

**International  
Journal of  
Social Sciences  
And  
Humanities  
Review**





## RELIGION AND WIDOWHOOD PRACTICES IN AWORILAND: KEY ISSUES AND LESSONS FOR POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS

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### Abstract

*This paper examines the role of religion in widowhood practices among the Awori, a Yoruba sub-ethnic group located in Ado-Odo/Ota Local Government Area of Ogun State Southwestern Nigeria. Relying purely on data from primary sources: (Indepth Interview and questionnaire), the common religions among the Awori: Islam, Christianity and Traditional religion were examined with a view to ascertain their influence on the widowhood practices observed by widows in the study area. Findings from 942 widows sampled using the purposive sampling method reveals that, religion occupy key roles in widowhood practice. Not only does religion influences the type and duration of widowhood practices, it serves as a coping strategy during the mourning period. It offers support for widows in cash and kind. On the basis of findings in the study, this paper recommends that, the positive strengths of religion in widowhood practices should be harnessed for societal development.*

**Key words: Religion, Widow, Widowhood practices, Awori.**

### Background Information

Religion is a cultural universal found in one form or another in all known human societies across the world. For instance, Ekiran (2003) observes that “it has affected and continues to affect human behavior, speech, mode of dressing and some other fabrics of human life. In a related issue, Olurode (2001) states “that religion affect our socio-economic, political and cultural outlook can hardly be disputed”. The subject of religion especially from the perspective of meaning, types, forms, functions and dysfunctions for individuals, groups and the society as a whole is widespread. Across the literature and the media (print and electronic) in Nigerian societies, there seem to be an over-emphasis of the negative aspect of religion to the neglect of its positive roles in most facets of human life including widowhood practices. Marx for instance, defines religion as the opium of the masses. Other critics view religion as a weapon of oppression and exploitation of the poor. No doubt some religious leaders and followers alike have used it as an avenue for selfish gains, to incite religious crises, wars and to perpetuate all manner of unwholesome acts. this paper argues the need to harness the positive virtues inherent in religion to all areas of societal life to attain peace, progress and stability. It is against this background that, this study attempts to explore the role(s) of religion on the widowhood practices observed by widows with a view to ascertaining if there are lessons to be drawn from the Awori example.

### Some Conceptual Issues on Religion and Widowhood practices

**Religion:** Report findings from the *New York Times* (2008), reveals that, “there are six major religions in the world currently”. These include: Christianity 33 percent; Islam 19 percent and Atheism, Gothic, Mormon, Jewish, and other minor religions occupying the remaining 48 percent of the world’s population. It should be noted that, religion and widowhood practices on which this study is hinged, cut across race, ethnicity and geographical boundaries. For the purpose of this study however, the three commonest and most popular religions (Christianity, Islam and



Traditional religions) among the study population will be examined to ascertain their roles as regard prevailing widowhood practices.

Emile Durkheim, the French Sociologist was perhaps the first to recognize the critical importance of religion in human societies. He defined religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices, relative to sacred things. According to Durkheim (1912/1969), religious faiths distinguish between certain transcending events and the every day world. The major elements of religion identified by Durkheim include:

**Beliefs**- which refers to statements to which members of a particular religion adhere to,

**Rituals** – That is, the practices required of a member of a religion, to honour the divine power worshipped and,

**Experience** – This implies the feeling or perception of being in direct contact with the ultimate reality.

In a similar vein, the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, defines religion as "a set of shared beliefs and practices often centered upon specific supernatural and moral claims about reality, the cosmos and human nature often codified as prayers, rituals and religious laws". In addition, religion encompasses ancestral or cultural traditions, writings, history and mythology; as well as personal faith and mystic experience. The term 'religion' refers to both the personal practices related to communal faith and to group rituals, stemming from a 'shared conviction'. Religion, according to Reineke (1995:430), expresses and shapes the ideals, hopes, and needs of humankind. For Mbiti (1969:1), "religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or always possible to isolate it". Today, the role of religion in widowhood practices cannot be isolated.

