

A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Practices Relating to Widowhood and Widow-Inheritance Among the Igbo and Yoruba in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Bereavement is a social fact in any culture but reactions and practices relating to this vary from culture to culture. The Igbo people live in the South Eastern part of Nigeria, covering four states while the Yoruba live in the South Western part of Nigeria covering six states in Nigeria. This study explores the differences and similarities in the issues relating to the death of a woman's husband among these two culturally different people in Nigeria. Among the issues explored are the reporting of the death, the rites and sacrifices involved, the care of the properties left behind including the children and the wife (or wives). The inheritance of the widow(s) and the rites and conditions surrounding these across these two cultural communities are also exhaustively explored.

INTRODUCTION

The loss of a loved one is a source of intense emotional stress, yet the bereaved need to express and deal with their feelings of loss before they can reorganize their lives. Normal grief often follows a fairly predictable pattern (Schulz, 1978). First a few weeks after a death, survivors react with shock and disbelief. Second, as the fact of the loss sinks in, this initial numbness gives way to overwhelming sadness. Some people cry almost constantly, many suffer physical symptoms like insomnia, shortness of breath and loss of appetite. Some fear that they will have an emotional brake-down, some drink too much or sedate themselves with tranquilizers. Third, beginning about 3 weeks after the death, continuing for about 1 year, survivors often relive the death in their minds, in an obsessive search for its meaning. They may hallucinate the presence of the dead person – seeing the face hearing the voice. Fourth, at the start of the 2nd year after the death, the survivors become more active socially, getting out more, seeing people, resuming their interest. At this point, survivors feels stronger, knowing that they have come through an ordeal. However, there are other cases in which the survivors find it very difficult to cope and adjust to their new status in life. (Schulz, 1978).

Reactions to the death of a man as husband or a woman as wife is culturally determined Each culture determines the rationality of practices relating to widowhood and mourning rites The Yoruba and Igbo in Nigeria have differing practices relating to widowhood and widow inheritance

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Although widows constitute a large proportion of the adult female population in many African communities, systematic investigation is missing (Betty Potash, 1986;1). The result is that much of the scanty pieces of information we have on widowhood practices are mere raw and unprocessed information. Systematic and sponsored sociological and cosmological studies are yet to be made (Afigbo 1986;8). For the same reason of lack of analytical approach, comparative studies of widowhood practices are also conspicuously absent. There are also absence of diachronic studies aimed at showing how widowhood practices have evolved or changed over time especially as a result of religion (majorly Christianity and Islam) and modernization. It is obvious that the widowhood practices are, no doubt, a product of history intercepted by religious and cultural contacts.

The brief reference to the state of research on widowhood practices is necessitated by the need to call attention to the limitations to this presentation and a need for a large scale study of this subject matter.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Widowhood as could be seen from the fore-going section is a phenomenon plagued with some inherent problems.

This paper examines the cultural practices relating to widowhood and widow inheritance among the Yoruba and Igbo peoples in Nigeria.

In concrete terms the objective of the study include:

1. To examine the cultural practices that relate to the handling of the death of a woman's husband.
2. To examine how the people in Yoruba and Igbo societies relate to the widows
3. To identify the ways and methods the widows adjusted to their conditions and plan for future marital life.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Widowhood experiences are generally a trauma but in some African societies, they are considered more as an experience of deprivation, subjugation and humiliation.

Ironically, the disorganization and trauma that follow the death of a spouse seem to be greater on the women than on the men whenever either loses his or her spouse. In the case of the loss of the husband, the wife becomes the primary suspect as the cause of the husband's death and is thus treated accordingly. On the other hand, where a man loses his wife, the man is almost immediately offered a substitution to comfort him and douse the impact of the grief of bereavement. The cause of this is not far fetched. It has been rightfully observed that "The differentiation between men's and women's role in Nigeria as with other societies is one of complementary and superior relationship in favour of men. It involves a hierarchy in which men are given greater leverage over decision making and resources than women. The result is a cultural setting that invariably promotes male domination and female subordination". (Ahosi 2002:2). As it relates to certain societies in Nigeria therefore, it can be observed that some of the customs relegate women to the background and clearly rob women of their rights and privileges.

