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Widowhood Practices of the Gbi Northern Ewe of Ghana: A Curse or Blessing for African Womanhood?

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Abstract

Widowhood is characterised by bereavement; a condition generally regarded as a difficult experience that constitutes a state of emotional and psychological stress which takes some time for the bereaved partner to recover from. For example, apart from preventing a bereaved wife from taking possession of her late husband's property, she is also subjected to some unpleasant widowhood practices. This paper, therefore, investigated widowhood practices among the Gbi-Ewes of northern Volta Region in Ghana, so as to ascertain whether these rites and practices are only targeted at dehumanising and oppressing African womanhood, or (in spite of its criminalisation in

recent times), it still has certain embedded cultural values that ensure the overall good of not only widows in the Gbi traditional area of northern Eweland, but also, in other indigenous societies of Ghana and Africa.

Key words: Widow, bereavement, widowhood practices, cultural practice.

Introduction

In sub-Saharan region of Africa in which Ghana is located, prejudices against women are deeply rooted. Of these prejudices, the one that perhaps most impinges on the dignity and rights of women (who constitute the focus of this study) is *ahowɔwɔ* (widowhood practices). The ever growing worry about this cultural phenomenon according to Chuku-Okoronkwo (2015, p.1), "has become an exclusive preserve for *ahosiwo* (widows) with accompanying elaborate customary guiding principles and regulations and not for *ahowo* (widowers) who African tradition prescribes little or no mourning rites". It is, therefore, a common observation in Africa that widows, compared to their male counterparts (widowers), suffer a lot of hardship from the tradition of the people and her husband's family. Chuku-Okoronkwo further stressed that a critical examination of this age-long culture of widowhood rites in African societies has consistently predisposed it as impeding than facilitating meaningful rehabilitation of widows. This worrisome development, has continued to draw wide outcry, which of late, has been fueled by the influence of western civilization, Christian and Muslim religious doctrines.

Location and historical background of the Gbi-Ewe

Agbodeka (2000) delineated Northern Eweland (*Eweme*) as bounded to the east by the Republic of Togo, to the West by the Volta Lake to the north by Jasikan and Krachi Districts and to the south by Aŋlɔ, North and South Tɔnŋu, Akatsi, Avenɔ and Ketu Districts. As part of the Volta Region which has a total area of 20,344 kilometres, the people of northern Eweland are currently located in seven administrative districts: Ho, Agortime-Ziɔfe, Adaklu, Kpandu, Hohoe, Kpeve and South Dayi. These seven districts occupy a total area of 4,900.4 square kilometres, representing about 20% of the size of the region and 1.72% of Ghana's total land size.

The Gbi traditional area comprises the people of Hohoe and Peki who form part of a major block of northern Ewes believed to have migrated from *Ɖɔtsie*, a settlement area that lies about 6^0 30' N and 15^0 E on the Lome-Atakpame road and about 112km from Lome, the national capital of Togo (Daketsey, 1979, p.1). On their migration from *Ɖɔtsie,* by the end of the 17th century (Amenumey 1997), stated that they journeyed in small or extended family groups and totemic clans which were led by hunters and farmers towards the Volta River in the north and settled in relatively peaceful and small autonomous communities

As a result of adopting self-autonomy, these two ethnic groups, collectively referred to as the *Gbidukɔ* (Gbi state) separated from each other for many years to form *Gbidzigbe* (Gbi north) which includes the Hohoe and its environs and *Gbinyigbe* (Gbi south) which comprises the Peki traditional area. Apart from these two Gbi ethnic groups, Obianim (1990) identifies other northern Ewe autonomous communities such as the *Abutiawo, Adakluawo, Alavanyoawo, Anfoegawo, Asɔgliawo, Awudomeawo, Danyiawo, Dzoloawo, Dzobiawo, Gbiawo, Kpalimeawo, Kpedzeawo, Kpanduawo, Leklebiawo, Sasaduawo, Vakpoawo, Veawo and Wliawo*.

Language Patterns

Apart from Ewe which is the main language spoken, Obianim (1990) further states that there are other varieties of dialects that are spoken in the *fiafiagbe* (non-Ewe speaking) areas which are occupied by pockets of *Guan, Buem* and *Akan* speaking ethnic groups referred to in Ewe as *fiafialawo*. Beside their own spoken dialects, they speak Ewe as a second language. Some Guan speaking settlements include *Akpafu, Avatime, Bowiri, Likpe, Logba, Lolobi, Nkonya, Nyangbo, Santrokofi* and *Tafi*. The Buem speaking groups are located at *Jasikan* and its adjoining settlements like *Baglo, Teteman, Kute*, and *Okadjakrom*. Going further north, one can find pockets of Akan speaking groups of settlers at *Ahamansu, Apesokubi, Breweniase, Kadjebi, Papase, Tapa-Amanya* and *Worawora*.

