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Research Article

Widowhood Rituals among Some Ethnic Groups Africa

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ABSTRACT

Widowhood rites are widely believed to be practices that a bereaved spouse must undergo upon becoming a widow in many parts of the world. It is the time period during which a woman transitions from being a wife to being a widow in her family and community. Different societies associate widowhood with a variety of different customs and values, which have a significant impact on how it is experienced. This article therefore sought to examine the practice among some Ethnic groups in Ghana and some African countries.

Keywords: *widow, widowhood, rituals.*

Introduction

Widowhood, whatever form it takes, is a painful experience. Widowhood is marked by bereavement (Amlor & Owusu, 2016). Widowhood in Africa is a process of passing the widow through several rituals (Sulumba-kapuma, 2018). The African's belief in life after death defines what widowhood is.

Widowhood is the marital status that a man or woman acquires upon the death of their spouse (Keister & Destro, 2008). A widow is a woman who has lost her spouse, while a widower is a man who has lost his spouse (Perkins et al., 2016). It is necessary to distinguish widowhood from bereavement. Bereavement can be defined as the situation or state of having been bereaved of a significant person in one's life—in this case, a spouse (Endris, 2008). Bereavement is commonly thought to be a brief state centered on personal sequences and meanings. Bereavement research frequently examines the events occurring up to two years

after the death. By contrast, widowhood refers to an ongoing and frequently lengthy state that has both social and personal implications and meanings (Eboh & Boye, 2005). Despite its utility, much research on widowed people makes no distinction between bereavement and widowhood.

Gunga (2009) writes that the practices of widowhood are inextricably linked to cultural and traditional beliefs about death, ghosts, inheritance, feminine roles, family structure, and family relationships. The overwhelming belief in the ability of a deceased person's ghost to return and dispute and haunt all manner of objects and relatives has reinforced and perpetuated Africa's age-old widowhood practices. The belief that death corrupts and that the dead retain contact with the living, particularly their closest life partners, is one of the justifications for subjecting widows to inhumane and humiliating customary practices. Thus, it is believed that successfully completing these ceremonies,

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rituals, and practices will aid in reestablishing the balance and security that the death sought to destroy. Due to their superstitious beliefs, the populace rationalizes these practices by claiming that they serve important functions, such as protecting widows from their powerful deceased husbands.

Widowhood is one of the most distressing life events that adults experience, and it becomes increasingly likely as people age (Atindanbila, Bamford, Adatara, Kwakye-Nuako, 2015). It is also more prevalent among women than men in most African societies. Men typically die at a younger age than women, and women typically marry men slightly older than themselves, explains part of this phenomenon. In 2005, 18% of men and 52% of women aged 75 to 84 years in the United States were widowed, while 32% of men and 75% of women aged 85 and over were widowed (Ghana statistical service, 2010). Similar patterns have been observed in other locations as well. For example, the Office for National Statistics (ONS; 2005, 2006) reports that in 2004, 16% of men and 45% of women aged 65 and over in the United Kingdom were widowed. In 2003, 27% of men and 63% of women aged 75 and over were widowed.

Rituals

According to (Thompson, 2014), the term ritual is derived from the Latin *ritualis*, which means "belonging to a *ritus*", with *ritus* referring to certain temple services in ancient Rome and the worship of the Catholic Church in mediaeval Europe. Ceremony is most likely Etruscan in origin and refers to priestly services such as marriages and funerals.

A ritual is a term that refers to an action or a series of actions that are predetermined and symbolically charged in accordance with a particular context within a community (Thompson, 2014). Ritual is a metalinguistic term; it does not define an object or event as ritual or an inherent quality of an object or event; rather, it is an analytical tool that can be applied to a wide variety of situations or events (Bell, 2009). Ritual is frequently used interchangeably with rite, ceremony, and occasionally liturgy or performance. A rite is a collection of actions, most frequently comprising a sequence

of ritual actions. Ritual, or ritual action, is the fundamental concept defining one or more actions that are governed by strict rules and are loaded with symbolism. Additionally, rituals are repeated with little or no variation, resulting in a tradition (Amlor & Owusu, 2016).

Ritual and related terms were frequently used to refer to the actions of "others," who were frequently regarded as inferior, primitive, or archaic, a connotation that pervades popular judgments to this day. The ritualistic actions are social processes through which an individual is connected to society through the symbolic actions of believers toward their gods/deities. It is a type of social activity that serves as a representation of a society's social structure.

