

Widowhood and Nigerian Womanhood: Another Context of Gendered Poverty in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examines the phenomenon of widowhood in Nigeria and assessed the negative stereotypes that are associated with being a widow. These stereotypes are rooted in cultural and traditional practices common in all cultures in Nigeria. They also vary from culture to culture and the degree of intensity also varies culturally. In addition, the levels of education and economic status of widow determines the degree of application or enforcement of practices culturally associated with widowhood. Economically strong and well educated women who are widowed determine or chooses which practices to accept or reject without incurring the wrath of tradition while poverty stricken widows are compelled to undergo the most vicious forms of widowhood practices. The resultant effect is ingrained poverty of widows in Nigeria, especially in the rural settings. We recommend an out of the woods solution is sustained education for women which would boost their skills from small scale business and employment opportunities that would empower widows to mitigate or challenge a cultural widowhood practice in Nigeria

Keywords: Widowhood, cultural practices, marriage, poverty, religion

1. Introduction:

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. In addition to this perspective as another aspect of gender based violence are others that include concern for the status of women in Nigeria relative to men in the circumstance of death. Sufficient evidence suggests that widowed women are severally affected financially, psychologically, sexually and socially (Stillion, 1984; Afolayan, 2011). The severe effects of widowhood in Nigeria are rooted in cultural and traditional practices as well as the socialization processes that condition women to passivity and dependence. 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. The debilitating conditions of women are worsened by societal factors that instrumentally feed into the situation ranging from loss of livelihood upon widowhood, and the fact that “widows are less likely to remarry than widowers” (Stillion, 2011:285). Widows rather than sympathized with even assisted are subjected to near inhuman treatment in traditional ritual rites and practices such as solitary confinement, defacement, disinheritance, a relatively long mourning period of limited but active socio-economic activities and outright ostracisation. The most obvious effects are deepening poverty, acute stress and depression, loss of identity and self-esteem. The widowhood conditions expose women to psychological and physical abuse as well as a whole range of health related problems including HIV/AIDs (Baobab, 2012).

This paper argues that widows constitute a sizeable social category that is highly marginalized by the Nigerian society due to cultural factors and is neglected by social policy. While their numbers are rising astronomically, their social economic conditions are deteriorating, manifested especially by excruciating poverty. Awareness of the existence of widows ought to be vigorously and systematically created while educational approaches must be designed to promote understanding of the widowhood phenomenon while social policy should be evolved specifically to address incidence of poverty among widows in Nigeria given its attendant consequences of child labour including withdrawal of children from school and engagement in prostitution as a coping strategy.

2. Culture, Marriage and Widowhood in Nigeria

Marriage in Nigeria is generally conditioned by culture and traditional norms that are varied across cultures given Nigeria’s complex ethnic plurality (Coleman, 1975). Nigeria is a country of more than 250 ethnic groups suggesting the existence of complex cultural peculiarities as relates to the institution of marriage. In the marriage market therefore, exist a variety of cultural practices that underpin the phenomenon of widowhood. Once marriages are contracted customarily between a man and a woman, the families of both spouses are linked

and parents of the husband or the extended uncles and male siblings become initial stake holders in the marriage to the extent that their views count in the marriage and upon widowhood.

In developed countries, substantial information albeit basic on widows exists especially in terms of age category and numbers of women in widowhood. These statistics are certainly absent or are available in uncoordinated and improper forms that are not easily accessible in the developing world. For example, it is estimated that there are about 7% to 16% of widows among women worldwide (UN, 2001:1). In Nigeria as in many parts of the developing world, the exact number of widows is unknown if it is available, it will be a matter of gross estimates. Beside the ages of these women and much of their socio economic conditions are poorly accounted for. Broadly stated, while widowhood is largely experienced by elderly women in the developed world, the reverse is the case in developing countries such as Nigeria where younger women, many of whom may still be bearing children are widows. With early marriages still largely in practice in Nigeria, many girls given out in marriage are turned widows before adulthood.

