-off his wife or wives. In this context it is reasonable to suggest that the unhygienic and appalling personal appearance of a widow was all part of an effort to make her no longer attractive to her otherwise would-be jealous, deceased husband. Allied to all this was the belief that, while death created for the dead the problem of gaining admission into the convocation of the ancestors of the community in the spirit world, it threatened the integrity and quiet repose of the community of the deceased's living relations. They guarantee the dead easy admission into this convocation in the spirit world, "all the practice associated with death and dying must be meticulously gone through. If not, he would be considered to have been improperly or inconclusively buried and would be denied admission"[67]. A widow whose husband died in 1982 reported;

When my husband died, some one came and told me after a few days that he saw my husband in his dream. He reported that my husband is complaining that he is not at peace yet. By then he was not yet accepted by the dead ancestors. His sons performed certain rituals before his spirit finally rested[68].

The widow's contribution to meeting these conditions include the observance of the practices highlighted. The dead man's relations (male and female) had their part to play for the purpose of achieving the same goal. The satisfactory completion of these ceremonies, rituals and practices also helped to restore the balance and security which the death had sought to overthrow. Among other things, a perfunctory performance of the basics of the regime, would not only annoy the already established ancestors, but expose the community to the danger of being haunted by the ghost of the recently departed.

On this subject M. Reads has written as follows in connection with the Ngoni of Malawi in the 1950s (1970:196-7);

These were acts performed by the living for the dead to cause the spirit to be settled in a place it knew. The living had certain rites to carry out on their own behalf which, if omitted, would bring the displeasure of the ancestors upon them.

With these acts, not only were all individuals who played any part in the funeral purified of pollution, but the living community was re-integrated after the loss of one of its members. This is a common practice among the Igbo. A man for example who has not performed "the second burial"[69] for his father or mother may not eat or drink if such ceremony is being performed for another person. He may not dance a certain kind of music (*ese and uko*) played at funerals if his parents were not honoured with the same music during their burial. Indeed it is customary to kill livestock ranging from goat to cattle to honour the dead. They are a mark of respect for the dead which will allow them to be accepted by their ancestors. Titled men as well as very old men have special ritual ceremonies performed

for them when they die. This ceremony known as *iwa nkita anya*[\[70\]](#) involves the killing of a dog and other rituals by the first son of the deceased the night before the burial. The living attribute any calamity or misfortune to their inability to properly bury the dead. These objectives of satisfying the ancestors and the recently dead and of protecting the living and restoring the integrity of the family and community helped to make the regime undergone by widows what it is.

What has been described above are some of the most important components of widowhood rituals among the Mbaise-Igbo of Eastern Nigeria. They were adopted for the purpose of meeting the varied needs of the dead, his living relations and dependants. They arose, from the strong sense of community between the living and the dead which formed a basic ingredient of the cosmology of Igbo peoples. This strong sense of community made those in the beyond and on this side of the grave so mutually interdependent that what affected the one either adversely or favourably, also affected the other in precisely the same manner.

The use of these ritual must therefore also be understood in the context of protecting the widow, her family and the society as a whole. We must however explore how far this protection goes. Does it apply to other aspects of the widow's life during and after the period of mourning?





Chapter III Widows in Domestic and Affinal Relationship

- [3.1 Igbo Marriage System: An Overview.](#)
 - [3.2 Marriage Among the Igbo: Rationale.](#)
 - [3.3 Igbo Traditional Forms of Marriage](#)
 - [3.3.1 Widow Inheritance \(Levirate\)-Nkushi](#)
 - [3.3.2 Widow Remarriage](#)
 - [3.4 Widowhood and Polygamous Marriage](#)
-

Societies differ in formal options available to widows. In some African societies such as the Beti, the Nandi and the Luo, Potash (1986:17) has recorded that widows generally have little choice but to remain in their husbands' community. In this chapter, we shall look at the widow's position in terms of domestic and affinal relationship. This will include an examination of the widows options regarding remarriage and widow inheritance/levirate relationship. We shall examine also the structural complexes in Igbo society which sustained widow inheritance and remarriage in the past and what impact changing economic and social forces have had on the practice.

To understand how this apply to the Igbo, it will be necessary to review the Igbo marriage system. This will enable us understand the widow remarriage pattern, levirate rules and how it forms an integral part of the overall social force which determine what the widow can do.

3.1 Igbo Marriage System: An Overview.

There are two types of valid marriage among the Igbo and the principles of law applicable to each of these types of marriage differ considerably. These are statutory law marriage and customary law marriage.

Statutory Law Marriage

This is a monogamous type of marriage. The majority of my respondents are statutory law marriage widows. The incidents which govern the celebration and validity of monogamous marriage herein referred to as statutory marriage, are found mainly in the Customs Law, Equity and Relevant Statutes of General Application received into Nigeria from the British legal system during the colonial era. Others are the Nigerian Marriage Act, 1914 and the Matrimonial Causes Act, 1970.

Customary Law Marriage

This system permits the practice of polygamy whereby a man may legally marry as many wives as possible. The main difference between a marriage under customary law and a mere concubine is the money paid by the husband as bridewealth. Under this system of marriage not only can a widow not inherit from the deceased husband but she herself is an inheritable property.

3.2 Marriage Among the Igbo: Rationale.

The women members of an Igbo village are of two categories: the *umuokpu* [71], who may be married, unmarried, divorced or widowed women who belong to the village by descent, and the *ndom alu alu* who belong to the village by marriage. The rule that a woman should always be married gives marriage the precedence over descent. The relationships between these two classes of women according to Uchendu (1965:49) is one of "potential" conflict covertly expressed in the joking relationships between them and overtly manifested in the institutionalised authority of the *umuokpu* over the *ndom alu alu* during the mourning rites marking the latter's widowhood. In western industrialised societies, about 40% of new marriages end in a divorce, about 75% of the divorced males remarry as against 66% females who do so [72]. Comparative figures are not available for the Igbo. But as Entwistle and Cole (1990:259) noted:

Like other West African women, virtually all Nigerian women marry at least once and most spend a large portion of their life married. Their experience of marriage is different from that of men-frequently shaped by early marriage to an older male, polygamy, extended periods of sexual abstinence after child birth and widowhood remarriage when the older spouse dies[73]

The primary item in the concept of family is that marriage is essential for completeness of the mature human being. There is no Igbo myth similar to the Bible one which indicates that a woman was made from the man's rib and that therefore the unmarried person is incomplete. Igbo mythology however, still gives support to this concept of the incompleteness of the unmarried. In Igbo pantheon, notes Nwoga, (1980) there is no male god who has no wife or female who has no husband. *Onyirioha*, the protective deity of Oru-Mbaise, has a wife from Obohia Mbaise and their first son *opara nzege* is the protective deity of Lude Mbaise. In addition, of course, he has all things a man of standing should have - slaves, children, *Ikenga*[74], *Ekwensu*[75], *Agwu*[76] etc. *Iyi* of Opkonkume-Mbaise, a river god, has his wife *lolo wiyi*, has his sons like *wiyi* of Umuchieze-Mbaise and *duru ugo* of Alike, Etiti; in his house (which these days is roofed with zinc) has his warriors - *ojimma* and others. As a diviner/priest said, *Nga nwoko no, nwanyi no ya wu nwunye ya* (wherever there is a man there is also a woman who is his wife)[77].

This belief in complementary duality is so strong among the Igbo that quite a few satirical songs arise from youths- boys or girls- who will not marry in time. An Abigbo[78] group satirised such a girl in a song in which they impersonated the girl as sending a message to her parents to find her somebody to marry, just anybody, even the old *ofo*[79] holder (pagan old), even *Edembe* (known in the town as a half-wit moron)

Ziere m papa m gbo, mama m gbo - Give a message to my father, my mother

Ya chotara mu di a huna m uwa - To find me a husband, I have suffered

Ya wuru Edembe ekwerele m - If it is Edembe I have agreed.

O wubela oke mmadu ji isi ofo - Even if it is the old man holding the ofo,

Ekwerele m - I have agreed.

(Recorded in Mbaise in 1965)

Some Igbo names shows the importance attached to the institution of marriage. Women have names like:

Di wu ugwu- A husband is prestige.

Mma nwanyi bu di- A woman's beauty is a husband.

In traditional Igbo society therefore, marriage was important to fulfil these social needs.

A young man who will not marry is equally satirised as foolish and unsatisfactory in maturity. In another *Abigbo* song, it is said that a young man not married, yet not looking flashy and well fed is like a counterfeit money. Among the Igbo therefore, married life according to Uchendu is the normal condition for both men and women; polygamy a symbol of high status is the ideal (1968:49).

Among certain parts of the Igbo society as is the case in Mbaise, endogamy, or the rule which prohibits a person from marrying outside his own social group, exists only in one form, namely that the class of slaves known as *Osu*,⁸⁰ must intermarry among themselves. Exogamy, or the rule prohibiting the marriage of an individual to any person belonging to the same social and local group as himself, is in some degree or the other almost universal throughout Igboland[81]. Field work in Mbaise area shows that the social group described as an extended family is almost invariably an exogenous unit and applies to the larger group which is regarded as kin. It even extends to the village level composed of unrelated kin. Marriage is prohibited between members of a sub-group.

A person therefore may not marry within the segment of his or her mother's or father's mother's patrilineage. The purpose of the initial inquiry conducted by families at the earliest point of the marriage negotiation is to ensure that this rule is not broken. The Igbo men acquire rights in women in many ways, but all must be validated by the payment of bridewealth[82].

Until it was legally abolished in 1956, child marriage was the most common way of acquiring rights in women. In traditional society, the prospective husband sent gifts to the girl and her mother, and sometimes helped the prospective in-law in farm work. The bride wealth payment is usually deferred till the girl becomes of age. This is now effectively restricted by socio-cultural changes rather than legal sanctions. The changes are growing demand for formal education for both sexes; the attraction of new symbols of wealth and new ways of validating status, and the changing attitude towards gender equality.

3.3 Igbo Traditional Forms of Marriage

The degree of family involvement was one variable in the range of Igbo traditional marriage forms. The standard form of marriage required the consent of the two families. Very many girls were not asked about their consent[83]. The agreement was symbolised by several stages of negotiation culminating in a final presentation of drinks and a nominal sum of money[84] paid by the man's family to the woman's family. This legitimised the marriage, gave the husband legal rights to all the children of his wife. Marriage in Igboland is therefore an alliance between two families as opposed to a contract between two individuals as is the case in Western culture. The philosophy and ideology associated with marriage in the traditional sense obviously will have implication for a widow. It may therefore limit the chances of remarriage outside the husband's family since it may be viewed as breaking such bonds.

Uchendu identified a marriage type associated with the *Ahiajoku*[85] cult. He observed that in traditional Igbo society, there is a prescribed status-linked marriage between "yam oriented" male and female children called *Njoku* (*Ahiajoku*), and *Mmaji* respectively. These children are usually born to members of the yam title called *Eze ji* (yam king). As the human representatives of the yam deity, these children are entitled to privileges. *Mmaji* must be the first wife of *Njoku* as well as the only wife with *Mmaji* status[86].

Women-marriages (marriage of two women) is a recognised Igbo institution[87] by which women can validate status in the society. In my study area, I did not identify any incident of women-marriage in recent times. Women in this regard marry in their own right by paying the bride-wealth and have the right to dispose of their rights in their brides. A woman allows her husband to exercise her right and she accepts her bride as co-wife. The woman is also free to take a lover. The children from this marriage belong to the husband no matter who their biological father may be. Women marriages is strictly a patrilineal institution, inherent in the logic of the transfer of the woman's reproductive capacities to her husband.

Women marriages gives an important insight into the gender issues in marriage. Once the right in marriage can be analytically distinguished, the confusion as to which gender should do the marrying, be the husband, for instance, and whether marriage is conterminous with sex or not, becomes irrelevant[88]. In this type of marriage, the genitor is different from the genatrix and the social father. The Judaeo-Christian tradition of marriage treats all the rights in a woman as a bundle. Other civilisations like the Igbo do not. Before science advanced the stage that yielded the test-tube babies and gave us surrogate mothers, Igbo cultural inventions had made it possible for wealthy and able Igbo women to play a husband role, not as a legal fiction but as a social and legal reality. There may be very few instances in contemporary Igbo society where women who could not have children marry other women to have children in their husband's name. Women could also marry other women to raise children in their fathers name if the man had no male children. This is to keep the family alive and preserve family property.

