

**CHALLENGES OF WIDOWHOOD IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN
SOCIETY: A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS**

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Abstract

It is an established fact that the African culture is highly patriarchal, where masculinity seems to be the measure of humanness in almost every facet of life. Males as husbands die as well as Females as wives; but till this day, what happens after the death of a husband differs in some parts of Africa from what happens after the death of a wife. With the use of the analytic method, this paper reflects on the outcry of many women who are seeking for justice and freedom from the inhuman treatment unleashed on them after the death of their husbands. The paper provides suggestions that can help to reduce this menace, one of which is a clarion call on African philosophers, sociologists, and indeed Africans generally to think differently from the rest, so that united we can make our impact felt in this often-neglected area.

Keywords: Challenges, Widowhood, Contemporary, African, Society

Introduction

There is no doubt that culture is “ascribed as the distinctive characteristics of a society. It is the society’s guiding principles of human behaviour and existence as transmitted by same society”.¹ It is therefore expected that its primary aim should be the “wellbeing and progressive development of the society and its people. However, a critical consideration of the agelong-universalized dehumanizing and obnoxious widowhood rites culture in Africa has consistently predisposed it as impeding than facilitating meaningful rehabilitation of widows in our society”².

Thus, the choice of this topic is to reawaken the minds of African thinkers to the plight of widows in our continent. From experience, most scholars pay little attention to this area. In as much as a young man ready to marry is afraid of who to marry, and makes effort to avoid marrying a woman with bad character, many

¹ Samuel O. Chukwu Okoronkwo, (2015). “Culture of Widowhood Practices in Africa: Deinstitutionalizing the Plights of Women and Communicating Development through Theatre” in American Journal of Social Science Research Vol. 1, No. 2, 2015, pp. 71-76
<http://www.publicscienceframework.org/journal/ajssr>

² Ibid.

ladies too are equally very much afraid of marrying from ungodly families or homes. One of the reasons is in case the inevitable happens. Death is a phenomenon that humans cannot stop thinking about, because it is an inevitable reality, and it can occur at any time. It is a reality that we have no choice than to accept it. Why then are many ladies afraid of marrying from ungodly families or homes? There could be many reasons for this, but one of the obvious reasons is the fact that many African families do not know or set limits of involvement in a relative's marriage. Hence, once a groom dies, the woman's life is endangered. This danger is experienced in different ways. They are sometimes tormented for being responsible for their husband's death, others are stripped of all that they laboured for with their husbands. In most cases, the woman begins life afresh, looking for means to take care of her children.

I watched a video clip on the 21st of March 2022, produced by Dr. Richard Okoye³ where a woman was dehumanized by being stripped naked. She was accused of being responsible for the death of her husband, which occurred during conjugal expression. Of course, the painful thing is that this action was carried out by her fellow women in the name of culture. According to the doctor, there is a high rate of such deaths in our society today. He explained the reason behind this ugly incidence. One of them is the fact that some men take hard drugs before sex in order to enhance their performance without knowing that such drugs are dangerous to their heart and can lead to sudden death.

This paper, therefore, is written to spore us into reflection that will lead to action. Philosophers according to Plato are seasoned thinkers, knowledgeable persons who are upright and sincere. That is why he recommended that for there to be

³ Dr. Richard Okoye is a Nigerian doctor and the chairman of "Save A Life Group" consisting of Save a Life Medisoft Limited (a software developing company based in the USA), Save A life Group of Hospitals and ISO Certified Groups of Hospitals with zero hospital acquired infection status, equipped with the first digital Cardiocare lab for heart, neuro and cardiovascular diseases, kidney dialysis and transplant facility, spine, orthopedic and painless minimal neuro-plasma surgeries, IVF and so on. Dr. Richard Okoye rejected an offer of 20 million US dollars from a corporate group in Dubai in 2012 who wanted to take over his "Save A Life" mission in 2012 and yet went on to build a multi-million dollar empire. His amazing story is not only a motivation to African youths but also a resurrection to even dead dreams. He is the author of 25 best-selling books and presenter of the popular radio TV show "You and Your Health" running in Nigeria and Ghana. (<https://www.Vanguardngr.com/category/national-news/> October 10,2021.

justice and peace in the society, philosophers must rule. If we agree with that, then, this paper challenges African philosophers to be sensitive to their environment and observe what is happening especially in the lives of widows. This is because, most African philosophers are married men. If as married men, you love and care for your wives and children, you should be interested about what happens to your loved ones, in the event that you go before them. In the cause of this write-up, interviews of some widows were made. Among the windows interacted with, their experiences are almost the same. They expressed being tortured, striped of their rights, and dehumanized by their in laws and villagers of their late husbands.