Among the Awori, three (3) major religious practices are common: Traditional religion, Islam and Christianity. In spite of the influx and practice of foreign religions of Islam and Christianity by the people, they still very much cherish the religion of their forefathers—traditional religion which accounts for why masquerade otherwise referred to as *egungun* (Yoruba) festival is both a household and a community event. This also accounts for why Ota the ancestral home of the Awori is popularly referred to as the *Mecca of masquerade* - meaning the traditional home of masquerades. A common Yoruba song among Ota people and the Awori in general is: *Igbagbo o pe kawa ma soro ile wa* – meaning Christianity or Islam as the case may be does not prevent us from our traditional worship/religion.

**Christianity** – This religion is based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ; a Christian is referred to as a follower of Christ. He/She is that person who believes in the doctrines and teachings of Jesus Christ as the son of God.

According to the World Fact book and Almanac, Christianity is the second largest religion in Nigeri after Islam. Christians are listed as comprising 40 percent of the population, with Muslims 50 percent and indigenous religions 10 percent accordingly. Among the Awori population, the ratio of Christians to Muslim worshippers cannot be easily determined due to non-availability of data, the religion is however found to enjoy large followership. The location of the largest church auditorium The Faith Tabernacle (Canaan land) popularly referred to as the 'Winners Chapel' built and dedicated in September 1999 as reported by *Europa World Year Book* (2009), is located in Awori community called Ota. The community also prides itself as being privileged to be in custody of the second oldest story building in West Africa, the Vicarage of St. James Anglican church built in 1842 in Ota city. Similarly, there exist several churches and Christian worship centers across most Awori communities. This among other reasons account for the fast spreading of Christian religion in Ota – the foremost Awori community and its environ.

The biblical doctrine of "wives submit to your husbands, as is fit in the lord" in Ephesians 5:22 encourages total submission of women to their husbands (dead or living). According to Ola-Aluko and Edewor, 2002: 24), "Christian ethics on gender relations are oiled with traditional patriarchal values, resulting in greater moral demands on wives to keep the rules of marriage,



while men easily break or bend the rules as the case may be". (Lasebikan, 2001:18). Similarly, Aina (1998:15) notes, "apart from the contradictions inherent in African patriarchal social structures and prestige, there is also the influence of exogeneous cultures (capitalism, colonialism and foreign religion amongst others) and their impact on African social structures, particularly gender relations".

**Islam** – This is one of the dominant religions in Sub-Sahara Africa (SSA) and Nigeria especially the northern part account for one of the largest Muslim population in Africa. Islam came to northern Nigeria as early as the eleventh century and was well established in major capitals of the region by the sixteenth century spreading into the country side and towards the middle belts Uplands. And today, Islamic religion is widely practiced among the Awori. The prevalent of several mosques and Muslim faithfuls further attest to the popularity of Islamic religion among the Awori as well.

A common feature of the three religions described above among the Awori remains the fact that social change in its various manifestations (western education, modern values, technology, modernization etc) have not succeeded in entirely changing the status quo except for some slight modifications. The Christian widow for instance, rarely escapes the wrath of widowhood rites and observances. The intensity and procedures may have changed over time, but the practices are still observed today. In a study carried out among the Uturu society in eastern Nigeria, Christianity and western education were major factors impacting on tradition. During a field work, a widow was found holding a crucifix instead of a broom or knife recommended by tradition. An informant stated "the Reverend will not be annoyed if she is holding a cross". This shows the difficulty of breaking with tradition. The Igbo Christian for instance, finds herself in a dilemma of keeping the Christian faith and also keeping traditions and customs. However, "traditional habits, fear, insistence on the maintenance of tribal identity have made it almost impossible to change the status quo" The Christian religion gives full support to widowhood practices among the Christian widows which further buttresses the assertion that existing traditional practices such as widowhood practices remain dominant irrespective of religious affinity.

