

The Inhuman Treatment of Widows in African Communities

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Abstract: Widows in Africa have often been faced with traumatic experiences in Africa communities at the instance of losing their husbands which is occasioned by death; the inhuman treatment meted on the widows varies from one culture to the other. Most of the treatments are geared towards dehumanizing their victims which is always a painful and psychological experience that can affect the individual throughout her lifetime. This study pools together a review of widowhood practices from different communities in Africa, an array of harmful widowhood rites in Africa, the way forward; recommendations were also made to help eradicate this unpleasant behavior in our communities.

Key words: Harmful, infringement, practices, rights, taboos, tradition

INTRODUCTION

A widow is a woman whose husband has died and who has not married again in other words a widow is a married woman who has been deprived of her legal husband as a result of death, the African woman remain victims of harmful traditional rites that are associated with the passing away of their beloved spouses. Deaths even in circumstances in which the causes are natural and explicable are never perceived as such, In Africa or Communities death are attributed to magico - religious factors and widows are targets of accusations of bewitchment or sorcery and are as such blamed for the death of their beloved partners (Ugweueze, 1997).

Widowhood can be described as the state or period of a widow or widower, it is necessary to note that naturally it is good to mourn once late husband but this can be done without subjecting the late man's wife to torture and infringement on her fundamental human rights that can lead to her death. Onyenuchie (1999), described widowhood as a traumatic life experience and process that naturally should evoke sympathetic treatment but the reverse is always the case. The treatment of widows most of the time is very inhuman and unfortunate.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine the inhuman treatment meted on widows in African communities and suggest possible ways of eliminating or reducing the inhuman practices as well as create awareness on the negative effects of the practices on widows.

WIDOWHOOD PRACTICES

Widowhood practices highly occur in various communities in Nigeria each ethnic group has its own set

of rules or behavior which are considered culturally appropriate however they may be detrimental to the widow's health, financial position, and social status. Our cultural practices have made women beasts of burden in our society. In Ikot Ekpene, as examined by Ugweueze (1997), the very moment the husband dies, his wife is immediately summoned by a group of old women who would confine her to a room where she is forced to sit on a floor for as long as the dead is not buried. She is not to wear shoes, sandals or slippers. Nor is she allowed to cut her nails or change her dresses as she would have wished. Above all, she is not allowed to have her bath no matter how long she is under confinement after the remains had been buried. The same old women may now permit her to change her dresses. The new dress must however be black. This is followed by a second shaving and cutting of her nails signaling a complete separation with the dead. The next stage is to choose a husband for her from within the confines of the extended family of the dead husband. Having made the choice, she is mandated to offer the old women some specified keg of palm wine, fowl and any other items as demanded by them. These items are then presented to the men of the family who will now approach the selected new husband. If however he rejects the offer, the widow is again made for another man who is also from within the family. On acceptance, the man is then required to buy for his new wife clothes, tubers of yam and other items as demanded by the custom of the people. The new wife is then officially informed and they (the new husband and the woman) will now meet each other for the first time. He also reported that In Ngwa land the death of a husband calls for immediate mourning by the widow/widows of the departed victims. The widow is confined to the room where the dead body of the husband lay. There she is meant to sit on the floor, (some even

insist that she sits on the cold floor) as long as the body is yet to be buried. After the burial, she is not expected to have free movement for at least ninety-days, (in some cases, more than four months). Before entering into the mourning period, her hair would have been shaved to the scalp, dressed in shabby half wrapper. The widow must not wear shoes, slipper, never to trim her nails. She is not permitted to go to the toilet unaccompanied, after the burial of the dead the widow is now expected to enter into another period of mourning which will last for one year during which time she is to be dressed in pure black with no shoes, sandals or slippers. It is now very clear that widowhood rites in some communities in Africa are not only discriminating but also dehumanizing.

