



A Survey of Widowhood Practices In Edo State

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Abstract

This study surveyed widowhood practices in Edo State. Three (3) research questions were raised to guide the study. The study adopted the descriptive survey research design. The population of this study consists of all widows living in Edo State, Nigeria, who had gone through widowhood arrangements and the major instruments used for data collection was the questionnaire. The questionnaire was validated using the content method and the reliability was determined through test-retest method which produced a reliability index of 0.86. The data collected were analyzed using frequency count percentage and mean score analysis. A sample size of Three hundred (300) widows were purposively selected from the major ethnic groups in Edo State which are Binis and Esan. All the respondents were identified as widows from their various communities in the States. This was selected through purposive sampling procedure. The findings of the study revealed that widows are confined to indoors practice throughout the period of mourning, subjected to oath taking exercise to prove they are not responsible for the death of their husband, forced to marry their late husband brothers, made to wear black or white mourning clothes and, their head, pubic areas and eye brows are also shaved during mourning. Though not too prevalent these days as it was in the past but in some places in Edo state, they still practice these inhuman acts, especially in the rural areas. It was recommended that; an aggressive enlightenment programme should be instituted to educate or provide the understanding on the problems associated with widowhood practices. It was further recommended that widows should also be encouraged and given the opportunity to engage in income generating or poverty alleviation programmes. This would help improve their lot and raise their dignity and respect.

Keywords: Survey, Widow, Widowhood, Practices.

Received: 10/02/2026
 Accepted: 23/03/2026
 Published: 31/03/2026

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INTRODUCTION

Widows are women that have lost their husbands to death. During this period, the bereaved mourn

their loss and, in many places, they are expected to undergo series of rituals referred to as widowhood rites/rituals. Widowhood rites, as practiced in many traditional African societies, are practices that accompany the mourning of the loss of one's spouse. The period of mourning

coupled with series of life events often have wide-ranging implications. Some of these practices such as wearing of black or white mourning clothes, shaving of the head, pubic areas and eye brows, oath taking exercise or drinking of the water used in bathing the corpse of their late husbands to prove they are not responsible for the death of their husband and marrying late husband's brothers variously described as barbaric, atrocious, backwards, immoral and an abusive violation of the sexual and human rights of the powerless (Chukwu-Okoronkwo, 2015). Although men may also experience such rites on becoming a widower, women often are especially harmed by these rituals because of how the societies relate to them, particularly on the bases of gender, cultural norms and the patriarchal structures of many Nigerian communities.

According to Obilor (2024) widowhood is a state of mourning the loss of one's husband or wife to death. The stress of this phenomenon is as real as those of loneliness and divorce. Widowhood is thus seen as a life event with wide range of consequences. For instance, widowhood is known to be responsible for the poor health status of widows and widowers, with minimal long-term consequences. In certain parts of Anambra State south east Nigeria, "the widow is made to cook with broken pots and eat with unwashed hands". These practices which stem from societal traditions and family perception are no doubt harmful to the health of the widow in question besides being extraordinarily harsh. Moreover, most of these rituals erode the dignity of the widows and also traumatize them. Besides exposure to diseases such as cholera, diarrhoea, etc, occasioned by eating with unwashed hands, drinking the water used to bathe the corpse is also poisonous. Widowhood is also associated with intense grief and anger expression, especially among more widows than the divorced when compared (Usman, 2020). This is probably because of deprivation following loss of spousal intimacy due to death. It can then be said that widowhood by implication is a stressful life event demanding practicable support system.

The effects of loss of spouse differ in Nigeria due to variation in culture and tradition. For instance, Azikiwe cited in Adeyemo (2016), observed that a wife mourns her husband for a period of six months to one year wearing the white or black mourning dress but, it does but not apply to a husband who lost his wife. Furthermore, some widowers remarry few months after the death of their wives for the widow it is considered an abomination. In most cases, a widow is accused of being responsible for the death of her husband, especially when the man dies at a young age. Therefore, widows are coerced into going through degrading and dehumanizing rituals otherwise refers to as widowhood practices in order to prove their innocence. Some of the practices are known to be very harmful, painful and resentful. They are oppressive and also vary from culture to culture and cover a wide range of rites. These harmful traditional widowhood rites are informed by the concept of negative attitude to women embedded in the legal, religious, economic, social and political structure of our male-dominated and patriarchal world.