This discussion on marriage shows that marriage, like all other social institutions occur within the context of society and culture. To appreciate Igbo marriage systems, and its impact on the women members of the society, we have to bear in mind that "marriage, like birth, death, or initiation at puberty is essentially a re-arrangement of social structure" (Radcliffe Brown 1975:43). By a marriage certain existing relationships particularly those of the bride and bridegroom's family, are changed; new social relations and bonds are created; and through the offspring of the marriage, the corporate character of the social system is strengthened. The structural changes brought about by a marriage tend to have important value contents. It is the value content rather than the structure of the changes brought about by a marriage that is the true measure of the value system (Uchendu 1991).

The Igbo world view and their social structure are two elements of the socio-cultural system, and they play a pervasive role in the marriage system. This world view shapes the social structure, the body of rule which governs society and gives it direction. On the other hand, the marriage rules re-enforce the social structure and re-affirm the world view. Igbo marriage rules make a statement on the social structure and help us to understand the world view

of the people. This includes the basic notions underlying cultural activities, the definition of cultural goals and social relations. This of course extends throughout the life of each of the marriage partner and sometimes influence what options are available to a woman on the death of her husband. Drawing from Uchendu's *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*, we summarise Igbo world view on marriage as follows;

First, the Igbo world brings the living and the dead into a system of inter-relationship in which lineage continuity is a co-operative enterprise between the two and the marriage system the chief institution to bring it about (1965:11).

The various forms of marriage described so far are therefore part of the Igbo social and structural system which can influence the widow option in her domestic and affinal relationships. Ideally, according to Igbo customs and tradition, a woman should always be under the guardianship and protection of a man. In the subsequent section, I shall discuss widow inheritance and remarriage explaining how far they are a viable alternative for the widow and far they can satisfy this need to be under a man.

3.3.1 Widow Inheritance (Levirate)-Nkushi

Like many other African peoples, the pre-colonial Igbo required that a widow be inherited by her deceased husband's kinsman. In Igbo customs, it means for a widow to be "taken over [\[89\]](#)" or "to be inherited" in a more general sense by a brother of the deceased. For example by the son or brother of her deceased husband. The levir's normative role is to sire children, if the widow's family is not already considered complete; to manage the property held in trust for her minor son's; to assist her by providing labour for clearing, ploughing, planting and harvesting and to contribute to the maintenance of her household. In traditional Igbo society when levirate was more frequent, a young widow is typically more likely to choose the levitate for several reasons;

She was under considerable pressure to have more children as quickly as possible particularly if she has no sons [\[90\]](#).

Young widows also may value the advice of an older man in managing her property ⁹¹

She needs the services of a man to cut her palm fruits for her and help in farm work [\[92\]](#)

She needs assistance in farm work, mending the house and a guardian for her children [\[93\]](#)

A widow in Igbo society is not compelled to become involved in a levirate arrangement. Although the levirate was common in traditional society, it is unlikely that a widow with a grown son would enter into such a relationship. With an adult male heir for her house, such a woman will not be under pressure to continue bearing children. She would probably depend on her sons to perform the male role in the gendered division of labour and give her other assistance that otherwise might be provided by a levir. If such a woman has a lover, it is a man of her choice and generally unrelated to her late husband. I do not have statistical data on the incidence of the levirate; only two case came directly to my attention during field work. However, I think that the levirate would not ordinarily be obvious to an outsider in an Igbo community unless cases were actively sought. For this reason, I conclude that the practice is very uncommon among the Igbo today. Levirate relationships according to my informants is not common today. They attribute this decline to the following reasons;

Resources are scarce and men no longer want to waste their resources to cater for a woman and children who do not belong to him legally [\[94\]](#);

A widow and her children in the past increased a man's pool of labour for farm work. Farming is increasingly becoming less important as a measure of wealth and status symbol [\[95\]](#);

Theoretically a widow and her children are not the levir's property. So people are no longer willing to raise children which they may not benefit from in feature [\[96\]](#)

It brings problems in the family [\[97\]](#)

It is against Christian ethics [\[98\]](#);

My children will not like it [\[99\]](#)

A young widow is expected to go on bearing children especially if she does not already have a large family. The children she bears will belong to her "house" and they are considered descendants of her first (and only) husband, irrespective of whoever their genitor may be. Sons of a

levirate relationship have inheritance rights as those born by the mother's deceased husband. They have no right of inheritance in the house of their genitor.

In an answer to "Why did you not take a levir?", Most of the widows answered that they have children (65). Many said they were not approached (50). 48 widows said they could take care of themselves and their children. 15 of the widows said that the practice is no longer popular while 5 widows said they had lovers. Only 3 of the respondents said that they were old.

Langely (1979:73) speaking of the Nandi of Kenya of the 1970s, says that "the levirate is looked upon with distaste and is resorted to only in secret." It is my impression that this was not the case in pre-colonial Igbo society. But the situation is different today. The impact of Christianity can not be ignored. My impression of a 1969 widow's reason for keeping her lover secret justifies Langley's opinion:

I was married in the church. When my husband died during the war, I had only two children. His only brother was married already. My father in-law encouraged me to raise more children in my husband's name. It was frowned upon by the church. I did not take communion for a long time. I did not want him to have the same problem.

There is marked discrepancy between reports of male and female informants about what usually happens when a young widow is left with minor children. Male informants generally report that the dead man's brother in traditional society took the widow in the levirate, managed the house property including land and palm trees, and provided for the children by giving the widow cash to buy their needs. Female informants tend to report that widows manage their own property and provide for their children themselves. In general my observation and discussion with informants led me to believe that a brother's voice in property management is nominal unless he is also an active levir. The extent to which the widow rather than the brother manages the property, as well as the amount of help provided to a widow by a levir, is flexible and depends on individual circumstances. In Igbo society today, there is greater tendency towards individualism. This has affected to a large extent kinship and group relationships as well as property management. Educated, independent and self reliant widows have greater control over their resources and its management than was the case in traditional Igbo society.

In traditional Igbo society, levirate was viewed positively, rather than with distaste. Although a lot of women are widowed at a relatively young age, they are becoming more self reliant. Moreover, marriage confers upon a woman with male children some access in a definite estate (her husband's) and these rights are held independently of any on going relationship with a living man. Today, a widow does not either need remarriage (which in any case is not forbidden to her) or a levir to have access to property through her children. This applies also to communal property irrespective of who the biological father of such children may be. A child born by a married woman among the Igbo cannot be illegitimate. It can be argued that the levirate is not in essence an institution designed to tie a woman and her children to her dead husband's family. It is rather an institution designed to provide for the woman and children. The levir has a responsibility to take care of his dead brother's dependants who cannot get along without male assistance.

For older widows, assistance in the form of labour may be provided by adult sons. Further, because of the general level of economic up-liftment for some widows, the argument that a widow should have a levir's help to meet her economic need does not apply to the Igbo society today. Income from other sources can be used to hire labour. In this case the widow will not need the assistance that the levir might otherwise provide. In most families today, a widows house property may be sufficient to support her and her children. This provides some insight into why this practice has been on the declined. She is freer than a widow in most other African societies to form a liaison with a man or not, wholly on the basis of her own personal preference. In pre-monetary Igbo economy, widows were presumably less able to replace the labour and other kinds of assistance that is theoretically the levir's responsibility to provide.

The practice of levirate was seen as an expression a of single underlying social principle, the social identification of the kin with one another. It can as well be seen as a means of reproducing structural relations across the vicissitudes of the human life cycle. Writing on widow inheritance and the levirate, Radcliffe-Brown (1950:64) notes that "all these customs of preferential marriage can be seen to be continuations or renewals of the existing structure of social relations. All of them are also examples of the unity of the sibling group since brother replaces brother".

The historical analysis of the system lends little support to such a simple interpretation. The search for "primary functions" of marital institutions places in the background precisely what ought to be in the foreground. These

include the variable ways in which ideologies about social relations have been implicated in processes of change (Ogbu 1978). In the pre-colonial Igbo society, widow inheritance may have corresponded to Redcliffe-Browns interpretation. By the end of the nineteenth century however, such important political and economic assets were implicated in the transaction of marriage that widow inheritance is hardly comprehensible as simply an element in position replacement. It was a crucial aspect of inheritance in general at a time when the nature and value of assets at stake were changing rapidly. It may therefore be understood in relation to accumulation and resource control by men. By the late twentieth century the relationship between widowhood and processes in the economic and social field had shifted again, bringing to the fore those elements of widow inheritance that define women's access to the most basic of resources for making a living.

All in all we found that many women now do not like the idea of being turned over from one man to the other as a levir. Men as well do not like the practice anymore. I might re-emphasise one more point here. That is, this practice became more disused because some men began to experience despair when the widow's children grow up. She may inform those children that the man they are living with is not their father. If the children follow their mother or their mother dies before the levir husband, they may give no support to the now helpless old man who spent his life bringing up the woman and his brother's children.

Likewise, this analysis shows that there is a decline in what can legitimately be considered widow inheritance that coincides with a growth in the importance given to patrilineal descent. Both processes result from changes in the ideological and economic system. The patterns of widow inheritance that developed at one period in Igbo history were not only a matter of communal support for widows. Rather, women were also an important means of obtaining political and economic power. As trade with Europeans replaced farming as the major means for accumulation of wealth, "wealth in people" became less important as a means of obtaining political and economic status, and widows lost their value as resources and were no longer wanted [100]. To a great degree, production of palm products which replaced subsistence and tuber cultivation was less labour intensive. But on the other hand, the decline in widow inheritance to a large extent has strengthened the independence rather than the inter-dependence of spouses in property acquisition. These changes in terms of resources control, access to productive resources and greater tendency towards accumulation of private wealth by women may provide some answer to the reasons for the decline in levirate marriages.

3.3.2 Widow Remarriage

While statistical evidence of the frequency of widow remarriage is not available to me, oral information confirmed that more than half of widows were inherited while few remarried in the traditional Igbo society. This was the case if the widow was young or of child bearing age. This pattern has changed and certain reasons will be advanced for this change later in this section. Two of my informants were remarried and have been widowed twice.

In terms of social constraints, a married women in Igbo society is primarily regarded as wife to the whole family. Hence most women will be called "my wife" by adult males in the family and community at large. Marriage is exogamous and builds a lot of ties between families and communities. Remarriage will mean breaking existing ties. It will mean breaking ties with the widow's children since they may not be allowed to follow their mother to a new home. A widow's remarriage in these circumstances may not be her best option.

Another important determining factor among the Igbo is the presence or otherwise of children from the previous marriage. Most of the Igbo widows will elect to remain outside of another marriage especially if they have male children. The sex of the children will thus inform the widows decision to stay out of another marriage or remarry. The field work indicated that the present trend is widows' determination to stay in their former husband's home even when they have only female children. For the widow children, are a guarantee for a permanent stay in the husband's family. Children act as a social insurance against any discrimination in their husband's family. Male children in particular guarantees the widow access to the productive resources of her dead husband. The determining factor in the past must have been the need for economic support from the second husband. Today widows are becoming more self reliant and economically independent.

Cultural practices which determine inheritance and the right to use community property also make it less attractive for widows to remarry. In one of the villages where field work was carried out, one widow had two children from a previous marriage including a boy. When her husband died she remarried in 1958 with her two young children who were then three and two years respectively. She returned to her former husband's village in 1990 because her son was not allowed to build a house in the village of her second husband. For in the Igbo cultural context the children from the former marriage are stranger elements who are not entitled to inherit any land. This to a large extent may

determine why women who already have children may prefer not to remarry. In the view of some of them, it is better to wait for their children to grow up than to make them strangers in some other place[101].

Age may appear to be a determining factor in some African societies such as the Hausa of Northern Nigeria[102]. This does not appear to be a determining factor in widow remarriage among the Igbo. A widow aged 30, told the researcher that she was unlikely to consider remarriage because she had four children still at home. Her youngest of the four was 4 years old, she also had full responsibility for these children. In this family there were few other relatives who could be expected to take care of the children, and the widow said it would be virtually impossible to find a prospective husband who could assume such a burden. The statistics in this study show that a lot of widows are of child-bearing age. 24 of the eighty widows interviewed were under 40 years while about 42 were between 40 and 49 years. Some of my informants did not reconsider another marriage(see table2). These are their views;

I did not remarry because I do not want to give birth to children at two different places[103]

I have grown up children. More so, I did not want to leave them for another place[104]

My children will suffer since the whole village has been against me[105]

Emphasis is on first marriage. I spoke to a young widow in one of the villages. She told me that she would have preferred to remarry since she is still young and had only a child. But in her view;

who will prefer a second hand woman to a new maid. Men will prefer a virgin for a first wife. You are a man and you know that[106].