According to Onyenuchie (1999), widowhood is a traumatic life experience and process that naturally should evoke sympathetic treatment. But the reverse is always the case in Nigeria especially in Edo State. In Edo State, the treatment faced by women who lose their husbands is very inhuman and unfortunate. In most cases they are accused of killing their husbands and as such subjected to all kinds of trials and ordeal. After the period of mourning, they are subjected to the psychologically frustrating experience or process of being inherited by their heir or next of kin of their late husband. Any attempt at rejecting such an offer attracts total ostracization from her husband's family, and even withdrawal or limited access to their children.

Olurode (1990) asserted that in ancient societies the independent woman did not exist; she was a member of a family and dependent either upon her father, husband or brother. In this case, the death of a husband puts the women in a very painful and difficult situation. Most widows at this time are exposed to extortion and oppression meted on them by their husbands relatives. It is important to note that the husband-wife relationship affairs become effective only after the burial of the late widow's husband. It is after this final burial that the widow wife now changes her name and starts answering the name of the new husband. In a case where the new husband already has wives, they are not expected to raise any objection concerning the admittance of the new wife. It is necessary to reiterate that the widow, now a new wife has no right to inherit her late husband's property - if she had no male child.

Widowhood rites may also involve both physical and psychological violence to the widow. Widowhood rite to be performed by the females are usually many and of various types. They range from those designed to express grave and adequate sorrow for the loss suffered to those designed to cleanse/purge the woman from her non-involvement in her husband's death. For example, she may be required to shave her hair, mourn by wearing black for as long as the customary prescribed mourning period and she is not allowed to bath herself or change her

clothing. These acts are thought to adequately express her grief and failure to carry out the practice is frowned upon severely. (LRRDC, 1995). They concluded that some of these practices could be hazardous to a woman's life and safety. For example, some of the practices require her to swallow concoctions or other dangerous substances to prove her non-involvement. She is sometimes required to partake of some sacrificial rituals which may involve her exposure to physical harm as where she has to take long treks on lonely paths or routes alone at night time. Among the Ashantis of Ghana, widowhood rites are strictly observed and wife inheritance is considered the appropriate thing for a heir to do when the father dies leaving a wife and children (Rattray, 1956), if these rites are not carried out it means that the man has not been given a befitting burial. Widowhood rites in Ghana amounts to emotional violence on the widow (Okoye, 1995). There is always a high level violence against a woman who has just lost her husband; all her husband's properties are eventually taken away from her without considering her situation and circumstances. He found out that in Cameroon, widowhood is a very painful experience. In the event of the death of a man, the wife is always the suspect and because of that, she is subjected to harmful and humiliating treatment. Her hair is scraped off and, in certain areas of Cameroon, her pubic region. This is accredited with some cleansing or purifying powers. The mourning period is usually for two years.

Among the Ibos in Nigeria as soon the period of mourning is over which is normally 12 months, the widow is open to offer for marriage from members of the deceased's family, usually the first son or the younger brother. If the wife was the father's only wife or their mother, then the deceased's uncle or younger brother or the nearest kin inherits her. If the deceased had so many wives the heir could pick the younger and more beautiful ones, give some to his younger brothers and request those he did not want in the family to refund the dowry on them and go (LRRDC, 1995).

Amongst the Edo's, especially the Esan's, in Nigeria as soon as a man dies, the wife is expected to mourn him publicly for at least seven days (Egharevba, 1971; Okojie, 1960). As soon as the body is taken away for burial, the widow is armed with "IKHIMIN". Ikhimin is a many sided fruit from a tree which looks like the oil bean tree and believed among the Edos to be much shunned by spirits. She is also armed with a bow and arrows to protect her from the husband's spirit. Earthenware pot with fire glowing from within is left at the door of the room where the widow is. During the mourning period, she is expected to go to the burial ground to have her bath. She will shoot the arrow into the bush requesting her dead husband not to come to her. During this period, she must eat alone with her left hand. She sleeps on the floor with a mat because anything she comes in contact with during that

period will be thrown away on the 7th day. On the night preceding the 7th day, the woman is forbidden to sleep. The widow is not allowed into the main house, most of the time, she can stay at the corner of the living room. After she has been through with all the rites for 7 days, she now enters the usual 3 months mourning periods. During this period, she has to use charcoal to smear her forehead and wear black clothes continuously. Onyenuchie observed that "in Nigeria the practice varies from one community to the other, the only common trend being the infliction of both physical, emotional and psychological violence on the widows.

