

**WIFE INHERITANCE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL BEING OF THE
INHERITED WIDOWS IN UGENYA SUB COUNTY, KENYA**

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Abstract

The death of a spouse is a moment of devastation and sadness to the loss of love, care, company, and livelihood, attended by a feeling of abandonment. It represents radical change in one's social status and lifestyle. The inherited widow's plight in Ugenya Sub County is not addressed due to the lack of awareness on the psychosocial challenges they experience. The purpose of the study is to determine the psychosocial challenges that affect the inherited widow's wellness and explore the coping and intervention mechanisms that can be adopted by the inherited widows in Ugenya Sub County. The objectives of the study were to explore the psychological and social challenges affecting the wellness of inherited widows and explore the coping and intervention mechanisms that the widows can adopt to deal with the psychosocial challenges and improve their wellness within Ugenya Sub County. To understand the psychological wellbeing and the adjustment mechanisms of inherited widows in the study, the researcher postulated that the three models; the Kubler-Ross Model, the dual process model of coping with bereavement by Stroebe and Schut and Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy by Albert Ellis would be applicable to this study. The study will adopt research design using a qualitative approach. Targeted populations are the inherited widows, those that are not inherited and clergy working with these women, local administrators. Purposive sampling will be used to select the 73 respondents that comprised of 36 inherited widows, 13 widows who are not inherited, 6 clergies, 6 women leaders local, 6 government leaders and 6 Luo elders. Interview guides instruments and Questionnaire for both widows and professionals was used in data collection. Qualitatively data was analysed using the thematic framework. Scales of psychological wellbeing by Carol Ryff was used to measure the psychological wellbeing of inherited widows. The study revealed that sexual rituals practices and process negatively affect widows psychological well-being. There are several coping strategies adopted by widows such include; cognitive restructuring, problem solving, express emotion, social support, self-criticism, problem avoidance, social withdrawal, wishful thinking. The study concludes that inherited widows experience both negative and positive psychological wellbeing depending on the inheritor. Inheritance, provide widows with emotional support that enhance their psychological wellbeing some

widows also receive financial and labour support from the inheritors that help them cop up with the loss. However, inheritance has also negative impact on psychological well-being of a widow such include the risk of HIV infection, emotional abuse and exploitation of the widow. It recommends exploration of alternatives to widow inheritance rituals.

Keywords: Inheritance, Psychology, Widows, Women, Well-being, Kenya

General Introduction

Death is a reality that all must face. Death of a husband affects the widow since her life must change, living without a partner. Death of a husband disturb the wellness pattern of a widow. The death of a spouse is rated as among the most stressful life event that humans experience (Amster& Krauss, 1974), and yet, it is a common occurrence in the lives of midlife and older women. Almost one half of women over the age of 65 years are widowed (Fields & Casper, 2001).

Wife inheritance can be dehumanizing since the spouse is still mourning the death of her husband. Ajiboye (2016) discussed the world of widowhood in many African cultures that is characterized by dehumanizing cultural and ritual practices passed off as mourning rites. The rituals, that include wife cleansing and inheritance of the widow and all her husband's properties, subject the widows to various psychosocial challenges. Eboiyehi (2013) noted that the death of a spouse is a traumatic event that results into profound effects on their wellness and provokes important life changes, including the loss of an intimate companion that results into long-term psychosocial consequences Oniye (2000) further noted that the widows feel ignored and suffer within the society; they may lack self-esteem and feel loneliness and may live in state of fear as they lack groups to identify with. The psychosocial challenges do affect the wellness of the widow and especially widow who are forced with inheritance.

In global perspective, what is known to Africa as wife inheritance or widow inheritance is commonly known to the world as levirate marriage (Kudo, 2017). It has been practiced across the globe. According to Westreich (2019) levirate marriage was practiced among religious groups such as Muslim and Judaism. Eurasia, It was popular in; Scythia, Central Asia and Xingu, India, Indonesia, Japan, Manchu, and some countries in Africa. The traditional people believed that widow inheritance provided the widow with considerable security (Dah 1995: 25, Sandys 2001: 8). The word levirate comes from a Hebrews word levir which means brother-in-law. This was an ancient custom which was practiced among the Semitic people and the Arabs of Yemen (Holy Bible, Ruth Chapter 1:9-21, 4:1-6, Deuteronomy Chapter 25:5-10).

A review by the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (2000) indicated that the various psychosocial challenges experienced by the widows, include low status, poverty and violence, discrimination on inheritance, the patriarchal nature of society, and the domination of oppressive traditional practices and customary codes. According to Oniye (2000) some of the psychosocial challenges a widow faces are related to the income variations, living conditions, perceived health, status, and presence of a confidant. Oniye (2000) further noted that the widows feel ignored and suffer within the society; they may lack self-esteem and feel loneliness and may live in state of fear as they lack groups to identify with. The psychosocial challenges do affect the wellness of the widow. The study further contends that an adjustment strategy is crucial because a widow without proper adjustment or assistance is not only experiencing problems, but could be a problem to herself, her family and local community. The perceived inability to cope with the demands of living following the death of a spouse causes stress and this result into various psychosocial challenges and reduced wellness levels.

