

# **Dealing with the Trauma of a Loss: Interrogating the Feminine Experience of Coping with Spouse's Death in African Traditions**

## **Abstract**

Dying as a human event is directly experienced by the dying subject. But death – the state of being dead – is directly experienced and dealt with by the living particularly those closest to the one who had died. Such persons are often traumatised and needs to be supported to cope with the death of a close relative. Philosophical thoughts on, and accounts of, death in the history of (Western) philosophy focus primarily on the futility of trying to make sense of the concept of death itself. Little attention is often paid to the experiences of the living dealing with the loss in death of a loved one. To be sure, this attitude toward understanding death in Western philosophy is not far-fetched from the dominant preoccupation in Western thought with the individual, the experience of the subject, or the conscious self rather than with the community of selves; the former takes priority over the latter in Western discourse I intend in this paper to shift the horizon of discourse from the former to latter specifically from an African philosophical perspective. In shifting the horizon of critical discourse on death to the experiences of the living in dealing and coping with the death of a loved one, I pursue and defend two theses in this paper. First, within African traditions, there is an obvious sexist treatment, marginalisation and gender bias against the women folk whose spouses have died when compared with the treatment of the men folk having the same traumatic experience. This is clearly seen in the requirements for mourning the death of a spouse imposed on women in African traditions. Second, the social structures available in African traditions for coping with the traumatic loss of a spouse please the men folk more than the women folk. In fact, the structures do not only marginalise the woman but may traumatise her more and hinder a much needed process of coping and recovery from the loss. In pursuance of these theses, I draw evidences from, and critically interrogate, rich cultural heritages in Africa such as those of Southern and Eastern Nigeria. In analysing these theses, I show that in the feminine existential experience of coping with a spouse's death, there is clearly a tension between individual expectations and communal expectations. There is again the difficulty of rationalising the ideologies of mourning rites for women in African traditions particularly when viewed against the background of an epistemology of ignorance. There is also the challenge of understanding the paradox inherent in the sexist treatment of women as perpetuated by women in conformity with societal expectations for mourning. I conclude from these analyses that a philosopher in Africa researching on African thoughts and traditions is saddled with the crucial responsibility of critiquing cultures and traditions within African communities of dwelling with the primary goal of liberating persons from indefensible ideologies. I employ the methods of analysis and constructive criticism to achieve the goals of this study.

**Keywords:** Death, trauma, women, feminine, African traditions.

## **Introduction**

The Ugandan poet and scholar, Okot p'Bitek, aptly captures the duty of an African philosopher when he said,

The role of the student of traditional philosophy, it seems to me, is, as it were, to photograph as much of and in as great details as possible, the traditional way of life, and then to make comments; pointing out the connexions and relevance of the different parts. In this way, the belief of a people whether in one God or in a hierarchy of forces or in a number of spirits or in magic and witchcraft will emerge.<sup>1</sup>

Doing African philosophy therefore could never really end with narrating or describing African traditions and belief systems. Rather, it primarily and essentially involves 'making comments', critical and analytical ones at that as, for instance, has been done with African communitarianism, and 'pointing out connexions and relevance of the different parts' as, for instance, an African environmental ethicist may do when he tell us the relevance of African ontological beliefs for the moral status of the environment.

This paper emerges from the same desires: to photograph and critically comment on a particular aspect of African traditions showing its connexion with a larger body of beliefs and ideologies. The aspect of African traditions that I focus on here is the experiences and challenges of the female folk in coping with, and healing from the pains caused by the death of a spouse in many African traditions. Dying as a human event is directly experienced by the dying subject. But death – the state of being dead – is directly experienced and dealt with by the living particularly those closest to the one who had died. Such persons are often traumatised and needs to be supported to cope and deal with the emotional and psychological challenges that often crop up due to the death of a loved one. Although many essays have been written on the widowhood practices and mourning rites in African cultures, little has been said about a philosophical analysis of the nature, approaches and challenges of coping with the trauma faced by such women. What is often available in existing literature are legal, sociological, anthropological, economic and religious perspectives

of widowhood and mourning rites. Philosophical perspectives on the intricacies of the traumatic experience are still quite rare.<sup>2</sup>

Also, as, evident in the existentialist discourse on death,<sup>3</sup> philosophical thoughts on, and accounts of, death in the history of (Western) philosophy focus primarily on the futility of trying to make sense of the concept of death itself. Little attention is often paid to the experiences of the living dealing with the loss in death of a loved one which, I think, constitutes a fundamental aspect of the philosophical discourse on death. I intend in this paper to shift the horizon of discourse from the former to latter specifically from an African philosophical perspective.

I begin, in the first section, with an analysis of the trauma of death particularly as felt by a female folk who has loss her husband in death. I show that the issue of coping with, and healing from, the trauma is essential for the wellbeing of the bereaved if he or she is to resume a measure of normal life after the loss and identify certain factor that may propel quick recovery, healing and effective coping. I then discourse in the second section, the understanding of death in African traditions not as an event marking an end, but as an event signifying a passage to a different **form** of being and existence. The discourse of the African understanding of death is a necessary prerequisite to understanding the feminine experience of coping with a spouse's death. This is because the African conception of death implies the manner in which the female folk who loss her spouse is treated.

