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Widows' Population And The Challenges Of Widowhood Rites: The Case Of The Awori Of Ogun State, Southwestern Nigeria.

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Abstract

Across many societies in Nigeria, widows of all age categories exist and form a significant part of the population. One striking feature is the much greater number of widows relative to widowers. A large proportion of these widows are without formal education, and low level of income and therefore lack economic empowerment. More worrisome is the traditional widowhood rites observed by widows irrespective of age, in the name of culture. Though the experience of widows varies from one society to another, the practice tends to be more entrenched in the rural communities. Utilizing data from the survey of 942 widows in six Awori communities, together with results of Focus Group Discussions among widows, in-depth interviews among widowers and opinion leaders as well as evidence from literature, the paper presents the cultural explanation for the practice, the gender construction of death as well as the social construction of widowhood. It examines the widowhood rites in the study area together with their challenges. The widowhood rites include confinement indoor, sitting on a mat, observance of vigil, wearing of dark clothes, use and disposal of different utensils as well as taking of special bath. The paper concludes by making recommendations for policy.

Keywords: Widows, population, widowhood rites, Awori, Nigeria

Introduction

The increasing number of widows' population across the world in recent

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times has become an acknowledged social problem. In spite of the great strides made in scientific and technological research, the death of both young and old, arising from sickness/disease, wars, accidents, etc. remains inevitable, leading us to assert that, there is no human society without widows and widowers. For instance, the United States Bureau of Statistics (2008) reports that yearly, there are seven million widows globally. In a similar vein, Potash (1986:1) opines that, "Widows make up about half the adult female population in Africa". Even though this view appears exaggerated, there is a large proportion of widows in Africa. In the 1991 population census of Nigeria, the percentage distribution of the population aged 10 years and above by marital status revealed that 3.6 percent of that population was widowed. When disaggregated by sex, it was observed that while only 0.9 percent of that population were widowers, 6.2 percent were widows, indicating that there were many more widows than widowers (NPC, 1998:109). Similarly, the 2006 population and housing census of Nigeria shows that about 2 percent of the same population (i.e. those aged 10 years and above) were widowed. However, when disaggregated by sex, only 0.5 percent were widowers while 3.5 percent were widows (NPC, 2009:27). This evidence suggests that there was a decline in the proportion of widowers and widows between 1991 and 2006. However, the proportion of widowers and widows in Nigeria in 2006 was still as high as 230,609 and 1,693,692 respectively (NPC, 2009:27).

The fact that females have higher average life expectancy than

males and the practice whereby men marry women younger than themselves possibly account for why there are more widows than widowers in Nigeria, as it is also likely to be in other countries, particularly those of Africa (Oyekanmi, 2007). Until the 1990s, not much research was done on widows and their plight in Nigeria. Yet, this is one specific subgroup that should be targeted for intervention, considering the incidence of depression among them, the socio-economic set back that the crisis of widowhood brings to them, and the sudden change in their status (Sesay and Odebiyi, 1998).

Most studies in Nigeria (Afigbo, 1989; Ahonsi, 1997; Akumadu, 1998; Korieh, 1996; Kantiyok, 2000; and Nwoga, 1989) have focused on the Southeast and Northern parts of the country. These scholars' contributions on widowhood practices, levirate, aged widows, etc., have no doubt contributed immensely to our understanding of the uniqueness of widowhood practices in other societies. However, the gap provided by the absence of literature and research on widowhood among the Awori sub-ethnic group of the Yoruba is what this study intends to fill.

This paper argues that the plight of widows in the Nigerian society is unhealthy for development. Traditional widowhood rites glaringly enforced on widows in the name of cultural traditions is not only barbaric but a violation of widows' rights and retrogressive for society. Besides the psychological trauma that is associated with widowhood, there is observed decline in the socio-economic well being of the widows. More worrisome is the fact that a bulk of the widows in the study area has low level of education and lack capacity for economic empowerment. Thus, they cannot

contribute their quota to family income and societal development. They become a burden to family members aside the children and the aged who constitute the dependent population in the society. This paper examines the cultural explanation for this phenomenon, the gender construction of death as well as the social construction of widowhood in this study. It conceptualizes widowhood and widowhood rites and then examines the widowhood practices and challenges in selected Awori communities of Ogun State, southwestern Nigeria, with a view to suggesting the way forward.