Religious concept of the people

Indigenous religion, as part of the cultural heritage of the Gbi-Ewe, does not fall short of their belief in *Mawu*, (Supreme Being), who they consider and accept as their superior and on whom they depend for their physical and spiritual needs. This religious thought has dominated their thinking, shaped their culture, their social life, their political organisations and economic activities. In addition, values and morals embedded in their religious culture always help them to cordially co-exist and settle their differences for peace and harmony to prevail among them. Commenting on indigenous religious life of the Ewe, Adjakpey (1982, p. 20) posits:

> Besides *Mawu,* Ewes acknowledge the existence of minor deities whom they call *trɔwo* or *mawuviwo* (minor gods). These *trɔwo* are servants and messengers of the Supreme Being and also serve as intermediaries between *Mawu* and the people. Although the *trɔwo* could be benevolent, they cannot, nevertheless, be compared with the goodness and generosity of *Mawu*. They (*trɔwo*) are generally tolerated, rather than loved.

In examining the place of ancestors in *Gbi* indigenous religious culture, it is never doubtful that Africans place a high premium on the dead and their influence over

activities of those in the physical world. As Opoku (1978, p.134) puts it, since they (ancestors) are now spirits and are able to protect the living against evil and misfortune, the people consider it natural to show their reliance and dependence on these unseen spirits through prayer and libation that they always offer them. The belief of the Ewe in their ancestors concurs with what Ejizu's (1986, p. 102) remarks about the Igbo ethnic group of Nigeria:

> The belief in ancestral existence is the clearest expression of the people's faith in after life. The same belief is also the dynamic hope of the people that after a successful career here on earth; one could be happily integrated with his fore fathers/mothers in the land of the living-dead to continue the interminable cycle of life.

Typology of Marriages Contracted by the Gbi-Ewe

The Cambridge International Dictionary of English (1995:867) defines marriage as a legally accepted relationship between a man and a woman that qualifies them to live together as husband and wife. Under Ghanaian law, the status of a widow depends on the type of marriage contracted. Four types of marriage are easily identifiable: Court/Registry or Statutory marriage which is grounded on government laws; Traditional/Customary marriage based on the indigenous tradition or customs of the people; Christian marriage that has deep roots in Christian ethics and Islamic marriage established on Islamic beliefs and principles. Marriage contracted in African societies is never considered to be between two individuals, but rather, between families of both the bride and groom. This explains why these communities constantly refer to their daughters-in-law as 'their wives'.

A woman married under the Marriage Act according to Ogundipe (2001), after the death of her husband, has her rights spelt out if the husband dies 'intestate' that is, without valid will. Statutory marriage, as guided by laws of Ghana, is monogamous. On the other hand, a widow under customary marriage which is also polygamous has a slim chance to inherit the matrimonial home and other property of her late husband. Similar to what obtains in the Gbi-Ewe societies, Akinbi (2015) cites the case of prevention of widows from inheriting their late husbands' properties in some Nigerian societies among which is the Yoruba ethnic group:

> It is a well-known fact in native law and customs of the people that a wife could not inherit her husband's property since she is like a chattel to be inherited by a relative of her husband. That is, the widow's brother-in-laws try to assume personal relationship with their late brother's wife and when she refuses, her problems become complex.

Ilozue (2007) commented that when a widow behaved badly towards her in-laws before the death of her late husband, the greedy family members take control of the deceased's chattels and throw her out of her matrimonial home but if not, they at times, do not see any justification in taking her late husband's property and punishing her.

In-depth study of widowhood rites/practices by scholars in African societies according to Tasie (2013), are in three clearly defined categories. The first category of scholars has a primary aim to document and project the perceived woes of widows whose state is considered as different from the ordinary. This period according these scholars, is considered as a dreadful moment because ritual performances associated with widowhood is described as harmful (Chima, 2006), and inhuman to the humanity of women (Chidili, 2005).

The second category of scholars delved into finding out reasons or factors that precipitate widowhood practices which subject women to certain dehumansing forms of treatment. Aderinto (2000) attribute the pervasiveness of widowhood practices within the social structure of African societies to the patriarchal nature of African communities and ways in which the culture of the people is applied to perpetuate and sustain its practice. Similar to what Odumegwu (2000) observed about widowhood practices in the Igbo societies of Nigeria, the practice of widowhood rites in the *Gbidukɔ* to date, are tied to the people's traditional beliefs about death, inheritance, feminine roles, family structure and relation.

The third group of scholars consists of those who vehemently endorse the view that widowhood rites and practices in African cultures are barbarous, cruel, uncivilised and for that matter, need western civilization, Christian and Muslim code of ethics to purge the practitioners of impurities. The main objective of these scholars is to advocate how African widowhood practices which they stigmatise a great deal, can be re-packaged and blended with the ideologies and doctrines of these foreign religions to sanitise the society.

