

Practice and Correlates of Widowhood Rites in A City in North Central Nigeria

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Abstract

Objectives: This study determined the practice and correlates of widowhood rites in a city in North-central Nigeria.

Methodology: A descriptive cross-sectional design was used for the study. Multistage sampling technique was used to recruit 450 respondents into the study. Interviewer administered questionnaire and two focus group discussions were used for data collection. Data analysis was done using Epi-info version 3.5.3. A p-value of 0.05 or less was regarded as statistically significant. The study included all males and females over 18 years of age residing in Ilorin South Local Government Area.

Results: The age range of respondents was between 20 – 79 yrs. A quarter of all respondents (25.9%) were in the fifth decade of life. Widowhood rites commonly practiced in Ilorin South LGA as identified by more than 70% of the respondents include; preventing the widow from going to the farm and market during the mourning period and preventing her from doing household chores. About 16.2% of respondents had ever practiced one or more forms of widowhood rites. There was a statistically significant relationship between age, gender, religion, marital status, educational level, ethnicity and occupation of respondents and the practice of widowhood rites ($p < 0.05$).

Conclusion: Widowhood rites are observed across different categories of people. Age, gender, religion, marital status, educational level, ethnicity and occupation were significantly associated with practice of widowhood rites. There is a need for legislation against harmful widowhood rites by relevant stakeholders.

Keywords: Widowhood Rites, Ilorin, Nigeria.

Introduction

All enduring marriages ultimately end with the death of either the husband or the wife or both. The death of a spouse may be the most extreme life crisis because it severs some of the deepest emotional bonds established in a life time (Nwadinobi, 2001). The loss of one's spouse is a source of emotional and psychological stress which requires a period of time to overcome. Most widows and widowers go through an intense grieving process early in widowhood, marked by feelings of depression, mood changes, disrupted sleep patterns, obsessive thoughts about the deceased and disorientation (Wells and Browning, 2002).

Widows across the globe share two common experiences: a loss of social status and reduced economic status. African widows, irrespective of ethnic groups, are among the most vulnerable and destitute women in the region (United Nations, 2001). Common to both francophone and Anglophone countries is the concept that death does not end marriages. While the widow may have no rights to ownership of her husband's property, she is usually expected to fulfil obligations towards her deceased husband through her participation in widowhood rites (Mezieobi et al., 2011; United Nations, 2001).

Widowhood rites are sets of expectations as to actions and behaviour of the widow, actions of others towards the widow, and rituals performed by, or on behalf of the widow, from the time of the death of her husband (Ilika and Ilika, 2017; Mezieobi et al., 2011). Widowhood rites are also described as series of superstitious acts performed on, by or against the widow on the instruction of her deceased husband's family in the name of custom and tradition (Sossou, 2002). Widowhood rites are also seen as a test of the woman's fidelity to her late husband and a cleansing ritual to free the woman from the

curse that come along with disobedience. Unfortunately these rites have led to ill treatment and gross psychological torture of women at a time when they need comfort the most (Sossou, 2002). Widowhood rites vary from one community to another and some of these rites violate a woman's human rights (Fasoranti and Aruna, 2015).

In Nigeria, harmful widowhood rites are prevalent in the Southern and Eastern parts of the country (Izuako, 2003). Family laws permits certain widowhood rites which discriminate against women, particularly women married according to customary rather than statutory law (United Nations, 2001). During the process of carrying out some widowhood rites, widows through poor nutrition, lack of hygiene, a lack of access to health care and vulnerability to violence are likely to suffer physical ill health as well as psychological pain (United Nations, 2001). Also, discussions about widowhood rites are considered as taboos thus there is scanty information, since not much research has been done in this area (Aderibigbe et al., 2017). Understanding the factors that influence the practice of widowhood rites will help in the design of programs and interventions aimed at reducing and addressing harmful widowhood rites. This study determined the practice and correlates of widowhood rites in a city in North-central Nigeria.

Methods

Ilorin, the capital of Kwara state is located in North Central Nigeria at the geographical and cultural confluence of the North and South of Nigeria. The indigenes of Ilorin are mainly Muslims and the major ethnic groups are Yoruba, Fulani, Hausa and Nupe. The study was conducted in Ilorin South Local Government Area (LGA), one of the three LGAs in Ilorin metropolis. It has a population of 315,000 delineated into 11 wards.

A descriptive cross-sectional design was used for the study. Multistage sampling technique was used to recruit 450 respondents into the study. Data was collected using an interviewer administered, semi-structured questionnaire. The questionnaire sought information on the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, practice of widowhood rites and its correlates. Also, two focus group discussions were carried out; one among the male participants and the other among the females.