Cultural Explanation of Death

The inevitability of death as the ultimate end of every living being and the inability of humankind to completely eradicate it in spite of the great strides made in scientific and technological research lead us to assert that there is no human society without widows and widowers. In many parts of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) especially in Nigeria, death is often attributed to some unnatural causes. For instance, Afigbo (1989) observed that in almost all societies, the immediate or remote cause of death is sought in the wicked machinations of some human enemy or of a malevolent ancestor or ghost. "Deaths, even in circumstances in which the causes are natural and explicable, are never perceived as such. Magico-religious factors and widow's targets of accusations about bewitchment or sorcery are blamed for the death of their partners" (Erinosho, 2000:1). The general belief is that

someone must necessarily cause the death of a man in Africa and that person is likely to be his wife. According to Ilogu (1974:40), "I have not come across any death that any Igbo accepts as a natural and biological end". The situation described above is not age specific. However, the cultural belief and explanation of death varies across most African societies.

Gender Construction of Death

According to Oloko (1997:9), "it is a widely known folklore that all enduring marriages ultimately end with the death of either the husband or wife or both. However, the challenges and traumatic experience which accompany the death of a husband tend to be greater than those which accompany the death of a wife". Even though men and women could die prematurely due to a number of factors such as ill-health, accidents and wars among other unforeseen circumstances, it is observed from the literature that unlike a wife's death, the death of a husband is culturally challenged in many African societies.

When a husband dies, the ready suspect is the wife but when a woman dies, it is more often than not taken with fatalism, even when such a death is queried; the culprit is sought amongst her contenders (e.g. co-wives or neighbours), and never is her husband seen as being responsible. Instead of suspicion and accusations, the husband receives more sympathies and supports, and in some Yoruba communities, a woman is arranged to sleep with the man for a night so that he is not haunted by the spirit of the dead

wife.

To Lasebikan (2001:19), a widower is evidently pitied and consoled genuinely and encouraged out of his situation as early as possible while arrangement for a substitute is in high gear, because "*Opo 'kunrin ki da sun nitori iyawo orun*" (Yoruba). In other words, "A widower does not sleep alone because of the dead wife's spirit". Though the widower experiences emotional trauma at the loss of a wife, he is usually given more social support to cope, and to eventually re-adjust to a new life. In a polygamy setting where a man marries more than one wife, other living co-wives become a source of succor. Because a woman is seen as part of her husband's property, at death, no family member challenges the husband on issues relating to her assets and wealth.

Social Construction of Widowhood

One of the events of life which many women go through is widowhood. This refers to the loss of a husband, companion, breadwinner and supporter. For most widows, the death of the husband is not only a time of emotional grief, but also a time that severe torture and humiliation is meted out to them by their in-laws. It is a time for scores to be settled with the deceased's extended family.

Under normal circumstances, a widow is to be pitied, and helped out of the psychological valley into which the unexpected has plunged her. Unfortunately, this is never the case. In most African societies,

she is stigmatized as the killer of her husband, oppressed, suppressed, afflicted, neglected, accused, openly insulted and consequently made to succumb to widowhood rites on account of customs and traditions. Usually, the widow's ordeal begins the very moment her husband breathes his last.

Dei (1995:6) aptly captures the widow's experience as follows: The sympathy for her ends on the spur of the moment. Promises and assurances are made at the graveside. But as soon as the earth swallows the dead, the widow becomes a victim of neglect, accusation, and bizarre cultural practices. In most cases, the in-laws use the mourning period as an avenue to give vent to their anger and ensure that the widow's solitary life is made more miserable. They strip her virtually of her self esteem and all the toil she had acquired with her spouse.

