

THE PLIGHT OF WIDOWS IN NIGERIA: THE PARADOX FOR TRADITIONAL COUNSELLING OF THE BEREAVED

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ABSTRACT

Historical studies have shown that widowhood in pre-Christian and Islamic periods was a natural phenomenon which carry with it the risk of conjugal bereavement due to the death of one spouse. However, the situation changed immediately the society started subjecting widows into various tortures and mistreatment (especially from the 1970s), leading to distrust amongst families and eventually violence amongst the people. This study, therefore examined the plight of widows in Nigeria as a paradox for traditional counseling of the bereaved in Pre-Colonial times and the Nigerian situations today.

Keywords: *Widowhood, bereaved, traditional counseling, plight*

INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria today, the plight of widows ranges from immediate relatives and families of deceased husband to members of his community. Many widows are suspected by family members of deceased spouse for been responsible for the death of the departed husband's. When the death is sudden and without any sign of protracted illness, it is believed that such death might have been caused by the wife, who is the closest associate. And to prove her innocence, the bereaved widow is subjected to all kinds of humiliations by the deceased's community. Sometimes, the widow is compelled to perform ablution rituals to prove her innocence. In most cases, she is restricted from going out or made to drink the water used in washing the deceased husband's corpse. These traumatic experiences that the bereaved widows pass through in Nigerian society show how widowhood is placed on the litany of woes.

Many widows who suffered such plights are likely to experience psychic and emotional breakdown. There are varied widowhood and traditional grief counseling, just as there are many scholars in the fields. According to Idyorough (1998), widowhood is "a state of being a widow". And a widow is a house wife whose husband had died and has not married again. Widowhood is the most devastating state of life which requires coping capacities and social readjustment to make life better in the society. The death of ones husband is a devastating change needing socio-structural arrangements to adjust to new state in life. This study therefore, aimed at examining the plight of widows in Nigeria as a paradox for traditional counseling of the bereaved in pre-colonial times and the Nigerian situations today.

TRADITIONAL GRIEF COUNSELLING

The word traditional grief counseling is better described than defined. This, notwithstanding, Agomoh (1987) describes traditional grief counselling as a cultural method of assisting men and women who have lost their loved ones to readjust to new situations of things in the society. For Mascoritz (1973), traditional grief counseling is a therapeutic way of giving traditional advice to bereaved people concerning the death of their departed ones. The various pieces of advice and condolences given to the bereaved during funeral celebrations are counseling to help them readjust in the society. It is an indigenous way of helping the bereaved to cope with emotional and psychological stress of bereavement (Wright, 1960).

THE BIBLICAL CONCEPTION OF WIDOWHOOD

Widowhood is one of the vital issues in the Bible that attract the mercy of God. In the Old and New Testaments, the theme of widowhood is treated with compassion. Thus, the status of widows, their legal protection, admonitions against their mistreatment, God's compassion for them, and the symbolic use of the term and the place of widows in the early Church were carefully examined for better understanding of widowhood in Nigeria. In Old Testament for example, widowhood was a life of penury (1 Kings, 17:8-15; 2 Kings 4:1-7). Although some widows were comparatively wealthy by inheritance, a lot of them were poor (Judith, 88:7). The Jews believed that death before old age was punishment for sin which probably accounts for approach attached to widowhood (Isaiah 45:1-13; Ruth 1:13).

Thus, priests were forbidden to marry widows (Luke 21:14). The Jews attached religious significance to beverage marriage, to give the widows measure of security in the society. And if the widow remained children after the beverage marriage, then she remain part of her husband's family or return to her parents (Genesis 38:11; Luke 22:13; Ruth 1:8). She could look forward to another marriage outside her deceased husband's family (Ruth 1:9, 31, 13; 1 Samuel 25:42). The Old Testament also warned against mistreatment of widows (Exodus 22:21-23, Is. 1:17, 23; Job 22:9, 31:16; Psalms 93, 94: 6; Zechariah 7:10). The fact of the injustices allotted to the widows was common and attested by the repeated threats of prompt actions against oppression on the day of the Lord (Malachi 3:5). God commended that the widows be considered part of the covenantal community. The people of God must extend to them the same merciful protections that they bestow on orphans and defenseless aliens (Deuteronomy 14:29; 16:11, 14). They are not to exchange their clothing or other property in payment of debts (Deuteronomy 24:17). At harvest times a portion of grain, some fruits of the olive tree and grapes in the vineyard were to be left for their sustenance (Deuteronomy 24:19-21; Ruth 2:2-12).