Causes of Widowhood

Widowhood is caused by death and death on its part is as a result of some factors such as diseases, illnesses, accidents, old age, afflictions or attacks, all of which finally result in death. But the major factor that leads to death among the older people is old age. Age tends to make older people more susceptible to disease and disease tends to make people age faster. The circle is a vicious one, the processes work together and result in the loss of health and finally in death. Autopsies indicate that 26 percent of individuals past the age of eighty five die from 'natural causes' (Kohn, 1985). In these "natural" deaths, degenerative disease is present, but its ravages are not severe enough to have caused death in a stronger, more vital person.

The approach of old age poses weighty challenges. Can the individual cope with losses, of work, loved ones who died and eventually a sense of personal competence and authority? Robert Havghurst, Bernice Neugarten et.al(1968) found that many elderly people experience a basic conflict. They want to remain active because that leads to a sense of identity and value. At the same time, they wish to withdraw or disengage from social commitments so that they can pursue a leisurely and contemplative life. Some ruminate over their past achievements and regrets; over those things which they have not been able to accomplish. At this stage in their lives, they look inwards and no longer towards the future. Conditions that encourage disengagement include:

- Losing contact with previous social roles and activities, as retirement begins and circumstances change.

- Becoming preoccupied with themselves because of illness and reduced physical and mental powers.
- Pushing aside of unimportant matters, even as their own death approaches and time seems more precious to them.
- Withdrawal of younger people in the community as a result of the differences in age.

With old age, the body's ability to withstand any given insult (sickness, side effect of medication, broken hips) deteriorates until even a small stress leads to death (Fries, 1994). With the death of one's spouse, the other surviving spouse becomes widowed.

Reaction to Widowhood

A common reaction to widowhood by the widow is the specific stress syndrome of grief. Grief is the complex emotional reaction arising from the loss of a spouse and the attendant difficulties and distress are apt to be very great (Lindermann, 1944; Parkes, 1972). Grief consists of a pattern of physiological distress including sighing, shortness of breath, tightness in the throat, fatigue and loss of muscular strength. The griever is occupied with images of the deceased, often feels guilty about real or imagined slights to the deceased and can be irritable and angry when others try to be soothing. The grief reaction comes in waves, especially when the griever is reminded of the deceased and this grief reaction may last any length from days to years (Lindermann, 1944).

When the widow reacts to the loss with an initial sense of well-being and the show personality changes like generalized hostility or irritability, when they sink into a long-lasting depression or when they develop major physical symptoms like asthma or colitis, they can often benefit from some kind of help in managing their grief. This help can come from non-professional organisations like Widow-to-widow, compassionate friends, family members or from short term psychotherapies or from even the government or community.

Treatment of Widows

In many districts of the indigenous African societies, special attention and care are expected to be given to widows. Under normal circumstances, a widow is entitled to either of two types of protection. She can either be remarried to the nearest male relative of her husband, in which case, she enjoys all the protection and care normally enjoyed by his wives. Or if she is not re-married, she can be given collective protection and care by the relatives of her deceased husband. In this

case, help of a financial and labour nature is rendered to the widow by the relatives of the deceased husband.

Widowers on the other hand do not receive any appreciable care, except that at the early stage following the death of wife, the sympathizers usually render assistance to the widower in respect to the specific duties his wife was fond of performing during her life time. For example, if a man's wife dies leaving young children behind, sympathizing women may assist the widower in taking care of the young children until they are grown up. Women may also help him by doing farm work, such as weeding and harvesting during the seasons for such which his wife usually performed during her life time.

The reactions and social security given to the widowed in the traditional Chinese family is a bit different. Here, it was found out that even if a woman's husband died when she was very young, the woman's in-laws still retained control over her. The remarriage of widows was frowned upon, and the deceased husband's family could actually block a remarriage of which they did not approve as the norm is that a widow was supposed to remain faithful to her dead husband, his family and ancestors for life but in practice however, the remarriage of widows was not uncommon especially among the poor due to their economic needs. The fact is just that whether or not a widow remarried is a question to be decided by her in-laws, who might keep her to sell her to another man to suit their family needs. If she was remarried, she had no right to take any family property nor does she have claims to her children, who belong exclusively by law and custom to the patrilineal family of their father. The only way a widow could retain a position of honour was to stay as the elder mother in the home of her sons. Widowed men, however could remarry without restraint and gentry, men sometimes elevated a concubine to the status of wife on the death of their first wife. (Cheng Lee, 1959).