Consequently, the death of a husband dramatically alters a woman's status and leaves her at the mercy of her husband's relations who are customarily empowered to take decisions concerning her and the properties left behind by the deceased not minding her welfare and that of her children if any. The plight of widows is made worse by various widowhood rites, though not uniform in all societies, but existing in one form or another almost everywhere. "As the prime suspect of her husband's death, the widow is usually compelled to go through an ordeal to prove her innocence. In some cases, she is made to drink the water used to wash the corpse" (Kantiyok, 2000:61). "To express their grief, widows are sometimes required to sleep on the floor, abstain from taking baths, shave their hair, and wear dirty rags as clothes for as long as mourning lasts". In a similar vein, "She is made to cook with broken pots and eat with unwashed hands" (Akumadu, 1998: 29).

These practices which stem from societal traditions and family perception are no doubt harmful to the health of the widow in question, besides being extraordinarily harsh. Moreover, most of these rituals erode the dignity of the widows and also traumatize them. Besides exposure to diseases such as cholera, diarrhoea, etc., occasioned by eating with unwashed hands, drinking water used to bathe the corpse is also poisonous. Worse still, any attempt to contest such practices is met with stiff resistance and sanctions. The confined widows, in the wake of these treatments no doubt, suffer from social degradation, inferiority complex and low self-esteem.

Conceptualizing Widowhood and Widowhood Rites

The subject of widowhood has been a topic of interest to few researchers. As Afigbo (1989) has noted, while topics like marriage and family, the economic role of women and recently the political rights of women have received a fair measure of attention, a subject like widowhood practices remains largely neglected even in anthropological monographs on African communities.

Widowhood is defined as a state of being a widow (Obazele *et al*, 1993). Cavello and Warner (2002:835) define widowhood as a phase of marriage following the death of one of the partners. Lopata (1971) on his part posits that widowhood involves not only the loss of the role of a wife but also the loss of a person most supportive of the woman. She stressed that for many women, widowhood can result in an identity crisis if the woman's

sense of identity was tied to her role as wife. More contemporary definitions, however, consider as widows/widowers only people who do not remarry at the death of their partners.

In a similar vein, Nwoga (1989) considers widowhood practices as a set of expectations as to action and behaviour by the widow, actions by others towards the widow, and rituals performed by, or on behalf of the widow from the time of the death of her husband. Similarly, Nwaogugu (1989) sees widowhood practices as one manifestation of the ritual cleansing which tradition prescribes for all members of the community following any death event or other influences regarded as corrupting. He adds that soldiers returning from war were expected to undergo a ritual cleansing of the hands before resuming normal relations with other members of their communities. In the same manner, the widow, being considered as corrupted and defiled by her close contact with death through her husband, would be subjected to a period of regimented seclusion. In the words of Nwaogugu (1989) "this period would enable her undergo the appropriate cleansing ritual". Widowhood practices differ from one location to another even within the same domain. However, what remains a general fact is that in addition to her loss and its attendant consequences, the widow is subjected to the whims of a culture she has no control over and to which she must submit herself (Ahonsi, 1997). In spite of the prevalence of widowhood practices across most societies in sub-Saharan Africa, there exists a dearth of literature on this vital aspect of

African culture.

Methods

The study on which this paper is based utilized both quantitative (social survey) and qualitative methods (in-depth/key informant interviews, Focus Group Discussions and case studies). The study population comprised of widows, widowers, married men and women as well as opinion leaders in Aworiland. The Awori are a Yoruba sub-ethnic group located in Ogun and Lagos States in southwestern Nigeria. However, this study was limited to only the Awori in Ogun State.