Data analysis was done using Epi-info version 3.5.3. The results were presented in frequency tables and charts. A p-value of 0.05 or less was regarded as statistically significant. The study included all males and females over 18 years of age residing in Ilorin South Local Government Area. Informed consent was obtained verbally from the respondents before the questionnaire was administered. All information was treated with strict confidentiality and respondents were given the free will to consent without coercion.

Results

The age range of respondents was between 20 – 79 yrs. A quarter of all respondents (25.9%) were in the fifth decade of life. A little more than half (53.6%) were females while a majority (80.0%) were of the Islamic faith. Slightly more than three quarters (76.7%) of the respondents were Yorubas by ethnicity while a majority (89.6) were married. About two thirds of all respondents had a form of education. (Table 1)

Table 1. Socio- Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Socio-demographic variables	Frequency	(%) (N=450)
Age group (years)		
20-29	30	(6.7)
30-39	88	(19.6)
40-49	166	(25.8)
50-59	106	(23.6)
60-69	51	(11.3)
70-79	9	(2.0)
Gender		
Male	209	(46.4)
Female	241	(53.6)

Religion		
Islam	360	(80.0)
Christianity	90	(20.0)
Marital status		
Single	18	(4.0)
Married	403	(89.6)
Separated /divorced	8	(1.8)
Widowed	21	(4.7)
Tribe		
Yoruba	345	(76.7)
Fulani	22	(4.9)
Hausa	16	(3.6)
Igbo	14	(3.1)
Others	53	(11.8)
Occupation		
Artisan	159	(35.3)
Business	158	(35.2)
Civil servant	82	(18.2)
Farmer	31	(6.9)
Student	13	(2.9)
Unemployed	7	(1.6)
Educational Level		
No Formal	173	(38.4)
Primary	123	(27.3)
Secondary	92	(20.4)
Tertiary	62	(13.8)

Widowhood rites commonly practiced in Ilorin South LGA as identified by more than 70% of the respondents include; preventing the widow from going to the farm and market during the mourning period and preventing her from doing household chores. None of the respondents agreed that widows are made to drink the water used to wash their husband's corpse. (Table 2)

Table 2. Types of widowhood rites practiced in ilorin south local government

*Types of widowhood rites	Frequency	(%)
Preventing the widow from going to the market during mourning	367	(93.9)
Preventing the widow from going to the farm during mourning	359	(91.8)
Preventing the widow from doing household chores during mourning	290	(74.2)
Confining the widow to a room during mourning	246	(62.9)
Widows paying a fine to abstain from any of the rites	108	(27.6)
Compulsory inheritance of the widow by her late husband's kin	95	(24.3)
Forcing the widow to eat with left hand during mourning period	89	(22.8)
Widow cleansing (ritual cleansing)	82	(20.9)
Preventing the widow from eating certain food items	70	(17.9)
Confiscation of the husband's property by his people	57	(14.6)
Preventing the widow from changing her clothes during mourning period	47	(12.0)
Compulsory crying at specific periods of day and night during mourning	39	(10.0)
Wearing black clothes for the duration of the mourning period	13	(3.3)

Forcing the widow to sit on the floor during the mourning period	11	(2.8)
Forcing the widow to sleep on the floor during the mourning period	9	(2.3)
Shaving the hair on the head of the widow	9	(2.3)
Forcing the widow to eat from dirty or broken plates during the mourning period	9	(2.3)
Preventing the widow from taking baths during the mourning period	7	(1.8)
Forcing the widow to drink the water used to wash the corpse	0	(0)

***Multiple response N= 391**

About 16.2% of respondents had ever practiced one or more forms of widowhood rites. None of the respondents; had forced a widow or was forced to eat from dirty/broken plates, had prevented a widow/was prevented from taking baths and had forced a widow/was forced to drink the water used in washing the husband's corpse. (Table 3)

More than three quarter: 28 (93%) of respondents within 20-29 age bracket had never practiced any form of widowhood rites while 88% of respondents within 70-79 age bracket had practiced one or more forms of widowhood rites. Less than one fifth, 27 (11.2%) of female respondents had practiced one or more forms of widowhood rites while majority: 84 (93.3%) of Christian respondents had never practiced any form of widowhood rites. Majority: 20 (95.2%) of the widowed respondents had practiced one or more forms of widowhood rites. In Addition, most 56 (90.3%) of the respondents who had tertiary education had never practiced any form of widowhood rites. (Table 4)

Table 3. Distribution of respondents who had experienced one or more forms of widowhood rites