In the Northern region death is attributed to God but the widow traditionally is expected to mourn her late husband (Tabaka) for a specified period of time. The mourning period is four Jumar months plus ten days. The widow after the mandatory mourning period could stay and remarry in the same family or go elsewhere for the same purpose. However, except for the fact that most widows are often neglected during and after mourning together with their children there is no other practice of mourning that is physically injurious or degrading to the widow. In order to survive the harsh financial situation faced, most widows thereafter are known to take to petty trading, begging for alms or other survival strategies to keep body and soul together.

Among the Igbos in Nigeria, as soon as the period of mourning is over which is normally 12 months, the widow is open for marriage from members of the deceased's family, usually the first son or the younger brother. If the woman was the father's only wife or their mother, then

the deceased's uncle or younger brother or the nearest kinsman would inherit her. If the deceased had so many wives the heir could pick the younger and most beautiful one(s), give some to his younger brothers and request those he do not want in the family to refund the dowry and go.

Among the Binis, widowhood rights are in two stages. First, the widow is confined to a room outside the family house for seven days immediately after the interment of the deceased husband. She is dressed in black with her hair left unkempt and she is not allowed to take her bath. She must look mournful and sober and must cry morning and evening. On the seventh day, a wake keeping ceremony is held and the widow is forbidden by custom to sleep because, it is believed that the spirit of the dead man will appear to her leading to her death if she sleeps. In the early hours of the night, she performs the semi-purification rites by taking her bath around 4.00am at a road junction. She is not accompanied by anyone. She sings a mourning song while going and coming in. Her safe return proves her innocence. The second stage of mourning begins at the end of the seventh day. The widow smears her forehead and her dress with black charcoal and remains so for three months. At the end of the third month, the final purification, which admits her into the society, is performed. Similarly, among the Esan, the practice is almost the same but with little difference. During the seven days of mourning, the widow carries an Ikhmin, which is a many sided plant used to cast and wear off evil spirit. She is also forbidden to sleep on the night preceding the seventh day because it is believed that, the husband will visit and carry her away if she sleeps. A widow in Esan however, is expected to identify and take obscure or isolated spot where she shoots an arrow into the bush afterwards, to deter the late husband from coming near her again.

In Agenebode land, the women have different status/order of birth. A woman can either be Amoya, a title that is highly respected and cherished because in marriage, she is given out totally or she is Adegbe, a title that allows the

woman to stay in her father's house even after marriage. Nothing is done in her father's house without consulting her. As a result of this, widows are made to observe or go through varying degree of rights and privileges. When an Amoya is widowed one of her sister-in-law who is an Adegbe usually assist her to wear a white hand woven pant. This she wears for one whole year without washing or changing. She stays indoor and cannot even go to the market or church. Her hair is scraped and live in total seclusion wearing only black. Furthermore, she remains in her husband's house for life. If she accepts to be inherited she performs the purification rite to legitimize the transfer. If she does not want to be inherited she performs another rite to appease the family's ancestors. Her son inherits the property of the diseased if she happens to give birth to first son, this does not, however, transfer ownership of the diseased husbands property to her.

The situation is different, when an Adegbe is widowed. She does not go through all the rites an Amoya goes through. Her hair and that of her children is scraped on the fifth day after the death. Wearing of black is her choice and her movement is not restricted for one day. She goes about her normal business. The issue of inheritance does not arise for her because she goes back to her father's house as soon as the man dies. However, she can chose to stay if she so wishes, without any obligation to the family of the late husband. If she is the mother of the first son, the son inherits his father's entire properties.

These practices by all purposes and intent are contrary to universal religious injunctions. These practices regrettably are another aspect of discrimination against women generally and a negation of the growing popularity of the legal principles that "women rights are human rights". The death of a husband, who is supposed to be the bread winner for the wife, automatically exposes the widow to lots of financial, social, physical sexual, emotional and societal difficulties. According to 2nd king 4:1 and the Holy Quran 4:24, religiously it is the marital role expectation of the husband to provide financial

and other support for the wife to the extent that the wife may be completely dependent on the man. Thus with his untimely death, a vacuum is created, which necessitates the provision of supports by well-defined support network.