In the third section, I develop and defend two thesis concerning the feminine experience of coping with a spouse's death in African traditions.. First, within African traditions, there is an obvious sexist treatment, marginalisation and gender bias against the women folk whose spouses have died when compared with the treatment of the men folk having the same traumatic experience. This is clearly seen in the requirements for mourning the death of a spouse imposed

on women in African traditions. Second, the social structures available in African traditions for coping with the traumatic loss of a spouse please the men folk more than the women folk. In fact, the structures do not only marginalise the woman but may traumatise her more and hinder the process of coping and recovery from the loss. In pursuance of these theses, I draw evidences from, and critically interrogate, rich cultural heritages in Africa such as those of Southern and Eastern Nigeria.

The forth section unravels different levels of an epistemology of ignorance that may help to explain and understand the tension between individual and communal expectations with regard to coping with a spouse's death, the basis for the ideas and beliefs of mourning rites for women in African traditions and the inherent paradox in the sexist treatment of women, perpetuated by women in conformity with societal expectations for mourning. I conclude from these analyses that a philosopher in Africa researching on Africa thoughts and traditions is saddled with the crucial responsibility of critiquing cultures and traditions within the African place and space of discourse with the primary goal of liberating persons from indefensible ideologies.

### **Spouse's Death as Traumatic Experience**

Death is generally a difficult experience to deal with both in scholarship and in real life situations. Scholars have for long grappled with the nature of death with little or no success. Socrates once aptly expressed man's futility in attempting to understand the concept of death in these words:

To fear death, gentlemen, is no other than to think oneself wise when one is not, to think one knows what one does not know. No one knows whether death may not be the greatest of all blessings for a man, yet men fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest of evils. And surely it is the most blameworthy ignorance to believe that one knows what one does not know.<sup>4</sup>

Socrates' words remind us that we can never say with certainty what death is. But when death occurs, we are sure of the feeling it lives behind for the living. It is often the feeling of meaninglessness and difficulty in comprehending the experience particularly for those closely related to the person who died. Sartre therefore says that,

Death is never that which gives life its meaning. It is on the contrary that which as a principle removes all meaning from life. If we must die, then, our life has no meaning because its problem receives no solution and because the very meaning of its problem remained undetermined.<sup>5</sup>

The confusion that sets in and the difficulty of coping with experiencing a relative's death is strongly felt, for instance, when a couple loss a child, when a child loss a parent, when a teenager loss her best friend, and when a person loss his or her spouse. The loss of one's spouse in death can bring so much grief. The United States Military *Cumberland Country Schools* (CCS) explain why this is so:

The death of a spouse can be one of the most painful events a person ever experiences. The loss of your spouse can mean the loss of your partner, lover, best friend, confidant, and the parent of your children. In addition to dealing with the loss emotionally, a surviving spouse often faces major life changes that can be stressful. Coping with the loss of your spouse involves working through the emotional grief while adjusting to new circumstances.<sup>6</sup>

When a spouse dies, grief certainly sets in. But how this grief plays out may vary from one person to another. For some, it may consist of shock, anger, fear, denial, sadness and frustration. Bolby-West identifies a number of phases common with grieving spouses.

1. A numbness phase that may last from a few hours to a week and may be interrupted by outbursts of extreme anger or distress. Coping with everyday tasks is difficult, due to incomprehension, denial and preoccupation with the loss.
2. A phase of yearning and searching for the lost figure which can last months or, often years. A period of intense inner struggle in which awareness of the reality of death conflicts with a strong impulse to recover the lost person and the lost family structure.
3. A phase of disorganization and despair; feelings of hopelessness in which the grieving person is aware of the discrepancy between his inner model of the world and the world which now exists.

4. A phase of greater or less degree of reorganization, development of new set of assumptions that includes finding a new personal identity.<sup>7</sup>

A number of factors determine how well grieving spouses will do in phase four. This may include religious beliefs, supportive family members and friends, a supportive social structure and a change of environment. For instance, Rosemary Eccles explains what helped her to cope with and gradually adjust to the death of her husband:

My own faith in a great God, who has said, "All things work together for the good of those who love him." My dog, who needed daily walks, enabling me to think, pray, and cry privately as I trudged through the woods and fields. My friends, many of whom invited us for meals and especially one who rang every night for a chat, allowing me to share the little and big things of each day at great sacrifice of time to herself. My children, who all share my faith, and so together we could face the many problems ahead in quiet confidence and trust in God.<sup>8</sup>

It is more difficult for a grieving spouse to cope with such a huge loss if a number of such factors are absent. It is very important that in such a time, the grieving spouse is around friends and family members, engage in many recreational activities rather than remain indoors, and is free to express himself or herself in the most convenient way such as crying, talking about the events surrounding the spouse's death, or feeling like staying away from the home where the spouse had died.