The phenomenon of widowhood is attributed to death of a husband which causes are varied. In contemporary societies like Nigeria, the first notable variety of death worth considering due to its profound and immediate impact on widowhood in terms of creating many widows at a given time is war or armed conflict. World War I and II, the Ibo pogroms of 1966, the violent political crisis in Western Nigeria in the mid 1960s, the Nigerian civil war of 1967 – 1970 all produced more widows than any period in modern Nigeria (Agena, 2008). Ethnic and religious conflicts such as the Tiv riots of the 1960s; the Tiv-Jukun crises of the early 1990s and 2001; the Ife-Modakeke crisis of 2000, the Amuleri-Aguleri in South-Eastern Nigeria in 2001; the Maitatsine religious crisis of the 1980s that erupted in Kaduna and spread across northern Nigeria with flash points in states like Kano, Bauchi and Plateau; the recurring religio-ethnic crises in Jos, Plateau State and Kaduna metropolis since 2000 have all combined to produce additional widows in huge numbers (Alubo, 2006, Hembe, 2003; Suberu, 1996 and Anifowose, 1982). In between these are unreported cases of violent conflicts between minority ethnic groups that result in male casualties. Since 1999, the Niger Delta crisis, electoral related violence and the Boko Haram menace have caused substantial deaths in Nigeria. The group has carried out heavy attacks since 2007 in Maiduguri, Kano, the Police Headquarters in Abuja, churches in Abuja and Suleija in Niger state and at the United Nations house in Abuja, media houses in Abuja (Thisday newspaper) and Kaduna (the Sun and Observer newspapers) (Adeyemi, 2012, Akogun, et al, 2011; Onojovwo, 2012; Alli, 2012; Adamu, 2012). Without debate, majority of those who lost their lives in all these wars and crises and bombings are men many of whom were married. Those left behind include widows and children in a sizeable proportion.

A second variety of death in terms of impact on widowhood by way of rendering many women widows is that attributed to HIV/AIDs. Many married women have lost their husbands due to the ravages of HIV/AIDs induced death. Related to this are natural causes of death such as brief and prolong illnesses attributed causes other than HIV/AIDs as well as accidents of all kinds especially in the road transport sector.

Once upon the death of a husband, irrespective of the age of the wife, she descends into widowhood and depending on the cultural background of the marriage; the widow's conduct and activities are henceforth regulated by customary practices and norms. In general, according to Ewuluka in Vanessa Emery (2003) widowhood rites include isolation and confinement, restrictions in movement and association and hair shaving. Among the people of Edo in Edo State in South Western Nigeria which consist of a variety of minority ethnic groups, conspicuous practices include a seven days period of mourning under restricted movement and association. Shaving of the head, eating from unwashed plates, compulsory wailing, and washing the dead man's body and drinking the water (Emery, 2003) are some of the dehumanizing practices that widows are subjected to. Among the Idoma speaking people of North Central Nigeria, the mourning period is imposed with heavy restrictions on movement of the widow. The mourning period however varies from community to community. Among the Tiv of central Nigeria a year period of mourning is imposed and the woman is expected to dress in white rather than black as it used to be the practice until the 1980s. In addition she would have her hair cut low and would further refrain from any form of sexual relationship during the period of mourning. These practices and persistence are explained by the desire for the woman to demonstrate considerable public grief over the death of her husband. In some cultures though, it is believed that the woman is usually responsible for the death of the husband hence the practices are designed to elicit remorse, impose punishment on the woman as the perpetrator and also to purify the widow by means of those practices.

Among the Hausa-Fulani community and tainted with a Islamic religious element, mourning and purification rites are also imposed and adhered to. A Muslim widow in Kano undergoes a 4-month mourning period and observes reasonable number of days in seclusion. In Plateau and Bauchi States, Muslim widows observe 40 days of mourning and 30 days of seclusion which run concurrently (Emery, 2003).

Among the Igbos of South-Eastern Nigeria, a widow's head is shaved immediately upon the death of her husband. In addition, a widow is expected to use sticks in scratching her body from time to time during the

mourning period. 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 (Okoye, 1995). At the death of a husband, the mourning period ranges from one week to a year with activities that differ from one community to another. In most Igbo communities, a woman is expected to dress in the mud cloth called “Ogodo Upa” for a period of seven days to a year depending on the emphasis of the community. In other communities, a woman is expected to wail three times a day or once in a day for three or seven days. In addition to the woman’s hair being entirely shaven, she would sit on a mat surrounded by sympathizers and clad in black attire for seven months during the mourning period (Breeze Magazine, 2012).