This explains why men want to marry once and would prefer a virgin.

Widow remarriage has also been less popular among the Igbo because widows who remained in their husband's houses or who live with their children carry on income-producing activities. But generally, they have greater financial responsibility for themselves and their children than they did as wives. An informant who lost his father in 1932 noted that a man's kin do have some obligation to support his orphaned children. Sometimes the children as was the case with him and his siblings live with members of the extended family to reduce the burden on the widow. They, of course, provide essential services including farm work for their benefactor. His mother did not remarry though, having a concubine was acceptable, and she preferred it. Remarriage while not forbidden, has social constraints which limited its choice by widows.

3.4 Widowhood and Polygamous Marriage

Polygamy, or the taking of more than one wife, was commonly practised among the Igbo. It had both an important practical function in cementing alliances in many villages and economic functions of increasing a man's available labour. It was also a social status symbol.

Basden (1965:97) noted that this institution is inseparably bound up with the family and the social life of the Igbo, and without exception, touches the lives of every man and woman in the country. In his view, polygamy is favoured and fostered equally by men and women. In some respects the latter are the chief supporters of the system. The ambition of every Igbo man he noted was to become a polygamist, and he adds to the number of his wives as circumstances permit. They are an indication of social standing and a signs of affluence. In any case, they are counted as sound economic and social investment. Uchendu (1965:86) agrees with the above assertion and further notes:

Married life is the normal condition for adults, and polygamy for the men is the ideal being an important status indicators...Polygamy has obvious status implications for the common husband and his co-wives. Igbo women supported and often even finance polygamy because it enhances their social status and lightens their domestic chores, thus giving them the much needed leisure to do their private trading. With a co-wives, the first wife assumes the coveted status of neekwu (the big mother). Other co-wives are ranked in seniority according to their marriage order to the common husband .

Another aspect of the case for polygamy as indicated by Basden (1966:99) states that a woman is not content to remain the sole wife of a man. An only wife he observed considers herself placed in an unenviable and humiliating

position. It is also lonely, as the sexes are not companions to one another. Again, as the sole wife she has to bear the whole of the domestic burdens of the household, a prospect that does not appeal to her.

While polygamy is recognised as an integral part of the social life of the Igbo, yet in actual fact one wife is specifically acknowledged. Customarily, the first wife alone is granted the position and right of a legal wife. However the economic obligations entailed by taking more than one wife could operate to curtail the degree to which polygamy was actually practised. But since women also produced wealth, through trade, agricultural activities, and production of crafts, as well as by exchange of bride wealth, it was often true that polygamy could be economically advantageous to men (Johnson-Odin & Strobel 1988:14).

The structural conditions supporting large scale polygamy broke down during the colonial period and have been superseded between the 1920s and mid 1930s. Levels of bride-wealth required offer a particularly important reason of this shift.

The introduction of a monetary economy, commerce and trade made polygamy less economically viable and expensive. Polygamy is now relatively infrequent and rarely involve more than two women married to the same man. In the four villages studied, six of the informants were from polygamous families. The contrast with pre-colonial Igbo society and its universal marriage for women of all ages is striking. A male informant noted that by the 1920s, nearly every man was a polygamist. Large scale polygamy has disappeared completely and women are no longer transacted as primary valuable good. However, many aspects of kinship ideology and customary practices have been retained, reworked and validated by local courts as the basis for family law in general and inheritance rights in particular.

What are the implications of polygamy for widows? If a deceased man was a polygamist, his widows may continue to reside in the same compound, but each will be attached to a different man as levir in traditional society. Each woman manages her own affairs. Some of the widows I spoke to stated that in a polygamous family, every widow controls her own life from the resources available to her. In this circumstance there is no rivalry between a widow and her co-wives. There is also no rivalry between a widow and her levir's wife, since they are not in competition for resources and do not share the same house.

Polygamy has further implications for the widow. The rules of levirate will suggest a lateral inheritance to a junior brother. In this situation how many wives in the polygamous marriage should a man inherit? I do not find any rule that suggest that a man should inherit all the wives of the deceased. An informant suggests that this became problematic especially with the introduction of Christianity in the late nineteenth century. Some widows in this circumstance may have some advantages over others because a widow may be inherited while others are not.

Inheritance of the deceased man's property follows what is known as the "house property system". This is perhaps where polygamy has greater implication for the widows. Among the patrilineal descent Igbo communities, the regulation of property use and inheritance within the family follows the above pattern. This has been studied by Gluckman 1950, Gray and Gulliver 1964, Schneider 1979 and Hakansson 1989 for some societies in East Africa. In traditional Igbo society, the extended family constitute a property owning group which holds exclusive rights of use of land and economic trees in it. The extended family itself is divided into more or less independent units called a house (*ulo*)¹⁰⁷. This consists of a man, his wife or wives and his children. Property is allocated to men within the extended family in a more or less equal ratio irrespective of the number of wives.

The ownership system is more or less centralised. Ownership and control of family resources is usually allocated to men on marriage. But this property is protected by customary law and cannot be alienated by the family head. The head of the house has a right to alienate his personal property. His sons have a right to inherit as well as alienate property. With this arrangement, a childless widow in a polygamous marriage may be only allocated a portion of land for agricultural purposes. But she cannot dispose of such land since, theoretically such land belongs to the sons of the deceased husband. The land she is entitled to use reverts to the extended family for redistribution on her death. As mother to sons however, she can use land belonging to the house and her sons retain tenancy right for such portions of land.

Each house is allocated land and the woman holds such land in trust for their sons. Sons inherit those lands belonging to their own house, but sons of an extended family cannot inherit a common land as a single group. When unallocated land is inherited, it is divided equally between houses (*usekwu*)¹⁰⁸ irrespective of the number of sons in each house. This system of resource allocation makes it possible for a widow with fewer sons to have more land

available to her sons unlike the widow with more sons. Apart from allocation of resources, widows in either a monogamous or polygamous family face similar social and economic situations. Practices observed on the death of the common husband are the same for all widows and their survival strategies are similar.

From our analysis, we can conclude that marriage for the Igbo is to a large extent a social bond between two families, their kin and their communities at large. In this situation, divorce, remarriage and levirate relationships affects the whole social structure if not properly executed. Marriage in Igbo society therefore cannot be understood outside the socio-cultural institutions in which it is inter-bedded and which correspondingly shape its structure and give it content. The Igbo have a common world view but evidence would suggest that there are different marriage patterns in a society that subscribe to such a common world-view. (*cf.* Igbo cultural areas).

To a large extent however, we can state that the options open to the Igbo widow are not as limited as is the case in some African societies. They are open to remarriage. They can also take a levir or lover. They have a greater independence and more control over their lives as widows than as wives. However, although this freedom exists for the Igbo widow, we equally recognise the social and economic constraints which make them less attractive. Parts of these constraints will be elaborated when we examine the widow and the economy.





Chapter IV Widows and the Economy

- [4.1.1 Agriculture](#)
 - [4.1.2 Inheritance](#)
 - [4.1.3. Customary Right to Land](#)
 - [4.1.4 Land Ownership.](#)
 - [4.1.5 The Spiritual Value of Land.](#)
 - [4.1.6 Other Problems for Farming Widows](#)
-

One of the most consistent findings by various authors with regards to African widows is the degree to which they are economically self-reliant (Potash 1986:27). Like African women generally, they contribute substantially to household economy and often provide most or all of the support for themselves and their children. In some African societies, women are the primary subsistence producers and men in others. The type of and degree of female and male economic interdependence relates to labour organisation, the requirements of the productive technology and the pattern of income distribution. Men and women in some cases control their own income. But in many, resources are pulled together. This type of income control has implications for the widow. For one, the widow may not differentiate her personal income and property from that of the husband. Furthermore, since the influence of the kin group, the inheritance rules, and kinship ties are strong among many African societies and are often more emphasised than marital ties, a widow stands the chance of losing access to property jointly acquired with her husband. The result is that the widow may have to start a new economic life on the death of the husband.

How does the above picture apply to the rural Igbo widows studied here? The assumption was that they will substantially differ from urban widows in terms of their economic survival strategies. They will invariably be dependent on agriculture and as such ownership and rights to inherit and use land will be very important to them. One would expect that the widow should inherit her husband's property and estate and sustain herself and her family from there. But this is not the case for these widows.

My focus in the interviews were what economic activities widows undertake. I further looked at the following: How significantly were widows' economic activities different from when their spouses were alive? What prompted the choice of economic activity which these widows undertake? What support, if any, do widows get from the extended family, children, levir and lovers (*iko*)? How is land, a major factor in a predominantly agricultural economy controlled in the family in terms of its allocation, use and inheritance? Since widows are not guaranteed part of their husband's wealth including land, we shall examine what economic activities they undertook.

Of the 80 widows interviewed, 28 were traders. 16 were farmers. 17 combined farming and trading (*see* Appendix A). Apart from farming and trading, 7 of the widows were engaged in various types of civil or public service. 4 were self employed in the service industry. 6 of the older widows were not engaged in any economic activity and two are apprenticed in a skills acquisition centre. Since my informants are rural widows, this percentage cannot be representative of Igbo widows. It cannot also be representative of the educated and urban elite widow. I assume however that they derive their major income from the civil and public sectors. The study concentrated on those widows who lived off farming, trading or a combination of both.

4.1.1 Agriculture

The importance of agriculture in Igbo economy cannot be overemphasised. Nwachukwu (1989) argues that up till 1900, a typical Igbo was in the main a farmer. Being the head of a household, he was the owner of productive resources and planned what to do, how to do it and the size of land to be cultivated. Labour consisted of the members of the family, neighbours, friends, in-laws and relations. Nwachukwu argues that there appears to have been a positive correlation between the number of wives, children and friends, and in-laws in Igboland and the size of his farm [109]. Agriculture was the main economic activity of the Igbo for a very long time. Aside from assisting men in yam production, women had their own crops. These ranged from cassava, coco yam, maize, pepper, various types of vegetables and legumes which were exclusive to women. Agriculture and local trading went hand in hand for women. They sold the excess produce in the local markets and substantially provided food for the family.

Cassava was the major agricultural product for women. It was introduced by the Europeans into Igboland after 1914. Since it was looked upon

as inferior to yam - the prestige staple crop and generally regarded as a man's crop, cassava thus became virtually women's crop^[110]. Its production and marketing devolved essentially on women. Ekechi noted that the adaptation of cassava as a food crop tended to enhance the economic position of women in society. Phoebe Ottenberg writing about Igbo women and cassava cultivation noted;

Women's acceptance of cassava meant not only the alleviation of the traditional famine period preceding the yam harvest but also a profound alteration in the economic and social relationship between husbands and wives. In pre-colonial times, if a woman's husband did not give her food, she was in a sorry plight; now she can subsist without her husband^[111]

Besides cassava offered a potential for capital accumulation and ultimately the assertion of some degree of independence. An Afikpo woman reportedly told an interviewer in 1952 that if a woman has any money she buys land and plants cassava. The year after she does this, she can have a crop for cassava meal which she can (also) sell and have her own money. Then she can say, "what is man? I have my own money"¹¹². The introduction of cassava provided women an opportunity to have a special agricultural product.

Agriculture was also important for women in other ways. The Igbo live in the palm belt of southern Nigeria. Agricultural output especially palm produce contributed substantially to the GDP (Gross domestic Product) of Nigeria as a whole. These palms grew wild in farm lands and who owned the land also owned the palm trees. Its processing however was the woman's duty. The palm oil belonged to the man while the palm kernel belonged to the woman. Agricultural export has been important and more pronounced in the fifteen years following the Second World War, when earnings from it were buoyant, and constituted the economic foundation of migration to the towns. From the 1960s an even stronger influence was exerted on the composition of the GDP. The volume of palm kernel in thousand tons were 409 in 1964-6; 213 in 1970-2 and 172

in 1976-8. For palm oil it was 146 for 1964-6; 10 for 1970 and 2 for 1976-8^[113]. Palm produce for a long time constituted a major source of income for men as well as women. But it has over the years declined as a major source of income for rural dwellers. After the 1960s, agricultural export ceased to be a major export earner. Petroleum emerged as the major export earner for Nigeria. Its volume was greatly increased after the Biafra secession was overcome in 1970. Although earnings for a woman were enhanced by income from palm produce, her inability to control the land and its resources as a widow also means a substantial loss of income from the palm trees.