In the survey, a 65-item questionnaire was administered to 997 widows. Nine hundred and eighty two copies of the questionnaire were duly completed and returned while 942 were adjudged usable for analysis. The study covered six randomly selected Awori communities, two of which were urban (Ota and Agbara) and four, rural (Atan, Iju, Igbesa and Ilogbo).

Focus Group Discussions were conducted among widows in each of the selected communities while in-depth interviews were conducted among widowers and opinion leaders, including senior citizens, traditional rulers as well as religious leaders in each of the communities. There were also 12 case studies of widows (two from each of the selected communities). Although the general study covered a wide range of issues including the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, the widowhood practices in the area, property inheritance among widows and

their coping strategies, this paper is limited to widowhood rites practised in the area as well as the accompanying challenges, leaning more on the qualitative aspect of the study.

Results

Causes of death

The causes of death among the widows' husbands included sickness and disease (with death from malaria constituting over fifty percent). Only two out of the six communities sampled (Ota and Agbara) were urban with large populations, infrastructural facilities and manufacturing industries. The remaining four Awori Communities (Atan, Iju, Igbesa and Ilogbo) were rural and agrarian in nature with poor environmental conditions, surrounding thick forests, dilapidated roads, poor sanitation and poor health facilities which may contribute to malaria and consequent deaths in the area. Unlike Ota, with a government owned general hospital and a host of private hospitals to provide health services to the teeming population, the rural communities lacked basic health facilities. Where they were available there was observed poor utilization due to distance from the communities in addition to the absence of qualified medical personnel and facilities in those health centres. According to a key informant, "most of the rural people lack confidence in English (orthodox) medicine. They very much cherish their traditional local herbs which are less expensive". Lack of utilization of modern health care facilities may be responsible for high mortality rate in the rural areas.

Other causes of untimely death, as reported by the respondents, include unnatural causes attributed to evil machination, witch-craft and sorcery, man's wickedness and inhumanity to man found to be common in the rural communities. In addition, natural causes such as old age accounted for the death of a few of the widow's husbands. However, across all the communities studied (both rural and urban), while the birth of a new baby is welcomed with much joy and celebration, death, irrespective of age of the deceased, is never taken as natural even when explicable causes are known. When a man dies, the first suspect is usually the wife who must prove her innocence at all cost. This finding corroborates Erinosh's (2000:1) assertion that "the general belief is that someone must necessarily cause the death of a man in Africa and that person is likely to be his wife".

Common widowhood rites among the Awori

Widowhood rites are socio-cultural norms and traditions observed by widow(s) in honour of their dead husbands. Widowers, referring to men who lose their wives, also perform widowhood rites. However, these rites tend to be low-keyed and in some cases they escape widowhood rites unlike the widows who are not so spared. Widowhood rites are cultural practices that are held in high esteem by the Awori local group. Usually, widowhood rites are regarded as the highest mark of respect and love expressed in honour of the dead. They are, therefore, considered as sacrosanct and their violation often attracts negative consequences such as death of the violator

or ostracization by family members or the larger community. The common widowhood practices among the Awori include confinement indoor, sitting on a mat, observance of vigil, wearing of dark clothes and accessories, use of separate utensils, disposal of items used as well as taking of special bath. These widowhood practices are here discussed one after the other.

Confinement Indoor

Essentially, confinement among the Awori refers to total restriction of the widow's movement within a particular place, usually the family house, throughout the mourning period. This implies that the widow is denied freedom of movement except around the compound and sometimes within the four walls of a room in which she is confined. Confinement of the widow was found to be the commonest widowhood practice among the Awori. The confinement period ranges from 40 days to 12 months with a mean of 4.07 months. The practice among this sub-ethnic group is such that, on receipt of the news confirming the husband's death, staying indoor within the confines of the family house or the matrimonial home, depending on the residential pattern in place, is mandatory for the widow in question. This is regarded as the greatest honour and mark of respect accorded to the dead. All forms of outings, business or social engagements are automatically suspended, outlawed and forbidden for as long as the mourning period lasts. For the Awori, confinement of a widow indoor has several socio-cultural implications, as data from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions conducted revealed.