One of them was living in the city with her husband, after the man's death and funeral in the village, she returned to their home in the city. However, the family members kept pestering her to come back to the village so that they will assist her in taking care of her children, without her knowing that it was a trap. She later agreed because of the pressure being mounted on her. Getting back to the village, she was stripped of all her belongings and one of them came to city and sold the house she lived in with the husband, a place she had lived since her marriage, which was more of a home to her and the children than anywhere else. As it is now, she is at the mercy of the family for a meal in a day, which has become a war. She now hawks in order to feed, what a pity! The question is why are they being tortured and dehumanised? This brings us to the problem of the African culture.

The Problem Of African Culture And Widowhood:

One wonders why some African cultures have remained unchanged since one of the characteristics of culture is dynamism. In the case of widowhood, several cultures have remained unchanged, because it has to do with the male domineering attitude, which is accompanied by selfishness.

The patriarchal⁴ nature of some Africans cultures hinders progress in this area. It is no longer a joke when people say that maleness is the measure of humanness.

⁴ Patriarchy is originally used as a system of society or government in which the father or eldest male is head of the family and descent is reckoned through the male line. This means that the system promotes male privilege. But it has been defined as a system of male authority which oppresses women through its social, political, and economic institutions. It has further been used within post 1960s feminism to refer to the systematic organization of male supremacy and female subordination. (Makama, Godiya Allanana,

This begins right from when a baby is brought into the world. After the pains a woman undergoes to carry a baby for nine months or less as the case may be; after the pains of labour, the baby comes out. The usual question that follows after delivery is which sex? Woe betides the woman if the child is a girl, most men change their mood or countenance immediately and unconsciously. No excitement, no congratulation to the woman for delivering successfully. No celebration of life, at least to thank God for the survival of the woman, as we have observed, many women have died in the process of child birth. The question to be considered at this point is, what happens to the woman that gave birth, who is supposed to be happy but sees her husband sad because she gave birth to a girl? The next thing is that she will start struggling on how to face the husband in the house because, she gave birth to a baby girl. Her joy will turn to sorrow. What a torture! This is a serious problem which has continued, even though science has made it clear that the woman is not responsible for the gender of the baby. Ignorance with selfish people hiding under the umbrella of culture have kept people away from liberation. But, if she gives birth to a baby boy, celebration starts, even when the man has no money, he will go borrowing, because a son has been born, which means a child has been born.

Many African countries if not all have been Christianized but till today, African religion and culture are still in a serious romance that remains inseparable. The effects of those religious practices are still binding on women and making life miserable for them. African Traditional Religion even though may have its female goddesses and roles which women play still remains masculine-based and patriarchal in nature, which implies that widows also suffer gender inequality.

Description Of a Widow

A widow is literally known as a woman whose husband has died. But based on the analysis made above, this paper chose to describe a widow based on her predicaments. Thus, “a widow is one who finds herself in the middle of the ocean of life, struggling to survive. Technically, a widow is a woman who survives her husband and has not remarried”.⁵ Basically, all African cultures

(2013), “Patriarchy and Gender Inequality in Nigeria: The Way Forward”, in *European Scientific Journal* vol.9, No.17 ISSN: 1857 – 7881 (Print) e - ISSN 1857- 7431.

⁵ Azumah, Frances & Nachinaab, John. (2018). “Outmoded Cultural Practices and Its Effects on Victims: The Case of Widowhood Rituals amongst the People of Balungu Community, Ghana”. *International Journal of Science and Technology*. Vol 6.

demand the mourning of the husband by his wife. In some cultures what the woman is expected to do is well defined. The process differs. Some are less dehumanized than others. But what is obvious is that there is a mourning period. The death of a husband can also be described as a woman's loss of dignity.