Women raise various agricultural products for food and cash. Indeed profit from sale of agricultural products especially palm produce was the largest single source of capital for investment in trading. (See p.72)

4.1.2 Inheritance

When an Igbo woman becomes a widow, it would be preferable for her to continue to work the land. But inheriting land is impossible for an Igbo widow. She will be subjected to one of two legal systems: statutory law or customary law. According to statutory law, a widow is allowed to inherit part of her husband's property and estate including land. Section 36 of the Nigerian Marriage Act provides for the widow in the following ways:

- (a) a widow with children is entitled to one-third of her husband's estate;
- (b) where the widow has no child, she is entitled to half of her husband's estate.

The above provision therefore, indicates that on paper, a widow is entitled to inherit from her husband on his death. Similarly, his children are entitled to inherit from his estate. Where the deceased is survived by both widow and children, the nuclear family is the sole beneficiary. But how does this apply in practice? In many cases, the applicable rules are difficult to discern. Even where they are known, the provisions are not really subject to precise interpretation. Evidence suggests that the widow's rights of inheritance under the Marriage Act are completely ignored by the deceased's relatives who regard the deceased's estate as their birth right. It also indicates that courts do not follow statutory law but customary law. One rule which most traditional African societies are unanimous about is that in the customary law of intestate succession, the widow has no place in the sense that she can never inherit from her husband. This is in line with the customary practice among the Igbo. In a case reported by Omiyi^[114] for example, portrays the inability of a wife to inherit property from the husband. The court held in this case that;

The native law and customs alleged here is, briefly, that property can not be allotted and descend through a wife. If such native law and custom existed, it would mean that on the death of the childless wife, not of the same family as her husband, property vested in her would pass away from the husband's family, from whom the wife became entitled to it, to the wife's family.

In a 1959 case which Omiyi also reported in her study, the husband was survived by three customary law widows. There were no children. Before his death the deceased instructed his senior wife to administer his property and use the income to maintain herself and the other wives, and to continue staying in the compound with the hope that they

might have children for him. The senior wife attempted to carry out the wishes of her husband but was challenged by his nephew, the plaintiff in this case. He claimed not only that he was the rightful administrator of his uncle's estate but also that the widow should be expelled from the late husband's compound. It was held that a widow can neither inherit her husband's estate nor administer it[115].

Another case which illustrates this customary rule that a widow cannot inherit property was demonstrated in a 1988 land dispute. In this case, a widow from the research area, had sold a piece of land. Her son challenged her mother's right to sell any part of his father's land. In his judgement the traditional ruler of the town noted;

The Eze who is the custodian of the customs and traditions of this town in no equivocal manner condemn the practice of purported purchase of landed property from women or housewives. Such purchase is disallowed by the customary laws of the town particularly in a case such as this where the woman, a widow for that matter, has a grown up son who is the automatic heir to the estate of the deceased father[116].

In an appeal in the above case at the Customary Court in Ahiazu Mbaise in 1989, the court held that;

It is unheard of that a woman with a grown up son can sell her husband's land in the absence of the son...It would be uncustomary if this court were to find for a defendant claiming that he bought a piece of land of a man with a son from his wife[117]

I attended the proceedings of a case during field work in 1995. In this case, a widow who had no surviving son had given all the land belonging to her late husband to a family member whom I would call 'A'. 'A' had taken care of the widow before she died. The extended family brought a case against 'A' in the village council. They claimed as follows;

1. That the widow had no right to give her husband's land over to one member of the family.
2. That although 'A' looked after the widow, he had no customary right to inherit the land alone.
3. That the land should be joint property. They based their claim further on the fact that the extended family had the customary right over the land since their brother had no son.

The village council decided that;

'A' could not inherit from the late widow as she had no right under customary law to transfer land to him

That 'A' be compensated with the plot of land given to the woman when she was married into the family.

That the other family members should pay back to 'A' some part of the money spent on maintaining the widow.

'A' refused the judgement and has taken the case to the customary court. This case is not yet finished, but it is reasonable to believe that the customary court will uphold the judgement of the village council. In these cases, the provisions of section 36 of the Nigerian Marriage Act are grossly neglected both by the courts and village council.

A similar case reported by Omiyi from a Ghana Law Report shows how wide-spread this practice was across many African societies. In this case a customary law widow sued her deceased husband's family claiming one-third of her husband's intestate estate basing her claim on two grounds. Firstly, she asserted that she helped the husband to acquire the property in question. Secondly she claimed that she was a lawful customary law widow and therefore was entitled under customary law to a share of her husband's estate. The court dismissed her claims although it was found out that she actually helped in the acquisition of the property. It was held that under customary law a widow does not become a co-owner of property she helped her husband to acquire[118]. All over Igboland and indeed many parts of Africa, the customary law that a widow cannot inherit her deceased husband's property was notorious by frequent proof in the courts that it became judicially noticeable. In this context, the wife was deprived of inheritance rights in her deceased husband's estate because under the prevailing native laws and customs, the devolution of property follows the blood.

The facts given here raise one major problem, namely that of the economic survival for a widow in a rural Igbo society. The widow's position, her right to inherit property, use and alienate land is constrained by customary and cultural practices. Although comprehensive data are difficult to obtain, it is evident that informal mechanisms have evolved to give widows some access to productive resources.

Although a widow cannot inherit land, most widows gain some kind of access to their husband's land. They have this access as long as they have sons and continue to live in their husband's family. The farm land was to enable the widow to provide some support for herself. Generally such allocation was regarded as temporary since the land belonged to the children as a right. The widow loses control of such land when her sons get married and share their father's land. Mother-son relationship can go sour as a result of who should control land.

Except under special circumstances, widows and in fact most women have access to productive resources especially land only through husband-wife relationship. Although husband's were important sources of farms for widows, some were also fairly independent in the means by which they acquire farms. Widows are not prevented by customs from buying land. This they did through a male proxy or their adult sons. These practices have remained largely unchanged in Igbo society.

4.1.3. Customary Right to Land

A widow lacks the flexibility to manage land and its resources since it theoretically belongs to her children or the kin group. This imposed limitations to what the widow can do with the land. But to understand the widow's peculiar position, we must also examine the peoples' spiritual and ritual attachment to land. We must also examine their understanding of land as the only means of maintaining a cosmological balance between themselves, their ancestors and the generation yet unborn. For the people land is an affair for men. Three explanations may be offered here: (i) women lack customary right over land, (ii) women cannot own land and (iii) the spiritual value of land. To understand why women lack customary rights to land, it is important to know under which circumstances access to land may be gained. Meek, (1937:30) has classified land into the following categories; (i) land which are sacred or taboo, (ii) virgin land, (iii) farmland held in common by the members of a village, kin group, or extended family and iv) individual holdings.

The first class of lands include sacred groves surrounding the shrines of public cults (such as *ala*, the earth-deity and *ekwensu*, the spirit evil) It also includes the taboo lands or evil forest known as *ajo ohia*. These lands do not belong to the individual but are regarded as belonging to the deities or spirit and no one could normally attempt or be allowed to use any fraction of such land for farming purposes. Although some of these sacred groves have been tampered with as a result of the advent of Western religion, they are still in existence in many communities today.

The virgin forests are land which have remained unused for farming purposes because nobody has required it or because the village has forbidden farming there, lest it should lose its use as a means of defence or shade or a source of supplies of wood. If a piece of uncleared forest is of no obvious use to the village, any one is at liberty to clear it for farming purposes, and the land so cleared becomes his private farmland. He cannot be deprived of it, and he can pledge it or transmit it to his children. But if there is any uncertainty as to whether the village may require the uncleared land, the would be farmer must first obtain the permission of the local elders. Such opportunities of having access to land must have been the practice a long time ago. Even when this was the case, women and particularly widows would have no right to clear or lay claim to any of such plots. Customs and traditions as well as the rituals attached to land will prevent them from having such access to land.

The next class of land is farmland held in common by an entire village, kin group, or extended family. This is one of our major area of concern here. This land is formally apportioned out afresh each time it is to be farmed. It is held in reserve for the benefit of the whole group (in addition to individual holdings) and cannot therefore be pledged without the consent of the group as a whole. This land is regarded as *ala ozuzu* (land held in common). Land in some instances are held in common on behalf of the kin group or the extended family. This type of land is usually allocated to married males in a particular family for farming.

Individual holding is a very important practice today. These lands are usually handed on from father to son, or acquired by clearing virgin forest or in return for a loan or sales. Among the Igbo, population pressure has made land very scarce. Land so held belongs to a man and his immediate family and can be pledged without reference to anyone. In this way, those who can afford to, acquire additional land in perpetuity for themselves and their family. In some instances, it may be leased and the land could be redeemed when the cost of lease has been refunded. In all classes of land, a woman does not fit any of the categories through which land may be acquired.

In terms of this customary right to land, let us view this right from the perspective of a married and an unmarried woman. An unmarried daughter has like her brothers, the right to live in her father's house subject to all the normal incidents of local tenure. But since a woman does not actually undertake to cultivate land as of her own right, she is not usually given any farmland^[119]. An informant answered when asked why women could not inherit land;

why should a woman be allocated land? She does not belong to this community. She marries away from this village and can only have access to land where she marries. Her access to land will be through her husband and her children.^[120]

This implies that rights over the use of land depends primarily on agnate descent, and secondarily on local residence. Women do not fit into this arrangement since marriage is basically exogamous. As a result, the head of the family never revolves on the woman. She never expects to become head of the family, nor to inherit land when the husband dies.

With regard to family property, also, the position of the head of the family is inherited by the most senior adult male child. Failing that, the

eldest adult male member of the family would inherit the property but never the woman. Thus a woman of what ever status is not allowed to inherit landed property.

Eze and Nwebo cited court cases which further clarify the above notions. They gave instances of such cases which took place in 1963 and 1967, indicating that women were not allowed to inherit landed property from their father and consequently have no *locus standi* to bring an action in respect of family property. In the 1963 case in particular, the supreme court of Nigeria held that;

By the customary law predominant in Igboland, a widow has no right to succeed to personal or real estate of her deceased husband. Of course, it would be absolute nonsense in the circumstances for a widow who is herself regarded as property to turn round to claim the property of her late husband. In such a case the only right available to her will be to be accommodated by the person who inherits the husband's estate until she remarries or becomes financially independent or dies [121].

Citing Obi's 'Manual of Customary Law', Eze and Nwebo observed further that in some areas within the Igbo society, a widow without a son has no right to remain a member of her late husband's family. The husband's heir or relative might even expel her from the husband's compound and other lands. Moreover, her limited rights in the family are subject to 'good' behaviour. Furthermore, the testamentary powers of the women are also restricted under the Igbo custom. In some communities in Igboland, a married woman or a widow who is living in her husband's family cannot as of right dispose of her landed property or economic crops by will, except to her own children or to members of her husband's family.

4.1.4 Land Ownership.

The same mode of thinking about customary right over land also created the atmosphere in which it was felt that a woman could not own land. Land ownership among the Igbo confers certain rights which are the same whether under statutory or customary law. But ownership is subject to differing interpretations. According to Lord Cohen, the meaning of the word 'owner' is not always clear. In his opinion,

...the term 'owner' is loosely used in West Africa. Sometimes, it denotes what is in effect absolute ownership; at other times is only to rights [122].

Chubb (1961:6) in his study of land tenure among the Igbo, pointed out also that:

in the main, the term, ownership, hardly connotes the exact relationship between such an occupier and his land. He has full right to its produce and may build and plant permanent crops as he pleases, but he regards himself as holding it in trust for the next generation

Collaborating the above, an informant noted:

Land was here before our fathers were born. They did not own the land but merely farmed on it. But as population grew, people became more acquisitive. They had to acquire more farm land for their family...men acquired the land and women only helped to farm on it. [123]

Also, the Pivv Council noted in a case brought before it at the beginning of the century that;

the notion of individual ownership is quite foreign to native ideas. Land belongs to the community, the village, or the family, never to the individual [124]

Communal ownership was the system when population densities were small and no one man could own or lay exclusive claim to any piece of land. However, when a community, kin group or family migrated to a new region and cleared it for settlement, it could lay claims to it. This action according to Chubb conferred the strongest of all titles to the land [125]. In such cases, the land holding passed on to descendants. I could not establish when individual holdings become very important in land ownership. But oral evidence suggests that this must have been long ago [126].

