

# BAD WIDOWHOOD PRACTICES IN NIGERIA: ITS ADVERSE EFFECTS ON WIDOWS

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## Abstract

*Present day African society is what may be regarded as “Transitional Society” a society characterized by a discontinuity of cultural perceptions arising out of the Juxtaposition of mentalities formed by external influences and variables. Certain customary practices have survived this transition, widowhood as shall be shown here is among them. It should be therefore noted that many cultural beliefs and practices surrounding widowhood ceremonies have seemingly survived largely. The role of widows everywhere has negative connotations. A widow is no longer a wife, and she lacks the security of a clearly defined status. It is likely that a widow will need the help and charity of the community even if she inherits the homestead and farm, she may have to rely on her neighbors and kin to help maintain it. To draw attention to the great fact of differences is not, to deny that there are perhaps similarities. Among such similarities are the asymmetry in the duties and privations expected of widows. It is a fact that widowhood throughout Africa is a period of hardship and deprivation. It includes varying degrees of physical seclusion and a state of ritual contamination or impurity calling for purification. When it comes to studying the history of women in most parts of African, many road blocks prevent the historian from producing a coherent narrative. The lack of evidence and the appropriate questions posed by scholars hamper such effort (White 1988:58).*

**Key words: widowhood, maltreatment, marriage, women, tradition**

## Introduction

The death of a husband is a tragedy that befalls a woman as it involves a physical break in their relationship and it is seen as a most stressful and devastating thing in life. It is a time when everything should be done to assist widows to withstand the emotional and psychological trauma, pain and frustration associated with this loss and not to add to her problems. But unfortunately the reverse is the case by African tradition. Instead of helping the widows to ease themselves from their problems and live a better life people chose the other way round which is the maltreatment of widowhood. The term *ōwidowhoodö* is the state or period of being a widow. A widow is a woman whose husband is dead and not remarried.

### **Dehumanization and Marginalization of Widows in Nigeria**

In different parts of Nigeria widows are treated differently according to their culture. In Abia state widows are not allowed to come outside during the burial of her husband and not allowed to see the body of her husband when the casket is opened for relatives to see. Sometimes widows are sexually abused and not allowed to remarry which was supported by religious sanctions and customs.

In Anambra state terrible treatments were meted out to widows on death of their husbands in the name of traditional funeral rites. The woman's hair would be shaved and she would do the early morning cry where the widow comes out very early in the morning to wail or every evening through a chink in the wall of her confinement whether she feels like crying or not, she is forced to render sharp, loud and long cries as a mark of respect for the dead man. The heinous rituals a woman goes through as soon as her husband died are innumerable.

According to Islam laws the widow should stay for 3 periods of legal purity or four months and ten days, during which she may not remarry. In Hausa land, it is five months; other vices against the helpless widow include making her sleep in the same unlit room with the corpse of her dead husband and; girded with only a tiny strip of white loin cloth in a part of the middle belt. Among a tribe in old mid-west, she is given a ritual pot to carry on her head. While carrying this pot, she is asked to confess her sins against the man. She will be left on the ritual site and asked to walk alone from the eerie fetish spot. In another place, before the man is buried the widow is stripped naked and made to have the last sexual intercourse with the man by lying with the corpse in a room all night.

In Ideato Local Government Area in Imo state, as soon as a man dies, his widow has to sit on the ground and can only be allowed to call anybody by the use of a gong. This forced dumbness imposed on the widow by culture is subjected to a variety of interpretations.

### **The Effects of Bad Treatment on Widows**

These are acts against women who have just lost their husbands which make widows suffer even more. For instance, in some cultures, a widow is to drink the water used to wash the corpse of her husband. They were subjected to this maltreatment in order to prove their innocence concerning the death of the husband.

Secondly, she is not allowed to keep any of the husband's property. This ungodly act is often purported by the widow's brothers in law who out of greediness want to inherit the deceased properties all by themselves without recognizing the widow who had been obliged to be taking care of her children. Most of the time, the widows are not allowed to keep their own property or joint property they have contributed to acquiring. A widow is frequently accused of being the cause of her husband's death.

Benedict, R. (1934) opined that "the role of widows everywhere has negative connotations. She is no longer a wife, and she lacks the security of a clearly defined status". Most of the times, widows are frequently accused of being the cause of her husband's death. Flanney, R. (1935) commented that some cultures treat widows as an inheritable part of the husband's family will not only want to inherit property of the deceased but also to inherit the

widow as part of their brother's property, which is absolute dehumanizing. In some places, it is also physical assaults like shaving the hair of the widow as if to say that by so doing the dead husband will come back to life.