Widows were also made the beneficiaries of additional gifts (Deuteronomy 26:12' 2; Macc.3:10; 8:28-30). God pledged himself to sustain the widows who hope in Him (Jeremaih 49:11). He will preserve their inheritance (Proverbs 15:"25) and be Himself their protector (Psalms 67 (68): 5; 145, 146:9. Thus Deutro-Isaiah symbolically compares Babylon to a widow left solitary in her desolation to show

that Israel is encourage to forget the disgrace of her widowhood because Yahweh has taken her back as his spouse to enter to a holier and fruitful alliance with her (Psalms 44:9, Proverbs 15:25, Isaiah 54:46). The authors of Lamentations also make a similar reference to Jerusalem. After the destruction of the city and the burning of the temple by Babylonians, Jerusalem, "the widow in poignant distress, will call on God and men of pity (Lamentations 1:1; 5:3-4).

In the New Testament, Biblical emphasis on the widows continues with frequent reference to their indigence. Thus, during apostolic era, this led to the appointment of the first seven deacons whose duty required them to care for the widows whom Hellenistic Jewish converts in Jerusalem accused the Hebrews of neglecting in the distribution of alms (Act 6:1). At Jaffa (Joppe), the widows grieved so deeply over the death of Tabitha, who had supplied their needs by her industry. Peter raised her to life so that she might continue her works of charity to them (Acts. 9:36-4). Under pretence of offering long prayers to widows, the scribes and Pharisees, whose avarice Jesus condemned enriched themselves by "devouring the substance" of these defenseless women (Matthew 23:14; 12:40; Luke 20:47).

St. Paul advises that widows should remain unmarried was not binding (1Corinthians 7:8-9; 39-40). Later he preferred that they should remarry if their loneliness tends to lead them to conducts that would dissatisfy the church and non Christians. But he approved of an official body of widows that was highly honoured in the early church. And to belong to this group, widows had to meet the requirements of being at least sixty years old, given themselves to prayer day and night, have no intention of remarrying, serve "the Saints", show hospitality, and help the indigenes (1Timothy 5:3-16). During the patristic period, the expectation of an imminent parousia, a closed group mentality fostered by the paralegal status of Christian and absence of centralized legislative institutions in the ancient church led to the early evolution of a special and possibly quasi-clerical status of widows. Evidence from the East has shown that widows were regularly chosen as deaconesses and their institution survived the public recognition of the church under Constantine I. Since then the institution began to decline as an independent class with the 5th century rise of female monasticism and the elimination of the need for providing financial and religious security to these precariously situated Christians.

WIDOWHOOD IN THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT

In Nigerian society, widowhood is a dreadful experience. After the death of the husband, the widow is bound to experience different kinds of sufferings. These experiences however, differ from one culture to the other. In Igbo land for example, on the day of the deceased husband's burial ceremony, his elder sister (ada) washes the hands of the bereaved widow with water and rub them with an unbroken egg which is thrown away into the bush. After this ritual, the widow goes into one month of seclusion without washing her body (Agomoh, 1987). The widow is also required to perform purification and ablution rituals. He sewed a garment of fibre and shaves off her hair. At the end of one year of mourning, the widow discards the fibre garment

and can re-marry if she so desired. This trauma sets the plight of widows in Igbo land on the literary of woes. Amongst the Yorubas, a widow is believed to be the property of deceased husband and so cannot inherit his property. Only children, brothers, and uncles are allowed to inherit the deceased persons' property. This exclusion of a bereaved widow in the issue of inheritance is a plight of widowhood in Yorubaland which should be addressed in present-day.