The Luo (Lwo) as a cultural group is found in South Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Ojwang' 2005, 72). The Luo are a patrilineal group that practices levirate as a means of taking care of the wife and home of a deceased brother. The custom is called *lako* or *ter* in the Luo language.

Lako as an institution stipulates that upon the death of a husband, his 'brother' takes up the roles and responsibilities of the deceased's 'home' including towards his wife (wives) and children; that is, he assumes the care of the deceased's 'home' (*dala*). The 'brother' who takes up the roles of the deceased is referred to as *jalako* or *jater*; and as Kirwen aptly puts it, the arrangement "is the cohabitation of a widow with her brother-in-law in which the brother-in-law relates to the widow as a substitute for her deceased husband" (Kirwen 1979, 3)

Statement of the problem

The loss of a loved one in most cases causes a lot of depression and some other problems in the life of the bereaved. Therefore, the society and close family members are expected to provide not only social support to the widow but also journey with her through the bereavement processes. However, the psychological wellbeing of the widow is deteriorated with the societal pressure to be inherited before the bereavement cycle is complete. This has escalated major depression, excessive use of alcohol, and anxiety disorders, including

panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and phobias among the widows. Ebinoluwa (2001) noted that women are treated like chattels (properties) they are subjected to several arduous and dehumanizing rites that violate some of their human rights and erode their self-esteem.

The institution of *lako* has aroused a very sharp debate in Kenya since about 1994 to date. This is majorly, but not only, due to the advent of HIV/ Aids and the wind of gender sensitivity. Of course, opposition to this institution by some Christian denominations began long before the two events, not only in Kenya but in the whole of Africa (Kirwen 1979, 1-4).

Another problem is that it only targets women. Widowers are not subjected to these sexual cleansing and inheritance. In fact, a man is free to remarry after the wife's death. The community does not dictate to him who to marry. So, the practice of wife inheritance is a violation to human and women rights. Women are treated as property of men.

Purpose of the Study

The general objective of this study is to examine the extent to which wife inheritance affect the psychological wellbeing of the inherited widows in Ugenya sub county, Kenya.

The specific objectives are:

- To examine the effects of wife inheritance rituals and the psychological wellness of inherited widows within Ugenya sub county, Kenya.
- To established the extent to which wife inheritance process and beliefs effect on the psychological wellbeing of a widow in Ugenya County.
- To establish coping mechanisms of inherited widows within Ugenya sub county can cope with their situation.

Research Questions

The study will seek to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the effects of wife inheritance rituals on the psychological wellness of widows within Ugenya sub county, Kenya?
2. To what extent does wife inheritance process and beliefs effect on the psychological wellbeing of a widow in Ugenya County?
3. What coping mechanisms do inherited widows use to enhance wellness in

Ugenya sub county, Kenya?

Design of the Study

To understand the psychological wellbeing and the adjustment mechanisms of inherited widows in the study, the researcher postulated that the three models; the Kubler-Ross Model, the dual process model of coping with bereavement by Stroebe and Schut (1999) and Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy by Albert Ellis would be applicable to this study.

The study adopted ethnographic Research design to gather an in-depth understanding of the challenges faced by the inherited widows after spousal death. Shuttleworth (2008) indicated that research design is a scientific method which involves observing and describing the behaviour of a subject without influencing it in any way. The research approach was qualitative and the participants were interviewed in their natural environments.

Population

The target population were widows who had lost their husbands and are most affected by customary practice of wife inheritance. The study targeted all the women who have been widowed and inherited in the study area. According to population & housing census (2019), there are 993183 people in Siaya County while that of Ugenya sub county is 134,354 people.

Kombo and Tromp (2009) define a target population as an entire group of people or objects that have at least one or more characteristics in common that are of interest to the researcher and from which samples are taken for measurements. The target population in this study were clergy, inherited widows, uninherited widows and local administrators. Ogula (2009) argues that the target population refers to the entire membership of the group that the researcher hopes to gain information from during the study and derive some generalized conclusions.

Sampling techniques and Sample Size

The study focused on inherited widows within Ugenya sub county that were selected purposively. Snowball sampling procedure was employed to identify the respondents, whose spouses had passed on and were congregants within the seven churches. Browne (2005) asserted that snowball sampling is best suited for those populations that are not known and are 'hidden' due to the sensitivity of

the topic. The choice of the snow balling procedure was influenced by the fact that the widow inheritance in the churches is a sensitive matter and the Catholic Church has been against it and so widows who have been inherited have remained silent and hidden among the church population. The snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling method, and the researcher will use his own judgment and consultations with the church ministers to choose the initial participants and request those participants to refer him to others they knew. Purposive sampling was used to select the 73 respondents that comprised of 36 inherited widows, 13 widows who are not inherited, 6 clergies, 6 women leaders, 6 local government leaders and 6 Luo clan elders.