Practice of one or more forms of widowhood rite	Frequency	(%)
Yes	73	(16.2)
No	377	(83.8)
*If yes, type of widowhood rite experienced (N=73)		
Preventing a widow/being prevented from going to the farm during mourning	71	(97.3)
Preventing a widow/being prevented from doing household chores during mourning	69	(94.5)
Preventing a widow/being prevented from going to the market during mourning	63	(86.3)
Confining a widow/being confined to a room during mourning	47	(64.4)
Making widows pay a fine/being made to pay a fine to abstain from any of the rites	23	(31.5)
Forcing widows/being forced to be inherited by late husband's kin	17	(23.3)
Preventing a widow/being prevented from changing clothes during mourning period	12	(16.4)
Preventing a widow/being prevented from eating certain food items	8	(11.0)
Forcing a widow/being forced to cry at specific periods of day and night during mourning	6	(8.2)
Confiscation of the husband's property/being dispossessed of husband's property by his people	5	(6.8)
Forcing a widow/ being forced to eat with left hand during morning period	4	(5.5)
Forcing a widow/being forced to sit on the floor during the mourning period	4	(5.5)
Forcing a widow/ being forced to undergo ritual cleansing	2	(2.7)
Forcing a widow/being made to wear black clothes for the duration of the mourning period	2	(2.7)
Shaving the hair on the head of the widow/having your hair shaved	2	(2.7)
Forcing a widow/being forced to sleep on the floor during the mourning period	1	(1.4)
Forcing a widow/being forced to eat from dirty or broken plates during the mourning period	0	(0.0)
Preventing a widow/being prevented from taking baths during the mourning period	0	(0.0)
Forcing a widow/ being forced to drink the water used to wash the corpse	0	(0.0)

*Multiple responses

Less than one fifth: 57(16.5%) of respondents who were Yoruba had practiced one or more forms of widowhood rites while more than two third: 70(85.4%) of respondents who were civil servants had never practiced any form of widowhood rites. There was a statistically significant relationship between age, gender, religion, marital status, educational level, ethnicity and occupation of respondents and the practice of widowhood rites ($p < 0.05$). (Table 4)

Table 4. Relationship between practice of widowhood rites and socio-demographic variables of respondents

Socio-demographic variables	Practice of Widowhood rite		
	Yes (%)	No (%)	X ² , p-value
20-29.	2(6.7)	28(93.3)	
30-39	5(5.7)	83(94.3)	X ² = 104.88
40-49	12(7.2)	154(92.8)	p-value =0.0000
50-59	19(17.9)	87(82.1)	
60-69	27(52.9)	24(47.1)	
70-79	8(88.9)	1(11.1)	
Male	46(22.0)	163(78.0)	X ² = 9.62
Female	27(11.2)	214(88.8)	p-value =0.0019
Islam	67(18.6)	293(81.4)	X ² = 7.56
Christianity	6(6.7)	84(93.3)	p-value =0.0059
Marital Status			
Single	3(16.7)	15(83.3)	
Married	47(11.7)	356(88.3)	X ² = 105.31
Separated/Divorced	3(37.5)	5(62.5)	p-value =0.0000
Widowed	20(95.2)	1(4.8)	
Educational Level			
No formal education	35(20.2)	138(79.8)	
Primary	24(19.5)	99(80.5)	X ² = 8.81
Secondary	8(8.7)	84(91.3)	p-value =0.0218
Tertiary	6(9.7)	56(90.3)	
Ethnic Group			
Yoruba	57(16.5)	288(83.5)	
Fulani	3(13.6)	19(86.4)	X ² =12.70
Hausa	4(25.0)	12(75.0)	p-value =0.0128
Igbo	6(42.9)	8(57.1)	
Nupe	3(5.7)	50(94.3)	
Occupation			
Artisan	16(10.1)	143(89.9)	
Business	21(13.3)	137(86.7)	X ² =54.16
Civil Servant	12(14.6)	70(85.4)	p-value =0.0000
Farmer	18(58.1)	13(41.9)	
Student	2(15.4)	11(84.6)	
Unemployed	4(57.1)	3(42.9)	

Discussion

Until recent times there had been a silence that surrounded Gender and Culturally Based Violence (GCBV) and a resistance by international agencies to address it because of cultural differences in relation to challenging existing local norms. Widowhood rites like many other customary practices form an integral part of the cultural beliefs of most African communities. These rites may have useful purposes but some also have negative effects on the widows. There are however few researches on this topic and most of the studies on widowhood rites are scantily published in scientific journals to provide other readers and workers the opportunity to learn more about them.