The Edo people represented by Esan and Etsako ethnic groups, inquires into the cause of a deceased husband's death. They also subjects widows to different abuses if they are suspected to be responsible for the husband death. Etsako people consult the oracle after the death of the deceased husband and the widow is forced to swear at a shrine if she is accused of killing the deceased husband (Akubor, 2009:8-16). While the Esans subject the widow to different mistreatment if she is guess to have killed the husband. In most cases, the widow is forced to drink the water used in washing the legs of the deceased husband to prove her innocence. She mourns the husband for seven days in seclusion, eat from unwatched plates, run round the house or farm of the deceased's husband stark naked in broad day light and wear old clothes during mourning period. After the mourning period the widow is inherited either by the first son of the late husband if he was a polygamist or the brother-in-law if monogamist. This becomes traumatic experience in the situation whereby the widow refuses to re-marry the brother or son of the deceased husband chosen for her.

The Delta people, especially the Uhrobos, Isokos and Ndukwas are strict with a widow, especially if she is a prime murder suspect of her husband's death. The Delta people believed that a man can hardly die a natural death unless someone must be responsible (Ikenga-Metuh, 1985:46-49). Thus, If the widow is suspected to be killer of her deceased husband, serious tortures are be giving to her and the deceased's property is shared amongst the children and his brothers, while the widow is betrothed to another brother of the late husband (Osemene, 1989, 14th July). But if she objects to remarriage within the same family, then the widow is made to refund the bride price paid on her. The Ndokwa people, inquired into the death of a deceased husband and if the wife is suspected to be responsible, she is forced to perform certain rituals before the husband is buried. The widow is thrown over the coffin by some strong men up to seven times and if she happens to fall down in the process, it is believed that her hands were involved in the death of the husband. The Yaba peoples whisk the widow from her late husband's house to the most elderly man within the family or clan during the mourning period. The widow is guarded by one of the sisters-in-law for forty days during which she is monitored to find out if she is pregnant (Osemene, 2006, on 16th August). The widow wore one dress throughout this period, bath in the presence of other widows, touch earthenware tripod and cook food for the whole villagers. After this ritual, the widow is allowed to re-marry within the family. But if she objects to the demand made of her, she is allowed to go empty handed (Agomoh, 1987). Similarly, in Tiv society, a woman enters into the family or community of the husband as a worker and bearer of children for the whole ethnic group. She is the

wife of the whole community in the cultural sense (that is without other males having sexual intercourse with her, except her legal husband). And even when the husband dies, her marriage in the family still continues. And in some cases a surrogate or proxy husband is found amongst her husband's brothers to take care of her, help her on the farm and support her in various other ways (Idyorough, 1988). Even when the woman becomes a widow, the families try to help her adjust to the new state of life. Despite that, the widow faces challenges of widowhood.

One important thing to note here is that unlike the widower who could not show outward demeanor and expression of loss, grief and sorrows in some situations, the widow exhibited feelings and actions which shows confusion and contemplation due to the sudden departure of her beloved husband (Bowen, 1985). Sometimes, the widow's shocking experience is recounted over and over again as she searches for her late husband. This results to other symptoms, some of which are the bereaved widow expresses fearful anxiety which soon takes on the paralyzing effects on the family, non-adjustment to stress results in illness that is numbing, the weeping in bed and hospitalization becomes a daily occurrence, apathy and antipathy, not excluding illness of social collapse, are also noticed (Ushe, 2005).

Psychologically too, back pain, muscles cramp, vomiting, lump throat, blurred vision, singing and whispering attitudes, abdomen emptiness, hair loss, tenor voice, day-night-rhythms, feeling of separation from the deceased husband, hallucinations, feelings of guilt, debility, heightened hostility towards other people and restlessness. Others are tension, jitteriness, hopelessness, persistent, watery eyes, melancholy attempt to commit suicide in order to terminate life and unusual pattern of speech when speaking about the deceased husband, are dominant features or symptoms expressed by the widow (Robert, 1970). These ambivalent behaviours are expressed by the widow as a result of preoccupation with ideas about the separated spouse which can easily lead to breakdown of emotions, psychic-imbalance and ill-health if not properly handled through counseling therapy. Thus, the plight of widowhood creates a state of mind and behavior characteristics, which can be understood within social-economic structure and social adjustment systems.

