

Widowhood Practice in Africa: X-Raying the Devaluation of Womanhood via Religio-Cultural Lens

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Abstract

Widowhood Practice in Africa: X-raying the Devaluation of Womanhood via Religio-cultural Lens is the focus of this research. Widowhood experience is generally considered to be a difficult life event which constitutes a source of emotional and psychological stress which requires a period of time to overcome. This is further complicated by the inability of family members and society to realistically assist the widow through the mourning process. Apart from the fact that the widow is usually disadvantaged in the distribution of late husband property, some unpleasant widowhood practices in Africa includes shaving of hairs, wearing of black/white clothes, widow cleansing, sleeping and sitting on floor or mat, being refrained from bathing for a number of days, seclusion and being made to swear with husband's corpse, among many others. This paper investigates reasons for widowhood practices in Africa, various form of harmful widowhood rites and the challenges of widowhood practice to women in Africa. It particularly examines the influencing factors for the widowhood practices in spite of modernization. These directly and indirectly have negative effects on widows and their children. This research made use of analytical method as well as books, journals, internet sources. This research therefore recommends qualitative education for the girl child at early stage, enlightenment programme and vocational skills acquisition for all women, particularly widows as means of reducing, if not totally eradicated the harmful rites, unjust discrimination and inhuman treatments against widows.

I. Introduction

Widowhood is deeply entrenched religio-cultural beliefs in many African societies create and sustain practices that are often harmful, discriminatory, and dehumanizing to widows, while widowers face few or none of these same restrictions. These practices are

often rooted in patriarchal ideas, a belief in "bad luck" or "contamination" associated with the widow, and the notion that the woman may be responsible for her husband's death. Bankole (2019) opines that in a patriarchal society the death of a male member of the family offers an opportunity to the other male of the extended family to increase their holding of the scarce and inelastic commodity 'land'. The widow may be falsely accused of killing their brothers so as to acquire the late man's properties and land.

According to Lockwood (2006), widowhood practices have never been palatable. It is a violation of human right. A widow is expected to express her sorrow of losing her husband through wearing black clothes, crying and often falling into the ready hands of others surrounding her to prevent her from injuring herself. Adekanye (1988) opines that she is also expected to go into seclusion seven days during which she is not expected to take a bath or change her clothes. As a sign of severing bonds between her and her late husband, she may be expected to unweave her hair, have a low cut, shave or scrape her hairs. She is to sit on a bare floor or a mat and she is expected to eat from broken plates and cooked with broken pots.

Fasoranti and Aruanh (2007) posit that at the end of forty days, three months as the case may be, the final rites are performed on the widow. The final rites include being 'washed' in the night after having the final wailing and making some rituals which are expected to finally pit the spirit of the departed to the final rest and 'outing' which involves change of dresses and being led to the market. They further noted that after the wailing periods, widows experienced several degradations and deprivation. The widow may be accused of killing her husband and therefore could be asked to swear with either the Holy Bible or the Holy Quran or through other traditional means like being asked to drink the water used for washing the corpse in order to prove her innocence.

The death of spouse in African culture marks a new stage of life for the partner left behind that demands separating rites aimed at terminating the sexual intercourse rights with the deceased (Siwila 2011). They do not enjoy the best of health due to pressure of conforming to widowhood practice. During the period of mourning the widow is considered unclean and has to go through a series of rituals (Daber 2003). In some cultures widows are given as long as one year to mourn their husbands, while in some, their mourning ends the day the funeral closed. This stressful situation makes them to suffer a lot of emotional, physical, mental and spiritual problems. The challenges facing widows are poverty, domestic violence, sexual abuse, indecent funeral procedures and rites, eviction and homelessness, violation of human and equal rights, and freedom (Hosken, 1981).