African widowhood rites are generally accepted to be mandatory procedures for any bereaved spouse by becoming a widow or widower. It is worth noting that, while the practise is not gender biased, it is typically women who are subjected to it. In the improbable event that a man is forced to go through it, the circumstances are typically different. Doris (2018) stated that the practise is observed by nearly all ethnic groups in Ghana; however, there may be some variations in the manner in which it is carried out (Tei-Ahontu, 2008). Certain traditional societies believe that when a man dies, it is because his wife is an unlucky woman whose misfortune directly contributed to her husband's demise (source). This belief underpins the treatment that a widow receives in some communities in Ghana (Doris, 2018). There is a widespread belief in these communities that such a woman is likely to bury a second and third husband, assuming she can find one (Doris, 2018). To avert this disaster, a widow must rid herself of her misfortune. The duration of such eradication varies by society, but what is common to the majority of them is.

Rituals in Widowhood Practices Widowhood rituals among some ethnic groups in Ghana

Widowhood rites are ceremonies carried for a person following the death of a spouse, as well as to facilitate the proper transition of the deceased spouse's spirit. Following the loss of a partner, the funeral rites simply refer to prescribed customs and rituals performed for and

by the widow or widower. Widowhood rites are prescribed and performed as part of the funeral rites of the deceased spouse by many ethnic groups in Ghana (Erick et al., 2016). Although both widows and widowers are prescribed, the rites for widows are much more elaborate and take much longer to complete than those for widowers. Widowhood rites are generally less stringent and involve less deprivation for widowers than for widows.

The Ga ethnic group in Ghana

According to Tei-Ahontu (2008), the widowhood rituals among the Ga ethnic group include the wearing of black clothing for the entire period of mourning; wearing of all-white clothing at the end of the mourning period; A period of one year is observed as the mourning of the dead; one year of confinement; crying loudly most of the time to indicate the pain of the loss; drinking of the water that is used in bathing the corpse, and the widow sleeping with the corpse overnight. He however added that due to the advent of foreign religion into the country, some of these widowhood rites and rituals are no longer practiced.

The Dagaaba ethnic group in Ghana

Erick et al., (2016) observed that the widowhood rituals among the Dagaaba ethnic group of the Upper West Region of Ghana. They posited that the Dagaaba believe that the deceased's spirit remains in limbo for a time, and during this period their loved ones are vulnerable to being cursed or afflicted by it. Eric et al. (2016) stated that widowhood rites among the Dagaaba ethnic group include the smearing of ashes or clay (yagra); wearing of rope (gana); shaving the widow; going around the stand on which the corpse three times to demonstrate her faithfulness to the deceased husband; For three days, the widow sleeps outside and is fed and watered solely through the mediation of the ground (i.e., items are put on the ground for her to pick).

The Akans ethnic group in Ghana

Among the Akans, the widow is needed to leave her marital home to search for a vacant room someplace to remain following the demise of the spouse. The widow should quick

until the spouse is covered and among some Akan bunches it is a no-no for her to eat any hefty food before the internment. She should not share the cup and plate she uses after her significant other's demise with anyone.

Among the Kwahu she has to sleep on a mat and, she should not rest level on the stomach or the back except sideways all the time until the entombment and burial service ceremonies were finished. Widows should bath cold water no matter the type of weather condition prevailing at the time (Korang-Okrah 2013, p.4). Among the Fanti, not until the husband is buried, she will continue to bath behind the house whilst the Akwapims will ask her to bath at the riverside (Erick et al., 2016). In related study, (Antwi, 2015) observed among the Akwapims the following specific widowhood rituals;

1. *Widows' Confinement*: widows' confinement for the purpose of performing widowhood rites lasted between one and three days.
2. *Mouth-touching of Widows (Anoka)*: the rite was overseen by an elderly woman who touched the widow's mouth with various food items while at the same time whispering some words.
3. *Taunting of Widows*: falsely accusing a widow of being rude (in a mock confrontational scene) to them when the husband was alive, resulting in the widow being fined (in money terms) and the money being used to prepare a delicacy for the widow.
4. *Sexual taboo (Restrictions) for Widows*: widows are prohibited from having sexual relations with any man until the first anniversary of the late husband's death, during which time the final funeral will be held for the late husband.