Even though Nwabueze argues otherwise (that is that family or communal land amongst the Igbo may have its origin in an individual founder who first acquired the land), he also recognises the possibility of a new settlement being founded by an entire community or family. They then entrust titular ownership to a strong patriarchal head or leader [127]. This however, developed from customary rights of occupancy, into real ownership after many generations of continuous occupation. Due to abundance of land in the past perhaps, there was little or no friction and dispute over pieces of land until population pressure turned individuals into petty capitalists.

As Wigwe contends, in Igbo customary law, ownership is in the sense outlined above. But whatever meaning is attached to ownership denotes who has right to control and benefit from it. The right, however, has been challenged. Some are of the opinion that the idea of an absolute property in land is incompatible with the limits which society places on the use of land. Such titles, leases, and mortgages merely express man's desire for orderliness. In the above circumstance, women have no customary right to own land as members of a village group since they are expected to marry. Furthermore, they do not have such rights as married women or widows since they are theoretically strangers in the community.

4.1.5 The Spiritual Value of Land.

There is still a third explanation for widows problem in getting access to farm land. This can be sought in the spiritual value attached to land. In approaching the subject of land ownership in Igboland and its impact on the widow's economic existence and survival, it is important to emphasise that land is sacred. In the context of traditional religion, land is the basic matrix of existence [128]. Land is described adoringly as 'mother earth' or earth goddess *ala* and is generally regarded as the arch-divinity of every locality in Igboland. Chubb described land as the *fons et origo* [129] (fountain and origin) of human morality, productivity and fertility.

Actions which constitute desecration of the land or abomination include suicide, homicide, stealing of farm products especially yam and coco yam, giving birth to twins (in the past), incest, a widow getting pregnant during the period of mourning and a host of other actions. Ilogu (1974) has itemised about twenty-four 'abominations' or ethical and social prohibitions and taboo of Igbo moral code associated with land. Any violation of these prohibitions is considered moral, spiritual and social pollution of the land. They therefore require appropriate ritual purification of the offender(s) and the community in order to appease the earth goddess. Echeruo (1978) has further emphasised the pre-eminence of *ala* among the other divinities and noted that;

one divinity, however, was beyond the capriciousness of Igbo men: that divinity is neither 'Igwe' nor even Chukwu, but Ala, the goddess of the earth. She was the one divinity which no man nor woman and no community could afford to offend, much less discard. If ever there was a supreme god among the Igbo, it was ala [130].

In cases of abomination against the land, it has to be sanctified, placated and purified of the sacrilege (*ikwa ala*) by special rituals through the office of the appropriate priest (*onye isi ala*) using appropriate cult objects (egg, fowl, kola nuts) as advised by the oracle. It is true to say that the cult of the ancestors or ancestor worship is closely linked with land. In traditional Igbo society, *ala* has a special shrine established by the competent priest including the *eze-ala* (priest of the land) and marked out with special shrubs or trees. It is perhaps because of conceptualisation such as the above that land ownership is a special privilege and a matter of prestige in all cultures, and especially among the Igbo [131].

The myth, rituals, taboos, beliefs, sanctions and emotional commitment that this worship engender on the Igbo becomes an instrument of social, political and economic control. It also imposes some degree of conservatism and constraint on Igbo land utilisation and ownership. The priest of *ala* for example is subject to many taboos. Thus they are forbidden as a rule to eat in another house, to eat food cooked by a menstruous woman, or to sit or have sexual intercourse on the ground. In some communities, widows and tattooed persons are forbidden to enter the house of the priest of *ala* [132].

From the reflection on *ala*, it must be mentioned that any research into the foundations and principles of Igbo land use, inheritance and taboos associated with it must understand the people's moral and religious attachment to it and not only its utilitarian value as a means of production. This of course, has implications for women and widows especially since control of land and its use fall outside the area of women's domain in Igbo society.

The religious traditions help to explain the existing customary law practices as they relate to widows. Even in the case of statutory married women, it is difficult to see how she could inherit her husband's real property, especially if it is part of family property. In the main, land was not easily accessible to widows. Men dominated land through their religious and spiritual control of it. The ownership and inheritance system, the religious meaning attached to land ownership and other customary practices place women in a different position. It was therefore impossible for the widow to survive entirely from farming. As a result of these constraints, we can understand why widows take to trade and other economic activities.

4.1.6 Other Problems for Farming Widows

Many of the widows presented the issue of land as the major problem which they face in farming. This state of affair is wide-spread for many widows. A woman who was widowed in 1960 had this to say about her husband's farmland.

When my husband died, I was in real trouble if I touched his yam, palm trees or land. I have been a very miserable widow especially after his brothers took away my seven children. The girls were given away in marriage without my consent and the younger ones were given away to distant people where I could not see them. I had to go to my father's house to stay. On one occasion, I came to my husband's house to collect my goats which nobody was taking care of. They beat me up, took me to the police and bribed the magistrate to jail me. I was sentenced to three months and I served it because I could not pay the option of fine [133].

In spite of these constrains, these rural widows engaged in one form of subsistent agriculture or the other. Two major additional factors come into consideration. These are the question of the number of plots that can be put under cultivation as well as the labour requirements for the production of certain crops. Land continues to be scarce due to the population pressure on available land. In the early 1970s for example the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) estimated that the total area cropped in Nigeria (including bush fallow) was less than two-fifths of

the area suitable for agriculture. The low ration, along with the widespread practice of shifting cultivation, suggest a favourable relationship of land to population. The impression is somewhat misleading. For Green & Rimmer (1981:70) notes that in some parts of the southern forest which includes Igboland, pressure of population has reduced fallow periods to interval too short to restore soil fertility.^[134] If we go by Leith-Ross's estimate of the fallow period in the 1930, she recorded that a farm in the Igbo area could lie fallow for four or five years during which time the land regains possession of its fertility^[135]. This was because of the abundance of land. Today however, a land in the Mbaise area cannot be left fallow for more than one year. Population pressure in this area has always been higher than most parts of Igboland.

As a result of this pressure on land, every effort is made by anyone who had the means to keep all available land in his or her possession. No wonder customary rules have persisted among the Igbo since they give men advantage in the control of land. This is critical for the widow considering that agriculture was the main occupation of over 60% of the rural population including the Igbo^[136].

In terms of the labour requirements, there are certain crops which the widow cannot cultivate. There is also a significant reduction in the number of plots a widow can put to use after the death of the husband. The widow may not pull together the labour needed to farm large plots of land. 62 of the informants have access to between 4-6 plots of their former husband's total agricultural land. In the past, a family's total cultivated land could be as many as 10-12 plots. Some of the widows still have access to all their former husband's lands because they have not been shared between their unmarried children. With their status as a widow, they will not be able to put the land to effective use alone. The labour requirement and the traditional division of labour along gender lines also dictate what crops the widow can plant. Yam cultivation, for instance, is labour intensive and requires a lot of attention from planting to harvest. Basden (1966:147 ff.) called yam-the Igbo staff of life and noted as follows;

The cultivation of yams absorbs such a great proportion of time and energy that it deserves appropriate attention when writing about the occupation of the Ibos...the planting of yam is a serious and important business to the native, and under the old system of government any infringement of the farming etiquette led to grave consequences.

This of course limited the woman's ability to engage in yam cultivation. An informant widowed in 1995 answered when asked what crops she cultivates;

After my husband's death, I was instructed by his relatives to sell his yam tubers and take a little which I can manage alone. I plant cassava, and coco yam^[137].

Another informant noted;

I had to sell my husband's yam tubers because people believed that since the owner is dead, the yam will continue to diminish yearly through poor harvest. The yam was sold in a far away market where buyers will not know that the owner was dead. My children took the yam to the market. They had to put on cloths that are not their normal mourning dresses. We sold the bulk of the yam because I could not manage it without help. Today, I plant coco yam, maize, groundnut and vegetables"^[138]

Only 3 of the widows cultivated yam on an average scale. They could afford to buy the labour, had assistance from their male sons and in some cases were helped by relatives.

To continue farming the land she worked as a wife, certainly is no easy solution for an Igbo widow. No wonder many combine farming with trade and some even entirely replace farming by trade.

4.2 Trade

By trade, we mean everything that is connected directly with buying and selling, and more especially the functions of marketing. Trading fills up the lives of many Igbos. Trade was of two kinds; local as well as regional (or long distance) trade. Trading activities provided an alternative occupation for many widows who could not make a living through farming alone. Local trade in particular has been important for women in many ways. It provided avenue for the sale of excess farm produce such as coco-yam, palm produce, vegetables, groundnut, maize, pepper etc. Basden (1966:194) describing traditional Igbo society stated that it might be affirmed that the whole of the native trade was on the hands of women and by them largely the markets were controlled. Trading became more important for women especially during the early twentieth century. Women especially have responded to increasing level of trade during the later part of the century by turning to marketing goods and services to help sustain themselves and their family. Basden confirmed that in former times, the women had direct transaction with the trading posts. These were the produce buyers who bought palm oil and kernel from women, but there sprang up a class of middlemen who worked on commission, a source of women's agitation in later years.

Ordinarily, no Igboman took part in the actual buying and selling in the local market. He may occasionally assist in preparing the goods for the market and may, occasionally assist in carrying to and fro, but there his activities usually ceased. Seen against this background Ekechi noted that it was not surprising that women strongly resented any attempt to challenge their dominance in the cassava trade. Thus in 1938 women complained vehemently "against unfair male competition in the sphere of women's crops, especially cassava"^[139]. What seems clear

according to Ekechi is that not only did men intrude into spheres of women's economic activity, but also they ultimately dominated it, especially its long-distance trade sector. Several factors seem to have made this possible. The infrastructure developments (roads and rail ways) as well as the introduction of bicycles and motor lorries had facilitated the expansion of trade. Thus while women still dominated the cassava trade at the local markets, men had very likely ventured into long-distance trading using bicycles and motor lorries as mode of hauling cassava. And since these new modes of transport afforded increased opportunities for bulk trading as compared to the traditional head loading, they increasingly helped to promote higher profit. It is therefore reasonable to assume that prospects of a lucrative trade must have provided the impulse for men to engage in the cassava trade.

Equally important are cultural factors which also may have given men a decisive communal advantage over women. For example by the 1930s and 1940s few women, if any, ventured into long-distance trading (Ekechi 1989: 185). Besides, long distance trading entailed being away from home. In fact social and cultural (sexual) constraints tended to prohibit women from engaging in long-distance trade in the traditional economy. Women who habitually returned home late from even the local markets invariably incurred the displeasure of the elders as well as reprimands from their husbands. Furthermore, until recently, there were few women indeed who could afford to transport cassava by bicycles or motor lorries. Thus from the 1940s noted Ekechi, the marketing of fermented cassava in far-away markets seems to have devolved largely on men. In fact, by the 1950s and early 1960s, some informants noted that men dominated the long-distance trade in cassava to various parts of the Igbo hinterland. The cassava was sold in bulk to women who then retailed it in the local markets.

The commercialisation from the 1920s of the market which implied greater emphasis on a money economy, colonial exaction (such as taxation) and the drive towards self-improvement may have all combined to induce men to intrude into the sphere of women's business. It can be stated that colonialism and its impact on the larger society altered the economic and political position of women in Igboland. Mba (1982:69) summed it up as follows:

The position of women in Southern Nigerian Society was both diminished and enhanced under colonialism. In government and administration, there was almost total loss of their traditional areas of responsibility and participation because they were excluded from all levels of administration. In the economic realm, while colonialism provided increased opportunities for some women in trade, it also led to a take over by men of many areas formally reserved for women and to a gross under-utilisation of women in their traditional roles in agriculture.

From all indications, it appears that this was the state of affairs till the period of the Nigerian - Biafra Civil War between 1967 and 1970^[140]. The civil war had the Eastern region as the theatre of war. The Igbo economic and commercial activities were paralysed. Agriculture during the period was disrupted as people planted in fear or never planted at all. However, agrarian economy especially food production fared well in some rural areas of Igboland such as Udi, Ohaozara, Abakiliki, Afikpo. Beyond some of the Igbo boundaries, areas such as Etche and other parts of the present Rivers State became sources for procuring food. To a large extent the war changed the economic position of women in Igbo society once again.