First, a widow is confined to a room for specified periods to ascertain

whether or not she is pregnant. If a widow is confirmed pregnant during the period, arrangements are made for her up-keep and that of the unborn baby by the deceased's family. Another explanation given for widows' confinement in the area is to ensure proper guidance, monitoring and supervision throughout the mourning period in order to prevent the abortion of the unborn baby and/or eventual death believed to be often associated with non-strict adherence to widowhood rites. The Awori believe that refusal of a widow to remain indoor during the mourning period and her consequent exposure to sunlight or rainfall will result to her untimely death. A major challenge with this widowhood practice is the very boring nature of the exercise to the widow as reported by over half of the respondents. Also, where confinement is prolonged, as in the case in which it lasts for as long as 12 months, this prevents the widow from engaging in her normal economic activities during the period, with attendant negative economic consequences.

Sitting on a Mat

This is another common widowhood practice among the Awori. On receipt of the news of a spouse's death, the widow is expected to replace chairs and foams in the living room with a mat, where she is expected to sit to receive visitors and well-wishers that come to condole with her. At night she is expected to sleep on the same mat to further express her mourning. Experience shows that sitting or sleeping on mats is a practice that is common among Muslims all over the world. Findings from the Focus

Group Discussions (FGDs) and In-depth Interviews (IDIs) reveal that non-widows are not expected to sit on the mats used by widows. Only fellow widows are permitted to sit on such mats. The dominance of Islamic religion and the low level of education among the study population may partly account for this finding.

Observance of Vigil

On the eve of the 8th day after the dead has been buried, it is forbidden for the widow to sleep. She is expected to keep vigil as a sign of honour to the spouse. Family members, friends, fellow widows, preferably old and experienced ones, and other well wishers make it a point of duty to keep her company with songs, storytelling, games and jokes. The night is programmed with these activities to ensure that no dull moment is experienced by the widow or widows as the case may be. If, on the other hand, the widow refuses to co-operate and gives herself to sleep, it is believed that she may not live to tell the story. According to a key informant, "should the widow fall asleep on this occasion, she will join her ancestors". By implication, the consequence of the violation of this widowhood rite (vigil on the eve of the 8th day) by the widow, it is believed, is death.

Wearing of Dark Clothes and Accessories

There was no consensus on the exact number of clothes the Awori widow wears during the mourning period. While some of the widows sampled stated that they wore just two sets of clothes, some others stated otherwise.

In other words, they wore more than two sets of clothes. One of the first signs of mourning, beyond weeping, wailing, staying indoor for a specified period and disengagement from all forms of social activities/gatherings, is in the dress pattern of the bereaved. The widow is expected to openly display her sorrow by the wearing of dark coloured clothes. However, there is no hard and fast rule as to the exact colour of clothes to be worn by widows during the mourning period. One thing that is paramount is that the clothes and accessories worn by the widows are usually dark coloured. The practice cuts across widows of the three major religions: Christianity, Islam and Traditional Religion. The description of widowhood as a state of loss, bereavement and mourning of a spouse with whom the widow is assumed to have shared the most memorable part of her life is largely reflected in the widow's sense of dressing. This finding corroborates Ore and Akin's (1998) assertion that widowhood is not a thing of joy, yet nature has made it a necessary evil consequent upon the death of a spouse. Indeed, the state of widowhood can be considered as one of personal loss, encompassing everything from the immediate psychological impact of the loss of a partner to the material deprivation of an income, a home or of contributions to domestic economy (Olapegba and Chovwen, 2007:835-836).