**Traditional Religion:** Before the advent of Christianity and Islam, the Aworis had mixed religions. Their forefathers were traditional religious worshippers. Traditional religion is regarded as the oldest of the three religions practiced in most Awori communities today. Among the Yoruba ethnic group generally, traditional religion involves the worship of Olodunmare (Yoruba) meaning 'god' and its divinities such as *Sango, Oya, Esu, Orisa-Nla, Orunmila, Ogun, Ela* and *Sapona* to mention a few. The religion also has linkages with common Yoruba festivals like *Oro, Egungun, Agemo, Eyo* etc which are celebrated periodically by the followers.

Although statistics are not available on the number of traditional religious adherents among the Awori, due to absence of written records, the religion is acknowledged as comprising of both the educated and non-educated members of the society. There exist evidence on how western civilization has greatly influenced the practice of traditional religion in recent time. For instance, human sacrifice which that was once a common feature of the religion is now gradually eroded and replaced with animal sacrifice. It is a common occurrence today to note that traditionalists use both print and electronic media to advertise their businesses. Common traditional festival such as *Oro, Egungun* are equally given high publicity on both radio and television. It is not however surprising to note that some highly placed individuals, educated elites and top government dignitaries secretly patronize priests and priestesses of traditional religion in our society.

**Widowhood Practices:** These are traditional and cultural dictates observed by the widow during the mourning period. It includes all actions or activities carried out by the widow or against the widow by the relatives or non-relatives of the deceased in fulfillment of rites while the mourning period lasts.



Nwoga (1989) defined 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) considered widowhood practices as one manifestation of the ritual cleansing which tradition prescribed 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". Suffice to note that widowhood practices observed by widows are relative and differs from one socio-cultural background to another.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings**

The Structural Functionalist Theory (STF) is one relevant theory in explaining religion as a socio-cultural variable that widowhood practices. The diverse traditional and socio - cultural practices though vary from one society to another but subject widows to specific mourning rites and rituals are products of the society. To the structural functionalists, beliefs, customs, and traditions are non-material cultures that exist as part of societal structures, which are perceived as essential for the survival of such society because of the roles they perform.

The pivotal role of religion in sustaining widowhood practices among the Awori ensures that the widows, irrespective of age, social status and level of education honour their dead spouse. They are encouraged and supported to cope with life through financial assistance, empowerment programmes designed to alleviate their sufferings and above all to ensure social stability of the family and the society at large. In essence, membership of a religious organization helps to cushion the effects of widowhood. Especially if the affected widow is a committed member of the religious group, her burdens are lighter as they are borne by fellow brethren usually expressed in form of cash or kind. To this end, religion is a very strong factor in widowhood practices among the Aworis sampled.

### **Study Objectives**

The purpose of this work is to investigate:

- (i) Examine the role (s) of religion in widowhood practices carried out by widows.
- (ii) Identify the influence of social change on religion and widowhood practices and

### **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

- (i) What is the role(s) of religion in widowhood practices?
- (ii) Has social change been able to influence religion and widowhood practices?
- (iii) There is a significant relationship between religion and widowhood practices.

### **Scope and Focus of the Study**

The scope of this research is limited to the Awori people of Ogun State, a distinct Yoruba sub-ethnic group. The study focused on widows of all age groups spread across 3 religions: Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion (ATR) with a major task of ascertaining the role of religion on widowhood practices in selected Awori communities: Agbara, Atan, Igbesa, Iju, Ilogbo and Ota. These communities are situated in Ado-Odo/Ota Local Government Area (LGA), one out of the twenty existing LGA in Ogun state. The choice of these communities is hinged on the following reasons:

- (i) they constitute both urban and rural Awori communities
- (ii) they are major ancient and historical Awori communities



(iii) they have unique socio-cultural, political and economic activities

(iv) most Awori indigenes of Ogun state reside in these communities.

It is pertinent to note that the Awori are also found in some parts of Lagos State, Nigeria namely: Badagry, Egbeda, Idumota, Ojo, and Okokomaiko to mention just a few.