In many cases, women could be more traumatised than men and find it more difficult to cope or move on when mourning the loss of a spouse. There are a number of reasons for this. In many societies, a number of women depend largely on their husbands for financial support. Some require full financial support from their husbands while others may require partial financial support from their husbands. When the husband of such a woman dies, it is not only traumatic but destabilising. This is worsened when there are children to care for which requires a great deal of financial stability. In such cases, the trauma of the loss does not go away easily and may persist for a long time.

Another important reason why women may be more traumatised in the event of the loss of their spouse is because in many societies, particularly in African cultures, it may be difficult for the woman to remarry particularly if she has advanced in years, say in her late forties or so, when the incident occurred. Men who lose their spouse even in their fifties may not find it as hard to remarry as women who do so even in a younger age. This has serious implications for the grieving widow that may cause her more trauma. She may have to face the weighty responsibility of parenting alone for a long time, which, of course, is not an easy responsibility for a couple more so for a single parent. And even when the bereaved woman is able to remarry sometime after the demise of her spouse, it may lead to difficult adjustments. She may need to relocate with her children, if any, to the location of the new husband, adjust to new relatives and in-laws and struggle to bring up her children within the new arrangement.

Again a bereaved woman in many cultures of the world is saddled with more mourning responsibilities and restrictions than a bereaved man. Of course this is our focus in this paper and we shall be elaborating on this from African perspectives in due course. Notwithstanding the peculiarities of the feminine experience, a spouse's death is generally traumatic for both men and women and the literature on the philosophy of death needs to pay more attention to an analysis of such trauma and how it could be better coped with.

### **Understanding Death in African Traditions**

Death is an event that occurs in every human society and understanding how events such as death is conceived in an African space of dwelling consists of understanding how Africans conceive reality and existence under which such events are subsumed. Literature now abound with much

consensus on the nature of African ontology/metaphysics. Polycarp Ikuenobe aptly describes the African view of reality as presented by many other literature on the subject matter when he says,

In the traditional African view, reality or nature is a continuum and a harmonious composite of various elements and forces. Human beings are a harmonious part of this composite reality, which is fundamentally, a set of mobile life forces. Natural objects and reality are interlocking forces. Reality always seeks to maintain an equilibrium among the network of elements and life forces. ... Because reality or nature is a continuum, there is no conceptual or interactive gap between the human self, community, the dead, spiritual or metaphysical entities and the phenomenal world; they are interrelated, they interact, and in some sense, one is an extension of the other.<sup>9</sup>

The African people therefore hold the view that there are a number of beings or entities, physical and non-physical that exist in the universe. In other words, the universe of beings consists of two realms of existence, the visible and invisible, intertwined and interlocked to form a whole, a unit and communal system. Within such realm of existence, there exist categories of beings both physical and non-physical. Such include the divinities, ancestors, humans, animals the physical environment and the Supreme Being. Events within such an ontology are therefore alleged to have implications for both the physical and non-physical aspects of reality. For instance, taboos, rituals, festivals and ceremonies do not only yield negative and positive results for the physically living, but also for the invisible segment of reality.

Death in an African culture therefore involves not just the physical loss of life of a person but the transition of that person into the non-physical realm of existence. This transition or passage seems to be more important in a typical African community than the actual death itself as seen in the numerous rituals and rites of mourning, burial and passage. There are two main reasons for this. First, it is important for the community of the living to ensure that the dead is properly rested in the invisible realm of existence by, for instance, performing the necessary rites to initiate the dead into the ancestral cult. This first reason is essential for preventing the second reason: the dead,



who is only physically dead may become wrathful and harmful to the living if he or she is not properly transitioned into the invisible realm of existence. Hence, in the words of Rebekah Lee and Megan Vaughan, "... the deceased must move from a state of impurity or contagion to a state of ritual purity and harmony with the spirit world. This transition can be guided by the living through close attention to the ritual preparation and interment of the body."<sup>10</sup> They add, interpreting Evan-Pritchard's earlier position<sup>11</sup> that "the dead could only find their place as ancestors, rather than vengeful ghosts, if their loss had been properly registered, not only by the individuals closest to them, but by the social groups of which they are members."<sup>12</sup>

The six-point summary of the African notion of death presented by Richard Moore is apt and instructive:

- i. Death is not an arbitrary event. It comes only at its proper time, strikes young or old. The event is always significant and can show a portion of truth. It can also be divined, explained, or even averted by those who know and follow the proper rituals for doing this.
- ii. The dead, especially the recent dead, are still a part of the living. They both influence it and make demands upon it. They may be blamed, but they must always be served. Otherwise they will not be at rest.
- iii. The dead can be reborn amongst us. Such rebirth is often recognized in the naming of a child.
- iv. Energy has primacy over matter. It precedes, controls, and survives all material forms. The energy or force of the dead man does not perish with him but passes into new manifestations. Death feeds life and makes renewal possible.
- v. Nevertheless, the actual event of death causes a sense of shock, grief, and loss to all those concerned. Many funeral rituals, especially those of the 'second burial' type, are designed to express and purge that grief. As the ritual proceeds, so the loss is recognized and socially accepted. Finally, in the last stages of the celebration, cheerfulness keeps breaking in.
- vi. While this sense of loss persists, it frequently finds expression in a sort of ambivalence as to whether the dead one is really gone or not. This ambivalence, often found in funeral songs, also helps to adjust the grief which death brings to the living, since it puts off the moment when the finality of personal death must be recognized.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to these apt descriptions of an African understanding of death, it is important to add that in African traditional communities, there exists the notion of good and bad death.<sup>14</sup> Whether

the death of a person is good or bad depends on certain circumstance surrounding the death. A good death result from a normal community-accepted life or a life well lived in the eyes of the community. Generally this would involve living a morally clean life, getting married and having children and dying under normal circumstances such as after a brief illness or in ones sleep at a reasonably advanced age. Persons who die in such a condition are aid to have died a good death and are given a befitting burial and all the accompanying rituals and rites to transit them to the non-physical realm of existence. A bad death on the other hand results from unusual circumstances such as death through suicide, unusual or unexplainable illness, accident and so on. A person who dies at a young age and without any child at the point of death may also be considered to have died a bad death. In such cases, many rituals are done to ensure such deaths do not bring calamity to the immediate family and the community at large. Bad deaths usually attract a quiet and, at times, shameful burial depending on the circumstances to serve as a deterrent for the living.<sup>15</sup>

However, whether good or bad death, the living has to perform some rituals and rites and avoid certain taboos in order to ensure that the dead do not relate with the living in a vengeful manner or bring calamity to the living. As we shall discuss shortly, the expectations from the living during the experience of death may become more of a burden than a relief for a bereaved woman.

### **Coping with the Loss of a Spouse in African Traditions: The Feminine Experience**

When a woman loses her spouse in death in many African indigenous communities, she is immediately confronted with a deeply entrenched structure of mourning and burial that she is expected to fit into. There are three interrelated reasons for her to readily and fully comply with

the mourning and burial expectations of her community: first, the moment her spouse dies, she has become impure and somewhat contaminated and requires cleansing without which she may never be viable for remarriage in the future; second, her failure to fulfil the communal expectations for mourning and burying her late husband is immediately interpreted within her space of dwelling as utter disrespect for the dead husband and his kin and this may quickly raise suspicions as to her innocence in the death of her husband; third, the rituals, rites and attitude expected of her during the period of mourning is regarded as essential for the peaceful transition of the late husband to the non-physical realm of existence, which is essential to protect her life from endangerment of the hunting and malevolence of the dead.

The nature of the mourning and burial rites and rituals that a bereaved woman is expected to fulfil are similar in many African communities but there are also slight variations from one community to another. Hannah Edemikpong gives an apt description of what is often expected of bereaved women in Nigerian communities. She says,

Some of the mourning rites include seclusion and general isolation, in which the widow is in confinement. All hairs of her body, including her pubic hairs, and the hair of her children are shaved with one razor. The widow is forbidden to go to the market or the farm and is prohibited from talking to anybody outside the kin family. She is also deprived of personal hygiene and can only wear a dirty cloth, known as a sackcloth, throughout the mourning period, which lasts from three to six months or sometimes a year. She must always sit on the floor and eat with unwashed hands and broken plates. If the women in her family see her secretly attempting to attend to her personal hygiene, she might be whipped, spat upon or reprimanded that she is attempting to beautify herself so as to attract men. They may even accuse her.<sup>16</sup>

Among the Igbos of Nigeria, for instance, much is expected from the bereaved woman. A. M. Okorie gives a vivid description of what is expected from a widow among the Igbos. He explains how the woman's process of mourning begins immediately after the death of the husband through verbal expressions consisting of loud and continuous weeping and wailing to express her pain and shock.<sup>17</sup> To be sure, as Edemikpong explains above, not fulfilling this expectation well

may result in blame and scorning of the woman. So the question is not whether or not the bereaved woman is immediately able to express her shock and pain verbally through hysteria of weeping and wailing. She has no choice than to do this in order to avert the anger of the husband's relatives and other community members. As Okorie points out,

The widow's behavior when the husband was alive and her relationship with relatives of her husband determine the intensity of her mourning. The negligence of mourning rituals may rob her of her late husband's property, and love of the community. Sometimes this can be tyrannical on the widow, especially if she has not been relating well with her husband's sisters [the *Umuada*] The *Umuada* are the enforcement agency and decide how severe the mourning should be. The *umuada* surround the widow, commanding her to make sure she obeys the rules of mourning rites.<sup>18</sup>

The mourning and wailing is immediately followed by the need for the bereaved woman to fulfil certain hideous and horrible requirements under the guise of cleansing, last respect, seclusion and lengthy mourning. For instance,