Use of Separate Utensils and Items

In the Awori tradition, the period of widowhood is one that involves a total separation of the widow from other members of the family. Besides confinement in a secluded place while mourning lasts, all utensils utilized

including cutleries, plates, mats, and clothes are not to be shared with anyone except her fellow widows. This separation is extended to her food which must be prepared by fellow widows and is not to be shared with other family members including her children. Should the need arise for the widow to plait her hair or beautify herself within this period, only her fellow widows are permitted to perform these assignments. Anything contrary will attract the wrath of the land. The enforcement of these widowhood rites are carried out by women against fellow women. This finding brings to the fore, the fact that women are the custodians of widowhood rites among the study population. They not only dictate expected widowhood practices to fellow women, they also ensure that the practices are carried out religiously. Usage of separate utensils is perceived to perform some significant roles for widows. For instance, among the study group, widowhood is considered as a period of total separation of the living from the dead physically. Thus, all items used by the widows must of necessity not be shared with anyone, including the widows' children, except fellow widows who have experienced widowhood practices.

Disposal of Items Used

This is carried out at the expiration of the mourning period. All material items used throughout the confinement period are neatly packaged and distributed to older widows who are relatives within or outside the community. Majority of the Muslim widows sampled preferred to dispose the materials to the less privileged (beggars) in their community according

to their Islamic injunctions. There seems to be no consensus among the study population on the beneficiary of the material items disposed by widows. While some widows, on religious grounds, prefer the less privileged, others from the traditional point of view consider their fellow children. In the past, this role was a joint responsibility of the couple. The psychological impact on the surviving spouse who is deprived of the companionship of the dead may be the same all over the world, but the treatment meted out to widows are diverse among cultures. Lasebikan (2001:19) captures the situation of widowhood in her statement: "what the African widow experiences during widowhood is better imagined than experienced". This is premised on the fact that widowhood practices that invade the privacy of widows and violate their fundamental human rights are glaringly enforced in most societies. These rites vary from one socio-cultural group to another. The above assertion no doubt, paints a gloomy picture of widowhood. This is perhaps why Ore and Akin (1998) assert that, widowhood is not a thing of joy, yet nature has made it a necessary evil consequent upon the death of a spouse. Indeed, the state of widowhood can be considered as one of personal loss, encompassing everything from the immediate psychological impact of the loss of a partner to the material deprivation of an income, a home or of contributions to domestic economy (Olapegba and Chovwen, 2007:835-836).

The plight of widows is aptly summarized in this statement by Machel (2001).

Wherever they are, irrespective of their religion and culture, a common feature of widowhood is the violence perpetrated

against them at the hands of near relatives and condoned by the inaction of governments. Many widows are hounded from their homes and denied access to essential resources such as shelter and land to grow food. They are also subjected to degrading and life-threatening traditional practices. They have no status and often they are figures of shame and ridicule. This neglect of millions of widows has irrevocable long term implications for the future well-being and sustainable development of all our societies.

In spite of the various challenges this segment of the population undergoes when they lose their husbands, traditional widowhood rites, denial of fundamental human rights and property dis-inheritance, etc. remain a common trend that calls for immediate intervention.

The plight of widows in Nigeria has been highlighted in different fora. However, there has been a lapse in the area of national consensus regarding the improvement of this aspect of women's existence in the country. Only a few States: Anambra (2005), Ekiti (2005), Enugu, Imo, Edo States (2004), Rivers (2003), Delta and Cross river State (2004) have signed into law the eradication of malpractices against widows/widowers. Surprisingly, most of these laws are mere window dressing as there are no supportive structures through which women can seek redress. In Ogun State and specifically among the Awori, there is no existing law on widows' rights nor any plan to eradicate widowhood rites. Even though a few well-meaning individuals, philanthropists, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are showing support to widows in form of cash and kind across many communities in the country, the question however is, how many widows are reached or benefit from such gestures? Considering the large number of

widows living in abject poverty with little or no means of sustenance after the death of their husbands/bread winners, much needs to be done at all the levels of government (local, state and federal) to address the plight of widows. The study recommends that more efforts should be channelled towards widows' welfare, capacity building, empowerment and economic independence. More importantly, government should legislate against all harmful and dehumanizing widowhood practices.

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