Reactions of the Widow

The most painful void left by the death of a spouse is felt after the funeral of the deceased, when relatives have departed and the bereaved is alone. In many instances the bereaved becomes pre-occupied by memories of the deceased, sometimes even talking to the departed person as though he or she were still alive. The widow or widower is not only isolating him/herself from the living but is making it harder for him/herself to face the reality of the spouse's death.

One group of researchers (Clayton et al. 1971) identified the symptoms that characterize the mourning process. In their study of 109 widows during their first month of bereavement, the

symptoms most frequently reported by over 80 percent of the respondents include crying, depression, and difficulty in sleeping. Nearly half of those interviewed claimed difficulty in concentration, lack of appetite and reliance on such medication as sleeping pills or tranquillizers.

Some investigators have attempted to outline the stages of mourning during bereavement. One such researcher was Bowlby (1960), who isolated 5 fairly distinct stages as follows:

- ❖ Concentration directed towards the deceased
- ❖ Anger or hostility towards the deceased or others
- ❖ Appeal to others for support and help
- ❖ Despair, withdrawal and general disorganization
- ❖ Reorganization and direction of the self toward a new love object.

Another researcher (Kavanaugh, 1974) suggests that there are 7 stages involved in the grieving process: viz: Shock; Disorganization; Violent emotions; Guilt; Loss and Loneliness; Relief and Re-establishment.

Problems Associated with Widowhood

Widowhood presents a myriad of problems such as economic, social and psychological particularly in the first year or so after the death of their spouse. Helena Lopata (1977, 1979) has done extensive research with more than 1000 widows and widowers. A major problem for both sexes is economic hardship. When the husband was the principal breadwinner, his widow is now deprived of his income and the nucleus of the family is destroyed. The freedom and independence of the nucleus of the family is suddenly lost as a result of the death of the husband. A widowed man on the other hand, now has to buy many of the services his wife had previously provided. Where both had been employed, the loss of one income is often major.

Grief over the loss of a loved one especially one who had played such a central role in one's life for so many years, may affect the widow's or widower's health making them to have more physical illness and are frequently admitted to hospitals, thus leading to rise in the death rate.

Bellin and Hardt studying 1803 people over 65 years of age in New York, found out that the rate of mental disorder was higher among the widowed than among the still married. These higher rate of mental illness was related not only to widowhood but also to advanced age, physical ill-health and other variables. Blackwell(1981) also found that higher rate of mental illness was found among the widowed than their married counterparts.

What does widowhood mean for day-to-day life? Widowhood has led to illness and death of the griever through grief. Men are more likely than women to die from a “broken heart”. Widows on the other hand are more apt to suffer from disabling chronic conditions (Verbrugge, 1979). Scientific evidence suggest that dying of grief is indeed possible. Either of the widow or widower is more likely to die than a married person, but the death rate among widowers skyrockets. One study compared the death rate of nearly 4,500 widowers over the age of 54 with the death rates of married men of the same age. The result showed that the death rates of widowers increased over 40 percent in the first six months of mourning and then declined again to the levels of the married men (Lynch, 1977, Young, Benjamin & Fitzgerald, 1963). In another study by Parkes, Benjamin and Fitzgerald, 1969. These people studied 4486 widowers over age 55 and found out that the death rate during the six months following their wives death was 40 percent above the expected rate and that most of the men had died of heart ailments. The extremely high death rates among the widowers probably develops for several reasons such as:

- ❖ Widowers with good health and financial resources generally remarry and leave the pool of widowers dominated by men with poor health and little money.
- ❖ The new tasks that a widower must assume (cooking and other domestic chores) are more closely related to survival than the tasks assumed by a widow (yard work, home repair).
- ❖ Wives usually maintain a couple’s social ties with relatives and friend, while on the other hand the widower often finds himself socially isolated and lonely.

With the above report, it shows that women who are widowed still live longer after being widowed unlike their male counterparts who not being used to doing some of the duties performed by the females find themselves grieving for too long leading eventually to their death.

Another of the problem associated with widowhood is loneliness as most widows nearly eight out of ten live by themselves and so they suffer the fear of being alone and loss of self-esteem as women in addition to the many practical problems related to living alone. They feel the loss of personal contract and human association therefore they tend to withdraws and become unresponsive. Most are reluctant to move in with their children and only those who are poor and frail live with some relatives, few express any interest in remarrying and so the lack of potential remarriage partners may not distress them.