Many endure unimaginable emotional turmoil, deprivation, sorrow, anguish and abuse at the hands of their relatives and society. Some are subject to inhumane and immoral treatment. Wearing of black/white clothes indicate that the widow is mourning and to make the widow unattractive as well as to let everybody knows that her husband is dead. Some of them may be uneducated and untrained and therefore unemployable. Some may consent to polygamous marriages in order to be able to care for themselves and children. Young widows may turn to prostitution if they see no other options. The widow is seen as the property of the former husband's family. Their right is violated and they are pushed into hardship and thereby many of them become commercial sex workers in order to care for their children. They suffer from the loss of social status and

marginalization. Beside these, other problems faced by this women are violation of human right, being forced into the new conjugal relations with a male relative or be forbidden to remarry even if they wish to do so. As a result, many women may spend a long period of their lives in widowhood, with all its associated disadvantages and stigmas. The research revealed that; illiteracy, poverty, male dominated society, poor socio-economic status of women, religious belief and traditional inheritance laws are factors responsible for the harmful practices.

Reasons for Widowhood Practices in Africa

Many reasons could be deduced to be responsible for the prevalence of widowhood practices as highlight below;

Superstitious Belief

There is the wide-spread belief in African societies including Nigeria that without all these rites and practices, the spirit of the dead man will not have rest, instead his soul will be wandering around to be destroying and hurting people in the community. So, the wife has to go through all these widowhood practices to appease the dead.

State of Joblessness of the Wife

This is another contributory factor, where wives depend solely on their husband for survival. This usually placed them at abject poverty level after the death of their husbands as other members of the extended family would want to lay claim to the deceased husband's properties. If women are economically empowered, they would be able to stand up and refuse to compromise to these obnoxious widowhood practices. This is practicable in societies where husbands refuse their wives to be engaged in a meaningful job and become economically viable and independent.

Lack of Education and Ignorance

Most of the women who are victims of widowhood practices believed in their culture and very difficult to convince due to fear of the society will do to them. Also, there are still some sections of Nigeria especially Islam that do not believe in formal education of the girl-child. An educated woman would not succumb to be abused and be maltreated as a widow. Education of the girl-child therefore becomes very important as it may serve as future security against various forms of violence against women especially widowhood practices. Bayeh (2016) asserts that education should be available to all women in order to enhance their economic, political, social and cultural development. This will of course widen their knowledge on what is obtainable in society and therefore create means of tackling issues militating against women's right and factors associated with women's degradation in the society.

Failure of Men to Write a Will

Most husbands do not bother to write a will before their death and when a mere suggestion is made by their wives, it attracts community or family council meeting on the basis that they want them dead is so as to inherit properties. Lack of any written will pertaining to inheritance of properties will place the wife at a disadvantaged position since the in-laws would want to confiscate their brother's properties, show antagonism to the wife and evict her from the family house in line with traditional laws and practices.

This reveals why most men do not consent to court marriage. They fail to understand that the future of their wives and children are protected under the above marriage.

Lack of Respect for Women fold

This is another cause of these obnoxious practices. Africa is being seen to be "a man's world", due to our patriarchal background; therefore, women are being treated as an article, like chattel that was purchased, which you can drop or transfer. This belief makes the in-laws to treat their wife without respect when the husband dies. Stallion (2014) states that in most African society, a woman has no voice of her own except that of her husband. When she is young, she is under her father, when she is married, she is under her husband. Even when she is a widow, she is likely to be taken over by male member of the family that is younger to her husband; or rather she may be expected to be taken care of by her first son. If she has no son, it is her ill luck and she is left to suffer with her female children or at the mercy of her brothers.

Sibani (2025) states that women are highly valued in the Western world. In Nigeria, women face great difficulty in the journey to achieve relevance in their political aspiration. Overtime, women in Rivers State have faced numerous challenges, including gender inequality, poverty, lack of access to education, etc. since women have become an indispensable entity, they should not be treated with reckless abandon and discriminatory cultural practices limiting their potentials, which include, seclusion from social life, ill treatments of widows from in-laws, sleeping on bare floors, wearing of black gown, denying them of inheritance from the wealth of their deceased husbands, female genital mutilation (FGM) and others. Sibani (2023) states that the Nigerian system of inheritance is not fair to women. Women are denied their rights as soon as they become widow. Most societies do not share property to daughters as parting gifts when she is married out of the family. In fact, due to lack of value for women, most men end up marrying many women and turning them into labourers and slaves.