The days before the burial of the man are always horrible for the widow as she is made to stay in the same room with the corpse where she is required to be waving away flies from perching on the fast and progressively decomposing corpse. She is supposed to sit down and raise an early morning cry before anybody is awake and this continues till the day the husband will be buried. Her most painful ordeal occurs at night before her husband's burial They make sure she stays awake all night with bitter kola (*aku ilu*) in her mouth to remind her of the bitterness of the death of her husband.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, if the widow had disputed with the husband shortly before his death, the widow will be made to lie with the corpse for many hours and in addition pay heavily in cash as a fine.<sup>19</sup>

After the burial, she is expected to start the seclusion period. This Okorie explains "is a period of deep mourning and it lasts for seven native weeks (*izu asa*), totaling twenty-eight days. At this period the widow never eats with nor talks to anybody except her fellow widows. She never greets nor responds to any greeting but if she does, she is believed to have passed ill-luck to the greeter or responder. She wears only rags, sits on a piece of wood, and sleeps on a mat or banana leaves. . . she may not wash her face nor bath."<sup>20</sup> This is followed immediately by the following rituals:

. . .the widow is taken at night by the patrilineal daughters to the bad bush far from the residential zone of the community for bathing and cleansing. The bathing has to take place on the grave of the deceased husband, especially if it were to be in some part of Owerri. The cloth which she used during the seclusion period is burnt ritually or given to the older attendant widow. She now puts on the real black cloth for the rest of the morning period which is supposed to last for a year as a sign of grief and love for the departed. The day after the cleansing, she exercises her restricted liberty as she is received back into the family and can now cook what others can eat and have the freedom to talk to people.<sup>21</sup>

These experiences of the Igbo bereaved woman is true of what female folks experience in the Southern part of Nigeria among the Binis and Esans, for instance, when they lost their spouse. Mamphela Ramphela succinctly summarises what an African widow go through in the following words:

The widow becomes the embodiment of loss and pain occasioned by the sting of death, and her body is turned into a focus of attention, as both subject and object of mourning rituals. The individual suffering of a widow is made social, and her body becomes a metaphor for suffering.<sup>22</sup>

But do men in these African communities go through the same hideous and dehumanising treatment as women do? The evidences show that they do not. The mourning period of men is shorter than that of women. They are not strictly expected to seat near the corpse of the woman, shaving his hair, eating from broken plates, wearing rags, putting on black (or white) clothing for a year and so on as women do. Among the Igbos, for instance,

a man is not expected to wail openly like a woman. His facial courage is supposed to be a first aid condolence, comfort and hope for the children who are psychologically broken down. After the burial of the wife, the widower is expected to mourn for at least six months or one year. In strict traditional obedience, the man may mourn for only twenty eight days. This is based on the idea that the absence of the woman makes her unimportant to the surviving husband except through her children and kin. Hence, it differs from that of a widow who undergoes intensive rituals at the hands of the *umuada*.<sup>23</sup>

Okorie adds that,

At the end of the morning, the man goes to the nearest river and dips his feet into the water, pulls the inner pair of pants he wears and throws it away. Although the reason for this ritual is not told, yet it could likely be a rite of purification and breakage of marital accord, since the Igbo philosophy accepts that the spirit of the dead hovers around, looking for normal life relationship. Again, the death of a spouse renders the living one impure and therefore he or she needs ritual purification. Nevertheless, after the ceremony at the end of the mourning, the man is expected to be free and may marry a new wife. Mourning, therefore, is understood as an expression of the widower's grief, love and respect for the dead. But for the widow, the process can be brutal and inhuman in practice.<sup>24</sup>

Among the Esan people of Southern Nigeria, the bereaved man is expected to have sexual relations with a girl two weeks after the burial of the wife. It is believed that this will help ward off the spirit of the wife so that he can move on with his life and probably remarry.

The sexism in the treatment of bereaved males as against the treatment of bereaved females is therefore obvious and undeniable. Women bear more of the horrible burdens of burial and mourning. While the man is encouraged to man up, recover and move on with his life, the death of a man is constantly and continuously rubbed on the woman's injury for a longer period of time. Under these conditions, can the woman recover easily from the trauma of losing a spouse? The chances are slim. She may become even more traumatised. The stress and communal expectations may hinder quick recovery from the incident and prevent her from easily moving on with her life and living a normal life. This is worsened if the woman had children for the man and if those children are still young. She may not be able to care for them properly while fulfilling all her obligations to the man. In fact schooling and normal life may become difficult for the children as their mother may not be available to cater for them. Some widows have thus expressed painful statements on how such widowhood practices further traumatises them. Here are some examples:

'I am accused of being a witch who killed her husband' (Terezinha, Zambezia Province, Mozambique, 1997).

'We have no shelter; my children can no longer go to school' (Ishtat, Bangladesh, 1995).

‘We are treated like animals just because we are widows’ (Angela, Nigeria, 1999).

‘I and my children were kicked out of the house and beaten by the brothers-in-law’ (Seodhi, Malawi, 1994).