The objective of this paper, therefore, is to find out whether in spite of its oppressive and dehumanising impact on African womanhood, widowhood practices of the Gbi-Ewe in Ghana have certain embedded cultural values that ensure the overall good or welfare of widows. An answer to this question would serve as a platform for drawing the attention of widows and stake holders in other Ghanaian and African societies to explore and harness to their benefit, good societal values embedded in widowhood practices in their respective societies.

Death among the Gbi-Ewe

The concept of death has been explained by scholars in diverse ways. In its widest sense death entails the cessation of the vital process in a living organism (Mondin, 1985:264). Ewe culture with its inherent philosophy, believes in the concept of death and life hereafter, marks a threshold that opens a gate to a new and more blissful life (Adjakpey, 1982). This explains why people always want to hear and be blessed with the last words of a dying relative. For example, the last words of a dying man to his wife or children or to all of them are considered as a sign of decead's peaceful transition from the physical to the spiritual world. Adjakpey stresses further that these last words may be useful advice, revelation of some family secrets or confession of a tormenting sin that has been concealed by the dying person for some period of time. If a confession made, the dying person requests for water to drink. The water is believed to serve two purposes: first, as a form of 'cleansing' which enhances a peaceful death and an energiser that facilitates the deceased's long journey to the ancestral world. Second, the water offered by the relatives symbolises the last act of kindness to a dying member of the family. Therefore, if a male spouse for example, dies, necessary ties with his wife have to be severed to facilitate her husband's peaceful journey to the next world; and this, according the people, can only be achieved through widowhood practices; a cultural requirement that also mourns the loss a deceased partner through expression of sorrow, pain, anger, crying and wailing. However, a married partner who dies through *dzogbeku* (accidental death); such as thunder strike, snake bite, swollen stomach or through childbirth, lacks a befitting burial. The spirits of such persons are said to be saturated with grief, and they wander about aimlessly causing varied forms of harm to the living.

Who is an *Ahosi/Aho* (Widow/Widower?)

When one's marriage partner dies, the surviving partner, if a woman, becomes *ahosi* (widow), if a man, *aho* (widower) The demise of a spouse is viewed in northern Eweland as life's crisis that has gone to the extreme for, it aborts the once established intimate and deepest emotional bonds between couples. From personal observations in the study area, the death of a husband has a more devastating toll on his wife than when a man loses his wife. The reason is that women are mostly traumatised and psychologically derailed on account of what Chuku-Okoronkwo (2015, p.1) described as harrowing experiences that await them during their widowhood ritual performances.

Definition of *Ahowɔwɔ* (Widowhood Practice)

Ahowɔwɔ can be explained as a set of rules or patterns of behaviour observed by a widow or widower with assistance and guidance from some elders who instruct such bereaved spouses about how to behave and act in their state of condition to comply

with societal norms. Korieh (1996) explained widowhood practice as "sets of expectations regarding the actions and behaviour of for example, a widow". *Ahowɔwɔ* among the Gbi-Ewe, thus, serve several purposes; to sever marital and conjugal ties between a woman and her deceased husband, to prepare the widow with the strenuous task of assuming manly roles to enable her be self-reliant to fend for herself and her children.

What are *Ahowɔkɔnuwo* (Widowhood Rites)?

Ahowɔkɔnuwo can be explained as "rituals or ceremonies that a widow or a widower performs as part of the culture or custom of the society to mourn the demise of a married partner. Though this cultural practice exists in almost all the cultures of Africa, it is particularly prevalent in the rural communities for; it is believed that there is low literacy rate in the rural areas as compared with urban centres where women are independent and enlightened.

Gbi-Ewe Widowhood Practices and Interpretations

Among the northern Ewe in general, mourning is a cultural obligation undertaken to honour the dead. For this reason, if the husband of a woman dies, she commences mourning from the moment the man gives up his final breath. Citing mourning situations in indigenous Igbo states of, Anambra, Ebonyi and Enugu in south-eastern Nigeria, Okorie (1995) wrote:

> A prominent spectacle projected by the bereaved wife is that she runs about wailing and weeping at the top of her voice; a hysteria which death generates or is expected to generate. The children, with other friends and members of the bereaved family, also join in the wailing and express regret and pain for the big loss. During weeping and wailing…., they recount the deceased's life achievements, his love, faithfulness and qualities such as good, honest, reliable brother, husband, father or uncle (p. 79).

By tradition among the *Gbidukɔ,* much is demanded from the widow in terms of mourning to depict her woeful state, pain and regret for the demise of her husband. In the former days, when divorce occurred between a man and his wife before his death, the divorced wife by custom, returns to mourn her ex-husband and do what Okorie (1995) described as undertaking a posthumous reconciliation with the deceased in the presence of the deceased's family members. There is the belief that failure to observe the rite can cause the death of the woman through spiritual attack from her late ex-husband.