Unscrupulous Character of the Wife

Traditionally speaking, this should not be a reason for widowhood practice, but the attitude of some wives contributes to the kind of treatment which they receive from their in-laws at the death of their husband. If a woman does not possess good attitude, the in-laws use this avenue (widowhood practices) to get their own pound of flesh.

Death of the husband is considered to be a calamity that has be fallen families and the society in general. Death especially of the most valuable individual such as the breadwinner can bring a lot of frustration and uncertainty. It brings the sense of fear, anxiety, sorrow, grief, emotional pains, depression, solitude, sympathy, compassion and frustration. It is viewed as a transition from one state of life to another. Death is a natural transition from the visible to the invisible or spiritual ontology where the spirit, the essence of the person, is not destroyed but moves to live in the spirit ancestors' realm (King, p. 10, 2025).

According to the African belief system, life does not end with death, but continues in another realm. It is a transition from the living person to the living dead or spirit. Becoming an ancestor after death is a desirable goal of every individual. When a person dies, it is believed that a new set of social relations has to be addressed. Upon death, the person's spirit is believed to leave the body and become restless. It is believed that the person's spirit starts wandering around. A wandering spirit is believed to be dangerous because it can harm people, especially the relatives of the deceased. Proper

funeral and rituals are needed in order to let the wandering spirit rest in peace among the dead. The rituals that are done during the time of death and after the funeral are aimed at calming down the spirit of the dead. In some societies, it is believed that without the ritual of mourning the dead would never lie quietly in the grave, but would be constantly interfering in the affairs of the living, such as, jealous of every new adjustment, such as the remarriage of its widow and indeed it might afflict with illness all those people who should have honoured its memory by holding a funeral gathering but omitted to do so.

The death of spouse marks a new stage of life for the partner left behind that demands separating rites aimed at terminating relationship with the deceased. Widowhood practice generally allow widows to pass through rituals on the loss of the husband via shaving of hair on the head, drinking of remains of bath water used to wash the husbands corpses, mourn her husband death for about three to twelve month depending on the ethnic group, denied right of inheritance: women do not have right to inherit land or property, widow are not allowed to bathe, clean her surrounding during mourning period, on rare cases once bath a day. According Young (p. 88, 2006):

The Berom widow mourns her husband for a year. During this period she is not allowed to socialize. In the early days she will only cover herself with a blanket known as (godo). But these days she put on white cloth. She is only allowed to take her bath at interval of days. She is not allowed to do make-up or cream her body.

Culture, Traditions of the Berom People in Plateau State (2017) holds that these practices and persistence are explained by the desire for the woman to demonstrate considerable public grief over the death of her husband. What happens during the mourning period, the friends of the woman come around her and the people in the area come to sympathize with her. There will be no lighting of fire or cooking in the house. People around will cook and prepare what is called (kunu) and different food will be brought until after seven days and after the burial. At the end of the mourning period, she will be prayed for by the chief priest in the olden days. But these days a pastor will pray for her, and then celebration will follow. At the period of her mourning, she must not have sexual intercourse until the period of the mourning is over. Then she is free to marry whoever she wishes. Or as the case maybe she may agree to accept levirate marriage but if not, she will not be forced into it. She can choose whoever she wishes to marry. It should be noted that she can decide to remain single and take care of her children. In the case where the deceased is wealthy and has children no member of the family interferes with the man's property, it is left to the woman and her children. But where there are no children and the woman refuses to marry any member of the man's siblings she will be sent away without any access to the man's properties. Tolu (2019), states that at the death of the husband, there is no suspicion as in some culture that it is the women that kill the man. They believe that God is the one that called him. They also believe that if it is human that killed him; it is left between the person and God.

Various Form of Harmful Widowhood Rites

Shaving of Hairs

Widows are humiliated in most African culture by shaving their hairs publicly with broken bottles, others shave them razor. In some places, there will be certain designs on her heads after literally scrapping off the hairs. The significance of this is that, since the

husband is dead, there is nobody to beautify her hair for, at least for a period of time (Ilozue 2007). According to Odimegwu (2009), a widow's head is shaved immediately upon the death of her husband. Besides, she is restrained from washing herself. These practices are rooted in the belief that every death is unnatural. Therefore, a widow must pass through these rituals to prove her innocence and purify herself and at the same time protect herself from further defilement.