The Loss Of Human Dignity

As part of some cultures in Africa, a woman has practically no place in the society if she remains unmarried. This is the reason why parents are worried if their female children stay long with them when they are due for marriage. The pride of the woman for example in Igbo culture of Nigeria is the husband. This is why statements such as 'Di bu ugwu nwanyi', which translates to 'husband constitutes honour and dignity to womanhood', or 'nma nwanyi bu di ya', which translates as 'the beauty of a woman is the husband' are popular traditional expressions in the Igbo society. What this means is that the very moment a woman loses her husband, that woman automatically loses her prized dignity, which the society accords to her. This sounds like, the woman is nothing without the husband, which implies that on her own, she does not exist. That is why at the death of the husband, she is abused, distressed, suppressed, oppressed and stripped of all rights that she possesses as a human being. No wonder, she is identified as a property once married.

Another point found also in Igbo culture is the belief that the god that owns a woman is the husband that married her, which is expressed thus: "Agbara nwe nwanyi bu di luru ya". The import of the above expression is the obvious deification of the man, who is the husband. Since the man is taken to like a god, after his death certain rituals are performed and the woman has to undergo ablution, cleansing and purification and other widowhood rites and practices as prescribed by culture.⁶

The Widow's State Of Anguish

According to Vocabulary.com, the word anguish is gotten from a Latin word, *angustus*, which literally means 'narrow'. It developed the figurative sense of 'distressed' – think of being choked off or forced into a small space. In modern times *anguish* has been in the English language with the parallel and related meanings of 'physical torment' and 'emotional suffering.'⁷ Anguish is a

⁶ Samuel O. Chukwu Okoronkwo, (2015). "Culture of Widowhood Practices in Africa: Deinstitutionalizing the Plights of Women and Communicating Development through Theatre" in American Journal of Social Science Research Vol. 1, No. 2, 2015, pp. 71-76.

⁷ Available at <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/anguish>. Accessed on 15th of April 2022

psychological state or problem, which many scholars both philosophers and psychologists have tried to deal with. As presented by Jessica from betterhelp⁸, an emotional stress can,

encompass a number of different emotions, such as trauma, grief, sorrow, fear, and anxiety. Simply put, anguish can refer to being in severe pain, and it is important to note that anguish can be mental and physical. It is a reasonable, typical, and even a rational response to a horrible situation. Someone may experience anguish when going through a divorce or through the loss of a loved one. These examples of grief have the potential to wreak havoc on your well-being. A traumatic event can change you as a person, especially if anguish goes on for long enough.⁹

The consequences of anguish is one of the reasons why African philosophers should begin a campaign to stop these barbaric experiences that widows go through for the simple reason that they are created women. Men who are widowers do not go through these inhuman and atrocious treatments that women go through. In fact, at the death of a man's wife, the man is pitied and no one accuses him of killing the woman, even when the man batters the woman often, which can lead to death. It has happened severally. No one accuses him except in obvious cases. Due to the immense complexity of the emotion, which goes with anguish, so many women have difficulty coping with it. Thus, "being unable to cope with anguish can lead to other mental conditions, such as depression and anxiety".¹⁰

The state of anguish of a widow is caused by the treatments she receives when she loses her husband.

⁸ BetterHelp is an online portal that provides direct-to-consumer access to mental health services. The online counselling and therapy services are provided through web-based interaction as well as phone and text communication.

⁹ Saxena Jessica, (2022) "How Anguish Affects You" Betterhelp". Available at <https://www.betterhelp.com/advice/grief/how-anguish-affects-you/>. Accessed on 15th of April 2022.

¹⁰ Saxena Jessica, (2022)

General Overview Of Widowhood Practices

In Africa, precisely in Nigeria, people think that every woman looks forward to marriage. When they see a lady unmarried, they quickly conclude that she has not found any man. In correcting such impression, it is good to know that in today's society, just as some men are afraid to go into marriage, so are some ladies. Some ladies decide to be single not because they did not see a man to marry but because they are afraid of what might befall them in marriage and worse still of might happen if their husbands die before them.

