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Ethic of Reciprocity and the Experience of Widows in Nigeria

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Abstract

A cursory glance at the experience of widows in Nigeria reveals that many of them lack education, job skills, and adequate resources to support themselves and their families. They often face difficulties in finding employment and are vulnerable to poverty. More often than not, they are accused of being responsible for the death of their husbands, especially when the man dies at a young age, and are thus coerced into going through degrading and dehumanising rituals all in an effort to prove her innocence. While there are several papers that have been written on the experience of widows in Nigeria, this piece distinguishes itself by its focus on the capacity of the philosophy of reciprocity to address this situation. While not suggesting any intention to trek all the allies of this experience, it adopts a new methodology in tackling the problem, by focusing on the ethic of reciprocity as a credible means of restoring the dignity of women for the stability of the family and the nation. The concept of the 'ethic of reciprocity' employed by the researcher is based on the philosophy of the golden rule: "Do for others what you want them to do for you". For the sake of this paper, the thematic and expository methods of inquiry were adopted. This piece is written as a contribution to the ongoing academic discourse on the socio-economic and religio-cultural experience of women in Nigeria, with particular interest on the experience of widows.

Keywords: Philosophy, Reciprocity, Experience, Widows and Nigeria.

Introduction

Women have for a very long time been relegated to the background of second-class citizens or even insignificance. The experience of women in Nigeria, with all its attendant characteristics of subordination, oppression and marginalization, has attracted the attention of scholars, religious bodies, activists, feminists and development workers. The conditions of women in Nigeria conveniently compete for the worst in the world among other third world countries (Salaam, 2003; Kanu 2012). This issue keeps reoccurring in every academic and informal discussion in Africa. This piece is a contribution to the ongoing academic discourse on the socio-economic experience of women in Nigeria, with particular interest on the experience of widows in Nigeria. However, while not suggesting any intention to trek all the allies of this experience, it adopts a new method to tackle the problem, by focusing on the tactic of reciprocity as a credible means of restoring the dignity of women in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for the purpose of this paper is the empowerment approach to addressing the problems of the widows. According to Saleeby (2009), empowerment refers to "the intent to, the processes of, assisting individuals, groups, families, and communities to discover and expend the resources and tools within and around them". This approach puts into consideration the widow's innate inner strengths rather than adopting the deficit approach to their problems that does not provide them with the necessary resources and options to deal with their challenges (Saleeby, 2009; Kam, 2021; Segal, Gerdes and Steiner, 2019). It is also called the strengths-based perspective, with emphasis on empowerment. This is the basis for the interventions to deal with the economic, psychosocial and social problems confronting widows.

The experience of widows in Nigeria

Widowhood is a period when a wife or husband has lost his or her spouse by death and has remained unmarried. This state of life has multiple intersecting elements such as social, cultural, economic, and even historical. It is a period

that comes with multiple and complex challenges, though depending on culture and society. Given the challenges of this period, the United Nations has set aside the twenty third of June, every year to look at the rights of widows and the issues that affect them.

One of the conditions of life that a Nigerian woman dread most is that she should be a widow. This is because the experience of widowhood tarnishes the grandeur of her womanhood. When the husband of a woman dies, she is first destabilized, and because most Nigerian societies are patriarchal, widows do not get justifiable treatment. At times, the treatment becomes so bad, one which could be referred to as “inhumanity to the humanity of women” (Chidili, 2005; Kanu 2015). According to Ijabulu (cited by Amuche, 2011), the widow after the death of her husband undergoes stages of mourning: The first stage is the shock stage, here she goes hysterical, with so much flashbacks as to the events that led to the death of her husband. The second stage is the dumb stage, when she looks at people around her and says nothing. She keeps looking and thinking. The third stage is the denial stage, when she denies that her husband is dead. Then the blame stage, when she blames herself or some other people, should they have taken the right step her husband could have lived. The acceptance stage has got to do with the widow’s acceptance of the reality on ground. Last is the adjustment stage, which has got to do with the widow adjusting to the situation.