The Christian religion holds that God prohibits cutting of one's body, including shaving hair as a ritualistic act of grief for the deceased. Deuteronomy 14:1, states "You are the children of the Lord your God; you shall not cut yourselves nor shave the front of your head for the dead". Also, Leviticus 19:28 opines "You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks on you: I am the Lord".

Sleeping and Sitting on the Floor or Mat

The symbolic effect of this by a woman at the death of her husband is dethronement. As a result, a woman by marriage becomes absorbed into the husband's family and is recognized by her role as a wife, therefore the loss of her position and entitlements in the family, hence, the sitting on the floor or mat and sleeping in the same room with the corpse for seven days.

Refrain from Bathing for a Number of Days

Neglecting a personal appearance and hygiene is really a terrible practice as we know how bad people feel when they fail to attend to their personal hygiene, particularly for a woman. The widow will be forced to stay for a number of days without bathing. This practice is simply unspeakable, unimaginable and honestly cruel, for a woman that just lost a husband, who needs pity and punishment. Yet widows go through this particular rite for the love of their late husband's though to their detriment. According to Oduyoye (p. 40, 1994):

The denigration of women is the creation of human culture ... the culturally defined duties and attributes we call gender are human creations not to be turned into idols.... What we call women's place in one human culture is also men's place in another.... There is nothing permanent about human beings as culturally defined.

Made to Swear with Husband Corpse

This is meant to prove if the woman killed the husband or not either with witchcraft, poisoning and the likes; once a man dies the in-laws immediately accuse the wife and ask her to confess to the killing, and to prove her innocence, she must be made to drink the water used in bathing the corpse of the late husband. If she refuses, she is labeled guilty. Therefore, she must be punished or made to cross the husband's coffin three times. If she dies before the mourning period is over, she will be thrown into the evil forest because her death confirms that she is a culprit. (Nzewi, 1981).

Seclusion

The general isolation of the widows from certain places in the community is a widespread practice in Africa, but its intensity and duration vary. Widows are not allowed to go to the market during mourning. In the Islamized communities this period was known as 'Iddat'. The purpose behind 'Iddat' on widowhood is to determine the paternity, should the woman turn out to be pregnant and also intended to give the widow time to recover from her bereavement (Sharka, 1996). Worldwide, widows face

restricted access to resources and weakened support systems due to patriarchal norms and social exclusion, which directly threaten household food security (UN Women, 2021). In India, this marginalisation, along with societal stigma, deprives individuals of identity, community support, and self-respect (Atwal, 2023).

In some parts of Igbo society, the early parts of this period are usually rigorous. During the first 28 days, the widow is not allowed to go anywhere; certain rituals must be performed at the expiration of the 28 days before the widow can perform normal activities. She must refrain from bathing, she must sit on the ground, her food must be prepared separately and she is fed by another widow from a broken plate which will be thrown away after the seclusion period. She will hold a kitchen knife or broom stick because she is not allowed to touch any part of her body with hands, but must use this knife or broom stick. At this time, she is regarded as unclean, the knife or broom stick is also to protect her from the spirits, which may attack her during this period (Umejesie, 2002).

Widow Inheritance (Also Known as Bride Inheritance)

This is a cultural and social practice whereby a widow is required to marry relative of her late husband, often his brother. Emery (2003) said, the practice is more commonly referred to as a levirate marriage, examples of which can be found in ancient and biblical times, Deuteronomy 25:5-10. The practice was meant as a means for the widow to have someone to support her and her children financially, and to keep her late husband's wealth within the family bloodline. At the time it was initiated, women were responsible for the house chores and men were the providers, therefore if the woman lost her husband, she would have no one to provide for the remaining family. Because her in-laws would not want someone outside of the family bloodline to inherit her late husband's estate, she was required to marry within the family. Most African societies still practice this.