This is because during the study, we found that the response by biological and affined relatives to assist widows is no longer spontaneous as it used to be. And that the emerging clubs/associations have neither responded adequately. We also found that the assistance given to widows in Nigeria is mostly moral supports. Widows have therefore not responded favourably to social adjustment. The majority of the widows depend on their husbands while they were alive and after their husband's death, they suffer from financial problem which they (widows) rate as the number one. Majority of these widows are still mentally attach to their deceased husbands and consequently could not socially adjust since they are left alone to grapple with economic demands and other oddities of daily living. And since they went to social welfare offices for assistance and they did not get, most of these widows are found to possess death instincts.

RELIEVING THE PLIGHT OF WIDOWS IN NIGERIA

It is our position that solution to the problem of widowhood should concentrate on economic and social transformations as well as some reasonable forms of adjustment rather than concentrating on the individual treatment of widows. Therefore, this study proposes that a survivor's benefit scheme should be introduced for the peasants, the self employed and widows in the private sectors. The existing provision under Decree No. 102 of 1980 which covers only widows in the public sector should be revived to include every person (Mark, 1972).

The amount of money paid as survivors benefit should be capable of sustaining the widows and children until children become adults. Widows who have no children but are of marriageable age should be encouraged to remarry. The burden on the widows can also be lessened by introducing free and compulsory education, a national health-insurance scheme that would take care of the health of the widows and surviving children, and a guaranteed employment to any widow with a requisite qualification. A housing policy that should favour widows and dependent children is necessary.

Social workers in governmental and non-governmental agencies can help widows in many ways. At psychological and individual levels, they can help widows to resolve continued psychological effect of their late husband. They can be helped to accept the social reality in which they have found themselves. Social workers can also organize self-help groups that would assist widows in their social adjustments. This is difficult within the existing social arrangement because of the little success it would achieve, but the little success may be counted as a gain (Idyorough, 1988). Social workers can also help widows to claim their welfare rights where they are entitled to but are being denied or delayed.

Most importantly, since widows' problems are located in the social organization of the society, social workers can play advocacy roles by fighting for change in the welfare rights of the widows for their benefits. In fact, the social action or reformist approach is the method that social workers have been known for long. But we must hasten to contend that reformist approach through the provision of financial assistance to the widows without transforming the economy and all other social services would be inadequate. Widows can hardly face a situation of high school fees, high medical bills, high housing rent and high transportation costs. Thus, social policy for the widows should therefore aim at transforming the society and making these services accessible to the lowest person. There is need to review existing laws and grants as well as the sole right of inheritance of deceased husband's property, including landed property, to the widows.

At present, widows are discriminated and denied the right to inherit the property in many parts of Nigeria (Laws of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1979, decree No. 102, 180: A 783-A 791). It is indeed agonizing and pitiful that we still witness every day the incidence of a husband's property being snatched away from the widow. What happens at the death of a husband is to accuse the widow of her husband. And while she is still crying over the loss and trying to sort out herself over

the accusation, her husband's property is being shifted somewhere unknown to her and before she realizes what has happened, the property is no more hers. This is what happens daily in our "civilized" society.

For the fact that it was found in this research that the widows depends on their husbands when they were alive, we suggest that the Nigerian economy be restructured in such a way that women would be self dependent. The economy should make every provision to encourage women to have other means of livelihood rather than depend on their husbands. Education should be made free and compulsory at least for all females (women). They should also have the right to gainful employment. The customary way people responded in giving assistance to widows should be revived. The Leverage system of marriage which is almost dead in many Nigerian cultures should be encouraged to help in social adjustments of the widows (Anyebe, 1985). The implementations of the above suggestions, however, cannot be feasible under the present dependent and socialist regimes in Nigeria unless it is structured in such way that the marginalized classes of the society like widows are given attention. Their socio-economic condition, exploitation, dehumanization and dependency should be addressed in a proper manner that gives them hope and sense of belonging, otherwise, the plight of Nigerian widows will remain a mirage which neither traditional grief consoling therapy alone nor government intervention can resolved.