Among the Yoruba of South-Western Nigeria, widowhood practices are generally characterized by human greed, superstitious beliefs and religion (Afolayan, 2011). This assertion holds true for other ethnic groups in Nigeria as well. The extent and intensity of these practices are influenced by modernity, the teachings of Islam and Christianity and the economic status of the widow. Among the Yorubas, widowhood in its raw cultural manifestation without the moderation of modernity, “is an enduring period of deep-rooted agony, exclusion, anxiety, as well as a period of restriction, isolation, trauma, insecurity and pain” (Afolayan, 2011:28). These widowhood practices also vary from community to community throughout Yoruba land. In some communities, widows are required to recite incantation in thick forests at night for the purpose of self “cleansing” (UN, 2001:8). In other communities, Yoruba widows are compelled to drink the water used in bathing the corpses of their deceased spouses. They are also shaven and isolated. These rites bear affinity with the ones among the Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria. The widow is expected to weep and wail loudly at intervals during the period before the burial of the husband.

Many cultures in Nigeria share similarities in widowhood practices. Many of these ethnic groups as Yoruba, Igbo and minority groups as the Tiv, Idoma, Urhobo, Isan and including those in Edo and Delta States observe a mourning period that differ only in degree. This may range from a few days to a year. During this period the widows’ appearance is distinct by dressing in white or black attire accentuated by a grieving expression. The Igbo’s shave the widow’s hair while the Tiv only cut the hair low. In most of the cultures, the widow is a suspect in the death of her husband and is made to undergo widowhood rights in atonement, purification and self immolation. There are two other elements in widowhood practices that are widely shared; levirate marriage and disinheritance for the widow. After the mourning period, the widow in Yoruba, Igbo or Tiv ethnic group is expected to remarry to a relative of her late husband. In general, this practice is on the decline due to modernity and Christian religious influence (Akumadu, 1998). With increasing level of education of widows and their children as well as among the relations of the husband of a widow, levirate marriages are no longer attractive and acceptable. The widow may remain un-married as long as she may choose relative to society’s consideration of what period is appropriate. Suffice to note that levirate marriages were more plausible with women of child bearing age. In this similarity appears the gendered nature of widowhood practices. For instance, while it is a forbidden practice or seemingly unacceptable across many cultures in Nigeria for a relatively young widow, to remarry after the death of her husband, widowers are often hurried into another marriage. Where marriage may be slowed, the widower is permitted to engage in sexual relations with one or even more women. For a widow, the marriage market holds little or no prospect. A similar level of discrimination plays out in terms of restrictions imposed by varying degrees of mourning especially in movement, appearance and social interactions as well as engagement in economic activities. While the widow is heavily restricted at all levels, the widower is free to move around and interact at different levels with little or no expression in dress or mien of mourning. Among the Tiv, the widower could be seen with the children is any dressed in a particular cloth on the day burial ceremonies are to take place. Thereafter, the widower may choose never to adorn the attire.

Another element that has shared inter cultural practices is the question of inheritance. According to Nwogugu (1980:303) succession and inheritance among the Ibos resolve around the principle of primogeniture and is primarily patrilineal. Both rights to succession and inheritance flow to the eldest son or in the absence of any, to the brother. Where there are only female children, property ownership passes to the brother of the deceased. Among the Yoruba people, property devolves around all children irrespective of age and gender. Where the eldest is a son, he takes over as the head of the family property. However, in the absence of male children, the female eldest daughter can assume inheritance.

In the twenty first century, the clash of civilization reminiscent in culture and modernity has produced discernible patterns of decline in widowhood practices in all cultures in Nigeria. For instance, the factor of restricting a widow to a point of confinement is weakened by modernity and the economic demands of modern life. For an educated career widow, the return to work in an urban setting clearly negates the demand for respect for the rules of restriction in movement and association or interaction. Where the widow is perceived to be well

educated and could be personally wealthy, the widowhood rights are observed more in breached than obedience. In rural areas where widows may be illiterate working the land, the demands of custom are more likely to be enforced with the presence of many predisposed to customary practices. The practice of widowhood rites has widespread effects and deeply ingrained social, psychological, economic and health implications for womanhood in Nigeria. It is to these that attention will now be turned.