Another lady mentioned that from experience, it is difficult for a man to die without the family demanding for explanations of what killed their brother or son. The accusation of killing a husband is "one of the horrendous nightmares that may confront a woman at the death of her husband in various African cultures...irrespective of how peaceful they might have lived, especially when the woman had not been in good relationship with them".¹¹ The way out of such accusation is to make the widow to swear in whatever they believe in or make her to "lie on the same bed with the corpse of her late husband, the night before interment, or even be subjected to drink the water that is washed out of the husband's corpse as a proof of her innocence."¹² An incident occurred were a widow was locked up with the corpse of her husband for three days; afterward she was still forced to sleep in the cemetery for two more days. This was done just to prove her innocence over the death of her husband.¹³ This is one of the realities that the widow goes through in some places within our continent. In most scenarios,

The widow, who may have enjoyed every amount of freedom and goodwill while her husband lived, suddenly turns incommunicado as the death of her husband heralds a period of imprisonment and hostility for

¹¹ Samuel O. Chukwu Okoronkwo, "Culture of Widowhood Practices in Africa: Deinstitutionalizing the Plights of Women and Communicating Development through Theatre" in American Journal of Social Science Research

Vol. 1, No. 2, 2015, pp. 71-76.

¹² Samuel O. Chukwu Okoronkwo, (2015).

¹³ Jake Omang Otonko, (2020). The Complexities of the Nigerian Nation: Interrogating Human Rights, Religion and Society. Eiwa Press Nig.Ltd. Jos, Nigeria. P. 188.

her. Her movement becomes restricted throughout the mourning period, and culture forbids her to eat except with ... tattered and old eating bowls made from gourds. She is not expected to be happy or laugh, chat or play with people at this period as she is supposed to be unclean and abominable and to be treated indifferently by others too; and she is mandated to continually cry and wail for her deceased husband. She is subjected to wearing mourning cloths throughout her mourning period thus making her readily identifiable as a widow and therefore stigmatized.¹⁴

Other intolerable and obnoxious practices imposed by traditions upon the widows are: - not allowing them to sit on a chair, they must sit on the ground with a mat within some specific days. They must keep vigil for a number of days based on the tradition of the place, they will be made to be taking special bath, in some places, they are not allowed to dress their hair, it must not be washed throughout the mourning period or the hair is shaved. They must also use separate utensils for cooking and eating of their food etc.

Another horrible experience which the widows pass through is the denial of inheritance of the properties of both the late husband and the wife. In some African cultures, the girl child has no place in inheriting the properties of the father. Such is also extended to the widow. Once the husband is dead, especially if the man was rich, the woman is in danger of losing everything except if she is lucky to have grown up male children. If not, she will be stripped of everything and left at the mercy of begging before she can eat.

It is unbelievable discussing with someone who claimed that these rituals are for the benefit of the widow. Such as healing of the psychological wounds and pain of the widow. A South African author also said that "Some mourning rites are said to also have the aim of removing the bad luck or misfortune or *senyama* that is said to surround the widow and which makes people discriminate against her or fear her"¹⁵. The same author went further to claim that "if the widow knows

¹⁴ Samuel O. Chukwu Okoronkwo, (2015). "Culture of Widowhood Practices in Africa: Deinstitutionalizing the Plights of Women and Communicating Development through Theatre" in American Journal of Social Science Research. Vol. 1, No. 2, 2015, pp. 71-76.

¹⁵ Manala, Matsobane. (2015). African traditional widowhood rites and their benefits and/or detrimental effects on widows in a context of African Christianity. *HTS Theological Studies*, 71(3), 01 09. [https:// doi. org/ 10. 4102 /hts. v71i3.2913](https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i3.2913) 09. Accessed 19/04/22

that the purpose of the traditional widowhood rites is to remove the alleged bad luck or *senyama*, it can be therapeutic. As such, it can be experienced by the widow as facilitating her integration with the community, which she desperately longs for”¹⁶. He argues further saying that,

Widowhood rites in Africa were not primarily designed to de-womanise African womanhood, or impoverish and oppress women; nor are they part of the so-called male chauvinism. Rather, the widowhood rites are generally intended for the overall good of the widow. He sums up the purpose of the Isiokpo tribe's widowhood rites in two main categories, namely:1) First, to sever the ties between a dead husband and his living wife. For, the Isiokpo believe that at the immediate aftermath of death, the ghost spirit lurk (sic) around the homestead to haunt the living and to continue to perform his duties to his living relations. 2) Second, some aspects of the rites are aimed at equipping the widow with the necessary courage and bravery to cope with the life of self-reliance which the death of the bread winner has exposed her to.¹⁷

The above assertions sound ridiculous. This is part of the reasons why widows will continue to suffer humiliations in Africa if nothing is done. There are so many people with such mentality. And for them there is nothing wrong in the rituals that widows are subjected to.