Among other Akan communities, upon the demise of the man, the wife needs to tie a little stone or a key which should be joined with an extremely sharp smell in a piece of cloth and tie around the midsection (Erick et al., 2016) to forestall the passing husband from having intercourse with her. This is so because most ethnic groups in Ghana believed that the phantom of the late spouse waits until every one of the ceremonies is performed to enable it to join the spirit world.

On the day of burial, the widow provides a cleanser, wipes, towel, powder, fragrance, pants, singlet, and a piece of material to wrap the corpse after the bath of the corpse. She will not be allowed to wear any sandals, pieces of jewellery, or ornaments she desires (Erick et al., 2016). Likewise, the widow should avoid visiting others because this implies she is happy but should cry every day during the grieving period and solicit support (Korang-Okrah 2013, p.4). She is expected to dress in dark fabric consistently (Erick et al., 2016).

Following the mourning period, a close relative will approach the widow to ask for her hand in marriage (Korang-Okrah 2013); if she agrees, a ceremony is performed to obtain consent from the deceased spouse before the marriage rituals.

The Frafra ethnic group in Ghana

The Frafra believed that the widowhood rite performed by the woman keeps off the spirit of the widow. When a husband dies and the body is dressed and laid in state in the customs room, the widow is isolated and dispatched to another room where different experienced widows as consolers and friends stay with her yet with an assigned old woman whose obligation is to control her and give her necessities. A calabash is prepared for her use. She stays in that room until internment, and on the off chance that she wishes to answer nature's call, she should be joined by a couple of ladies. The widow is temporally free to mingle with her community after burial. The calabash is then taken from her and stored safely awaiting the final funeral rite when it will be used to complete the widowhood rituals.

The Ewe ethnic group in Ghana

The very day a husband dies; there will be consultation with the oracles to find the cause of death. This ritual is significant in that it spells out what the woman can do or cannot do during the performance of the funeral rites of the deceased husband. If the woman is cleared to perform the widowhood rites, she will first perform a ritual that can be termed "Courtship rite" (gbolowowo). This ritual consists of the widow providing a piece of cloth, pomade, powder, a cake of soap (these are a list of items

a lady will provide to the husband to be used for bathing when alive) (Erick et al., 2016). The items will be received by the man's family and some put in the coffin. The ritual signifies love even in death. These are done before the burial of the man.

The next rite to be performed is the wearing of the black cloth (avordede nuti) (Amlor and Owusu 2016). These are one of the important rituals a widow must undertake and failure to do so, it is believed, has several negative consequences. The ritual requires the husband's family to provide a black piece of cloth which the widow must wear for not less than six months. The period of the wearing of the black cloth determines one's love for the departed husband. It is believed that once a woman starts wearing these clothes, she is shielded from other men and it becomes taboo for any man to propose love to the woman. It is during this ceremony that the widow will decide what to do during this mourning period. The list of items that are not mentioned during this ceremony becomes taboo for the woman during the number of months or years she intends to mourn her late husband.

A widow, who is in black clothes, must not sleep in the same matrimonial bed used by the couple when the husband was alive. It is believed that during this period of mourning, the departed husband still visits her and avoids contact with the husband. She must not sleep on the same bed until the mourning period is over.

Also, she must not talk to anybody at night, no matter who the person is, except if she has a body, then it will be exempted (Amlor & Owusu, 2016). This is so because of the belief that the ghost of the late husband still visits and can make any kind of sound. She can only talk to any person after taking her bath in the morning and because of this, she is expected to take a bath very early in the morning.

She must bathe before the sun sets unless there is a pressing need for a bath after that time and she must not bath in hot water (Korang-Okrah 2013, p.4). The widow cannot ask someone on a journey whether he/she is back, but not using the phrase "you are welcome".

Following the mourning period, the widow must go through another ritual of "black cloth" removal before the black cloth is officially removed. The removal of this black cloth signifies the end of the mourning period. On the day of this ceremony, the woman must buy white clothes (this time all by herself or assisted by the children or family members). She must provide a different variety of ingredients to be used for the cooking. This will be the widow's time to do a public dance for the first time after the death of her husband.

After the removal of the black cloth, someone from the husband's family will have to buy off "her dirt" (Ahogotutu), signifying she is now clean from the spirit of the late husband and available to other men or she can start a new love life (Amlor and Owusu 2016).