The greatest problem of all though, is still emotional. Even in a bad marriage, the survivor feels the loss. The role of spouse has been lost, social life has changed from couple-oriented to

associations with other single people and the widowed no longer have the day-in, day-out companionship of the other spouse that had become a basic part of their lives.

Effects of Widowhood

In some African societies, a wife is perceived as a stranger among her husband's family. They are therefore ready to throw her away like a useless appendage the moment her husband is dead. This often makes the widow to wallow in poverty and even sometimes a widow is also devastated by certain cultural practices which makes her to undergo certain degrading rites in the process of mourning the man.

Some women have had to undergo ugly experiences as a result of the demise of their husband for instance some women had given account of the bad experiences they had to undergo, some women had also been accused of killing their husband in order to inherit his property. After the accusation, they could be asked to swear with either the Holy Quran or the Holy Bible to prove their innocence, even the water used for washing the corpse could be given the widow to drink in order to prove her innocence the more. The process and duration of mourning wearing dull brown to black clothes without having bath could last from seven days to two weeks while the duration for wearing dark cloths ranges from three months to a year.

In some cases a widow could be asked to marry the junior brother of the late husband and in case a widow refused such an offer, she was disowned by the late husband's family and banned from inheriting any of the dead man's property while all the household properties would be carted away by the family members especially where the widow does not come from the same town as the deceased husband. Such women have had to rely on the help and assistance from friends and social organizations to which they belonged in order to cater for themselves and children or to fend for themselves or be taken care of by their family of origin.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is examined widowhood and widow inheritance in two societies in Nigeria. Theories that deal with people and their interaction in the society are relevant for the background to this paper. However, the theory of symbolic interactionism is here adopted.

Symbolic Interactionism

Blumer (1962, P.2), who coined the term symbolic interaction presents three principles as its foundation. These principles and their implications for present presentation are:

- “Human beings act towards things on the basis of the meaning that things have for them”
To convey this, considerable ethnographic detail is usually presented about the range of ways in which people see themselves, others and their situation.
- “The meaning of such things is derived from or arises out of the social interaction one has with one’s fellow”.

The interaction pattern among the participants in the activity in question is presented in such a way that people’s activity can be seen to support the way they interpret the situation. The focus here is on those aspects of the interaction that promote stability.

1. “These meanings are handled in, and modified through an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters”.

The focus here is on activities that foster change in how people see the situation and themselves. The symbolic interactionist’s rationale for focusing on concrete activities is the view that a person’s behaviour “is not a result of such things as environmental pressure, stimuli, motives, attitudes and ideas but arises instead from how he interprets and handles these things in the action which he is constructing (Blumer, 1969, P. 82).

Marshall’s (1975) presentation on how people come to see death in a retirement village is a modern symbolic interactionist analysis. He shows that death comes to be seen not as desirable, but as appropriate and thus the anxiety of people shifts from death itself to the manner of death (slow or quick). For instance, most residents want to live no longer than they expect to and only 12 percent of retirement villages as compared with 53 percent of respondents on a general population survey (done by somebody else), feel death always comes too soon. How the old people interpret death is an open discussion of death which makes it part of the community’s symbolic universe. Death is approached in a practical manner – for instance, residents make funeral arrangements. The village treats it on routine – there is no obituary, only a notice on the board and list in the village newspaper. Residents in the village are involved in a full round of activities and these in form of informal socialization. This helps to induct people into and to maintain a community in which death is interpreted as appropriate, yet in which a full life can go on until death comes.

An important addition to symbolic interaction is provided by one strand in the early work of Goffman- a dramaturgical analogist. He suggests that any social establishment can be usefully studied from the point of view of "Impression management" (1954); how people create and maintain a certain impression on others. This approach lends itself to a dramaturgical analogy as Goffman does not wish totally to assign the 'self' to the role player. People are seen as standing to some extent outside situations, calculating both what role they should play and how they should play it (e.g. should they maintain role distance or not). Goffman develops this analogy by using concepts like "front region"- the area where an effect is made to show that an action maintains and embodies certain standards- and 'backstage'- the area where for some given performance the illusions of the front region are constructed and may even be openly contradicted. He also talks about terms of performers with solidarity and secrets presenting to an audience and some of the ways in which situations can deviate from this.