There are several factors responsible for the widowhood practices such as Indoctrination/Power, superstitious beliefs, inferiority complex, male dominance, poverty, illiteracy on the part of widows who execute these evils etc. Few of these will be elaborated.

Indoctrination/Power

The unfortunate thing is that those that are responsible or those that “spearhead the administration of these widowhood practices are themselves women, perhaps potential widows”.¹⁸ In some places, elderly widows carry out those functions against their fellow women and they will boldly tell you that it is the culture of the land and that they themselves did the same. In some other places in Igbo land of Nigeria it is the “women who are daughters of the lineage

¹⁶ Manala, Matsobane. (2015).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Samuel O. Chukwu Okoronkwo, (2015).

(Umuada) and have been socialized to accept and uphold these traditions by being administrators that administer these dehumanizing and subjugation rites to fellow women”¹⁹. As presented by Samuel Okoronkwo the “situation, only creates room for the Umuada, who now assume the lofty status of quasi-demigoddesses, to exercise their own authority and power over fellow women and to humiliate fellow women who are widows”.²⁰ It is obvious that such women “as supposed custodians of culture, may have won the recognition of the males in their community, such that they want to continue to enjoy such position of power”.²¹

Superstitious Beliefs

Superstition is described according to Merriam Webster dictionary as a belief or practice resulting from ignorance, fear of the unknown, trust in magic or chance, or a false conception of causation. b: an irrational abject attitude of mind toward the supernatural, nature, or God etc. This is one of the problems nailing women down. It is superstitious belief that will make one to see evil as good. Believing that because a widow was having sex with the late husband, which was a rightful demand by law and nature, she must go through cleansing to avoid her husband appearing. This is erroneous and needs to be corrected.

Inferiority Complex

African cultures or the world cultures made women to believe that they are intellectually and physically inferior to men. This begins right from home. And they grow up with such mentalities where men are seen as masters and kings and women are made to bow to them. This is the reason why some women continue to perpetrate evil against their fellow women because they have been brainwashed from childhood.

Way Forward

The paper advised Those that are at the corridors of power can help by making sure that appropriate legal measures can be taken to ensure that widows enjoy their rights as humans when their spouses die. The following can be suggested to them:

That widows should not be subjected to inhuman, humiliating or degrading treatment. 2. A widow shall automatically become the guardian

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

and custodian of her children, after the Death of her husband, unless this is contrary to the interests and the welfare of the children. 3. A widow shall have the right to remarry, and in that event, to marry the person of her choice, not the deceased relation only that is her choice.²²

As philosophers, we should live by example. It is true that it is not easy to agree always when two people are involved. It is a natural thing. If you married a woman because you love her, family issues should not wipe away the initial love that existed. And those we love should be protected from harm. Therefore, it becomes also necessary for husbands to write their 'WILL' on time and keep it save, so that in case of sudden death, your wife and children will be protected.

Conclusion

Many people strongly believe that those clamoring for the freedom of women in different areas of life are feminists making noise, and disturbing the rest of humanity. Researching consistently in this area needs courage because even the researcher suffers violence. Sometimes after presenting papers of this nature, I receive open confrontations and calls with abuses. Some claim that I am a feminist and so on. This paper is strongly asking African philosophers to do away with all kinds of prejudices and rather try and investigate the realities of widows around us so that we can move into action to help reduce this evil and injustice. We cannot stop it entirely but we can help to reduce it. It is on this note that the paper is making a clarion call to African philosophers to take the lead in liberating their mothers, wives and sisters from degrading and dehumanizing cultural practices connected to widowhood.

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