In Nigeria, there are peculiar problems that are faced by widows. When the husband dies, the widow is the first suspect, especially if she has in the past danced in some diabolical steps. The situation is worse if the widow has not been good to the man’s relations. They would at this point call her all sorts of names. She is accused of being a witch or a juju or a murderer, depending on the one that would easily gain wider acceptance. Sometimes she is forced to confess a crime she did not commit and if she refuses, she would be flogged by some elderly women. These elderly women are usually widows themselves, and at this point they would recall their terrible experiences and try to revenge on her (Amuche, 2011; Kanu 2016). Sometimes, the widow is forced to swear in a shrine that she is not responsible for the death of the husband. It is in this regard that provocative questions such as these are asked,

If the community considers death as bad, why should women be charged and convicted of it before any formal display of adjudication. Do women not die?

If they die as they do, who should be convicted? Why men are not considered culprits of their wives' death immediately they die? If the system is not sexist why should the female spouse be convicted of her male spouse's death as soon as death occurs? Does it mean that men are incapable of killing their wives? (Chidili, 2005)

In some parts of Eastern Nigeria, woeful crying and wailing at death and burial by the widow is a very phenomenal action. The wailing of the widow is supposed to give the sympathizer the conviction that she is not responsible for the death of her husband (Timothy, 2008). The widow is expected to go into traumatic wailing immediately, to beat her chest, fling around her arms and go into falling down. Other women surround her immediately and restrain her and force her to sit down on the ground where they sit around her (Okafor, 1982).

Added to these is the purifying rite a widow goes through. Loosing a husband renders the widow unclean, because it is believed that the event of the death of a husband despoils the wife and therefore must be purified before communicating with the community. As a result of this, those who stream in to commiserate with the widow do not shake hands with her (Chidili, 2005; Kanu, 2017). Moreover, she is barricaded from the rest of the people to avoid contact. The rituals for purification include shaving of heads and sometimes all the hairy parts of her body with blunt blade (Timothy, 2008), as among the Igbos and Yorubas, staying at home for three months and drinking the water used to wash the corpse of the husband, as is obtainable in Etsako in Edo State, sitting or sleeping on the floor for many days before the man is buried and swearing an oath that she has no hand in her husband's death (Timothy, 2008). These rites, obviously, have little or no regard for the woman's feelings (Ekwunife, 2005). The intensity of these practices vary from culture to culture and is more rampant in the Eastern and Southern parts of Nigeria.

After the burial of her husband, the widow goes through more horrible experiences. These include widow inheritance, loneliness, widow disinheritance, children discipline, financial problems, rape and readjustment among others (Ekwunife, 2005). As regards widow inheritance, in places like Ukwuani Community in Delta State, the widow against her will is married to the husband's brother especially when she is still young and beautiful, and if she

refuses, she is driven away without any share of her husband's property (Amuche, 2011).

At this point, any widow who is accused of having killed her husband would not have any of the husband's relations asking her for remarriage for fear of being killed themselves. If the widow gets married to any of the husband's relations, she enters as a second or third wife, and will have to adjust to all the deficiencies of polygamous marriage.

The widow's disinheritance is a painful experience, especially for those who have struggled together with the husband to invest for their future and those of their children. At the death of her husband, this fortune, no matter how small or big, is seized by the husband's relations, and the widow is left to struggle alone, as it obtains in Ohafia, Abia State. More painful is the issue of rape experienced by widows. In some communities in the Eastern part of Nigeria, the widow is made to go through the 'Ajayin' rituals for cleansing, which comes up twelve days after the death of her husband. This is done by the Ajayin priest who would sleep with her during the ceremony. This experience has psychological consequences aside the possibility of being infected with one or more of the sexually transmitted diseases. Any form of resistance attracts ostracism (Amuche, 2011).

Parallels of the Ethic of Reciprocity

The passage of scripture on the ethic of reciprocity from Matthew parallels with some other passages of scripture and also some literature in Judaism and Ancient Eastern Religions.