‘My husband died of AIDS and slept with many women; I am now dying, but his family blames me for his death’ (Isabel, Kenya, 1996).<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, the deeply entrenched structure for mourning and burial of the dead in African cultures traumatise the woman more and hinder the process of coping and recovery from the loss. There is therefore an obvious tension between individual and communal expectations with regard to coping with a spouse’s death. What may be responsible for this tension? What is the basis for the ideas and beliefs of mourning rites for women in African traditions and why is there an inherent paradox in the sexist treatment of women, perpetuated by women in conformity with societal expectations for mourning? The section that follows explores a patriarchal epistemology of ignorance with its inherent harmful ideologies that is responsible for the problems faced by bereaved women in African cultures.

### **A Patriarchal Epistemology of Ignorance and the Perpetuation of Harmful Ideologies**

In *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana gives a precise explanation of what epistemology of ignorance consist of, an explanation that aptly captures what I have in mind when I talk about a patriarchal epistemology of ignorance. In their words,

The epistemology of ignorance is an examination of the complex phenomena of ignorance, which has as its aim identifying different forms of ignorance, examining how they are produced and sustained, and what role they play in knowledge practices... Ignorance often is thought of as a gap in knowledge, as an epistemic oversight that easily could be remedied once it has been noticed. It can seem to be

an accidental by-product of the limited time and resources that human beings have to investigate and understand their world. While this type of ignorance does exist, it is not the only kind. Sometimes what we do not know is not a mere gap in knowledge, the accidental result of an epistemological oversight... a lack of knowledge or an unlearning of something previously known often is actively produced for purposes of domination and exploitation.<sup>26</sup>

This of course captures the point Charles Mills makes in his *The Racial Contract* where perhaps, the term 'epistemology of ignorance' first appeared. Mills had given a fine analysis of how the idea of white folks as superior and black folks as inferior was established through an epistemology of ignorance that was in no way accidental but one that was carefully doctored actively produced over centuries for the purpose of the racial domination of blacks by whites.<sup>27</sup> The pioneers of the active production of a form of ignorance that describes black folks as inferior, pre-logical or nonhuman were not 'ignorant' of the fact that their views were not rationally indefensible but saw this form of an established knowledge of ignorance as necessary if they were to successfully exploit the black race within accepted moral standards of behaviour.

Hence although it may have been wrong, for instance, as at the time of the racial contract to take fellow humans as slaves, there was certainly nothing wrong in taking as slaves some black folks within the framework of an epistemology of ignorance that described them as not having the capacity to be humans. Otherwise, how could we resolve, for instance, the paradox in Kant's moral theory that, among other things, promotes respect for human dignity and Kant's verbal support for slavery and racism? However, centuries later, when such epistemology of ignorance had been deeply entrenched into the fabric of the Western society, it produced citizens who saw and still see the racial distinction as a given and infallible knowledge.

The same game, to me, is played out in the feminine experience of coping with the loss of a spouse in African cultures. It is enveloped by an actively produced and purposive patriarchal epistemology of ignorance. In African traditions, there is deeply rooted patriarchal arrangement



enforced by the patriarchy to sustain an ego and superiority over women. The goal is to promote by means of certain deeply entrenched ideologies about reality and existence the idea that men are superior and women are inferior, that men are strong and women are weak. Thus while men, for instance, do not need to perform any rituals or rites when they loss their wives because women's spirits cannot harm them, the women need to perform all sort of hideous rituals in order to the protected from the strong spirits of their dead husband and his ancestors. Hence it is not uncommon to hear such reasons as these why men hardly undergo what women face during burial and mourning:

... for the man, physical strength and biological difference between man and woman remove the psychological fear upon which the religious belief that the dead can harm a living relative hinges. Again, man in a typical rain forest and agrarian society like that of the Isiokpo, is naturally endowed with superior physical strength than the woman, to cope with the arduous task of fending for his family, and therefore needs not to undergo any rites at the demise of his wife to acquire this dexterity.<sup>28</sup>

The ancestral patriarchy that theorised these ideas about existence and reality (particularly the theories about the status of the dead and their degree of interaction with the living, both men and women) are well aware like the pioneers of the racial contract and just as Kant was, that such ideas are not always rationally defensible. They are aware that they have created an epistemology of ignorance, claiming to be ignorant about the actual facts of life just as the racial contractarians claimed they were ignorant that black folks were like any other human beings, and veiling the facts with harmful indefensible ideologies. Such ideologies are then handed down from generation to generation until they attain the status of a given, some sort of revealed knowledge that cannot be altered, a framework or structure that beings within the community must fit, or at least strive hard to fit into. Matsobane Manala is thus right to say that,

... these rites were conceived and applied in accordance with the whims of and to the benefit of patriarchy. The stated positive assessment is definitely not meant to

benefit the poor widows but to strengthen the hegemonic and imperial patriarchal system.