3. Poverty and other Effects and Implications of Widowhood Rites

Nigerian widows like their counterpart elsewhere in especially Africa and Asia are a special social category that is scantily acknowledged in social policy but is potently vulnerable to psychological, socio-economic and health risks as a result of the widowhood practices prevalent in Nigeria. One of the major effects of widowhood is poverty. Many Nigerian widows are pauperized by widowhood practices. These practices drastically reduce the economic status of widows upon the death of a husband. Before detailed elaboration on the process that this immiseration assume, it is important to consider poverty in the elaborate and broad sense in which the United Nations conceives it. Poverty is beyond income and includes wellbeing or good life in multidimensional sense that comprises both material and psychological components. Wellbeing therefore encompasses peace of mind, good health and safety, freedom of choice and action and being able to associate in a community. In a nut shell, wellbeing means a dependable livelihood and a steady source of income (UN, 2011).

It is difficult to achieve a good life by a widow when she has no right to inheritance. Upon the death of a husband, widows may be completely dispossessed and chased off (Afolayan, 2011). Widowhood therefore deprives women of homes, agricultural land and other assets. Thus, without inheritance rights, widows are automatically dependent on the seasonal charity of their husband's relatives and friends. Upon the death of the husband and immediately after the burial, financial assistance may flow in torrents from friends of the late husband and immediate relatives relatively well off and from colleagues to either or both spouses where they work but declines slowly and peter out completely after a few months or a year. Really concerned friends or close relation(s) may offer to train one or two children in school as a way or reducing the burden on the widow.

Poverty level of widows is exacerbated by factors of illiteracy and lack of education and training. Long drawn out and rigid and expensive burial rites further compound the economic condition of widows. Long period of mourning with characteristic restrictions on movement and interaction restrains the poor widow from engaging in any creative income generating opportunities which may arise from initiating new social levels of interactions. Stereotyping plays a critical role in this process (UN, 2011; Stillion, 1998).

The poorest widows are those that are relatively old and frail with children and other dependants to cater for. Though modernity and Christianity are altering established perceptions, women in Nigeria across cultures are socialized into dependent and passive conditions. Where a widow is illiterate and lacked skills, she would have been totally dependent on the husband upon marriage. Where she is a working career woman, the death of a husband signifies the loss of a dependable source of income. Hers alone suddenly would certainly not be enough to meet the needs of the family. Negative stereotyping accentuates the declining economic status of widows when the question of remarriage is considered. Widows are less likely to remarry than widowers, a dangerous and deliberating discriminatory gender dimension. Women are usually expected to marry men younger than themselves. In the event of death, the widow is expected to wait for a relatively long time before she may remarry to be able to access spousal financial support. As long as the mourning and waiting period to meet societal expectations last, poverty grinds painfully. In the case of the husband, he is hurried to remarry and stabilize his social condition; while the widow may not remarry at all.

For many widows in Nigeria, the implications of poverty include withdrawal of children from school and the adoption of coping strategies such as engaging in exploitative informal work, engaging the children in child labour and hawking, begging and sex work. In a number of cases, sex work is discretely undertaken but no doubt remains an option.

Due to widespread violent conflict induced by ethnicity or religion as well as HIV/AIDs pandemic, Nigeria has recorded a dramatic rise in the widow population. To these widows remarriage with as an option and avenue to stable support is an exception rather than a rule. Faced with the reality of existence as widows two other effects ravage them: the loss of status and self esteem and depression or stress. To the very extent that marriage is perceived as a symbol of success, upon the death of husbands, widows are moved from a category of success to losers. With the death of a husband, the social status of the widow is largely reduced and with it is the loss of self esteem (Stillion, 1998). Closely related is the issue of loss of identity. Upon marriage and until recently, Nigerian women would change their names underlying the reality of a new identity which derives from the marriage as a vocation. With the death of a husband, widows are thrown into a crisis of identity and are no longer willing to identify themselves with reference to a deceased spouse.