Research in the Mbaise area indicate that regional trade outside the town and state boundaries increased during the war in addition to local trade. An informant noted that most women during and after the Nigeria-Biafra civil war were active traders^[141]. The civil war like colonialism led to a sexual reversal in inter-regional trade once more. Men could not freely engage in this trade during the war and the war created opportunity for most women to once more take control of the cassava trade.

Ahia Attack: Women on the Economic War Front

On the Igbo side teenage boys and men of up to 50 years and more were recruited or conscripted into the army. The war, according to one informant created a large widow population and poverty among the Igbo but liberated women in many ways. Women fought on the economic front. Asked why she took to trading during the war, this widow replied;

Before the war, I was dependent on my husband's income. When he died in the first year of the war, I had to start trading to save my children from hunger. We went to various places which would have been impossible if my husband was alive. In our group of ten, six were widows. The war changed things and it is difficult to reverse it now.^[142]

Changes during the war modified the position of women in general and widows in particular. Women became more involved in regional trade during the period of the civil war. This remained attractive for many women even after the war. I gathered from oral sources that a large percentage of women who are engaged in long distance trade today remain predominantly widows. Certain factors were responsible for this change. In the main, the social constraints within the society which prevented them from undertaking long-distance trade beyond the local areas as married women, became less important for the widow. Moreover, the widow had to survive. Survival for others during the war was also more important that the social constraints which prevented women from taking part in the trade in the past. Thus over many of women involved in such trade today are widows. The remaining are usually older women who have reached menopause.

At the end of the civil war in 1970, one would have expected that men would take over the long distance trade from the women once more. This did not appear to have been the case since women still dominate the trade. This can be explained by the following reasons: First, easy means of transportation by lorries which reduced time required for the trade made it possible for groups of women to engage in long distance trade. Women therefore do not have to be away from home for long periods of time. The labour requirement in the form of driving, loading and off loading of the goods were still being done by men. In addition, cassava trade has been traditionally looked upon as a female area of activity and men were ready to give it up for migration to the urban centres after the civil war. For the widow in particular, she had to fend for herself and

was not obligated to be at home at any particular time.

It must be noted however that Igbo women in most cases combined farming and local trade. It was typical to hear many widow's say that they are both traders and farmers (*see* Appendix A). Farming for many is a way of life and not just an occupation. A lot of women would therefore farm some piece of land available to them in addition to trading. The fact that the society does not look kindly on a woman who buys all that she needs from the market makes it imperative that every one sees herself as a farmer also.

4.3 Kin Group and Communal Assistance

But farming and trading were not the only means of survival for widows. In purely traditional society and by the custom of widow inheritance, the heir succeeds to the wives of the deceased as regards the duty to maintain his widow. But the degree to which the heir or those who have inherited the widows provide maintenance and support for them depends on what the widow did. If she leaves her deceased husband's family and remarry there is no support. The rules governing inheritance are consistent with the general character of the social organisation. At the same time, they are so elastic and based on such equitable principles that they can be easily modified to meet changing conditions, such as the progressive tendency towards individualisation.

The Igbo custom of widow inheritance, whereby the heir or successor steps into the shoes of the deceased kin as regards the deceased's rights and obligation to his wives, was perhaps one of the most effective ways of providing for her in an intact traditional society. This was well and good for the bygone days. But today traditional obligations are easily evaded. They have become very burdensome and most people are no longer interested in widow inheritance. These arrangements have become unattractive to men for several reasons. In the past, a woman and her children increased a man's pool of labour for farming. As agriculture loses its importance as the means of sustenance, labour requirements also become less important.

Related to the above is the shortage of land for agriculture which implicitly reduces the number of plots that could be put under cultivation. Monogamy which increased with adaptation of western religion and culture has contributed to this decline. For the widow, there is increased tendency towards individualism. The widow, therefore, has to look else where for support and sustenance. A widow commented when asked what assistance she gets from the kin group.

I sustain myself by farming. I sell some of my products for cash. The extended family does not assist me in any way [143]

For one widow, the case was different. She said;

Since my husband died, his property has been in my care though I placed some in the care of my in-laws. I have not had any problems. My in-laws are unique. They take good care of me and my children [144].

According to some informants, widow's children in some cases are shared among relatives and at times co-wives. At times, kinsmen involve widows in life sustenance such as share cropping.

The statistics indicate that the kin group play less role in assisting the widow. 69 of the informants indicated that they had no form of assistance from the kin group. 4 had some assistance from the kin group. 2 widows got assistance in the form of training their children from the extended family (*see* Appendix A). However, in most African societies where rules of seclusion, as among the Hausa of Northern Nigeria or limited access to resources as among the Swahili prevent widows from being self-reliant, widows depend partly on natal kin or either a new marriage [145].

Older widows among most rural communities also rely on the support provided by their children, especially by their sons. Daughters in-laws, co-wives, sons and occasionally daughters provide substantial assistance to the widow. In-laws in many instances provided assistance for the widow especially if her daughters married wisely and successfully. They provide for the widow in cash and in kind as well and protect her from undue maltreatment within and outside her home. Widows may also be protected by their own parents and their matrilineal kin. Brothers and sisters in most parts of Igboland supported the widow in various ways. Some of the informants noted the assistance from their children;

After my husbands death, my survival depended on what I could do for myself. But today, my children and in laws assist me. I thank God that I have these children to take care of me at old age [146].

There is much difference now and when my sons were not yet married. Initially, they cared for me, but now, their attention is divided between me and their own families I do not expect much any longer. I farm my husband's land since all my children live in the city. They are yet to share their father's land [147]

One informant said she had assistance in cash from her lover and his wife. The lover also paid school fees for her children. In exchange, she rents part of her husband's land to her lover's family. This was the only example of assistance from a lover did not come to my notice. But I assume that other cases exist since many of the widows were not willing to answer such questions.

A final source of assistance could be found in the rural banking system and friendly societies. Widows who had guarantors were given small loans from the rural banking systems known as *isusu* and *otu* (triff and loans groups). Some of the informants indicated that they took loans from friendly societies for trading. The virtues of friendly societies were thrift and self-help, inculcation of the spirit of cautious husbanding of funds, a determination to save some amount however meagre, for the rainy day.

4.4 New Possibilities

Wage earners have never formed part of the Igbo social system in the traditional or rural societies. But with the introduction of colonial rule and education for women, salaried work has become an important part of Igbo economic life especially in the urban areas. It is increasingly becoming a possibility for rural women. Among the 80 widows interviewed, 7 used these possibilities to survive economically (*see* Appendix A). Western institutions and a variety of openings are available in this area. Teaching for women stands first; then comes, nursing in hospitals dotted about the rural areas. Those informants who have acquired western education find themselves in these professions while others are self employed in the service sector. This is an emerging trend and the possibilities open to widows in this sector will continue to increase.

Although I identified a case of prostitution among the informants, I could not establish how many women who get involved in the practice. I think however that there may be more cases than meet the eye. At least, this is an option for young widows in many other societies.

We may conclude that the social system determines what widows can do in the economy. The support system which formed the basis of widow sustenance in the past has given way to a more individualised survival system. But the customary rules which determined the system of inheritance of assets and property have not changed. Customary rules of inheritance as well as right to use property places the widow in a difficult position. Rules and regulations relating to the use of land for agriculture have remained unchanged over time. This is more pronounced if the widow has no male children who can inherit their father's land. The result is that the majority of widows in Igbo society have no secure land rights and are unable to ensure sustenance for themselves and their family through agriculture alone. Consequently, trading became an important supplementary source of income, in some cases even an alternative to farming. These two economic activities are also in many cases combined with assistance from nearest kin.





Chapter V Disadvantaged or Privileged? A Conclusion.

This study sought to examine the widowhood rituals and practices in a rural Igbo society. Certain of the conclusions in this paper can be presented with some confidence, whereas others represent more tentative forays into problems that for the moment are difficult to conceptualise.

I started this study by looking at the problems associated with the study of women's history in Africa. It is imperative that I also make some concluding remarks in this area. It was noted that the studies of African women have been plagued by more than the methodological and ideological question of male perspective. In the main, it has been observed that this reflected the changing attitudes in European society towards women's issues. In effect, African women have sometimes become a field upon which the Western world has played out some of its concerns about women in general (Hafkin & Bay 1976:2). Colonialism in their view for example would foster the emancipation of non-western women by raising living and educational standards. At the same time, women would be freed from the drudgery of farm labour and oppression of social customs-evils that were said to include early betrothal, lack of choice in marriage partners and few or no divorce rights. Writers dealt with the problems of women's education and supported reforms designed to abolish bride-wealth and polygamy and to improve women's inheritance rights[148]. Such analysis reflects the conception of African women as subjugated and oppressed members of a largely patriarchal society.

This study has highlighted the extent to which these conceptions are not so easily converted to the Igbo. Evidence has shown that women were sometimes active in the economic and social process. Uchendu's assessment of the Igbo woman needs to be restated here:

The African Woman regarded as a chattel of her husband, who has made a bride wealth payment on her account is not an Igbo woman, who enjoys a high socio- economic and legal status. She can leave her husband at will, abandon him if he becomes a thief, and summon him to a tribunal, where she will get fair hearing. She marries in her own right and manages her trading capital and her profit as she sees fit. Though women are not the normal instrument through which land rights are passed, and though their virilocal residence after marriage makes it impossible for them to play some important social and ritual roles in their natal villages, yet they can lease hold, take titles and practice medicine (1965:87).

In spite of the fact that women generally have received little or no attention in historical writings in Africa, Igbo women, were among the first to receive attention in anthropological research and literature as a group distinct from Igbo men[149]. This study of Igbo women as widows revealed far reaching differences between their relationship with men as opposed to the general notion that women are a subjugated group in all societies. Studies of any aspect of women's lives should therefore be approached with a broader frame of mind than the popular conception of the victimisation and subjugation of women found in most literature's about women in most African societies.

To a large extent, the presentation attempted to analyse women not as objects but as actors in the social and economic process. In looking at women and their activities in this study, we have gone beyond description of roles and status. Igbo widows like other women have been found to interact with their society. They are also visible and are an integral part of the social system. At the same time this study has recognised that women cannot be wholly in control of all the social and economic forces which affect their lives. In this regard, women's and men's existence and activities are closely interrelated to the extent that changes in the sphere of one must necessarily affect the other even in societies where labour, social and political realities are strictly divided along sex lines.

In her discussion of Igbo women's roles, Judith Van Allen has noted that women's organisations were very influential in policy making and community affairs via such organisations as *mitiri*, (meeting) which is the association of wives of a village[150]. While we recognise from this study that it is a wrong concept to generalise all African women as oppressed and subordinate in society, we equally have recognised that there are social structures

and mechanisms that prevent women from enjoying full equality with men.

In general terms, the variations in the presentation of African women discussed in this work have all been shown to produce inadequate representations in terms of viewing women as actors in the historical process. The need for a development of a final trend in presenting women in history is therefore clear. In this study we have brought out both the specific social and economic and ideological constraints within which women have lived and ways in which women have interacted in relation to them. This presentation has emphasised also the need to understand some of these constraints so to say from the perspective of the cultural setting in which they obtained. This should be the ideal trend.

Looking at widows in particular, it was found that widows constituted a large proportion of the adult population among the Igbo. This is confirmed in previous studies. In addition, it has indicated how little widow's lives as a group and as individuals have been studied. From this study, we may state that when examined from the perspective of the widow, many social processes look different. These include the extent and nature of corporate kin group responsibility, the significance and durability of marital alliance and the differential importance attached to conjugal and filial bonds. Others are the pattern of affinal relationships, process of household and community development and dissolution, and the nature and continuity or discontinuity of women's different ties to the community.

However, as actors, widows make choices from the possibilities available to them in Igbo society. Although behaviour cannot be explained by such abstract principles as descent, affinity, or sibling solidarity, and conformity to norms is not automatic, it is clear nonetheless, that some norms have strong institutional support and others do not. Rules concerning marriage and child custody, rights of residence, access to productive resources, the sexual division of labour and the labour requirements of productive technologies, are aspects of the structure that influence, but do not determine what widows do. Others are moral values, religious beliefs and supernatural sanctions, the basis by which prestige is accorded, and available channels for meeting sexual and emotional needs. In the main many of these processes while limiting the options open to the widows in some ways, frees her from perpetual control by the husband's kin in other ways. Hence the widow in Igbo society while better off in terms of independence to control her social and economic life is constrained in terms of access to productive resources in the husband's family.