This active production and sustenance of ignorance in African traditions explains why those who have assimilated such ideas about being as infallible seem justified in enforcing them. This also explains why women who should display fellow feeling to a bereaved woman, and close relatives who the bereaved woman may have hoped for as source of comfort are often the ones who implement these horrible rituals and rites on the bereaved woman because such ideas have become part of their sub-consciousness. They do not question them; they simply implement them.

Thus although only a few men may have taken part in the formulation of the patriarchal epistemology of ignorance and its supporting ideologies, virtually all men within the African community benefit from it. And such epistemology of ignorance may go on unnoticed unaddressed and un-reconciled. Except the epistemology of ignorance is addressed and revised, the hostile environment for coping with the death of a spouse by a bereaved woman will thrive and the inhuman treatment will continue.

### **Overcoming the Epistemology of Ignorance**

Harmful ideas and knowledge claims about reality constructed within an epistemology of ignorance to guarantee a particular kind of behaviour thrive more in human societies where the social structure is consciously designed to subdue reason with authority. African traditional or indigenous societies have, for good reasons, been presented in existing literature as authoritarian in nature due to the manner in which it subdues, individual autonomy, overrides on the individual will and relegate the individual's free use of reason to the background. Kwasi Wiredu aptly

describes what it means for an African community to be authoritarian, or to override reason with authority:

What I mean by authoritarianism may be stated in a preliminary way as follows: Any human arrangement is authoritarian if it entails any person being made to do or suffer something against his will, or if it leads to any person being hindered in the development of his own will. This definition is likely to be felt to be too broad. It might be objected that no orderly society is possible without some sort of constituted authority which can override a refractory individual will. Anybody wishing to elaborate on this kind of objection has a rich tradition of both Western and non-Western philosophical thought to draw upon. Let me here cut the matter short by making a concession. We might now say that what is authoritarian, is the *unjustified* overriding of an individual's will... a society would be seen to be revoltingly authoritarian in as much as a person's will would usually be the result of the manipulations by others.<sup>29</sup>

Many of the ideas about the condition of the dead in African traditions that are harmful to the living, particularly to the widow as shown in this paper, are harmful because of their authoritarian stance, which tends to unjustifiably override on the individual's will. Even when such ideas defiles all forms of rational evaluation, perpetrators still hide under the veil of communal authority on the matter.

If this is the case, then to overcome such harmful ideas about being and reality, the table must be turned around. Reason, human autonomy and enlightened perspectives must be valued over authoritarian perspectives. The enthronement of reason over authority would ensure that ideas about reality, such as ideas about the dead, are not just superimposed on persons in the community of beings through an authoritarian structure there in, but are subjected to rigorous rational evaluation and validation. This is because enlightened and rational persons do not simply allow others to lead them or tell them what to do; rather, they are convinced about why they should do what they are told to do. Kant is thus right to describe enlightenment in the following words:

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in

lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. *Sapere Aude!* [dare to know] “Have courage to use your own understanding!” — that is the motto of enlightenment.<sup>30</sup>

Africans therefore need to wilfully and consciously exert themselves to use their own reasoning in evaluating issues rather than relying completely on social authority. In fact, Kant describes the inability of persons to rely on their own ability to reason as laziness and cowardice. In his words,

Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why so great a proportion of men, long after nature has released them from alien guidance (*natura-liter maiorenes*), nonetheless gladly remain in lifelong immaturity, and why it is so easy for others to establish themselves as their guardians. It is so easy to be immature. If I have a book to serve as my understanding, a pastor to serve as my conscience, a physician to determine my diet for me, and so on, I need not exert myself at all. I need not think, if only I can pay: others will readily undertake the irksome work for me.<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, to overcome harmful ideologies, Africans must avoid being lazy in the Kantian sense and consciously enthrone the reliance on reason in all human affairs. A few persons in different African communities have refused to believe in the harmful ideas about mourning and burying the death because they were not rationally convinced that such were necessary. Their failure to accept such ideas and participate in the corresponding rituals and rites may have isolated them from communal life, but surely protected them from harm. The reliance on reason rather than authority emancipates and liberates mankind from the authoritarian, rigid, fixed and static social, economic and religious structures through the rational critique of power. It seeks for individual’s freedom from rationally indefensible ideologies and mythologies. This is why the legacy of Enlightenment has been the notion of critical reason and it is intrinsically intertwined with the critique of foundationalism with the aim of producing a normative though fallibilistic perspective of reality.

To be sure, the enthronement of reason is not meant to discard or trivialise authoritarian perspective. Rather it is to subject such perspectives to the court of reason in order to critique and

validate them. Such validation will help to identify which ideas about reality are rationally meaningful and should be held on to and those that are not. In the words of Georgia Warnke,

We need not simply succumb to the cultural values and prejudices with which we initially understand specific situations of action. Rather we can rely upon discourses of application that can justify our judgments of the appropriateness of applying specific normative principles to specific cases.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, we do not just accept to do things because tradition says so. Rather we do things because we are rationally convinced about them. In doing so, epistemologies of ignorance would be exposed and questioned and their authoritarian stance about reality will be subjected to critical reflection. This will result in the perpetuation of harmful ideas about reality.