Widows Cleansing

Widows cleansing is a ritual which demands a widow to have sexual intercourse with another man, normally one of her brother in-law. In order to let the spirit of the deceased rest in peace among the dead. The rationale behind this ritual is the belief that the spirit of the deceased husband still recognizes the widow as his wife; hence, he will be interfering with any relationship the widow might establish.

In Mozambique, traditionally, after the death of his/her wife/husband, the widow/widower has to undergo a cleansing or a purification ritual. Although the widow/widower cleansing ritual is observed in all parts of Mozambique, it varies from region to region, depending on the gender of the individual who is subjected to it. In the north (Zambezia, Nampula, Cabo Delgado, and Niassa provinces), it is practiced by the use of water and medicinal plants for both the widow and the widower. They use this mixture to cleanse the body. In the south (Maputo, Gaza and Inhambane provinces) and in the center (Sofala, Manica, and Tete provinces) of the country, the cleansing ritual involves sexual (coital) intercourse for the widow, and the widower is generally "washed" with water mixed with medicinal plants. The widow's sexual cleansing ritual is called pita-kufa in the center of the country and kutchinga in the south. In general, sexual relations are maintained for three consecutive days, often two or three times a day.

Under the internal logic of this ritual, the cleansing/purification sexual act is not practiced with condoms because it is the “hot” sexual fluids and the “hot frictions” that are assumed to neutralize the impurity involved in the death of the husband.

According to the traditional explanation of the widow’s sexual cleansing ritual, after the death of her husband, a woman becomes “dirty”, contaminated by the woe involved in the death of her husband, whose spirit inhabits her body. It is believed that this “dirtiness”, and the misfortune that goes with it, can spread among other members of society. Consequently, the widow must be “washed” in order to remove the contagious “dirtiness” and the curse associated with it, as well as to free her from the shadows of her former life partner. According to (Theopi, 2017), a group of women in western Kenya is fighting “widow-cleansing”, a traditional ritual practiced by Luo ethnic communities in some of the poorer, more rural areas of the country. The ritual requires women to have sex - often with strangers- when their husbands die. The men who “cleanse” them are sometimes HIV-positive and do not use protection.

The Challenges of Widowhood to Women in Africa

The death of a husband is a challenge to the wife especially in the culture that upheld the practice of male superiority over female folks. These conditions have erected enormous difficulties for women to creatively and stoutly initiate new robust relationships with both men and women in social and economic spheres upon widowhood, (Gwom (1992). Widowhood practices have destabilizing challenges on African widows such as:

Economic and Dehumanizing challenges

The widows are poor and uncared for by people who are supposed to give them succor and help. Geoffrey (2012) states thus, many widows face extreme poverty, discrimination and dehumanizing treatments. They are miserably deprived of their social security and family support. Their children too are isolated, often in unhealthy condition, physically abused and at times without inheriting any property. “Widowhood is an unpleasant experience”. It is degrading when widows are subjected to untold hardship and maltreatment by their in-laws and by the society, (Olanisebe, 2015). Their socio-economic conditions are deteriorating, manifested especially by excruciating poverty.

Psychological and Health challenges

Another unpalatable effect of widowhood practices is that many widows become emotionally deranged and psychologically unstable and are prone to shock, temporary or even permanent loss of memory and sense, (Stallion, 1984). They are not meant to look neat so as not to attract other men. According to (Njaka, p. 17, 1975):

This is a pan Igbo custom that has been practiced for a long time. As it stands now, widows can now take adequate care of themselves such as having access to good hospitals without being subjected to die at home.

Widows are not allowed to shave their pubic hair during the period of mourning in Igboland. They are kept in an unhygienic environment. Health wise, they are prone to any kind of diseases, especially after drinking the disgusting water used in bathing a corpse. The most obvious effects are deepening poverty, acute stress and depression, loss of identity and self-esteem. Widowhood conditions expose women to psychological and

physical abuse as well as a whole range of health-related problems. Withdrawal of children from school and engagement in prostitution as a coping strategy.