The “vacuum filling” is necessary in order to alleviate the attendant suffering of the widow who consequently become confused, helpless and frustrated. It has been observed that the functions of support system to widow include restoring widow’s confidence and sense of belonging often accomplished through the availability of close and intimate relationship between the widow and other significant persons in her life. However for any support system to be effective it must meet at least four basic requirements namely adequate and proportional to perceived need, timing must be appropriate and prompt, it must be genuine without any degrading or insulting conditions attached; and practicable in its structure.

However, there exists individual difference and socio-cultural variation in the amount of support systems received by a widow and provided or to be provided by the identified support network. It is contended that majority of the widows receive general support from most of the network. Specifically economic support is given to most widows mainly by their siblings, female friends and husband’s friends. Service support is provided by widows’ siblings’ children and female friends. The same support network provides widows with social and emotional support system. It can thus be said that at least five main factors usually determine the type and amount of support system received or given to the widow. These are the marital or parental ethnic background of the widow, her age at bereavement (whether she could still give birth or not) duration of widowhood, marital status and childlessness. Categorically, it has been observed that younger widows were mostly supported by their husband’s relatives, while older widows get their own support mainly from their siblings and children. As for the childless widows, they were mostly supported by their relatives. It has also been found that as the length of widowhood increases the amount

and/or frequency of economic support given decrease.

Widowhood practices are as old as Yoruba Society itself as they are observed across different Yoruba communities and across different categories of persons. A widow is expected to express her sorrow of losing her husband through wearing black clothes, crying and often falling into the ready hands of others surrounding her to prevent her from injuring herself. She is also expected to go into seclusion seven days during which she is not expected to take her bath or change her clothes. As a sign of severing bonds between her and her late husband, she may be expected to unweave her hair, have a low cut, shave or scrape her hairs depending on the type of practice prevalent in such Yoruba community. Similarly, the mourning period varies from one community to another. She is to sit on a bare floor or a mat at best. While in some Yoruba communities, she is expected to eat from broken plates and cook with broken pots. At the end of forty days, three months, four months as the case may be, the final rites are performed on the widow.

Statement of the Problem

The issue of widows as victims of weak State patriarchal structure is one problem that has received little attention. Existing legislation is often silent on widows’ rites. In spite of global response to women subordinate position in societies through the United Nations (UN) Women Decade (1975-1985) and International Conventions and Declarations, there seems to be no end to widow’s plight especially in most part of sub-Saharan Africa. Similarly, the UN World Conferences in Mexico in 1975, Copenhagen in 1980, Nairobi in 1985, and Beijing in 1995, and the ratification by many countries of the 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) have not achieved any significant success. Of major concern is the fact that in Nigeria, response to the international conventions and declaration (especially as they relate to widows) is grossly inadequate as there is no unified national response. In spite of the several fora

efforts in highlighting the plight of widows in Nigeria, there are still observed lapses in the area of national consensus regarding the improvement in this aspect of women's existence in the country. Only a few State; Anambra (2005), Ekiti (2005), Enugu, Imo, Edo State (2004), Rivers (2003), Delta and Cross River State (2004) have signed into law the eradication of widowhood practices. Surprisingly, most of these laws are mere window dressing as there are no supportive structures through which women can seek redress.

Edo State government in 2001 enacted the Inhuman Treatment of Widows Prohibition Law to help guide against inhuman treatment of widows in the State. It is seemingly clear that the widowhood rites/practices have continued unabated. However, there are clear indications that the situation has been altered and have changed in view of the growing interest on the issue. The fundamental question that then arises is: what is now the current status of these widowhood practices in Edo state? There is therefore need to obtain empirical data. This is the issue that necessitated the study.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to survey widowhood practices in Edo State. However, the study seeks to achieve the following specific objectives.

1. determine the type of rites widows are subjected to in Edo State.
2. find out whether these rites are still prevalent
3. ascertain the problems associated with the widowhood rites/practices.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised to guide the study

1. What type of rites are widows subjected to in Edo State?
2. Are these rites still prevalent?
3. What are the problems associated with widowhood rites/practices?