Nwezi (1989) noted the dehumanizing and humiliating widowhood rites that women are made to undergo at the death of their husbands. Widowhood rites in Igbo land begin after the burial ceremony. According to Nwezi (1989), the widow's ordeal starts immediately after the husband's death. The relatives demand documents pertaining to their husband's property, including land, investments and bank accounts. Furthermore, the widow is required to provide expensive items, including a white goat and two jars of palm wine for purification purpose to the female members of their husband's lineage who made and implemented decision on every matter concerning widows.

The widows are seen as ritually unclean at the demise of their husband and so they could not touch any object, including them without defilement. So sticks were given to them to scratch themselves to avoid defilement by touching their body. Nwezi (1989) also found out that fines imposed on widows by female members of their husband's patrilineage were substantial in comparison to what they earn in rural economy. The fine was found to range from ₦300 (₦10 to ₦300) depending on the gravity of offences committed when their husbands were alive or dead. They were locked in with their husband's corpse for several hours and lying down for about ten minutes beside the corpse of their deceased spouses.

Johnson (1976) described widowhood in Yoruba land. According to him, widows are expected to lie over the grave without even a mat for three months. On the seventh day, the widow is led out of her town by an Egungu to a place where a mound of earth had been raised, with a yam placed on it. There is an extra mound on which a yam is placed and this represents the deceased. The widow is led out in rags with both hands on the opposite shoulders, her head being left bare. The widow takes a yam from the heap and this is understood to be the last subsistence she should expect to receive from her departed husband. After this, she returns home weeping, and is expected to remain indoors for the period of three months with shaved hair and dress unchanged.

At the expiration of this period, on an appointed day her hair will be shaved and thrown away. The widow is expected to parade the streets dressed in her best, singing

and dancing in honour of the dead and calling at one house after another to return thanks to sympathizers. The final ceremony is the division of the property of the deceased and this includes sharing his wives amongst his male relatives.

Widows in Nigeria are subjected to a number of cultural taboos and practices which are overwhelmingly oppressive and dehumanizing. These practices include wearing black material, staying indoors, shaving of hair, not bathing, not plaiting hair, keeping hair for seven days, staying indoors for 40 days according to Muslim rites, sleeping on the floor not sleeping during the day, dancing around town with a black dress, not being allowed to eat, rubbing on charcoal, made to swear with husband's corpse.

However, the most exploitative practice concerns the disposal of property. In the event of a husband death, and in the absence of an older son, his brother or male relations embark on what is tantamount to looting his property or asset quite in total disregard of the widow's joint or independent contribution. Under customary law, which governs most marriages in Nigeria, a wife has absolutely no right to the husband's property or income (Boparai, 1995).

For an African, no man dies from a natural cause, even at an old age. His death must necessarily be caused by someone and that person is likely to be his wife Okogie concluded that given the patterns of inheritance in African societies which is patrilineal, it is likely for a woman to kill a man than for a man to kill a woman. In order to forestall such behaviors, widowhood has to be labeled evil and associated rites made dehumanizing and humiliating to forestall women killing their husbands. In effect, obnoxious widowhood rites are forms of social control mechanisms meant to dissuade women from harming their husbands. Because of the associated stigma and stress, Korieh (1996) argued that widowhood practices are associated with a process of communal and spiritual cleansing, thereby carrying with it spiritual and cultural significance for both the widow and the community. At the end of the mourning period, the widow goes through a period of ritual cleansing. All materials and things used during the period of "NSO" or mourning are thrown into the 'evil forest' while the widow goes to the stream to wash away all impurities in a form of purification rite. After the mourning period, her hair is cut and the clothes she used that period burnt. Thereafter, the widow is considered clean and to re-enter normal life. In most communities, the mourning ends with purification rites. In this way, it is believed that the spirit of the dead husband had been adequately appeased or taken care of and the land also cleansed.