In Chapter two, we examined the rituals undergone by the widow in Igbo society. We also examined the rationale behind these practices. Widowhood practices among the Igbo are closely tied to traditional beliefs about death, inheritance and feminine roles, family structure and family relationships. Of significance is the ritual aspects of the practice. These rituals consists of agreed practices derived from the belief that death brings corruption and the dead still have contact with the living, especially their closest partners in life. These rituals also arose from the strong sense of community between the living and the dead which formed a basic ingredient of the cosmology of the Igbo people. This situation has to be remedied before the widow is free to return to a new life. The people rationalise these practices arguing that they perform important functions: They give the widow protection from her deceased husband whom the people believe would still attempt to make contact with his wife. Practices and rituals were to sever this bond between the man and his wife. They also acted as a means of ensuring that the deceased was accepted into the congregation of his ancestor who had died before him.

For one thing, the strong survival of traditional burial forms account for the continued survival of traditional widowhood practices some of which may imply humiliation of the widow. At this stage of the development of Igbo society, one would have expected that these traditional burial forms and the rituals associated with them would have been discarded. However, some reasons for their continued existence may be advanced.

To a large extent, both Christianity and Western education, two major factors that have influenced the Igbo since the early nineteenth century, has been helpless in the face of the continued existence of these traditional burial forms. Trimmingham (1959:116) has shown that instead of abolishing the irrational and superstitious fears connected with witchcraft, ghost haunting, sorcery and the like, converts feel themselves more exposed than hitherto because they have given up the charms which traditional society consider adequate protection and without acquiring substitutes. It is this apparent impotence of Western religion in the face of superstitions that explains why traditional funeral rites and forms survive in Igbo society. This was apparent while I was doing field work. I witnessed a widow holding a crucifix instead of a broom stick or knife (which were the traditional instruments used to protect the widow from the spirits). Irrespective her Christian faith, this widow still clings to the old rule. In other words, we are faced with a problem which is purely cosmological. I think that many widows would not view the rituals as oppression and subjugation. For many of them, this is the only way to express ones love for a deceased husband, and to protect oneself.

I have also raised the practical issues involved. This has to do with the widow's association with the *Umuada* and her

husband's relatives which is dominated by their assessment of her personality and her performance as a married woman both towards her husband and his kin. We noted that the *Umuada* performed these widowhood rituals. We also raised the issue of how discriminatory or spiteful these practices could be. Some may view this as discrimination. But these *Umuada* are married somewhere else and one day will face the same ritual on the death of their husbands. If the regime gone through by a widow is so burdensome as some writers have noted, it would be irrational for the *Umuada* to encourage it since they will face similar treatment. We can therefore say that these rituals were performed by the *Umuada* because there was at every stage of the process a sense of community between the dead and the living. This involved a much wider group ranging from the family, the kin group and the community as a whole rather than the widow alone. It is assumed that it made everyone so mutually interdependent that what affected one adversely also affected the other in the same manner, the *Umuada* included. But this point notwithstanding, there is no doubt that the regime gone through by a widow is burdensome.

In chapter three, I have taken up the question of how domestic and affinal relationships affected the widow in Igbo society. With regard to this, I touched on the rationale for marriage among the Igbo and its importance to women. Marriage was identified as essential for completeness of the individual in Igbo society. In order to understand the mechanism by which this functions or the direction of its change, I discussed the various forms of marriage and its impact on the Igbo social system. I emphasised the importance of kinship relations among the Igbo in order to understand how it can affect the widows as well as how it is related to gender issues in society.

I attempted further to show how marriage in Igbo society was vital in creating social bonds and alliances between different groups of people since marriage was essentially exogamous. Its impact in the woman's relationship as widow were highlighted. This section also showed some of the common experiences of women in marriage, some aspects of gender relations and what defined choice of a marriage mate. Other features of Igbo domestic and affinal relationship such as the levirate and polygamy were examined.

From this study, there are indications that issues of polygamy, sexual conduct, allocation of economic resources, marriage, divorce and widowhood practices often transcend the immediate family and are affected by group social norms and values. From this study, we can state that domestic relations are at the heart of the Igbo society. In this area, in we have noticed that domestic relationships involved far more people than a nuclear family. To a large extent, the concept of family most often functionally (not conceptional) encompass a wide range of relatives including grandparents, parents, children, brothers and sisters, cousins, aunts and uncles etc. It is evident from this study that the Igbo sense of communal living makes it imperative that responsibility, obligation and authority is wide-ranging and encouraged. The importance of the individual, as a general value is still submerged to that of the collective will. In this situation, domestic relationships and decision making within a nuclear family are often influenced by a wide variety of individuals and situations.

In terms of marriage in particular, the Igbo people do not stress that biological and social paternity must coincide; hence the institution of levirate. In this circumstance, marital fidelity is not emphasised. Therefore, although marriage is an extremely important institution in defining adult status for women in Igbo society, the rights transferred to the husband and his kin at marriage do not bind a wife to continue the marriage after the death of her husband. This is related to the fact that although Igbo kinship relationships have a strong patrilineal bias, the woman is open to other ties such as remarriage. Let me quote Henderson's description of the Onitsha situation which I believe fits partly into our own analysis of the Mbaise people. He writes of the "four possibilities" of a widow under these circumstance: she may be sent to her natal home to be maintained by her people there; she may return to her natal home but continue to be maintained by her husband's successor; she may be allowed to remain for her husband, living in his house and continuing to bear children in his name; or she may be formally taken over in marriage by his successor or the latter's designated equivalent (1977:223).

In all cases, this study shows that these possibilities have consequences for ownership of the children she has produced or will produce, the upbringing of those children and the support she may get. Sending a wife home without support is viewed as an act of divorce by the Igbo people, and it frees the woman and her kin group from any future obligation to the husband's people. It is likely to occur only if the woman has no male children. All in all, levirate relationships are being reduced by economic and ideological changes. This also holds for polygamous marriages.

From our analysis, if we refer to any comparative scheme for classifying widows, the Igbo will be difficult to place in the scale that classifies "solutions" to widowhood according to how much change occurs in the widow's lifestyle upon the husband's death. While most of the liberating factors are present and open to widows, social constraints

appear to be an unending factor. We assume that remarriage can jeopardise a woman's right to use her husband's land and support from her children, but widowhood need not, particularly if the woman lives in her husband's family and has male children. We realise also that in a society that defines marriage as existing to produce children, the options open to women also depends on their continued childbearing capacity.

Divorce and remarriage are not common even in contemporary Igbo society. But given the possibility of remarriage, as well as the economic opportunity open to Igbo women, widowhood ought to be for most Igbo women a phase in their lives. It is a point at which many women have the largest number of options-more than during or before marriage. Age for example determine the number of options open to a widow in many societies[151]. But in practice today, this does not seem to be the case for the Igbo widow. Social circumstances, the close knit ties created by the marriage system between mother and child as well as the husband's family puts a constraint on options open to the widow.

In chapter four, I have discussed the widow and the economy in Igbo society. To understand the nature of the widow's position, I have reviewed those activities which women undertook as well as the constraints which they face in terms of inheritance of land in particular. Attempt was made to show how important land as a resource is in Igbo society and why widows could not inherit it. I offered three explanations for this. Women had no customary right over land, they could not inherit it and the spiritual value attached to land made land a male prerogative. Traditional religious value have been a source of power for men. It has also been a source of subordination for women. In spite of over one hundred years of Christianity, traditional religion has been little affected in terms of its aid to male control of land. In this regard, religious beliefs reflect and reinforce the subordination of women. I argued that men used these reasons to rationalise their continued control of land.

In terms of economic activity, I contended that in the main agriculture was the single most important activity for Igbo women. The division of labour on gender lines were implicated in the politics of resource control. To a large extent men controlled and manipulated the rituals involved in planting the most prestigious crops, such as yam. Men also had control of land for its production. Coco yam, was grown by women and required less specialised knowledge than did yam (Amadiume 1984:29).

It has been identified that women in Igbo society have some access to land within their husbands' household. But they could not inherit it. The importance of land in Igbo economy and its social and cosmological increases its value. It also increased interest in its inheritance as well as strengthening patrilineal descent. It would appear that as land became more individualised under the influence of colonial requirement for agricultural products, women's access to land for subsistence farming, especially for market farming, was circumscribed. Of course, the colonial legal system also barred women from owning land. The system recognised the patriarchal power in land ownership. In this regard, while the modern legal system offer the formal possibility for the inheritance of land by widows, actual legal judgements commonly defer to the traditional customs which routinely deny a woman's right to land. In order words, ignorance, poverty, tradition and outright male opposition are formidable barriers to women's ability actually to obtain the legal rights they have on paper. Not only do women receive land of declining size and quality, their use rights are becoming increasingly insecure. This notwithstanding, women who have access to money could buy land.

Trading was one important activity for many widows. Although trading was not as important as agriculture during the pre-colonial times, this pattern changed during the nineteenth century. Women responded to increasing levels of trade during the nineteenth century by turning to marketing, in part because of their discriminatory role in the subsistence economy. In particular, petty trading offered women especially widows, independence that they might not ordinarily have contemplated.

All in all, this study shows that women, especially as widows play important part in local and regional or long distance trade. For the widow, her obligation to her family and to herself in terms of sustenance made the acquisition of marketing profits appealing, allowing them to provide more to their family than they might simply from farming. This was more pronounced for the widow whom we identified is now very active in long distance trade, a predominantly male area of activity in the past.

On the other hand, there is considerable decline in communal and kin group assistance to the widow. The lack of communal support may be attributed to a breakdown of kinship institutions resulting from tendency towards individualism and capital expansion. Certainly these developments have transformed most societies including the Igbo, modifying social structures, but change has not been unidirectional. There has been a varied impact on the organisation of the Igbo society, different types of adoption to a cash economy and labour migrations and different

implications of such adaptations for the case of the widows. This is indication of a general transition from communal to more individualistic systems. We have also identified a new and emerging trend with regard to the educated widow. The professional and educated widow will be the emerging trend in the future. In this regard, we assume that the civil and public sector will be a major contributor to widow income in the future.

Generally, we must note that economic issues are of great importance to Igbo women. Their significant emotional and social relations are ties to children, particularly their sons. Women work as hard as men to support themselves in a cash economy and to educate their children. They usually hope that by having sons, they will be in a position where one or more will succeed financially and be able to provide for them in old age. From the analysis of the Igbo family structure, motherhood brings important change in a woman's status, a change from a mistress who simply attracts and allures to a mother who shares the dignity of her husband and who increased the lineage membership. Uchendu (1965) has observed that the husband-wife relation does not last as long as the child-mother bond. This study shows that children are a great social insurance agency, a protection against dependence for women in old age. To have a male child is to strengthen both the social and the economic status, for it is a male child who inherits the father's property. It may be assumed that a woman or man who has no male child contemplates old age with particular horror.

As a woman becomes a widow, her relationship with her husband's kin and access to productive resources depends on this mother-child bond. This bond not only guarantees a woman right of residence, it also acts a social and economic insurance in old age. It also ensures that the widow is guaranteed continued right of residency in her husband's family. In present day Igbo society, labour migration is one factor which has affected child-mother relationship in terms of control and use of land. Migrant sons have less need for land, thus leaving the majority of widows access to productive resources that would otherwise have been out of their reach. Moreover, migrant children also send cash to their mothers. Well to do daughters also assist their mothers in cash and kind.

Gender relations in Igbo society are rooted in the family and kinship system, especially the inheritance system, and in the economic and cultural practices connected with this. Though the Igbo culture has been exposed to external influences, these features remain basically the same over a long historical period. Social features of widowhood rituals and kinship relations have changed little. despite the influence of colonialism and Western civilisation.

Now wealth is based on trade, farming and wage or salaried employment. In this situation widows can be obstacles to their "inheritors" full enjoyment of the property. A widow now more or less struggles to be economically independent. She wants to have more control of and defence of her rights to a portion of the husband's property. The transition from one situation to the other constitutes a battle over many different elements of the resources system, widow's included. This complex transformation of social relationships and the implications for widows can therefore be traced to cultural practices that have survived with the changing society as well as increasing impact of societal transformation.