Unlike the classic symbolic interactionist approach focusing on the construction and reconstruction of the meanings of activities, situations and symbolic universes, the dramaturgical approach takes this largely for granted. Instead, the focus is on how individuals cope with the 'conditions and constraints' (Goffman, 1972:150) that situations impose. Situations are seen as limiting the ways in which a person can pursue his ends and thereby producing a set of 'patterned adaptations'.

What makes Goffman's and other similar analyses seem cynical is that people are presented as constantly selecting among a wide variety of adaptation to the situation to extract advantage for themselves. Also contained in this view is what Rock (1979:172) calls a 'hidden contrivance'. People in the same position appear to have the same competence and grasp of situations. All people are shown to possess similar capacities for acting- it is only their situations that change and with this the appropriate ways of acting.

By examining situations from the point of view of the individual, the dramaturgical approach adds another dimension to the symbolic interactionist analysis of how symbolic universes are sustained and changed. A presentation of the ways in which an individual can cope with a situation helps one to understand what the situation means to him and thereby adds another layer of meaning to the symbolic interactionist presentation of the symbolic universe. If the communication between individuals that maintain a symbolic universe is also reciprocal assessment, then our understanding of their interaction is deepened and has a different 'feel'. As a result, some 1970s

article, as well as some earlier ones (e.g. Miller, 1964), blend the classic symbolic interactionist approach with a dramaturgical one.

The symbolic interactionist accounts attack some major ways of giving a causal understanding of an activity. Arguing that this account is refined an alternative description of the activity in some specified socio-cultural setting is put forward. This account examines the processes through which people produce and change their meaningful activities by showing how the setting shapes these activities.

The central basic concept of symbolic interaction is interaction, according to several of its proponents (e.g. Brittan, 1973 ch. 1; Glassner, 1980 chs. 1-2). Glassner points out that “interactions consist of at least the following: events, states, phenomena and processes. None of these can be reduced entirely to analysis of symbols’ (1980, p. 16). Interactions’ occur on a variety of levels and thus require an analysis in turns of both causal and meaningful understanding of actions and beliefs as it holds that the linkages among human activities are both meaningful and causal. Neither causal nor meaningful links are alone sufficient for an understanding of the process whereby activities came to have certain meanings (e.g. a payment being a tip), or people engage in certain actions (e.g. wearing a uniform), or people acquire a particular awareness of self (e.g. as ill), or people come to hold certain views (e.g. that death is appropriate). The linkages that exist in some particular situation must be understood at both levels and an integrated analysis produced. Another way to state the central claim of this paragraph is to say that symbolic interaction rejects idealist account of human action. It recognises that people’s processes of creating definitions of the situation, themselves and others exist in the world and cannot be grouped purely on the level of meaning.

Once component of a symbolic interactionist analysis is an analysis of action in terms of meaning- symbolic interaction is concerned with how activities or beliefs are intelligible to or are to be understood by or what meaning they have for some specified group of people. One establishes that action or belief A has meaning x for some specified group of people by placing it in a pattern of other actions done by and beliefs held by the group. By supplying a large enough description of the context of the action or belief, one endeavours to get to the point where there is only one intelligible way of filling the gap. This way of filling in the gap is the meaning x of the action or belief A.

Symbolic interaction accounts also contain claims about the causal effects of the activities they are discussing. However, these claims are embedded in the analysis and cannot be detached from the situation about which they are made. An embedded causal claim states that some concrete

action has a particular effect (another concrete action or belief). These embedded causal linkages are presented as a routine accomplishment that anybody familiar with the situation which is being analysed could make.

The basic concern of symbolic interaction is to present ethnographic description of the range of ways in which interaction between particular groups of people creates, sustains and modifies various particular symbolic inverses. A sustainable programme of symbolic interactionist research shows the diversity of humanity. The main thrust of symbolic interactionist research is towards more and more 'esoteric' subjects. Symbolic interaction is over-concerned with the transient, quaint and exotic features of social life (Meltzer et al, 1975 ch. 3).

Symbolic interaction is not only voluntaristic interpretative description that is necessary to the foundations of causal theories, but it is pregnant with causal theories as well and its concern with people as the creators of their world, though not in circumstances of their choosing; the insistence on people collectively having the freedom to create vast numbers of forms of life, its concern for the detail and texture of human life all contribute to a humanistic view of people.