## **Conclusion**

Our analysis thus far shows that the ancestors of African communities were great thinkers and theorists who, in the quest to protect a patriarchy, formulated ideas that were not always to the best interest of all in the society. They employed methods of authoritarianism and mystification to enforce such entrenched ideas into the fabric of the community and the minds of the people. Majority of such ideas have remained unchallenged for ages and continue to favour one segment of the African society while cause harm to others as we have clearly seen in the case of widowhood. Philosophers researching and writing on issues and ideas within the African space and place therefore have a lot to do. We are saddled with the crucial responsibility of critiquing African cultures and traditions with the primary goal of liberating persons from indefensible ideologies and fostering the reliance on reason and human autonomy.

## **Notes**

---

<sup>1</sup> Okot p'Bitek, *The Self in African Imagery*, *Transition*, 15 (1964) p64

<sup>2</sup> One major philosophical essay focusing on coping with the trauma of the death of a loved one in African traditions is Isaac E. Ukpokolo's essay, *Memories in Photography and Rebirth: Toward a Psychosocial*

---

Therapy of the Metaphysics of Reincarnation among Traditional Esan People of Southern Nigeria. *Journal of Black Studies*, 43.3 (2012): 289-302

<sup>3</sup> See for instance, Sartre's view of death in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (London: Methuen, 1969); and Heidegger view of death in part 6 of Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (trans.) (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988)

<sup>4</sup> Socrates, *Apology*. In *Plato: The Complete Works*, John M. Cooper (Ed.), (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), p.27.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p.545

<sup>6</sup> Coping with the Death of a Spouse. Cumberland Country Schools, The United States Military. <http://mil.ccs.k12.nc.us/files/2012/06/Loss-of-Spouse.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Lorna Bolby-West, The Impact of Death on the Family System. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 5 (1983): 282

<sup>8</sup> Rosemary Eccles, Coming to Terms with the Death of a Loved One. *British Medical Journal*, 299.6715 (1989) p.1599. Cf. Joanna Wojtkowiak, Bastiaan T. Rutjens and Eric Venbrux, *Archive for the Psychology of Religion*, 32.3 (2010): 363-373

<sup>9</sup> Polycarp Ikuenobe, *Philosophical Perspective on Communalism and Morality in African Traditions* (London: Lexington Books), p. 63-64.

<sup>10</sup> Rebekah Lee and Megan Vaughan, p.344

<sup>11</sup> Evans-Pritchard had earlier said about the Nuer that "Death is a subject Nuer do not care to speak about," which is best meant to explain the extent to which the Nuer fear the dead that has not been properly buried. See E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Burial and Mortuary rites of the Nuer. *African Affairs*, 48 (1949: 62)

<sup>12</sup> Rebekah Lee and Megan Vaughan, Death and Dying in the History of African since 1800. *The Journal of African History*, 49.3 (2008): 342

<sup>13</sup> Gerald Moore, The Imagery of Death in African Poetry. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 28.1 (1968): 17

<sup>14</sup> See Kwasi Wiredu, Death and afterlife in African culture. In Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye (Eds.), *Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies* (Washington DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Rebekah Lee and Megan Vaughan, p.345

<sup>16</sup> Hannah Edemikpong, Widowhood Rites: Nigerian Women's Collective Fights a Dehumanizing Tradition. *Off our Backs*, 35.3/4 (2005): 34.

<sup>17</sup> A. M. Okorie, African Widowhood Practices: The Igbo Mourning Experience. *African Journal of Evangelical Theology*, 14.2 (1995): 79

<sup>18</sup> A. M. Okorie, p.80. Cf. George I. K. Tasié, African Widowhood Rites: A Bane or Boom for the African Woman. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 3.1 (2013): 155-162

<sup>19</sup> A. M. Okorie, p. 80

<sup>20</sup> A. M. Okorie, p.81.

<sup>21</sup> A. M. Okorie, p.81.

<sup>22</sup> Mamphela Ramphele, Political Widowhood in South Africa: The Embodiment of Ambiguity. *Daedalus: Social Suffering*, 125.1 (1996) : 99

<sup>23</sup> A. M. Okorie, p.82.

<sup>24</sup> A. M. Okorie, pp.82-82

<sup>25</sup> These experiences are quoted in Matsobane Manala, African Traditional Widowhood Rites and their Benefits and/or Detrimental Effects on Widows in a Context of African Christianity. *HTS Theological Studies*, 71.3 (2015): 4

<sup>26</sup> Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Eds.), Introduction to *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007) p. 1

<sup>27</sup> See Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

<sup>28</sup> George I. K. Tasié, pp.160-161.

<sup>29</sup> Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p.2.

<sup>30</sup> Immanuel Kant,

<sup>31</sup> Immanuel Kant, p.

---

<sup>32</sup> Georgia Warnke,