Pre-Burial Activities

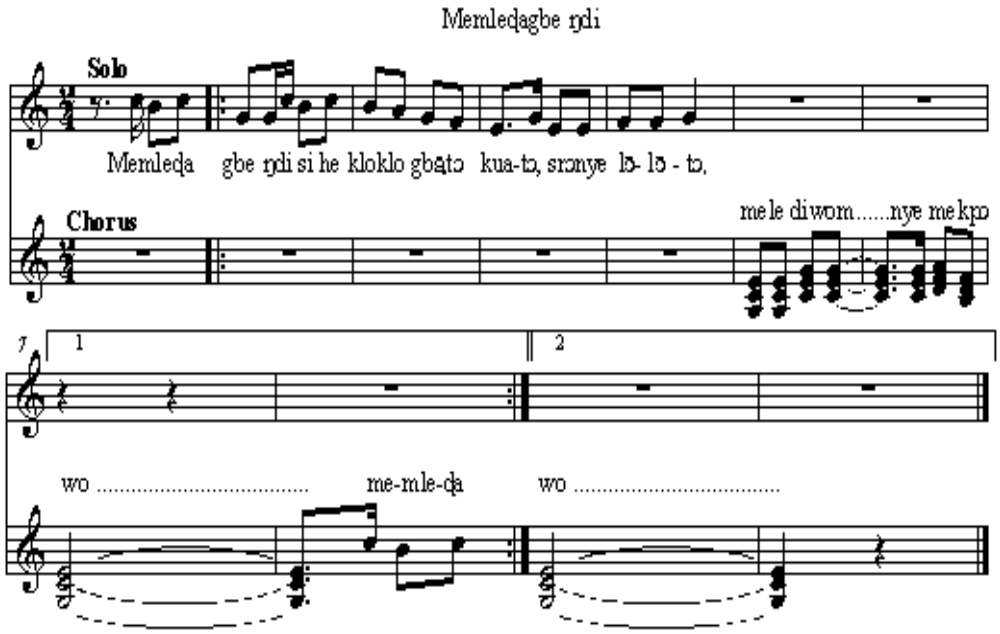
In the evening that precedes the day of burial, Kludze (1983, p. 65) stated that between 4 and 7 o'clock in the evening, female mourners carry *kunake* (wake-keeping firewood) on their heads to the funeral ground amidst singing *avihawo* (dirges) including the text of the one below:

ɛ! Kunake xe menya fɔ o	Yes! Death's firewood, is difficult to fetch
Kpɔ xe ɖewo fɔe kple dzibii	It is fetched with pain and broken heart
ɛ! Kunake xe menya fɔ o	Yes! Death's firewood, is quite difficult to fetch
Kpɔ xe ɖewo fɔe kple dzibii	It is fetched with pain and broken heart

The firewood is set ablaze to keep warm the aged female mourners who sit in the open during the cold night. At the dawn of the day of burial, female mourners again march in a procession through the principal streets of the town; singing, weeping, wailing and eulogising the deceased through declamatory singing styles. *Avihawo* are often accompanied with light instruments such as *gakogui* (bell), *akaye* (container rattle), *afritsiwɔe* (castanet) and *asikpe* (handclap) and supported by graceful and rhythmic dance-gestures; rocking the body, moving of heads from side to side, biting the tip of the right fore-fingers, snapping the fingers and clasping both hands on the head, chest and at the back to depict grief, anger and pain.

As a way of paying their last respect and farewell to their deceased relative lying in state, the vocation that the deceased engaged in when he was alive, for example, if he was a farmer, farming scenes are staged through dance-drama by his colleague farmers to highlight the role(s) that he played.

An opening phrase of a dirge, "***Memleda gbe ŋdi***" shown below, describes a sorrowful wife who through wailing and singing, makes frantic but fruitless attempts at finding her beloved deceased husband at the dawn of the day of his burial.



Example 1: A dirge sung by a widow seeking the where about of her late husband.

//:*Memleɖagbe ŋdi, si he koklo gbãtɔ ku atɔ*,	Saturday morning, upon the first cock crow
Srɔnye lɔlɔtɔ	My beloved husband
Mele diwom, nye mekpɔ wo o://	I am searching but cannot find you
//:*Fine nele ɖa?*	Where are you?
Mele diwom, nye mekpɔ wo o	I am searching but cannot find you
Fine 'dzo yi ɖa?	Where have you gone to?
Mele diwom, nye mekpɔ wo o://	I am searching but cannot find you

Before the deceased husband is finally laid to rest, traditional prayer is offered to cushion his smooth and safe journey to the ancestral world. The ritual materials used for prayer include; *wɔtsi* (dried corn flower) which is mixed with *tsifafa* (cold water) in *etre* (calabash) and poured intermittently to accompany a prayer that informs and solicits the permission of the elders in the spiritual world to grant the deceased coming into their fold, peace and solace.