Some others have argued that widowhood rites are actually in the interest of the widow, since the sole aim is to protect her from the wandering spirit of her late

husband who might want to come to take her away if she is not properly protected. This belief explains why in some cultures the women are disguised by being rubbed with charcoal, wearing rags, carrying bows and arrows, cane, brooms cutlass etc. these are meant to scare away late husband's spirit. In some cases, some medicinal herbs believed to have the effect of scaring spirits are left burning at the entrance of the room to prevent the spirit of the husband from coming after her.

Osakwe (1995) stated that the tendency in contemporary Nigeria has been for men to claim that the mourning rites are to protect the widows from being "hunted by their late husbands spirit" while the majority of women reported that they agree in these rites mainly to demonstrate their non complicity in their husband's death (either deriving from acts of adultery, the use of deadly charms or witchcraft) and to ensure continued acceptance by the relatives so as not to be neglected.

Onyenuchie (1999) advised that a widow needs the moral, financial and emotional support of all persons around her. It should not, and must not, be a period of seduction or deprivation. Death is as natural as birth; both phenomenons are on the two extremes of a continuum. Africans should be made to understand and appreciate that fact as it will go a long way in solving the problems of widows in Nigeria, in Particular, and Africa in general. Factors influencing widowhood practices may include cosmology, religion, illiteracy, low concept of women, male-dominated society, Umuokpu (daughters of the lineage), female passivity, inheritance and marriage laws of the land, the extended family system, poverty, gender blindness, etc.

Erinosho (2000) narrated that the ordeal of a widow begins with accusations and victimization by the next of kin of her spouse who hold the view that she (the widow) is responsible for the death. She may be forced to swear before a family shrine and/or to drink water that has been used to wash his corpse in order to prove her innocence. It is believed that any of these measures can be used to establish her culpability and a widow who suffers dire consequences thereafter is deemed to be guilty while anyone who does not is innocent

Brown (1992) observed in Ghana, as in most African countries, that the death of a spouse is viewed as a serious matter which involves an observance of a series of rituals and ceremonies meant to signify the separation of the deceased's spouse spiritually from the surviving one. This is based on the general belief that the relationship between the spouses is a special one and something must be done to mark the permanent severance of the relationship and the departure of one of the partners.

Ohansi (1997) stated that it is generally acknowledged that widowhood rites among the Muslim population in the northern region of Nigeria are largely shaped by Islamic prescriptions. This is in contrast to other groups that are neither Christians nor Muslims in

other parts of the country. He reported that widowhood rites consist of the following in other parts of Nigeria: uncontrolled loud wailing and a falling on the floor, cooperating fully with her sisters - in - law to fully strip herself of clothing, be poorly fed, appear unkempt and remain completely ostracized during the pre-burial period, agreeing to undergo a trial to absolve herself of complicity in her husband's death, drinking impure or poisonous concoctions such as the water used to wash her husband's corpse, deprivations of husband's assets by husband's kin. He noted that, in spite of their cooperative attitude, a widow usually transits from relative luxury to penury when her husband's kin deprive her of all the assets she toiled with him to acquire.

According to Erinosho (2000) a recent survey under the auspices of the Better Life Programme (BLP) in Imo, Benue, Plateau, Rivers State etc revealed that widows are deemed to be ritually unclean at the demise of their husbands. They could not touch any object without defilement and were provided with pieces of stick to scratch their bodies to avoid defilement. Widows reported that their impurity extended to all aspects of their lives. To give an example, their meals were cooked in old pots rather than those normally used for cooking for other members of the family. They had to sleep on old mats placed on wooden planks or old doors. The rationale for restricting widows to the use of old items is because the items are to be disposed of or burnt at the end of the mourning period.