The types of widowhood rites are varied. There are however certain rites that are frequently practiced and therefore serve as the core practices. Widowhood rites commonly practiced in Ilorin South as stated by more than 60% of the respondents included; preventing the widow from going to the market and farm during mourning, preventing her from doing household chores and confining her to a room during the mourning period. This finding quite agrees with Aderinto's report in 2000 which stated that in Ekiti State, the community provides necessary social and psychological support to the widow. Family, friends and sympathizers cook for the widow and help her in doing the household chores although the exception to this is a childless widow, who according to them has no stool (*Ijoko*) (Aderinto, 2000). This finding implies that the core practices may not really entail abuse of fundamental human rights and that there are widowhood rites that may be beneficial to the widow. Although, confining a widow to a room denies her the freedom of movement and may increase her feelings of loneliness and therefore have negative effects. Very few of the respondents said that widows are forced to sleep on the floor, shave their heads and eat from broken plates while none of the respondents stated that widows are forced to drink the water used to wash their husband's corpse.

Findings from the focus group discussions revealed that the length of the mourning period is four months and ten days according to Islamic injunctions and this period is used to know if the widow is pregnant. This is in line with a study by Aransiola *et al.* which showed that one of the reasons for widowhood rites among the Yoruba is for the husband's relatives to know if the woman was pregnant before the death of her husband, that is; her staying at home will give them the assurance that the pregnancy is theirs and that they must be responsible for the care (Aransiola and Ige, 2010). The findings from this study indicated that dehumanising rites are less commonly practiced in Ilorin South and this is in agreement with studies that reported that less harmful rites are carried out in the Northern part of the country (Kabir, 1991), Ilorin lying within the North-central geopolitical zone.

The proportion of respondents who had experienced one or more forms of widowhood rites was 16.2%. None of the respondents in this study had; forced a widow or was forced to eat from dirty or broken plates, prevented a widow or was prevented from taking baths during the mourning period and forced a widow or was forced to drink the water used in washing the corpse of the husband.

There was a significant difference in age and practice of widowhood rites as the practice of widowhood rites by respondents was shown to increase with age. The likely reason for this is that as people grow older, the chances of becoming widowed increases, as well as the power to make other people observe widowhood rites. The observed difference in gender and practice of widowhood rites was also statistically significant. Despite the larger number of females in this study, a higher proportion of males had practiced one or more forms of widowhood rites when compared to females, implying that men are enforcers of the rites. This finding is in concordance with a report that stated that the differentiation between men and women's role involves a hierarchy in which men are given greater leverage over decision-making than women (Owasanoye *et al.*, 1997).

In this study, practice of widowhood rites was linked to religion as more Muslims had carried out one or more forms of widowhood rites when compared to Christians. The probable reason for this finding is that Islam is the predominant religion in the study area. There was an association between marital status and the practice of widowhood rites by respondents. Although the number of widowed respondents was few, majority of them had been involved in one or more forms of widowhood rites. This could be because the practice of widowhood rites arises only when a spouse dies, therefore those who are not widowed are less likely to practice widowhood rites.

Level of education was shown to significantly influence the practice of widowhood rites. Respondents who had no formal education had the highest practice of widowhood rites when compared to those who had some form of Western education. This finding is in line with studies that reported that women who were well educated suffered less or none of the harmful widowhood rites as against those who were not educated or less educated (Aransiola and Ige, 2010; Okoye, 2001). This suggests that with education, people become more empowered and have better knowledge of their rights. They are therefore less likely to subject others or be subjected to detrimental rites while illiterate individuals remain less empowered and defenceless because they do not know their rights.

The observed difference in tribe and practice of widowhood rites was significant connoting that tribe influences the practice of widowhood rites. This finding concurs with reports that stated that culture plays an important role in determining the extent to which widowhood rites are carried out (Aransiola

and Ige, 2010) because, culture is an ethnic identity, and widowhood rites vary from one culture to another (Fasoranti and Aruna, 2015). The occupation of respondents was also shown to significantly influence the practice of widowhood rites, implying that practice of the rites was linked to occupation. Similarly, studies by Aransiola *et al.* indicated that the intensity of widowhood rites varied based on occupation of the widows. While a woman who was either self-employed or a full house wife was enforced to stay at home for certain number of days/months, those who were engaged in civil service or in private business organizations could not be enforced since they had to resume in their places of work after the number of days they were allowed to stay off duty by their bosses (Aransiola and Ige, 2010).

Conclusion

Widowhood rites are observed across different categories of people. Age, gender, religion, marital status, educational level, ethnicity and occupation were significantly associated with practice of widowhood rites. Better knowledge of widowhood rites, their implications and the factors influencing the practice would help in the design of programs and interventions aimed at reducing and addressing harmful widowhood rites. The Federal and State government should initiate/put up legislation against harmful widowhood rites and ensure that it is implemented.

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