METHODS AND MATERIAL

The design adopted for the study is the descriptive survey research design, The population of this study consists of all the widows living in Edo State, Nigeria, who had gone through widowhood arrangements. A sample size of Three hundred (300) widows was purposively selected from the two major ethnic groups in Edo State which are Benin and Esan. Due to a paucity of records on widows, the entire population of widows in Benin and Esan cannot be determined. As a result, the purposive sampling design was utilized. In this wise, the researcher purposively identified widows from their various communities in the States and then those identified widows in turns helped to reach out to other widows in their communities until the required sample size was reached, the instrument used for data collection for the study is a close ended questionnaire titled a "Survey of Widowhood Practices Questionnaire (SWPQ)", To establish the reliability of the instrument, the internal consistency method of estimating of the reliability of the research instrument was employed., The data collected for the study were analysed using descriptive statistics such as frequency counts, percentages, mean and standard deviation. A criterion mean of 2.50 was used as the standard for accepting or rejecting any item.

DATA ANALYSIS

Results

The result emanating from the data collected and analysed are presented here under

Research Question One: What type of rites are widows subjected to in Edo State?

Table 1: Mean response showing the type of rites widows subjected to in Edo State

ITEMS	Response	Weighted	Remark/
	Mean	Mean	Decision
1 Widows are confined indoors throughout the period of mourning	1055	3.62	Accepted
2 Widows head, pubic areas and eye brows are shaved during mourning	1036	3.45	Accepted
3 Widows are subjected to oath taking exercise to prove they are not responsible for the death of their husband	1069	3.56	Accepted
4 Widows are forced to marry the late husband brothers	1036	3.45	Accepted
5 Widows are allowed to wear black or white mourning clothes	1094	3.65	Accepted

Criterion Mean: 2.50

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

The data in Table 1 above shows that items 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 met the mean score of 2.50 and, therefore, were all accepted. This, therefore, means that widows are confined indoors throughout the period of mourning, widow's head, pubic areas and eye brows are shaved during mourning, they are subjected to oath taking exercise to prove they are not responsible for the death of their husband, forced to marry the late husband brothers and allowed to wear black or white mourning clothes.

Research Question Two: Are these rites still prevalent in the area?

Table 2: Mean response showing whether these right rites still in prevalent in the area

ITEMS	Response	Weighted	Remark/
	Mean	Mean	Decision
6 Widows are still subjected to these inhuman	1064	3.55	Accepted

	treatments			
7	Some places in Edo State enforce these harmful widowhood practices	1036	3.45	Accepted
8	Widows are still forced to marry their late husband brothers in Edo State.	1069	3.56	Accepted
9	These widowhood rights are more prevalence in the rural areas than in the urban areas.	1036	3.45	Accepted
10	Widows are no longer subjected to these harmful traditional practices as a result of the proliferation of churches and mosques	1094	3.65	Accepted

Criterion Mean: 2.50

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

The data in Table 2 above shows that items 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 met the mean score of 2.50 and, therefore, were all accepted. This, therefore, means that widows are still subjected to these inhuman treatments, some places in Edo State enforce practice these harmful widowhood practices, widows are still forced to marry their late husband brothers, These widowhood rights are more prevalent in the rural areas than in the urban areas and widows are no longer subjected to these harmful traditional practices as a result of the proliferation of churches and mosques

Research Question Three: What are the problems associated with widowhood rites/practices?

Table 3 Data on the Problems Associated with Widowhood Rites/Practices

S/N	Variables	SA (%)	A (%)	D (%)	SD (%)
11	Widows are left alone to take care of children's feeding	194 (65)	100 (33)	06 (02)*	Nil (0)*
12	Widows are left with responsibility of sponsoring children's education.	136 (45)	160 (53)	Nil (0)	04 (1.3)
13	Widows are denied access to most of the rooms in her husband's houses	200 (66)	100 (33)	Nil (0)	Nil (0)
14	Widows are not allowed into late husbands' farm-land	136 (45)	164 (55)	Nil (0)	Nil (0)
15	Widows are not allowed to operate late husband's bank account.	194 (65)	100 (33)	Nil (0)	06 (02)

Source: Field Survey, 2025

***Percentages in parentheses.**

From the results on Table 3, it was revealed that 194 (65%) and 100 (33%) of the respondents

Strongly Agreed and Agreed respectively that Widows are left alone to take care of children's

feeding. The data however showed that 06 (02%) of the respondents Disagreed. However, none of the respondents Strongly Disagreed on the variable under consideration.