Symbolic interaction has been criticized (Stryker, 1980, 1980, p. 153) of neglecting the emotions and having too cognitive an image of the acting self. This seems a fair criticism, part of the reason for the stress on cognitive rather than emotional factors is that when a person is presented as acting reasonably, the reader tends to accept the meaningful, voluntaristic nature of the person's activities. However, symbolic interaction does not have to neglect emotional factors. On a theoretical level, both Shott (1979) and Hochschild (1979) have provided the foundation for good symbolic interactionist accounts of how the meaning of people's emotions is shaped by their situations.

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

This study compares widowhood practices in two culturally distinctive communities in Nigeria, the Yoruba of the South West and the Igbo of the South East.

The People

The Igbo speaking people are located in Latitude 5 and 7 degrees north and 6 and 8 degrees East, out of the 36 states in Nigeria, they cover wholly 4 – namely Imo, Abia, Anambra and Enugu and parts of Delta and Rivers States in Nigeria. There was no central political organisation among the Igbos traditionally and the village of clans were the basic political units. The Igbos display

cultural traits that are common among them throughout their own society and which are also significantly different from those of other surrounding societies although there are minor variations from one specific Igbo community to the other.

The Yoruba speaking people on the other hand live in cities, towns, villages and other forms of settlements in the south western Nigeria where they wholly cover six out of the 36 states in Nigeria namely Ondo, Oyo, Ogun, Osun, Lagos and Ekiti States and also partly in Kwara and Edo states in Nigeria. The central language spoken is Yoruba although there are considerable variations in diets and practices. The Yoruba display fairly common cultural practices as they relate to cultural rites on such important areas as births, marriages and deaths.

Sources of Data

Data for this study are from two sources namely interview of respondents from the two culture areas on cultural practices relating to widowhood and widow inheritance and interview of widows from the two culture areas. For both interviews, purposive but systematic sampling was employed to choose the respondents. Age, sex and knowledge of the subject matter were the important variables in selecting the first category of respondents while for the second category of respondents, the major variables are sex and personal experience of widowhood. This last category of interview was specifically for bereaved women only.

The table below shows the selection of respondents for the study.

Table I: Respondents Selected for the Interview on Widowhood and Widow Inheritance

RESPONDENTS				
CULTURE AREA	COMMUNITY	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
Igbo	Mbaise	3	2	5
	Awkwa	3	2	5
	Ogidi	2	3	5
	Ogburuka	2	3	5
	Akili-Ogidi	3	2	5
Yoruba	Ikere Ekiti	2	3	5
	Akure	3	2	5
	Aridiogo	2	3	5
	Otan	2	3	5
	Offa	3	2	5
Total	10	25	25	50

Table II: Widow Respondents Interviewed

CULTURE AREA	COMMUNITY	RESPONDENTS (widows only)
Igbo	Mbaise	5
	Awkwa	5
	Ogidi	5
	Ogburuka	5
	Akili Ogidi	5
Yoruba	Ikare Ekiti	5
	Akure	5
	Aridiogo	5
	Otan	5
	Offa	5
Total	10	50

Data Collection and Recording

Interview method was chosen because of the level of illiteracy of most of the expected respondents. The questions were asked in Yoruba language from the Yoruba respondents by the researcher while an Igbo speaking enumerator was used to ask the questions from the Igbo respondents. In both instances, the responses were recorded directly with a cassette recorder and later transcribed and translated into English language. Bearing in mind the objectives of the study, the questions were framed in such a simple way as to enhance understanding and unhindered responses of the respondents.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings are presented under two subsections. Sectional A contains the presentation of the response of non-widow respondents on the customs of surrounding widowhood and widow inheritance and section B is the presentation of the analysis of responses of the respondents who were widows.

SECTION A

Causes of Widowhood among the Igbo and Yoruba

The death of a woman’s husband leads to the woman becoming a widow. An analysis of the responses reveal that among the Igbo and the Yoruba traditionally, “there were large differences in age of husbands and wives especially in traditional societies”. The Igbo respondents pointed out that the acquisition of all that is required for marriage consummation takes some time and as such

many would be husbands were about an average of age of 40 years while the wives were often 15 or 20 years younger. In “polygynous families, the age disparity for second and subsequent wives is even greater”. On the other hand, responses from the Yoruba respondents show that while the first does not account for the age disparity between husband and wife as the Yoruba’s are liberal about marriage rites and obligations, the second reason accounts for age disparity between husband and wife and subsequent reason why some husbands die earlier than their wives due to old age.