The maltreatment of widows is wide-ranging. Young children of widows are forced to drop out of school, work, and become destitute due to lack of access to their fathers' resources. The tendency has been to discriminate against female children, especially as regards schooling even when the kin of the dead (mostly brother, male cousins and uncles) allocate some of his resources for the upkeep of children (Osimiri, 1990). Widows go through all of the harmful pre and post - burial rites whereas widowers do not.

An array of harmful widowhood rites in some communities in Africa:

- Swearing on the dead body of husband.
- Making her to eat kola-nut placed on the dead body of the deceased.
- Making her to eat from a particular plate with her left hand for the period of mourning.
- Making her to marry a relation of the deceased husband.
- Making her to go into the distant bush alone in the dark during the mourning period.
- Making the woman during the mourning period to expose her naked body outside house both morning/evening.

- Making the woman to drink from the water used in washing the deceased husband's body.
- Making the woman to sleep with the dead body of the deceased husband.
- Dispossessing them of property or disinheritance
- Prolonged mourning for weeks, months or for over a period or a year.
- The woman is forced out from matrimonial home
- The woman is forced to shave her hair.
- Deprivation of basic personal hygiene example not allowing her to take her bath for days.
- She is forced to wail incessantly to remorse and grief (United Nations General Assembly, 1981; UNICEF, 1998).

The way forward: In order to avert the ugly situation faced by widows in our society the following need to be put into consideration, because nobody is aware of when death will come and as such people must equip themselves with the following:

- Women should try as much as possible to do so many things by themselves without totally depending on their husbands
- All women should have a means of livelihood whether rich or poor so that you can be economically stable
- Wives should try and maintain a cordial relationship with husband and extended family members.
- Women should ensure that properties that they acquire are in their personal names
- Let whatever you are be known to all when he is alive i.e., Christianity, paganism, or Islam
- Try and be conversant with your husband's activities this may not amount to monitoring him around
- When death occurs, the widow should understand that the, situation is not the end of life, she should try to organize herself and be alert
- When a woman or man is conscious of the fact that death can come anytime and that he or she is not in control of life, then one can prepare for the unknown

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations have been proffered to check the menace of harmful widowhood practices in our communities:

- There should be public enlightenment campaign to educated people about the plight of widows. These should include workshops, seminars, posters, handbills, radio and television gingles, health talks, etc.
- Meetings should be arranged with traditional rulers and opinion leaders like district/village/ward heads, village health committees, town criers, traditional

birth attendants, old women whose views are respected in communities.

- Government at all levels should be alerted over the plight of widows and should enact legislation to protect them and their children.
- Women who are usually used against fellow women in times of bereavement should be educated to change their behaviors towards widows.
- Religious organizations should be effectively mobilized to propagate the need for fair treatment of widows and equality of sexes.
- Men should be sensitized on the need to put their homes in order before they die, that is, ensuring that half of the property goes to the wife. Any negation of the will after the death of a spouse should be severely dealt with by law.
- Wives under customary marriage should be given equal rights as their counterparts under statutory marriage Act.
- Government and Non-governmental organization should be established to assist widows in difficult situation.

CONCLUSION

Widows are humans and as such they need a fair treatment from their spouse, relatives and members of the community; these rites which are considered appropriate by the culture are most of the time detrimental to the health and wellbeing of the widows and their offspring; therefore, the rites to a large extent need to be dropped to enable women to live normally despite the exit of their husbands.

Conclusively, people are gradually gaining awareness of the harmful effect of harmful widowhood practices in our communities; some states in Nigeria have already enacted law prohibiting harmful widowhood practices the act spells out different situation whereby people can be convicted when they disobey the law. The content of the law should be publicized. So that people will be aware of their rights and duties under the law. The government should set machinery in motion to implement the law.

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