While the body lies in state, the ritual of *takume mama* (tearing of a piece of cloth), is performed to symbolically depict a final separation of the dead husband from his widow. An elderly woman assists the widow in addressing her late husband as she tears apart the white piece of calico: *"tso egbe dzi la, nye kple wo dome klã;naneke megale mia dome abe srɔtɔwo ene o".* (Our relationship as husband and wife; ends today, henceforth, we have nothing in common to do with each other). An unspecified amount of money is tied in a white handkerchief, and given to the deceased as 'transport fare' that can ferry him to the ancestral world. During this period, the widow, who by custom, dresses in tattered clothes (as a sign of mourning), is also prevented from witnessing the burial of her late husband.

Mbiti (1969, p. 121) stressed that these rituals are intended to accord the deceased a peaceful send off, sever links between the deceased and those alive and ensure a return to normal life among the living. The most elderly female member of the family performs this ritual by facing sunset, a symbol to mark the exit of the deceased from the physical to the spiritual world.

As a sign of profound mourning of her husband, the widow, by tradition, besmears her body with ashes and gives early morning loud cry in order to avoid what Nwoga (1989) remarked about widowhood practices among the Igbo of Nigeria as "sneer and jeer as well as accusation from the family members of her late husband for not crying loud enough, but instead, keeping the tail of her eyes open for her past and prospective lovers". From the moment of her husband's demise, a widow is considered as unclean and could likely contaminate herself and others. For this reason, before her deceased husband is buried, she is expected to observe certain rituals such as not bathing, eating and shaking hands in public.

Post-Burial Rites and Practices

As typical of some indigenous societies in Ghana, one can notice among the Gbi-Ewe that after the death and burial ceremonies of a male spouse, the normal life pattern of his wife is suspended and immediately replaced with a chain of restrictions. Soon after the interment of her husband's corpse, the widow now begins either a six or a twelve-month period of widowhood practices as a sign of loss of her husband. The choice of the widowhood period depends largely on the choice of both families of the couple. The widow, at this time, is always clad in a black cloth for the rest of the mourning period. In the former days, the widow walked bare-footed, wore pads as done by women under menstruation and left her hair uncombed. According to the *Gbi* tradition, the unattractive appearance of a widow is similar to what Tasie (2013) observed among the Isiokpo of Nigeria that "it as a ploy to prevent sexual advances by the ghost spirit of the deceased husband towards his widow and also hook-wink him into believing that she is menstruating". Tasie further stresses why the appearance of

widows is always unattractive: The austere look of widows and rejection of anything that gives pleasure and comfort (about them) is aimed at pacifying the vengeful spirit of the deceased and make his widows appear seriously regretful and sorrowful about his demise". This state of condition according to Okorie (1995):

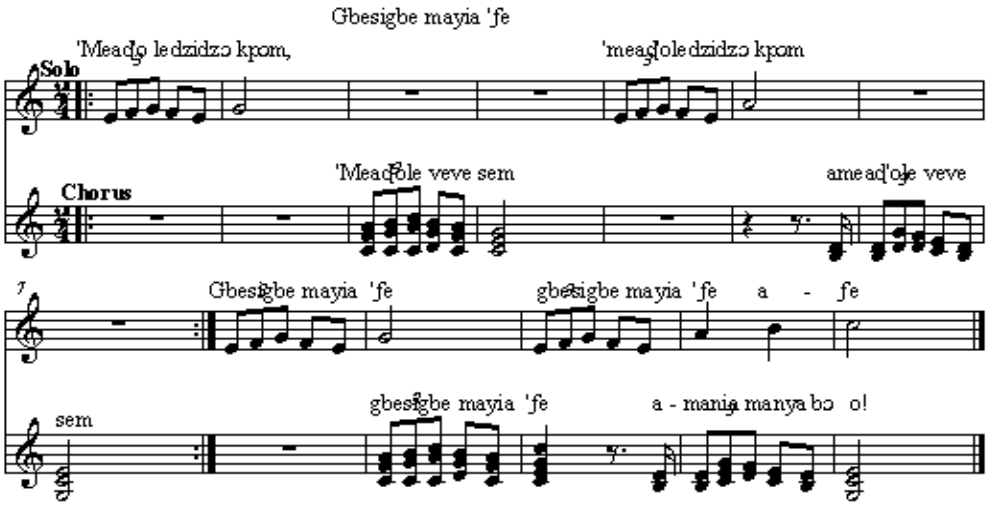
> .....makes the widow run the risk of breaking down socially, economically and psychologically after her lengthy mourning, particularly if she has no grown-up children and receives no care from her husband's relatives. Prevention from engaging in any farming activity is based on the belief of the *Gbi* tradition that any farm crop that she touches at this stage of mourning is liable to wither away.