In addition to the above, the Igbo respondents traced the fairly large number of widows in Igboland to the civil war between Nigeria and the Biafra (1967-1970) in which, it was estimated that more than one million Igbo, mostly, man, lost their lives. This, coupled with the low incidence of widow re-marriage among the Igbo, accounted for why according to the respondents, there are many current widows in Igboland. On the other hand, this other factor did not apply to the Yoruba since the civil war did not have this same devastating effect on the Yoruba men and the process of remarriage of widows in Yorubaland is not as rigorous as it is among their Igbo counterpart.

It must be pointed out however, that age disparity between spouses is not the only demographic variable that is important in the issue of widowhood. Schildkrout (1989) pointed out that divorce and remarriage are important in clustering widowhood at two different periods of life-cycle based on the initial marital history. It follows therefore that those who divorce and remarry may not be widowed until late in life since the new husbands tend to be closer in age to their wives. Furthermore, the time of life at which a woman becomes a widow determines whether she could remarry or remain a permanent widow.

Widowhood Rituals

Among the Yoruba, the ritual rites for the widow is called “ile Opo” and among the Igbos, this is called “Igbo Nkpe”. An analysis of the responses shows that among the Igbo, although there are differences in details and materials involved, the rituals for widowhood follow a fairly common way when a “common man” dies but clearly different for “Ozo” title holders. It is practically impossible to here give details of the practices in each community as narrated by the respondents. Some common elements will hereby be presented.

Among the Igbo, at the death of a woman’s husband, the mourning period takes between one week and one year with specific activities recommended for the periods. Most Igbo communities recommend that a widow at announcement of her husband’s demise, would wear the “mud cloth”

(“ogodo upa”). The time of wearing this varies from seven days to one year depending on community’s emphasis.

The respondents interviewed revealed that a woman is mandatorily expected to wail at the death of her husband either three times in a day or once in a day for three or seven days. During the mourning days, the woman’s hair among the Igbo is scraped and she is expected to sit on the mat surrounded by other mourners or to sit by the corpse of the husband, warding off flies from it. The respondents from Ogburuka revealed that “the widow is put in a cage where she could sit and not sleep on a mat or mattress”. She is expected to be clad in black attire for seven months and any other cloth for the remaining five months of her one year of mourning.

The respondents from Akili-Ogidi revealed that the widow is expected to do “evening wailing through” *onu ntapá*”, a chink in the wall, facing the west the first 28 days after the burial of her husband”

The rites are different in Yorubaland. According to the respondents, when a man dies, his wife or wives are expected to express the sorrow through crying and often falling into the ready hands of others surrounding her who would prevent her from injuring herself. She is thereafter expected to go into confinement for seven days during which she is not expected to wash herself or change her clothes. Among the Akure people, the woman would be expected to unweave her hair and have a low-cut while in Otan, the woman would be expected to shorn or scrape her hair as a sign of severing bonds between her and her death husband”

During the mourning period which sometimes lasts for forty days or four months (120 days) the widow is expected to wear a pensive look and be clad in black attire to all public places. During the initial seven days of mourning, the widow is expected to sit on bare floor or a mat at best but definitely not on a stool or a bed. In some Yoruba communities, she is expected to eat from broken plates and cook with broken pots

At this period, it will be ascertained whether or not the widow is pregnant etc. At the end of forty days, three month or four month as the case may be, the final rites are performed for the widow after which she is free to remarry. These final rites include being washed in the night after having the final wailing, making some rituals which are expected to finally put the spirit of the departed to final rest and the “outing”, which involves change of dresses and being led to the market.

A woman may refuse to be “inherited” even if the family of her late husband wants it so. A relation may also refuse to marry a dead relation’s widow even if the family wishes it so.

PROPERTY AND WIDOW INHERITANCE

It was revealed by majority of the Igbo respondents that at death of a woman’s husband, she would be expected to surrender all the man’s properties, including bank account to the relations for appropriation. She would, in some communities, be expected to take an oath that, she had not concealed anything from the family members. In some communities, the woman would be accused of masterminding the husband’s death even where it is very apparent that he died a natural or accidental death. Hence, the widowhood rites would begin by making the woman to pass through “acid” test such as “drinking bitter water”, swearing in a shrine, drinking the water used to birth the husband’s corpse or going to a “T junction” to bath, returning home naked by 2.00am. It is believed that if she survives any or a combination of these, then she is free from the guilt of causing her husband’s death.