### **Research Methodology**

Essentially, both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection were employed in the course of this study. In-depth interview guide containing relevant questions to the topic was utilized to elicit responses and opinions from key respondents mainly the opinion leaders (Traditional Rulers, Religious leaders and selected male and female senior citizens) across the research areas. Three interviewees from each community were engaged and in all eighteen persons were interviewed. For the quantitative data collection, a survey research design and administered purposively to widows in the Awori communities earmarked for the study.

### **Population, Sampling and Sample size**

The population surveyed was exclusively widows of Awori indigene but of different age categories religious affiliations, educational background, occupation and widowhood experiences. The purposive sampling technique was used to select the participants for this study. It was difficult identifying the actual size of each Awori community and the exact number of widows in the various communities as there was no record to that effect. Of the six communities studied, only two: Agbara and Ota are urban, the rest are rural agrarian communities with low level of infrastructural development. The researcher enjoyed the co-operation of the traditional rulers, religious leaders and other key opinion leaders who not only granted the researcher audience for the In-depth-interview conducted on the research topic but also assisted to mobilize widows in their various communities to actively participate in the study. Also, the level of awareness of the research purpose significantly informed the level of participation of the widows in the various communities. Overall, the study enjoyed high response rate as a total of 942 widows were sampled across the research areas as shown in Table 1 below.

### **Instrumentation**

About 1000 questionnaire was administered to the widows of Awori Indigene but of different age groups, religious affiliations and level of education etc. Out of which, 942 useable instruments representing 94.2% response rate were returned. The high response rate is mainly attributed to the face to face interview of the widows by the researcher and some research assistants recruited and trained for the exercise. Even though, majority of the sample had little or no form of schooling, the data collection exercise was a huge success. The sixty-five item structured questionnaire designed for the study contained both closed and open-ended questions. For ease of data analysis, it was divided into three parts: The first section examined questions relating to widows socio-demographic data such as age, religion, type of marriage consummated, highest educational qualification, number of children, preference for a particular sex of children, occupation, number of wife/wives including widow, and length of years widowed. The second part dwells on general questions relating to the widowhood practices carried out by the Awori and the influence(s) of religion on such practices, while the last section focused on the coping mechanisms of widows with a view to the specific role of religion in such widowhood condition.

### **Data Analysis**

The data elicited from the field survey were collated and analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency distribution, percentages and cross tabulations to interpret the results on the

basis of which major findings in the study were ascertained. In addition, data from in-depth interview and content analysis complimented the quantitative techniques used in this study.

**Table 1: Percentage distribution of respondents (widows) by study area**

Community	Frequency	Percentage(%)
1. Agbara	110	11.67
2. Atan	181	19.21
3. Igbesa	238	25.26
4. Iju	108	11.46
5. Ilogbo	63	6.68
6. Ota	242	25.69
<b>Total</b>	<b>942</b>	<b>99.97</b>

Table 1 shows the distribution of the sample by study location. Ota has the highest response rate of 25.69% while Ilogbo has the least response rate of 6.68%. Ota is a Local Government Headquarter of Ado-Odo/Ota, one of the twenty LGAs which incidentally houses a large number of industries and manufacturing plants in Ogun State, south west Nigeria. Within the last few years, the community has witnessed the influx of migrants from Lagos and other neighbouring communities. The highest response rate of widows in Ota is no doubt as a result of the large population of widows resident there and the high level of awareness received by the widows through the office of the traditional ruler; The Olota of Ota who incidentally is the paramount ruler of the entire Awori kingdom. This among other reason may account for the increasing population of Ota compared to the other Awori communities sampled in this study.