The Frafra ethnic group

Erick et al., (2016) reports that the Frafra believed that the widowhood rite performed by the woman keeps off the spirit of the widow. When a husband dies and the body is dressed and laid in state in the customs room, the widow is isolated and dispatched to another room where different experienced widows as consolers and friends stay with her yet with an assigned old woman whose obligation is to control her and give her necessities. A calabash is prepared for her use. She stays in that room until internment, and on the off chance that she wishes to answer nature's call, she should be joined by a couple of ladies. The widow is temporarily free to mingle with her community after burial. The calabash is then taken from her and stored safely awaiting the final funeral rite when it will be used to complete the widowhood rituals.

Widowhood rites among some ethnic groups in Nigeria

Nwannennaya and Nkama, (2018) observed that widowhood rituals among the Igbo in Nigeria have other objectives to give protection to the community and the widows and also ensure social stability. This they noted is necessary because both the living and the spirits of the dead may come after these women but for the rituals. And that the dead husband still recognizes the woman as a traditionally legal wife

until all rituals are fully carried out for the dead to separate the couple. The widow must therefore observe the following rituals "dressing in pure black material, moving bare feet, wearing a pad as menstruating women do and wearing of tattered and uncombed hair" (Nwannennaya and Nkama, 2018, p. 51). The widow must have her hair shaved (Atindanbila1, Bamford, Adatara, and Kwakye-Nuako, 2015). (Sossou, 2002) also observed the locking of the widow in the same room with the corpse and making her sleep on the husband's grave as some of the rituals practice some Igbo traditional societies in Nigeria.

Widows in states like Enugu, Edo, and Oyo, are pressured to drink the water used to wash the corpse and to swear an oath with a Kola-nut put on their late husband's forehead. The swearing is concluded by the smashing of two broomsticks on the forehead. If a widow refuses to carry out the funeral rituals, she will be subjected to physical violence, as well as being rejected by the family or deprived of her inheritance, including her children (Report by the project coordinator of Women's Rights Watch - Nigeria, 2013).

It is believed that a widow in the Yoruba culture should not wash or dress for seven days after the death of their husband. As part of the ceremonies, widows are required to sit on a bare floor or mat, leave their hair unkempt, cook and eat from shattered pots, and having cried her last tear for the departed husband, she has to be bathed in the night as a final widowhood ritual (Olukayode 2015, p.69).

Widowhood rites among some ethnic groups in Kenya

Accorg to (Gunga, 2009), women are expected to undergo a cleansing ritual that includes sexual elements prior to being reintegrated into society. For an entire year, a widow was confined to her homestead, as she was deemed culturally impure and a danger to the community. During this time period, a widow experienced a dream in which she had sex with the deceased. The sex dream indicated that the widow was now available for cleansing. Indeed, widowhood taboos were lifted following the final post-burial ritual honouring the deceased. Following that, widows were given to men in

the community to guard in order to meet their material and emotional needs. This ritual puts widows and their new sexual partners at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS. If the family suspects HIV/AIDS was involved in the death, they hire a professional cleanser and provide him with alcohol (Fraser & Nwadinobi, 2018). He is then taken to the widow's house and subjected to a sex ritual. Occasionally, family members supervise the ritual to ensure that actual sexual contact occurs, thereby completing the cultural cleansing. Sex is required. This is because the primary purpose of cleansing is to liberate the widow from "okola" (bondage) and to enable her to conceive children in order to continue the deceased's lineage. A professional cleanser, "jakowiny", removes all ritual impediments in preparation for the guardian to assume control of the widow.

Method

This was a review narrative highlighting the different rituals associated with widowhood practice in some ethnic groups in Africa. It reflected key findings in literature.

Results and Findings

The review found that widowhood practices cut across African countries. There are rituals associated with each widowhood practice. Also there are similarities among Africans in terms of widowhood practices. Widowhood practices across most ethnic groups holds significant traditional belief system.

Conclusions

Widowhood rituals and practices are held in high esteem among almost all African countries. Some common rituals and practice include Widow inheritance, Widow cleansing, Theft of widow properties, Community rejection, and Widow witchcraft accusations appear among some old authors. It is found that some of the old practices are undergoing some sort of transformation. For example PNDC law 111 of Ghana intend to protect widows when the husband dies without a Will.

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