S/N	ORIGIN	EXPRESSION
	Judaism	Rabbi Hillel or Hillel the Elder (Leske, 2004), in giving an answer to a question from a proselyte who demanded a precise and good understanding of the law and the prophets "That which displeases you do not do to another. This is the whole law, the rest is commentary" (Mckenzie, 1965, p.75)

	Brahmanism	"This is the sum of Dharma: Do naught unto others which would cause you pain if done to you" (Mahabharata, 2011). In Buddhism: "...a state that is not pleasing or delightful to me, how could I inflict that upon another?" (Samyutta, 2011)
	Confucianism	"Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you" (Analects, 2011)
	Ancient Egyptian Religion	"Do for one who may do for you, that you may cause him thus to do." (The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant, 2011)
	Hinduism	"This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you" (Mahabharata, 2011)
	Taoism	"The sage has no interest of his own, but takes the interests of the people as his own. He is kind to the kind; he is also kind to the unkind: for Virtue is kind. He is faithful to the faithful; he is also faithful to the unfaithful: for Virtue is faithful." (Tao Teh Ching, 2011)
	Old Testament in the book of Tobit 4:5	"Never do to anyone else anything that you would not want someone else to do to you".

Matthian Expression and Its Relations

As expressed in the gospel of Matthew 7:12, the Golden Rule is a summary of the law and the prophets: "This is the meaning of the law of Moses and of the teachings of the prophets". This is attested to not only by the text itself but by the structure or arrangement of the passage 7:12 in relation to the preceding verses. 7:12 is presented as a summary of all that Jesus has been saying about living in relationship with one another as God's people.

There is a difference in Jesus' presentation of the ethic of reciprocity from others. Jesus presents it in a positive way, unlike the rest which are in the

negative. By putting it into the positive Jesus has transformed a wisdom saying into an action of love instead of self-protection. According to William Barclay, when the rule is put positively, a new principle is put to life. In its positive sense, the Golden Rule is a deliberate and chosen policy of life which makes a person go out of his or her way to do to others as he or she would wish them do to him or her. This is more outgoing and difficult than the negative dimension of the rule which involves nothing other than not doing certain things (Barclay, 2000).

The ethic of reciprocity and the love of neighbour

Christ came to teach mankind not only what they need to know and believe, but also what they are to do as persons who live in a community. This is grounded upon the great commandment of love which exhorts that “thou shall love thy neighbour as thyself”. As regards the Golden Rule, a step further is taken. People are not just to love their neighbour but are also to bear the same affection to them as they do to themselves. Matthew (2007) believes that the meaning of the ethic of reciprocity lies in three things:

- a. We must do that to our neighbour which we ourselves acknowledge to be fit and reasonable: the appeal is made to our own judgment, and the discovery of our judgment is referred to that which is our own will and expectation, when it is our own case.
- b. We must put other people at the same level with ourselves, and reckon that we are as much obliged to them as they are to us. We are as much bound to the duty of justice as they, and they are as much entitled to the benefit of it as we.
- c. We must, in our dealings with others, suppose ourselves in the same particular case and circumstances with those we have to do with, and deal accordingly. For instance, if I were making a bargain for someone else, labouring under the same infirmity and affliction, how should I desire and expect to be treated? This is a just supposition because we do not know how soon their case or situation may turn out to be ours.

The ethic of reciprocity and the experience of widows

In the consideration of the liberation of women from the shackles that widowhood throws them into, the ethic of reciprocity is the puzzle resolver. Men

should look at the conditions of women, especially in areas like widowhood, where men have built structures that have confined women. Men should ask themselves, if I were treated in the same way, would I be happy, or if I were to find myself in this condition, would I be happy. The ethic of reciprocity obliges men to treat women in such a way that they acknowledge to be fit and reasonable. It also reminds men that they must put women at the same level with themselves, and reckon that men are as much obliged to women as women are to men. This can only be realized if Men, in their dealings with women (widows), suppose themselves in the same particular case and circumstances with them, and relate accordingly. If this is done, there would emerge a modest progress in the ongoing campaign to restore the dignity of women, for the stability of the family and society at large.