**Table 2: Distribution of Respondents by Age**

Age (yrs)	Frequency	Percentage(%)
21 – 40	264	28.03
41- 60	406	43.10
61 – 80	172	18.26
81 -100	81	8.60
Age Unknown	19	2.02
<b>Total</b>	<b>942</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 2 presents the age distribution of respondents. A total of 406 widows representing 43.10% of the 942 widows samples are in the age bracket 41-60years, accounting for the highest no widows in Awori communities sampled. It was observed that most of the widows were unable to determine their actual age perhaps due to old age, no form of schooling and lack of record to that effect. However, the data obtained on age distribution of widows above buttresses the fact that widows of all age categories are found among the Awori. Age of widow was not a strong factor as both young, middle-age and the old observed widowhood rites as dictated by their religion in the various communities studied.

**Table 3: Distribution of Respondents by Religion**

Religion	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Christianity	398	42.25
Islam	436	46.28
Traditional Religion	108	11.46
<b>Total</b>	<b>942</b>	<b>99.99</b>

The figure presented in Table 3 affirms that there are more Muslim widows among the Awori communities sampled. Of the 942 widows, 46.38% representing 436 widows were Muslims.



Traditional religion accounted for the least 11.46% representing only 108 widows. Aggressive evangelism and periodic religious programmes organized to sensitize the people may have accounted for the large membership of both Christianity and Islamic religions.

**Table 4: Distribution of Widows by Highest level of Education Attained**

Highest Education	Frequency	Percentage(%)
No schooling	596	63.27
Primary	186	17.95
Secondary	121	12.85
Tertiary	31	3.29
Other	8	0.85
<b>Total</b>	<b>942</b>	<b>98.21</b>

Of the total widows sampled, those without any form of schooling at all accounted for 596 respondents representing 63.27% of the entire population of widows sampled. This however calls for a concern, in spite of campaigns and various government programmes to eradicate illiteracy as part of its Millenium Development Goals (MDGs).

**Table 5: Influence of Religion on Widowhood practices**

Religion	Yes	No
Christianity	327	69
Islam	318	113
Traditional	97	18
<b>Total</b>	<b>742</b>	<b>200</b>

A total of 742 widows spread across the three religions and representing 78.76% affirmed the positive influence of religion on widowhood practices carried out by them while 200 respondents representing 21.23% responded otherwise. Furthermore, religion also informed the following widowhood practices as elicited from the interviewees responses:

**Duration of Mourning, Apparel worn by widow, Items used during mourning and mode of Disposal** – For an Awori Christian widow, it is mandatory to mourning the dead for a minimum of forty days and maximum of one year ascertain if the widow in question is pregnant or not. On the eve of the first seventh day, the widow is expected to perform a vigil whereby her friends, relatives and fellow widows keep her company with singing and praying for the repose of the dead. The widow is not expected to go out in the sun and under the rain for fear of her shadow being marched accidentally or rain touching her apparel, should that happen she is believed to join the dead shortly after. All items used (mat, cooking utensils and apparel worn usually of dark colour and food throughout the mourning period must not be shared by a non-widow. At the expiration of the mourning period, all items used by the widow are disposed either by burning or re-packaged as gift to other widows.

For the Muslim widow, the practice is similar in every respect except for a difference observed in mourning duration of five months especially for those who consummated the Islamic marriage with their deceased spouse. It is not mandatory that items used during mourning be disposed to other widows. Their religion permits them to give out such items as gift to the needy in community.

In the case of the traditional worshippers, there is no hard and fast rule about the mourning duration observed by the widow. What is paramount is that such a widow must stay indoor for at least eight days to mourn the dead, she may however extend it to forty days if she so desired. According to a 65year old male informant of the traditional religion in Atan:



*“religion, in whatever form it exists remain a dominant factor. It is one engine that drives widowhood practices in our community. It teaches the widows respect for the dead, compliance to cultural dictates among others”.*

**Table 6: Religion and social change in widowhood practices**

Religion	Opinion on changes in widowhood practices		
	Yes	No	Total
Christianity	82(33.6)	244(35.0)	326(34.6)
Islam	144(59.01)	417(60.0)	561(59.9)
Trad. Rel	18(7.3)	37(5.3)	55(5.8)
<b>Total</b>	244(100.0)	698(100.0)	942(100.0)

Table 6 shows that across the three religions, religion in widowhood practices has not been significantly influenced by social change as affirmed by 60 percent of Muslim widows..