It seems misleading, however, to see a static situation here. Though an Igbo widow's behaviour is constrained in some ways, it is quite unconstrained in others. An Igbo widow is free to remarry. She is free to leave her husband's family. She is also free to hold and manage her own property. The society gives her freedom to take part in any economic activity of her choice. I would suggest that it is precisely because of the constraints imposed upon a woman's right to inherit from her husband that she is able to enjoy the freedom cited above. The Igbo woman's freedom of choice and action has its basis in her largely independent status as a married woman. Although the inheritance rule do not confer a permanent estate on a wife, the constraints on Igbo widows in exercising certain options, and the usual autonomy they enjoy in other spheres, are best viewed as two sides of the same coin. Igbo women are hard working and self-reliant. Many do not need help, since widows are normally middle-aged rather than elderly. For the Igbo woman, the period of widowhood is not just a ritual phase but one that may be regarded as a permanent status of some independence.





Appendix A

List of Informants

A) Widows

Widow(W) Age widowed No of Children Occupation

1 60 1960 7 -

2 33 1983 3 Trader

3 28 1987 3 Trader

4 35 1992 4 Trader/Farmer

5 75 1978 9 Trader

6 20 1994 1 Nurse

7 41 1991 5 Trader/Farmer

8 36 1990 4 Farmer/trader

9 30 1993 7 Farmer/Daily Labour

10 30 1989 8 Hair dresser

11 33 1995 7 Trader/Daily Labour

12 28 1994 6 Trader/farmer

13 29 1993 9 Trader

14 30 1988 5 Trader

15 33 1993 6 Teacher

16 27 1994 5 Hair dresser

17 30 1992 7 Trader/farmer

18 35 1990 4 Trader

19 27 1991 8 Trader

20 25 1989 3 Teacher

21 28 1990 5 Teacher

22 62 1989 6 Trader

23 67 1989 5 Trader
24 70 1969 3 -
25 58 1970 2 Trader
26 50 1968 2 Farmer
27 49 1967 3 Trader
28 52 1969 3 Farmer
29 48 1972 3 Trader/farmer
30 45 1970 5 Trader
31 47 1980 6 Trader
32 46 1968 2 Farmer
33 40 1980 5 Trader/Farmer
34 40 1971 3 Trader
35 40 1990 - Student
36 42 1990 7 Trader/farmer
37 41 1994 6 Farmer
38 43 1969 3 Farmer/trader
39 44 1968 1 Trader
40 40 1968 5 Trader
41 40 1969 3 Trader
42 51 1970 2 Farmer
43 47 1970 2 Farmer/Trader
44 51 1979 5 Trader
45 44 1968 4 Trader
46 48 1967 6 Farming
47 80 1960 4 -
48 83 1958 3 -
49 71 1992 5 -
50 19 1994 1 Student
51 28 1990 2 Seamstress
52 62 1984 7 Farmer
53 69 1972 3 Farmer

54 35 1994 5 Hair dresser
55 42 1990 2 Trader/Farmer
56 48 1983 5 Trader/Farmer
57 57 1979 2 Trader
58 50 1989 10 Trader/farmer
59 53 1978 2 Farmer
60 59 1977 - Farmer
61 59 1968 3 Farmer
62 60 1985 4 Trader
63 62 1978 3 Farmer
64 55 1980 1 Farmer
65 31 1990 4 Trader
66 48 1987 9 Trader
67 54 1990 8 Teacher
68 48 1989 6 Trader
69 40 1994 4 Civil service
70 59 1970 5 Trader/farmer
71 45 1989 7 Trader
72 46 1990 2 Nurse
73 49 1985 4 Farmer/Trader
74 38 1988 5 Farmer/Trader
75 68 1995 6 -
76 70 1969 4 Farmer
77 47 1978 2 Farmer
78 56 1987 7 Trader/farmer
79 40 1990 2 Trader
80 32 1994 4 Trader

ii) Male Informants.

1 63 Trader/Chairman of Village council
2 80 Village Elder and Kindred head

3 66 Elder/Head of and extended family

4 75 Village elder/priest of an oracle

5 48 Teacher/Widower

This list is certain to have error in the following areas:

- a) Age in some cases is an estimate especially for the older informants whose births were not registered. The margin of error I hope is minimal.
- b) It was difficult to classify some widows in terms of occupation.





Appendix B

Questionnaire

Widow No.

Age:

When were you widowed:

No of Children:

1. What widowhood rituals did you perform?
2. Was your mother or grand-mother a widow? If yes what were the differences between your widowhood rituals and theirs?
3. What were the most remarkable things about your widowhood?
4. Are you a customary law or statutory law widow?
5. Are you from a polygamous family.
6. Do you have a levir or lover? If yes what kind of assistance do you get from him? If no, Why did you not take a levir or lover?
7. Why did you not remarry?
8. Did you inherit property from your husband? Did your children inherit from your husband.
9. Did you inherit land? Did your children inherit land?
10. Are your children married? How has land been used since your children married?
11. What was your occupation before your husband died? What is your present occupation? Why did you choose this occupation?
12. Did you trade during the civil war period?
13. Why did you take to trading during this period?
14. What assistance do you get from other sources? from your children? From the extended family?

For Male Informants

15. Why rituals should a women undergo on the death of her husband?
16. Why should a woman undergo these rituals?
17. Why did men inherit widows in the past?
18. Why is widow inheritance not popular in contemporary society?
19. Why do women not inherit land in Igbo Society?

20. What changes do you think are taking place in widowhood practices?





Bibliography

- Afigbo, A. E. (1972) *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in Southern-Eastern Nigeria 1891-1927*. London.
- Afigbo, A. E. (1986) *An Outline of Igbo History*, Owerri, Nigeria. RAA Publishing Company.
- Afigbo, A. E. (1989) 'Widowhood Practices in Africa; A preliminary Survey and Analysis' Paper presented at the Workshop "*Widowhood Practices in Imo State*". Owerri. June 6-7.
- Amadiume, I. (1987) *Male Daughters, Female Husband's: Gender and Sex in an African Society*, London, Zed.
- Andreski, I. (1970) *Old Wives Tales: The Life stories of African Women*. New York, Schocken.
- Awe, B. (1991) 'Writing Women into History: The Nigerian Experience' in Offen Karen *et al* (ed.) *Writing Women's History*. London, Macmillan.
- Awe; B. (1992) (ed.) *Nigerian Women in Historical Perspective*. Lagos, Sankore/Bookcraft.
- Basden, G. T. (1966) (First ed. 1921) *Among the Ibos Of Nigeria*. London, Frank Cass and Co.
- Basden, G. T. (1966) (First ed. 1938) *Niger Igbos*, London Frank Cass
- Blom, I. (1992) 'Widowhood: From the Poor Law society to the welfare Society: The case of Norway 1875-1964' *Journal of Women's History Vol. 4 No. 2 (Fall)*.
- Chubb L. T. (1961) *Ibo Land Tenure*, Ibadan University Press.
- Echeruo M. J. C., (1979) A Matter of Identity, 1979 Ahiakoku Lecture, Culture Division, Owerri, Nigeria.
- Eluwa G. *et al* (1988) *A History of Nigeria for Schools and College.*, Nigeria, Africana- FEP Publishers.
- Emeagwali, G. T. (1980) 'Explanations in African History', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria 10.3*.
- Entwiste B. and Coles C. M. (1990) 'Demographic Survey and Nigerian Women' *Signs Journal of Women in Culture and Society Vol. 15, No. 2*.
- Finley, M. I. (1968) *Aspects of Antiquity*. London.
- Forde D & Jones G. I., (1950) *The Igbo and Ibibio Speaking Peoples of South-Eastern Nigeria*, London.
- Green, M. M. (1947) *Igbo Village Affairs*. London.
- Hafkin N. J., and Bay E. D., (1976) (eds.), *African Women in Changing Perspective*. London
- Henderson, R. N. (1972) *The King in Every Man: Evolutionary Trends in Onitsha Igbo Society*. Yale University Press.
- Ifemesia, C., (1981) *Traditional Humane Living Among the Igbo: An Historical Perspective*. London.
- Imam A., (1988) "The Presentation of African Women in Historical Writings". In Kleinberg S. J. (ed.) *Retrieving Women's History*.
- Ilogu, E. (1974) *Christianity and Igbo Culture*, NOK Publishers.

- Kirk_Greene and Rimmer D. (1981) *Nigeria Since 1970: A Political and Economic Outline*. London . Hodder & Stoughton.
- Kirwen, M. C. (1980) *African Widows*. London.
- Leonard, A. G. (1906) *The Lower Niger and its Tribes*. London.
- Leith-Ross, S. (1963) (First ed. 1939) *African Woman: A Study of the Igbo of Nigeria*. London. Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.
- Lewis B. (1984) "The impact of Development on Women" in Hay . M. J., & Sticher S., (eds.) *African Women South of the Sahara*, Longman.
- Lopata, H. Z. (1972), `Role Changes in Widowhood: A World Perspective in Cowgill, D. O. & Holmes L. D. (eds.) *Ageing and Modernisation*, New York, Appleton-Century Craft.
- Meek, C. K. (1937) *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe*, Oxford.
- Nwabueze B. O., (1972) *Nigeria Land Law*, Nwamife Publishers Ltd.
- Nwachukwu C. C., (1989) 'Labour and Employment in the Traditional Igbo Society in *Igbo Economics*, 1988 Ahiajoku Lecture Colloquium, Culture Division, Owerri, Nigeria.
- Nwebo, O. E. & Eze O., (1989) "Widowhood Practices; Law and Customs"- Paper presented at the Workshop *Widowhood Practices in Imo State*. Owerri. June 6-7.
- Nwoga, D. I., (1989) "Widowhood Practices in Imo State" -Paper presented at Workshop, *Widowhood Practices in Imo State*. Owerri. June 6-7.
- Nzewi, E., (1989) "Widowhood Practices; A Female Perspective"-Paper presented at Workshop, *Widowhood Practices in Imo State*. Owerri. June 6-7.
- Njaka E. E. (1975) *Igbo Political Institutions and Transition*. California, California University Press.
- Obi, S. N. C., et al (1977) *The Customary Law Manual: A Manual of Customary Law Obtaining in the Anambra and Imo State of Nigeria*, Government Printer, Enugu.
- Obbo, C. (1976) `Dominant Male Ideology and Female Options: Three East African Case Studies', *Africa* 46 4.
- Obbo; C. (1980) *African Women*, London.
- Okonjo, K. (1976) "The Dual Sex Political Operation: Igbo Women and Community Politics". In *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change*, Stanford University Press.
- Onwuejeogwu, M. A. (1987) *Evolutionary Trends in the History of the Development of Igbo Civilisation in the Culture Theatre of Igboland in Southern Nigeria*. Owerri, Ministry of Information and Culture.
- Pittin, R. I. (1979) *Marriage and Alternative Strategies: Career Pattern of Hausa Women in Katsina City*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of London.
- Potash, B. (ed.) (1986) *Widows in African Societies: Choices and Constraints*, California, Stanford University Press.
- Read, M., (1970) (First ed. 1956). *The Ngoni Of Nyasaland* London. Frank Cass,
- Strobel, M. (1983) "Wives and Cattle: Bride Wealth and Marriage in South Africa, a review", *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 16. 6.
- Talbot, P. A., (1926) *People of southern Nigeria*, Vol. III. Oxford University Press.
- Talbot, P. A., *Tribes of the Niger Delta*. London. Frank Cass & Co Ltd.

Terray, (1972) *Maxism and Primitive Societies*, New York, Monthly Press Review.

Trimmingham, J. S.(1959) *Islam in West Africa*. Oxford..

Tuker, J. E. (1985) *Women in Nineteenth century Egypt*, Cambridge University Press.

Ubesie, T. (1978) *Odinala Ndi Igbo*, Ibadan, Oxford University Press.

Uchendu, V. C. (1965) *The Igbo of south Eastern Nigeria*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc.

Uchendu, V. C. (1989) 'Igbo Marriage System: An overview' Paper presented at the 1994 *Ahijoku Lecture Colloquium*; Owerri, Nigeria.

Umeasiegbu R. N. (1977), *The Way We Lived: Igbo Customs and Stories*, London, Heinemann.

Van Allen, J. (1972) "Sitting on a Man: Colonialism And The Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women", *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 6.2.

Wigwe, G. A., (1986) Igbo Land Ownership, Alienation and Utilisation: Studies in Land as a source. In *Igbo Jurisprudence: Law and Order in Traditional Igbo Society*, 1985 Ahijoku Lecture Colloquium. Culture Division, Owerri.