The Ethic of Reciprocity and the dignitization of women

The choice of the concept ‘Ethic of reciprocity’, otherwise known as ‘the golden rule’, is a prospective tactic for the “dignitization” of women. It is a significant norm when it comes to maintaining a decent society. Those who break the Golden Rule in order to pursue their own self-serving aim are, clearly, a real danger to the society because they poison the prospect of building a descent society. Also, very crucial to the choice of the term ‘ethic of reciprocity’ is that it is relatively simple to articulate and understand, especially for moral decision making. It is derived from human feelings and behaviour; it addresses an enormous range of behaviours, such that all the experiences of women can be articulated into it.

The understanding of the ethic of reciprocity employed by the researcher is taken from the Gospel of Matthew 7:12: “Do for others what you want them to do for you”. It would be analyzed alongside its parallels in other passages of scripture and the history of other religions. This passage of scripture from the Gospel of Matthew is what may be considered a puzzle resolver to the problem of the experience of widows in Nigeria.

Conclusion

In the world, there are about 258 million widows, however, Nigeria is home to 15 million of them. Studying the experience of widows in Nigeria reveals that

many of them lack education, job skills, and adequate resources to support themselves and their families. They often face difficulties in finding employment and are vulnerable to poverty. More often than not, they are accused of being responsible for the death of their husbands, especially when the man dies at a young age, and are thus coerced into going through degrading and dehumanising rituals all in an effort to prove her innocence. The concept of the 'ethic of reciprocity' employed by the researcher is based on the philosophy of the golden rule: "Do for others what you want them to do for you". For the sake of this paper, the thematic and expository methods of inquiry were adopted. While this work does not claim to have succeeded in providing a full exposition of the experience of widows in Nigeria, it is however, plausible to assert that it will join ranks with the concerned people of Nigeria and indeed the concerned people of the world who have begun an honest and creative awareness about the oddity of patriarchy and sexist cultures both in Nigeria and the world over. If this work succeeds in creating awareness to this threat, and proffering lasting solutions, then it would have made a modest contribution to the ongoing campaign to restore the dignity of the woman for the stability of the family and the Nigerian nation.

Recommendations

From the foregoing, the following are, hereby, recommended in favour of addressing the challenges of widows.

- a. Based on the realization that widowhood is generally stressful for widows, it is hereby recommended that massive and intensive campaign should be mounted nation-wide to sanitize people on the need to stop all forms of abuse associated with widowhood.
- b. It is further recommended that Nigerian National Assembly members should legislate against all oppressive, barbaric or dehumanizing mourning rites and widowhood customs that tend to heighten widowhood stress and hamper adjustment.
- c. It is recommended that rehabilitation counseling be provided to widows. This should emphasize cognitive restructuring for widows to enable them accept their plight. Similarly, they should be oriented to appreciate the inevitability of the phenomenon and the need to acquire requisite skills for survival after spousal bereavement. In order to actualize this

- goal, widows in Nigeria need be provided with functional education capable of emancipating them from the stress and tension of widowhood.
- d. Rehabilitation counseling to be provided, demands that counselor-trainees be fortified with training in bereavement and widowhood counseling. This is necessary in order to equip the counselor-trainees adequately to adequately meet the challenges of providing rehabilitative counseling. Essentially, counselors to provide rehabilitative' counseling ought to possess a thorough grasp of widowhood as a concept, stress level and sources as well as the adjustment strategies options to be adopted.
 - e. Apart from the above, rehabilitation counseling should emphasize the need for widows to acquire skills needed for securing gainful employment either in public/ private or personal enterprise. For instance, they should be oriented to appreciate the usefulness of possessing impressive academic qualifications, basic know-how of transacting business, saving for old age and future investment among others.

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