### Major Findings/Summary

Of the six Awori communities sampled, Ota had the highest response rate of 242 respondents representing 25.69% of the population. Besides Ota being the traditional home of the Aworis sampled in this study, Ota is the headquarter of Ado-Odo/Ota Local Government Area which houses the largest manufacturing and industrial organizations in Ogun state. The availability of job opportunities perhaps influences the influx of people to the community in addition to the growing infrastructures (Pipe borne water, electricity, health facilities and roads) in the area. The dominance of traditional practice such as widowhood rites influenced by religion in expected to be low-keyed because of urban lifestyle. The reverse is however the case as Ota community in addition to the other study sites showed evidence of high conformity.

Secondly, all the widows sampled, belong to Christianity, Islam or Traditional religion which influenced their attitude and level of conformity to widowhood practices. Adherents of the Islamic religion accounted for 46 percent of the total sample. Noticeable social change which influence more women to participate in the formal sector and other sectors of the economy seemed not to have diminished the traditional practice of widowhood rites as it is common for those who died in the city to be buried in the village or “Home town burial” today’s widow has little or no choice to observe such practice whether willingly or pretentiously. A few exceptions are widows with tertiary education who tend to shy away from longer mourning duration and total conformity to the traditional dictates of widowhood practice.

Thirdly, the various widowhood rites: mourning duration/confinement periods, apparels worn by widow, other items used and disposed on expiration of mourning, and other rituals performed to honour the dead was greatly influenced by the religious beliefs of the respective widows. Every religion has its dos and don’ts as far as widowhood practice is concerned. Thus, strict adherence to cultural dictates of widowhood rites during and after mourning period was largely influenced by widows religion. In addition, religion was one vital tool used by widows to cope with the challenges of widowhood in the study area. Religion provides support in cash and kind through which majority of the widows were empowered and supported financially to settle down to a new life. However, the level of support received by widows vary from one religion to another. A common trend however shows that the measure of support received by each widow is determine by her level of commitment to her religion besides her interpersonal relationship with



the brethren. The level of commitment is measured by her regularity and active participation at religious programme which serves as a proof of her love and total dedication.

### Concluding Remarks

Observing widowhood rites is one socio-cultural practice that has remained unchallenged and taken as natural by widows in the Awori communities studied. For the widows, observing widowhood rites is considered as a mark of honour and respect to a deceased spouse with whom one has shared love and life before death. By this finding, widowhood practices remains a vital part of the people's culture in spite of modern civilizations aided by computer in the jet age.

Of prime interest in this study, is the role of religion in widowhood practices. Findings in this study shows that widowhood practices goes hand in hand with religion among the Awori. Refusal by a widow whether married or divorced to observe the stipulated mourning rites would be met with the wrath of the gods. Calamities such as strange sickness and eventual death of such deviant widow is often the resultant effect as stated by a female respondent in the in-depth interview (IDI) session.

The subject of religion and widowhood practices cannot be concluded outside the topic of social change. Wilmot (1995) defines social change as an alteration in a given social structure. In spite of the notable influences of social change on the various religions examined (Christianity, Islam and traditional) and widowhood practices in recent time, religion remains one non-negotiable factor that continues to influence widowhood practices in the area. Social change, western education, civilization, urbanization and changing cultural values have not succeeded in eroding widowhood practices. Based on the findings in this study, it is recommended that the positive roles of religion in widowhood practices among the Awori should be harnessed to other aspects of societal life such as work, politics and business ethics to achieve the much needed transformation and overall progress of the society. As exemplified by this study, for a widow to enjoy of the benefits inherent in membership of a particular religion in challenging times of widowhood, strong commitment to the values and dictates of ones' religion is a major requirement.

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