In the same vein, 136 (45%) and 160 (53%) of the respondents Strongly Agreed and Agreed respectively on the view that widows are left with the responsibility of sponsoring children's education. However showed that 04 (1.3%) of the respondents Strongly Disagreed. However, none of the respondents Disagreed on the variable under consideration.

In ascertaining whether widows are denied access to most of the rooms in her husband's houses. 200 (66%) and 100 (33%) of the respondents Strongly Agreed and Agreed respectively. While none of the respondents Strongly Agreed or Agreed on the variable under consideration.

By the same token, 136 (45%) and 164 (55%) of the respondents Strongly Agreed and Agreed respectively that widows are not allowed into late husbands' farm-land. There were no contrary opinions on the issue.

Finally on the research question Three, it was observed that 194 (65%) and 100 (33%) the respondents Strongly Agreed and Agreed respectively on the assertion that widows are not allowed to operate late husband's bank account. However showed that 06 (2%) of the respondents Strongly Disagreed. However, none of the respondents Disagreed on the variable under consideration.

From the forgoing analysis it can be concluded that widows are left alone to take care of children's feeding, sponsoring children's education, denied husband properties and not allowed to operate late husband's bank account

Discussion of Findings

The result of this study has been quite instructive, informative and revealing. In this study, Three (3) research questions were raised and answered.

Findings from research question one revealed that widows are confined indoors throughout the period of mourning, are subjected to oath taking exercise to prove they are not responsible for the death of their husband, forced to marry the late husband brothers, are allowed to wear black or white mourning clothes and their head, pubic areas and eye brows are shaved during mourning. This finding corroborates the study of Ndisika and Abiola (2022), who asserted that widowhood rites include isolation and confinement, restrictions in movement and association and hair shaving. This finding was also supported by another Oyeniyi and Ayodeji (2010). These scholars revealed that widows are made to shave their hairs, wear of black/white clothes, sleep on the floor or mat, and refrain from taking bath for a period of time, being made to swear with husband's corpse and Secluded from others.

Findings from research question two of the study revealed that some places in Edo State still practice these harmful widowhood practices, these widowhood rights are prevalence in the rural areas than in the urban areas. This finding corroborates the findings of Adeyemo (2014), who reported that widows in various part of the country are still confronted with series of widowhood rights. The prevalence of the widowhood practices has a truth in the culture and norms of the people. The social context also helps to strengthen and foster these practices.

Findings from research question three revealed that widows are left alone to take care of children's feeding, sponsoring children's education, denied husband properties and not allowed to operate late husband's bank account. This finding is in agreement with the study conducted by Myriam (2020) who asserts that the inhuman treatment of widows continues to abrogate their human rights. In some parts of Africa, she continued, widows are still subjected to traditional practices which lead to seizure of their property, social ostracism and exclusion as well as loss of their homes and children. She pointed out that in many cultures, widows have no right to inheritance of land ownership, and even where modern legislation provides such

rights, ignorance of the law (which is no excuse) by the widows or cultural practices, and even the long and rigorous processes of law itself with its cost intensiveness coupled with other factors. Most of these deprivations have had great deplorable impacts on the lives of widow.

Afolayan, (2011) who asserts that widowhood therefore deprives women of homes, agricultural land and other assets. Thus, without inheritance rights, widows are automatically dependent on the seasonal charity of their husband's relatives and friends. Upon the death of the husband and immediately after the burial, financial assistance may flow in torrents from friends of the late husband and immediate relatives relatively well off and from colleagues to either or both spouses where they work but declines slowly and pitied out completely after a few months or a year. Really concerned friends or close relation(s) may offer to train one or two children in school as a way reducing the burden on the widow.

Conclusions

In the light of the findings of the study, it can be concluded that widows are confined indoors throughout the period of mourning, are subjected to oath taking exercise to prove they are not responsible for the death of their husband, forced to marry the late husband brothers, are allowed to wear black or white mourning clothes and their head, pubic areas and eye brows are shaved during mourning

Recommendations

On the basis of the findings and conclusion drawn, the following recommendations are made.

- An aggressive enlightenment programme should be instituted to educate or provide the understanding on the problems associated with widowhood practices and the need to discontinue the practice
- Widows should be encouraged to engage in vocational based education provided for them. This would enable them assist

themselves, raise their dignity and empower them economically

- Widows should also be encouraged and given the opportunity to engage in income generating or poverty alleviation programme. This would help improve their lot and raise their dignity and respect.

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