The widow is forbidden from engaging in any form of commercial activity like farming or going to the market. She is never allowed to go the riverside or stream to fetch water, for; it is believed that the late husband, whose spirit still wanders around in the neighbourhood, may cause her harm. In addition, the widow is not allowed to cook food on her own, eat or talk in public to anybody except her fellow widows. Her food is cooked separately and eaten from cracked bowls. The reason for eating food from cracked bowls can best be explained in the words of Tasie (2005, p. 35) who comments on a similar widowhood practice among the Isiokpo, an Ikwere speaking people found at the north-eastern fringes of the Niger Delta:

> It is dishourable for the spirit of an accomplished deceased husband to eat from disfigured plates; it is a way of dissuading the hovering ghost spirit of her late husband from partaking in the meal with his widow.

The widow, however, is customarily permitted to prepare the favourite dish of her husband (for few weeks or a month), and deposit it at his door step or on the path leading to his farm with the belief that it would be consumed later by the spirit of her late husband. She is also barred from greeting or responding to greetings from the public. If she flouts this order, there is the fear that she might pass ill-luck to whoever greets or responds to her greetings.

Shaving of hair (usually by an elderly widow) as a widowhood practice is considered very vital in these Gbi traditional states. Apart from being a symbol of breaking all links between the deceased and his widow, it keeps off men with insatiable amorous desires from approaching a widow in that state of condition. All this while, weeping, wailing and singing declamatory choral laments early at dawn or late at night, is a clear indication to the community about the demeanour of a dedicated, sincere and sorrowful wife who feels pain about the demise of a loving and supportive husband. The dirge below, and titled, ***Gbesigbe mayia 'fe,*** is a report which an embattled widow intends to give after her death to her late husband.



Example 2: A dirge expressing a widow's difficulties after her husband's death

Ameaɖe'o le dzidzɔ kpɔm,	Some people are filled with joy;
Ameaɖe'o le veve sem	Some people are filled with pain
Gbesigbe mayi afee	The day I shall go to my ancestral home
Gbesigbe mayi afe	The day I shall go to my ancestral home
Gbesigbe mayi afee	The day I shall go to my ancestral home
Amanie manya bɔ o	My mission statement would be difficult to narrate

At the end of the mourning period which lasts for about six months or a year, the ghost spirit of the deceased husband of the widow, is believed to be completely ushered into *tsiefe*, the ancestral world. The widow is given a ritual bath and the black mourning cloth is removed and replaced with a white one. The white cloth symbolises her fortitude and success in going through all the travails of this indigenous cultural practice. To mark the end of the widowhood practice, she is taken to her late husband's farm to harvest food items such as tubers of yam, cassava, cocoyam or plantain for sale at the market often at a cheap price and immediately returns home. Similar to what pertains to market attendance by widows of the Isiokpo traditional society in Nigeria, Tasie (2013, p.160) wrote:

> On a designated market day, a widow carries her wares, which may be a bunch of plantain or tubers of yam or cocoyam to the market. She is escorted to the market by close agnates who are not expected to walk

side by side with her, but rather be behind her. The widow is not allowed to talk to anyone on her way to the market. As they reach the market, she displays her wares, and sells them off to the first bidder, irrespective of the price offered.

After her return from the market, the widow cooks food and invites all and sundry in the Gbi state to come and eat with her from the same bowl. This form of communal feasting symbolises a final customary barring of the spirit of her deceased husband from taking part in any dinning activity with the woman who is no more his wife. A widow, after a successful widowhood ritual performance, is no more expected to exhibit any form of grief. She is re-integrated into the society and given the freedom to begin a normal life and re-marry.

Implications

Amlor (2011, p. 28) in his study of *Oguaa Fetu Afahye*, a traditional festival celebration of the *Fante* ethnic group of Cape Coast in Ghana, notes; "there are emerging changing trends in many African societies which are not completely their making but rather from external socio-cultural pressures". This is because, prior to the advent of Western and Arab civilisations, African ritual performances, including widowhood practices, remained intact and undervalued. The emergence of Christian and Muslim religious ethics and their educational enlightenment have now eaten deep into the cultural fabrics of African societies to the extent that every indigenous value or practice in contemporary Africa is labelled as entirely evil or dehumanising.

While this paper does not totally condemn foreign cultural influences, or ascribe rigidly to every African cultural practice as flawless, it, on the other hand, cautions about the danger of sacrificing every African traditional value on the altar of foreign culture and labelling what is African as evil or demeaning. While the paper advocates the adoption of only aspects of foreign cultural values that enhance and project African identity, it on the other hand, stresses the need for a contemporary evaluation of widowhood practices in African cultures by eliminating oppressive and inhuman practices and maintaining and improving upon widowhood practices that enhance and project the identity and dignity of African womanhood.