A world public opinion organization poll 18 nations around the world finds a widespread perception that widows are treated worse than other women. Discrimination against widows appears to be a phenomenon of many countries just some traditional cultures, says Stephen Kulö, a director of World Public opinion organization. Poor treatment may take a variety of forms. In less developed nations, women's right and development, experts have long noted wherever the wife has trouble securing her property rites after her husband's death, the widow and her children can become impoverished-in extreme cases by being stripped off her land or goods and expelled from the household, which results to high rate of poverty among widows.

According to Asward, E (1967)

*"A widow remains an appendage of her husband's family. Her lot is unenviable, especially if she is young and childless, for she has no one of her own to turn to and her life is spent almost as an unpaid servant within the family."*

In the past, women of high castes were burnt to death on the funeral pyres of their husbands. Albert (1980) reiterated that "This custom of suttee has long been outlawed, but the role of widows was not ameliorated, nor have the basic attitudes of the Hindus towards widows changed. It is likely that a widow will need the help and charity of the community even if she inherits the homestead and farm, she may have to rely on her neighbours or kin to help maintain it. All these bad treatment of widows has many negative influences on widows. It makes the poverty rates of widows to be far above the average, it makes widows to live a life devoid of peace and happiness. And finally, it makes widows feel inferior in all their dealings with other peoples and also they feel unwanted and rejected by all. Leith-Rose, S. opined thus.

In the view of Chinas (1983), there are rare instances of very wealthy widows who choose not to remarry, acting as regents to keep the property intact for their minor sons. Asward describes such widows in wealthy land-owing lineages in a middle Eastern village. These women never remarry, but assume control of their late husband's property and take on the patriarchal role. In some cases, provided she lives long enough and has strong personality, a woman may retain economic and political control of the whole extended family of grown sons and their families (1987, p. 145).

All these bad treatments of widowhood practices have many negative influences on widows and they should be prevented so that widows will feel at ease like other humans and not outcastes.

### **Suggested Ways of Curbing these Problems of Maltreatment of Widows**

Though there are limitless of widows problems caused by the societal cultures and norms and the deceased family respectively. There are solutions for these problems.

- 1) The government should establish an association of widows, which its primary objectives are basically on the rights and freedom of widow.
- 2) Secondly, attempts should be made to explain the practice in their sociological and cosmological context (Afikpo, 1989:8).
- 3) There should be the presence of dynamic diachronic studies aimed at showing how widowhood practices have evolved or changed over time. This may be explained by the impact on indigenous African cultures of the two great world religions (Islam and Christianity) in addition to colonialism.
- 4) Roles and political rights of women should not be neglected or tampered with. It should receive major attention, and a subject like widowhood practices should never be neglected.
- 5) Steven Kull adds that while there have been no large-scale studies quantifying the scope of discrimination against widows, the thousands of respondents in the poll reports that the problem of discrimination on widows is quite widespread and because of that, discrimination against widows should be stopped automatically.
- 6) Widows should be allowed to possess their possessions and not the other way round. Moreover since it is said that culture is dynamic, the society should put a stop to these ill cultural practices against widows so that they will have the sense of belonging and as well dwell in a peaceful atmosphere.
- 7) Finally, Nigerian women should fight collectively in order to put a stop to this dehumanizing tradition.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, widowhood practice is the most tragedy and hard luck that befalls a woman in life. And it poses many cultural problems to a widow. For instance, a widow is discriminated and humiliated in many areas, and is deprived of her husband's properties and so on.

Although widows constitute a large proportion of the adult female population in many African communities, Betty Potash (1992:1) confirms that systematic investigation is missing. The result is that much of the scanty information we have in widowhood practices is what may be described as raw or unprocessed information. Africans suggests that we are entitled to expect a wide variety of widowhood practices not only as whether a local group is patrilineal, matrilineal, verolocal or exorilocal and so on (Dorothy Hammond 1996). In this widowhood period, practical help should be rendered to assist widows to withstand the psychological and emotional trauma and not the other way round. Finally, actions should be taken by the society to ensure that this ill cultures and traditions against widows is positively checked for the benefit and betterment of widows, and Nigerian women should put hands on deck to stop the dehumanizing tradition that affects them negatively.

### Recommendation

Roles and rights of women should not be toyed with on and discriminations against widows should be stopped. That was why Dorathy, Hammond (1996), commented that there are wide varieties of widowhood practices and because of that religious organizations and the society at large should do something harder to put a stop to this wicked pattern of culture.

Women basically, should organize themselves and work jointly to ensure that something positive should be done to put an end or to relegate this dehumanizing tradition that affects them negatively.

Finally, since it is often said and believed that culture adopts and adapts and culture is dynamic in nature and not static, therefore, they should try and make amendments where necessary concerning this bad widowhood practices.

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