TRADITIONAL METHOD OF COUNSELLING THE BEREAVED IN NIGERIA

For us to meaningfully discuss the method that can be use in counseling the bereaved, especially widows in Nigeria, it is pertinent that we have a grasp of what traditional grief counseling is. However, the terms "Traditional grief counseling" simply refers to "an indigenous way of helping the bereaved to cope with emotional and psychological stress of bereavement and to get adjusted to the new situation in life (Idyorough, 1998). In Nigeria society, death has psychological trauma on the bereaved, especially widows after the death of their husbands. This creates an imbalance situation which calls for traditional grief counseling. These traditional grief counselors are the elders, sorcerers, soothsayers, seers, traditional medical practitioners, herbalists, magicians, native doctors, diviners and traditional religious leaders.

The roles of these religious functionalists cover social, religious, economic and psychological aspects of life ranging from grief to comforting the bereaved ones. They also act as adjudicators, assurance instillers and psychologists, linking the world of sorrows to the world of happiness. Through proverbs, stories, past experiences of grief, anecdotes, myths, wise-sayings, and similar ideas, the bereaved are consoled and helped to calm down their emotional and psychological tensions. The traditional grief Councilors employ sympathetic phrases which help in reducing the anxiety, sorrows, bitterness and hopelessness in the bereaved. Some of the phrases are; "take heart" God will always care and provide for you", "clam down your anger God knows the best", "there's need to worry but worry less, all will be well," "though is's okay to cry, don't cry too much, and so forth. While the bereaved should be emotional, the

sympathizer should rather empathize not necessarily because you have had such or similar experience but because you understand what it means to miss a loved one. At this instance, the sympathizer should really control his/her emotion to avoid feeling up that of the bereaved. These condoling phrases are meant to reduce emotional and psychological tensions in the bereaved as well as give them future hopes that they can make it, despite the death of their loved ones. Thus, Mascoritz (1973) posits that, traditional grief counseling is important for a handful of reasons. First, it helps in controlling the emotions and psychological feelings of the bereaved. And second it helps the bereaved to recover from the feelings of loss and get adjusted to the present life challenges.

Bohannans (1964) also corroborates that traditional grief counseling is an alternative therapy which helps the bereaved to re-integrate, withdraw and assimilate the reality of bereavement through the painful process of adjustment. It also establishes a relationship between the deceased and the bereaved which can suppress grief on the one hand, and take refuge in the perpetual posture of mourning on the other hand. These traditional programs of counseling the bereaved are meant to help the bereaved understand themselves and the world around them so that they may become increasingly more capable of making wise decisions and in carrying out their plans.

In counseling the bereaved traditionally, information appraisal, placement, follow-up, evaluation and guidance services are needed. The counselors fully accept the clients (the bereaved) as people who need assistance to cope with their new state of life. The clients on the other hand, concentrate their attentions on this mutual acceptance to allow the counselors the chance of helping them to adjust and to live better in the situation which they have found themselves. In most cases, the counselors formalize appropriate tools or procedures as indicated above to help them in discharging effectively their counseling strategies to their clients. This interactive measures adopted by traditional grief counselors helps in re-shaping the emotions of the bereaved in contemporary Nigerian society. Thus, many psychologists describe traditional grief counseling as "that system born out of time due to the recognition of indigenous counseling by individuals in the society" (Bromly, 1974).

The traditional grief method of counseling the bereaved has proved to be more useful than other methods such as pastoral, the use of drugs, amongst others, which temporarily makes the bereaved to stay without breaking down emotionally. It also helps the bereaved to recover psychologically by transmitting messages of sympathy and care to them. They (traditional counselors) facilitate complicated issues affecting the emotions and feelings of the bereaved, bringing them under control.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it is clear that widowhood is a bitter experience not only in the Nigerian society but in the globally system, which creates a state of mind and behavioral characteristics that can be measured and known within the socio-economic structure

and adjustment system. The prevailing socio-economic conditions with very demanding finance makes Nigerian widows to find it difficult to adjust mentally and socially in modern times. This also indicates that the problem of widows in Nigerian society can best be interpreted in relation to the socio-economic structure rather than concentrating on individual treatment of the widows. A widow needs care and financial assistance, but unfortunately, the supports given to them is mostly in terms of moral aspects. The negative attitude of most Nigerian communities towards widows needs re-orientation and cultural integration. The introductions of social and religious programs are necessary in this regards. Thus, traditional way of helping the bereaved to adjust economically and socially would serve as a departure from other counseling services operating in Nigerian society which yield marginal impacts on the lives of the bereaved in contemporary times.

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