The Way Forward

The first hurdle to confront and eliminate totally from the *Gbidukɔ* and societies elsewhere in Ghana and Africa, are practices which have largely mystified and enslaved widows. Lesbikan (2001), notes that in Africa, the widow is oppressed, suppressed, afflicted, neglected, suspected, insulted and most often, accused of being the cause of her late husband's death. The widow, who might have enjoyed every amount of freedom while her husband was alive, suddenly turns incommunicado as the

death of her husband marks her period of customary imprisonment and hostility (Edet, 1992). There is the need also to discard bad practices such as shaving of hair, sleeping on bare floor or mat, abstinence from eating and talking in public, eating from broken bowls; all which Okoye (1995) describes as "making a widow as an outcast in the society and a creature at war with the world until she frees herself by fulfilling all widowhood practices".

Tackling the Predicament of Widows in the Gbi-Ewe Enclave

Among the approaches that can be adopted to end bad widowhood practices as a relief to widows in the study area and elsewhere in Ghana or Africa, the paper, therefore, suggests the following: The need for the government to formulate and rigidly implement laws prohibiting all obnoxious widowhood practices so as to relieve especially widows from sufferings associated with such practices is very critical.

In addition, there is the need also to take a cue from local laws promulgated in some traditional African societies to end inhuman widowhood practices and equally enact similar laws within the cultural matrix of not only the Gbi-Ewe but also other Ghanaian indigenous societies to combat these obnoxious practices. It is, therefore, worthy of note to perhaps study and begin to enact laws that are similar to Ojigho's (2011), examples of local state laws in Nigeria such as "Malpractices against Widows' and Widowers' (Prohibition) Law, 2004" and the "Prohibition of Infringement of Widows and Widowers' Fundamental Rights Law, 2001 in the Igbo states of Anambra and Enugu respectively, to abolish harmful widowhood practices.

Furthermore, girl-child education should be well intensified in the rural communities of Ghana. This will yield a long term benefit of equipping women with knowledge about their rights and thus, empower them to reject demeaning cultural practices imposed by the society.

As Akinbi (2015) rightly opined, "husbands should make adequate provision for their wives and children by leaving behind a will. This will save widows and their children from intense psychological, physical and financial embarrassment and trauma that they go through".

Also the government, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Widows Association, Ministry of Gender and Children, Traditional and Churches, Philanthropists and other well-meaning Ghanaians must offer assistance in cash or kind to mitigate the problems of widows.

Aspects of Widowhood Practices that Need to be Maintained and Improved

The meaning and understanding of culture should always be sought from within the cosmos and socio-cultural matrixes of a people. It is an unfortunate scenario

in this contemporary time that scholars who denigrate African widowhood rites are only affirming their elitism and projection as western educated African elites who, as a result of totally alienating themselves from their roots, find solace in exhibiting flagrant ignorance of their own tradition and the world view of their own people. It is an ardent opinion of this category of scholars to see Africa judged from the perspective of foreign cultures such as Christian and Islamic education and modernity so that the image of Africa which they so desire to uphold, reflects only western cultural values. We need to be cautious and be aware of the fact that assessing African culture through foreign cultural lenses is not right and proper because it definitely leads to information clad with falsehood. For this reason, widowhood practices which have stood the test of time and are continuously regarded by the Gbi northern Ewe as satisfying certain needs and purposes in their life should be encouraged, improved and preserved for posterity. There is the need to position ourselves in the socio-cultural matrixes of traditional societies so as to understand the merits and demerits of their values among which are widowhood practices which the Gbi-Ewe strongly uphold due to the following reasons:

To the Gbi-Ewe, just as Christians and Muslims perform rituals to mark the exit of a deceased from the land of the living, widowhood practices among the *Gbidukɔ* are designed to sever relationship between a dead husband and a living wife. As typical of cultures of other African societies, Brown (1992) observes widowhood ritual performance in Ghana and stated:

> The death of a spouse is viewed as a serious matter which involves an observance of a series of rituals and ceremonies meant to signify the separation of the deceased's spouse spiritually from the surviving one. This is based on the general belief the relationship between the spouses is a special one and something must be done to mark the permanent severance of the relationship and the departure of one of the partners.

The reason behind the performance of ritual of separation in most African societies is that the spirits of the deceased are believed to wander around in the society and desiring to continue performing their duties to their living relations. These widowhood rites are performed to prevent such spirits from intruding into the affairs of the living (Tasie, 2013; Ojigho, 2011).

Widowhood practices among the Gbi-Ewe is a means of toughening and equipping widows with the needed courage to cope with life of self-reliance which the loss of their late husbands who were the breadwinners, have exposed them to. Corroborating the above statement, Limann (2003, p. 29) cited a similar example of widows from the Lugbara ethnic society of Uganda:

> There is a ritual of felling a tree by a widow after the death of her late husband to symbolise that she has henceforth, assumed the role and responsibilities of her departed husband. To the people, this ritual practice serves as a form of psychological boost to brace the widow to meet challenges that lie ahead as a single parent.