Social Status and Marginalization

Widows are being avoided in the society as if it is an abomination to be a widow. Most of them lose their friends and they finally become loners and highly prone to committing suicide to end the sufferings. They are open to several men who seek to have sex with them. Due to their impoverished conditions, most men in the society always deny them access to their rights by placing conditional demand on sex which opens up avenues for prostitution and illicit relationship with several men. The important thing is that we are either male or female; otherwise, we are not human. I do not believe in hermaphrodites. Therefore, being a man or a woman is neither a punishment nor a privilege. None is superior; none is inferior to the other. Oduyoye (p. 40, 1990) vehemently defending women's right to self-determination avows that: "By nature we are male and female; there is no intrinsic hierarchy here". Udondata and Ekanem (p. 18, 2013): "Races are unique and different not superior or inferior; the idea of racial or tribal superiority or inferiority is a delusion". The idea of a particular sex being branded superior or inferior is a delusion. Hence a woman is a woman and she should remain a woman to the fullest, realizing all her potentialities; she cannot be a man and was not meant to be one. She should not want to be or strive to become a man.

Political challenges

Politically, many widows cannot seek for political offices because of their status and due to the fact that men and women in the society will not respect them. However, some widows who know their rights and refused their being made silent in the society usually fight and achieve what they want to achieve in the society, their status notwithstanding. Widows in the political sphere are termed loosed women who do not have dignity. This is indeed a social stigma on women. In the view of (Okoye, 1995), across different cultures in Nigeria, there exist harmful traditional widowhood practices which have attracted the attention of the global struggle in general on violence against women. The severe effects of widowhood are rooted in cultural and traditional practices, as well as the socialization processes that condition women to passivity and dependence.

Lack of Male Child in the Marriage

In the view of (Mbefo, p. 55, 2009):

The woman was looked upon as the vessel of life or a fertile field in which a man planted his seeds. The more children she bore, the better for the man; the more wives (fields) the man had, the more children he was likely to beget.... The barren woman was (therefore) considered a dead – end and useless to the community. In some communities she was scorned and at times labeled a witch.... Whatever other qualities, gifts and talents a woman might possess, the inability to procreate reduced her to the status of a non-person.

This picture of childlessness resulting in apparent nonentity of an African woman is just a glimpse at the horrible experiences of the female folk right from birth. The upbringing of a female child already set her aside for these unacceptable but unfortunately tolerated degrading burdens against women.

II. Recommendations

Religious groups in Nigeria should preach against obnoxious cultural practices against women (widowhood) for women emancipation.

Women whose rights are violated should speak out and call on Civil Liberty Organization so that necessary action can be taken early for their freedom.

It is obvious that women are seen as men's property in Africa via the practice of paying bride price during marriage, hence, portraying women as goods, objects displayed in the market for purchase and when purchased, the buyer can do with it whatsoever he wants. The government erodes such practices by providing alternative ways of not presenting women as purchased property by the men.

Abolition of obnoxious cultural practices against women in Africa should emanate from government policies with law enforcement agents instituted to punish offenders in all communities in Africa.

III. Conclusion

Death is considered to be a calamity that occurs with grieves in families and the society in general. Death brings the sense of fear, anxiety, sorrow, grief emotional pains, depression, solitude, sympathy, compassion and frustration. Africans believed that without the ritual of mourning the dead would never lie quietly in the grave, but would be constantly interfering in the affairs of the living, jealous of every new adjustment, such as the remarriage of its widow. The death of spouse marks a new stage of life for the partner left behind that demands separating rites aimed at terminating relationship with the deceased.

From the foregoing, attempt has been made to give a retrospective examination of widowhood practices in Africa. Widowhood practice varies from one culture to another, but the general patterns involved in the practices shows marginalization and high level of discrimination. Widows are subjected to a lot of dehumanizing practices due to the patriarchal nature of the society with the customary laws of the society skewed favourably towards men while women have been the disadvantaged. This explains why the society always pity men and seek to offer succor for them when they lose their spouse, while the same society suspected women for the death of their husband. However, in contemporary time, factors like modernization, education, involvement in industrial and other bureaucratic jobs, Christianity and high level of exposure of the women have gone a long way in opening the eyes of widows to these harmful widowhood practices. Therefore, economic empowerment of women (widows) is advocated to liberate the women folk from these harmful practices.

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