The declining economic and social and psychological condition of widows clearly generate three major

negative emotions; anger, resentment and guilt. The restrictions imposed by the mourning period, the distinctive identity in shaving of the head and the compulsory appearance in white or black attire and the social isolation amplify the effect of dependence by a woman on a husband before his death. With the disintegration albeit shortly by death throws the woman off balance emotionally, with social isolation and constraint in mobility and mobilization of resources in the face of wants or needs propels resentment accentuated by de-sexualization. This physical, material, social and psychological barriers faced by widows' result in frightening anger, resentment and sometimes guilt. Overall, a widow may gradually descend into depression due to stress.

4. Conclusion:

Widowhood results from the death of a spouse which may be as a result of natural causes or human propelled factors. Natural causes of death include old age and various forms of illnesses. Human propelled causes of death include accidents, war or violent conflicts and outright assassination or suicide or even murder have been the major sources of widowhood since the last half of the 19th century. The 20th century has seen more wide spread civil conflicts of ethnic and religious inducement. In all of these has emerged the growing number of widows who form a special category of women with socio-economic, psychological and health related problems as a result of their changed social status but which they have never found a place in social policy in Nigeria.

Public policy on poverty alleviation must seek to address the concerns of widows as a special vulnerable group. One way of doing this is to raise awareness about the plight of widows and the fact that many more women at very young ages are becoming widows with many children to cater for with slim chances for a place in the marriage market. The state working in collaboration with women groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should evolve training programmes to equip widows with skills in entrepreneurship so as to improve their economic status. The lack of educational training by most widows makes this approach imperative. This measure is instructive to stem the prevailing abuse of widows who are being used in Nigeria by politicians as a source of charitable acts during campaigns and festivities. It is common knowledge during festivities to witness wives of state governors and other public officers assembling widows to receive food items and cash donations as a way of support. This represents exploitation of widows as a group for political gains. They are coerced by this means into voting for a particular party or candidate. There is a gendered context of widowhood that needs an effective approach that will introduce a new form of socialization of women and men towards equal opportunities. The new socialization will also expose the prevailing discrimination that is sanctioned by cultures of various groups in Nigeria. Marriage should be seen as an institution in which both men and women have equal status. The post death stage should provide opportunities for the remaining partner to engage with life without preconditions that dehumanizes the widow and impoverishes her. It is clear that widowhood as a social issue affects women more than men. Given traditional socialization that entrench dependence and passivity for women, widows over a fairly long period of time are affected psychologically, sexually, economically and socially. In a very profound way, cultural and social norms such as a rare chance to remarry, mourning rites that places heavy restraints on movement and social contacts and lack of inheritance do exacerbate widowhood and deepen poverty among women rendering them to further abuse, discrimination and exploitation.

5. Recommendations

The following recommendations are suggested:

- i. One effective but non radical way off challenging the effect of deleterious cultural practices that dehumanizes widows is broad based education. Women's' education is necessary to empower the women with knowledge about the dangerous implications of practices meted out the them by the society to which they are obviously partner with the males. For instance, a widow deprived of deserved inheritance of economic resources on account of an old-fashioned and irrational customs or traditions, and is further restrained or restricted and "forced" to perform certain 'rites of purification' is indeed, a infringements on the fundamental human rights the women in a modern society. It may also result in loss of reasonable income by the family and a tendency for school going children to drop out of school.
- ii. Policy makers should ensure that extant laws reflect radical modifications of such that tend to exact unacceptable pattern of behaviour by modern standard on the women.
- iii. Government must ensure that education for the women; especially the girl-child is pursued vigorously and made compulsory up to at least the senior secondary school level.
- iv. Laws against dispossessing the widows of their inheritance should enacted and effectively enforced throughout the country.

- v. The women should be conscious of their fundamental human rights and at times seek to use available civil society institutions; especially, the non-governmental organisations to protect and defend their rights against all forms of infringements.
- vi. The emerging trend in Nigeria of electing or appointing educated traditional rulers from retired bureaucrats and the military is likely to weaken the application of the traditional rites of widowhood on the women. To be sure, this practice is clear violation of the very foundation of most of our human rights.

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