The confinement of a widow to the house immediately after the death of her husband and thus, preventing her from going to the farm, riverside or engaging in any form of manual activity outside the home is not considered as enslavement or impeding free movement of a widow. The northern Ewe in general, adopt this measure to allay societal fear and prevent a widow from possibly committing suicide or harming herself as a result of the pain, agony and trauma the death of her late husband has caused her.

Another widowhood practice that instils fear and moral discipline into the people including the Gbi-Ewe is the belief that a man can die through engaging in sexual activity with a widow who has not completed performing her rites. This, in effect, discourages adultery, raises moral standards and protects widows from falling prey to men with insatiable sexual desires who might want to take advantage of their vulnerable conditions during their periods of mourning.

As typical of the Gbi-Ewe male folk and best described in the words of Tasie (2013,161),

> are not in rivalry domination over their women folk, in which the women are subjugated and condemned to perpetual servitude. Rather, roles assigned along gender lines are complimentary, and aimed at achieving peaceful co-existence within the family and the community at large. It is, therefore, the duty of a man, for example, to split firewood for the woman to use in preparing meals (p. 161).

This practice which is proverbially expressed in Ewe language as *ɖusie klɔa mia, eye mia ha klɔa ɖusi* (it is the right hand that washes the left hand, and the left hand equally reciprocates) largely accentuates ways in which males and females lend assistance to each other in the execution of their marital roles. Self-confidence, self-dignity and pride of African womanhood is often heard in certain remarks that Sofola (1998) identified with illiterate women's discourse, in the rural communities. He commented:

> Quite often, when one hears the western educated African women speak in a demeaning manner about their illiterate and rural counterparts, one cannot help but pity the former for their false sense of importance and delusion of grandeur. It never dawns on them that while they rattle the phrase, 'what a man can do, a woman can do

better', their illiterate counterparts assert; 'what a woman can do, a man cannot do'. While they (educated female elites) quote the western adage 'behind every successful man is a woman', her illiterate counterparts affirm 'the strength of a man is in a woman'.

During the researcher's field studies, information gathered through personal interviews with thirty elderly widows between the ages of 35-65 years, and ten widowers within the age range of 40-80, between March and June, 2016, collectively see *ahowɔwɔ* as a cultural obligation and not a punishment. To the respondents, before the advent of western civilization, the idea of labeling widowhood practice as harmful or demeaning never existed.

Ahowɔwɔ in some rural communities of Nigeria as noted by Saba (1997), shows that most women who perform these rites find nothing wrong with them and thus, regard them as usual requirement for widowhood status. Onyenuchie's (2007) study of widowhood practices revealed that about 86% of the rural folk in the Delta and Edo states in Nigeria reject major changes in widowhood practices. This shows that particular societal practices, will survive if only they continuously serve socio-cultural functions in the personal and/or group social interaction of the practitioners.

Conclusion

Widowhood practices which result from the loss of a married partner, is described as difficult and full of emotional and psychological stress which constitute an affront to the dignity of especially the African woman. Though the practice seems to yield to rigorous condemnations by jettisoning most of its loathsome features, it largely remains unrefined by foreign cultures or the dynamics of modern society. The paper, therefore, investigated why the Gbi-Ewe to date, cling to widowhood practices regardless of their vilification by scholars which include western educated African elites as barbaric, oppressive and dehumanising. The research findings revealed that though the people admit that some widowhood practices such as shaving of hair, dressing in tattered clothes and eating from broken bowls are outmoded and should be abolished, they on the other hand, insist that aspects of *ahowɔwɔ* that satisfy their needs and purposes should be maintained, improved and preserved for posterity.

Some good widowhood practices that they claim include: ritual of separation which severs marital ties between the woman and her deceased husband is believed to be a psychological boost that braces the widow to assume manly roles after her husband's death to meet challenges that lie ahead of her as a single parent. As a result of the pain and trauma that she suffers from her late husband's death, a widow is confined to the house for fear that if she is left alone, she might commit suicide or harm herself. The practice is also said to instill fear, moral discipline and discourage adultery

because of the belief that a man who engages in a sexual activity with a widow who has not completed her rites can die. Widows are, therefore, protected from falling prey to men with insatiable sexual desires, taking advantage of their vulnerable conditions to exploit them.

The Gbi tradition, therefore, asserts that both men and the women folk, execute complimentary roles that foster a peaceful co-existence within the family and the community at large. It is, therefore, unfortunate to note in this contemporary era that scholars, who denigrate the entire African widowhood practices, are only affirming their elitism and stance as western educated African elites who, as a result of totally alienating themselves from their roots, find solace in exhibiting overt ignorance of aspects of their own tradition and the world view of their own people. What we should never forget is that particular societal practices will always survive if and only they continuously serve socio-cultural functions in the personal and/or group social interaction of the practitioners.

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