The above notwithstanding, the property of a dead man among the Igbo passes to his siblings rather than to his wife and children who are left un-regarded or are often ejected from those properties. It has been suggested that the humiliating and almost inhuman ordeal to which the Igbo woman is subjected during widowhood rites are to subjugate her and deter her from ever laying claims to her husband’s properties.

The Yoruba respondents on the other hand revealed that after the death of the husband, his wife or wives would be expected to observe the community based widowhood rites. Thereafter, the leaders of the extended family would constitute themselves into a committee to share the man’s properties among his children and close kits and kin where he had only one wife. This is called “Olori ko kori”- i.e. an individual basis. However, where he had more than one wife, the properties are shared on the basis of “onidi judi”, that is, on the basis of the group of children each wife has. Clearly, in Yorubaland, a dead man’s properties belong primarily to his children and can be extended to his close kin but the wife/wives have access to their late husband’s properties only through their children.

Among the Igbos and the Yorubas, the respondents revealed that a barren woman has no rights to his late husband’s properties and their widowhood rites are less rigorous.

As earlier mentioned, among the Yorubas, the issue of widow inheritance was common up to three or four decades ago in which case a close kin of the dead was expected to take his widow to wife after the normal widowhood rites. This custom has however almost completely frizzled out except in very remote rural areas.

Among the Igbos also, widow inheritance is no more popular as it was about three decades ago. Indeed, as revealed in section B, most widows who are of child-bearing age prefer to remain un-married and to stay in the family of their husband, taking care of their children.

SECTION B

As earlier mentioned, 50 widows were interviewed in order to understand what the widows experience in the two culture areas.

Table III Distribution Of (Widow) Respondents According To The Age When Bereaved

AGE	YORUBA		IGBO	
	f(x)	%	f(x)	%
30-39 years	2	8	1	4
40-49 years	4	16	5	20
50-59 years	10	40	8	32
60-65 years	5	20	7	28
70 years and above	4	16	4	16
Total	25	100	25	100

Table III shows the age at which the widows were bereaved. Among the widows from Yorubaland 24% are still in childbearing age, and the same percentage are from the Igbo respondents.

Table IV: Showing a Cross-Tabulation of Widows Age and Number of Children

AGE	YORUBA (No. of children)				IGBO (No. of children)			
	1-2	3-4	5-6	7 and above	1-2	3-4	5-6	7 and above
30-39	2	-	-	-	1	-	-	-
40-49	1	3	-	-	-	4	1	-
50-59	-	6	2	2	-	3	4	1
60-69	-	2	2	1	1	4	2	1
70 and above	-	-	3	1	-	1	2	1

Table IV above shows the number of children that each widow has. Majority of the widows have between 3 and 6 children.

TABLE V: SHOWING THE STATUS OF THE (WIDOW) RESPONDENTS

Response	Yoruba		Igbo	
	f(x)	%	f(x)	%
Have Remarried	4	16	3	12
Hope of marry	2	8	4	16
To stay un-remarried	19	76	18	72
Total	25	100	25	100

The table above shows the current marital status or future expression of the respondents. Majority of the widows from both culture areas does not hope to remarry any longer perhaps due to old age and number of children. Those who have married or wish to marry are still of child-bearing age and also reported that they needed companions.

The widows interviewed recounted their experiences at the death of their husbands. These experiences confirmed what had been earlier noted from the two culture areas.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined widowhood and widow inheritance, comparing the practices among the Yoruba and Igbo in Nigeria. While most of the rites have found their ways to the modern day, some of them are now only practiced nominally. It is not possible at the moment to estimate the extent of changes that have occurred in the practices, first due to lack of proper records and statistics in the past and secondly, due to systematic study in the present, there is no doubt however that significant alterations have taken place in these practices.

The sources of these changes among others include: Religious creeds and practices, modernization and education ownership of personal properties and gainful employment by the women, the mass-media in their outcry against dehumanizing treatment of widows, voluntary associations that support and defend the widows etc. It is expected that many of the inhuman treatments of widows in Nigeria will soon go into antiquity.

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