Research instrument

The data was collected using in-depth interview guides and Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) to illuminate the lived experiences of the inherited widows and the challenges they have experienced after the spousal death. The in-depth interview guide method was chosen as it allows for flexibility of gathering information on the participants 'experiences.

The questionnaires contain close-ended and open-ended questions. The respondents will be able to communicate their opinions, views, suggestions and give recommendations freely. Scales of psychological wellbeing by Carol Ryff (1989) was used to measure the psychological wellbeing of inherited widows. The Questionnaire for inherited (QFI) was a five point Likert type questionnaire used to determine the respondents' responses with the items through the following response options; Strongly agree (SA), Agree (A) undecided, (UD) Decided (D), Strongly disagree (SD), weighted 5,4,3,2 and 1 respectively. The mean and standard Deviation were used to answer the research questions. The criterions mean score of the data collected was 3.00. The description is as follows:

$$\begin{array}{cccccc} \text{SA} & \text{A} & \text{UD} & \text{D} & \text{SD} & \\ 5 & 4 & 3 & 2 & 1 & = \frac{15}{5} = 3.00 \end{array}$$

All the items with mean (\bar{x}) scores which were equal to or greater than 3.0 were accepted, while those with less than 3.0 were rejected. By motivating the respondents to express their feelings, data was collected to provide their views and perceptions on psychological challenges on inherited widows. Information

obtained from the interview with the respondents will be transcribed and then analysed.

Results

The first objective of this study was to examine how wife inheritance rituals contribute to the psychological well-being of an inherited widow. The study unravels rituals like sexual cleansing, changing the house, shaving the hair, ritual concerning the dead as well as ending the bond with the dead and burial rituals conducted for the dead.

One cannot understand the alternative rituals of widow cleansing without having a full understanding of the ritual of widow cleansing itself. Widow cleansing is a ritual which demands a widow to have sexual intercourse with another man, normally one of her brothers-in-law in order to let the spirit of the deceased rest in peace among the dead. The rationale behind this ritual is the belief that the spirit of the deceased husband still recognizes the widow as his wife, hence interfering with any relationship the widow might establish. The ritual of widow cleansing was however challenged by various groups especially at the dawn of the HIV and AIDS pandemic. Through increased awareness about the HIV and AIDS malady and its widespread effects on human health, communities in Zambia have adopted alternative cleansing rituals to cleanse widows without the act of sexual intercourse. While many scholars have hailed the alternative rituals to the extent of encouraging them, the question about women's sexual rights seem to have been ignored. Studies have shown that although the alternative rituals do not involve sexual contact, some of them are done in a manner that comprise the sexual rights of women. The disregards for and of women's sexual rights causes the marginalization and denial of their social, political and economic rights. Sexual cleansing is part of the social transition process for widows to become eligible to remarry after the death of her husband.

This ritual is conducted to cleanse the widow of evil spirits resulting from the death of her husband. All the participants described sexual cleansing as a widely known practice within the community. The reasons for the practice were defined as participants explaining the ritual and the purpose of sexual cleansing. Most of the participants mentioned sexual cleansing removes impurity ascribed to her, protects the children, and homestead, and upholds tradition.

Sexually cleansed widows reported their knowledge of the practice when asked “what are some of the reasons why a widow is sexually cleansed in this community?” Most of the participants mentioned sexual cleansing removes impurity or evil to protect the children, extended family, community, and homestead. Every widow mentioned that she was perceived in the community as having a bad omen because of the death of her husband. A widow must be sexually cleansed to remove bad omen, and sex must be part of sexual cleansing. Only one participant mentioned that cleansing should be done publicly so that community members know that the widow has been rid of a bad omen. If the widow is not cleansed, she cannot visit other people's homes, mingle freely with others, collect water from the river, and eat with her children.

Have you been inherited?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	30	61.2	61.2	61.2
	No	19	38.8	38.8	100.0
Total		49	100.0	100.0	

(Source Field Data, 2022)

Table4.1: Have you been inherited

The study showed that 61.2% (30) widows have been inherited and 38.8% (19) had not been inherited. This confirms that wife inheritance is still prevalent in the community and it is a practice that cannot be eliminated easily. The above data support Perry, et al., (2014) that confirms that widow inheritance is part of the Luo community and there are meta factors that maintain the traditions. Such factors include taboos, curses, social stigma and social isolation from the community. In the African traditional context, the death of the husband signifies the social death of the widow, the widow loses the breadwinner and a partner.

The members believe that inheritance is important. This practice is carried out for many reasons which include: retaining the family's health, where they believe if she is re-married to another man, it will benefit her new family. The practice is also for continuity of the deceased's family and also to support the kids of her late husband. For instance, fear of taboo tends to exploit widows through fear of being mad, getting diseases, misfortunes and the like. Intimidations can also be associated with alienation, withdrawal of economic support and social barriers, hence, widows are left with no choice but to oblige.

The belief itself affects the psychological well-being of a widow. For instance, widows who say no to such practices with claims that are Christian may be

isolated by the family and may associate any misfortune with their failure to perform the ritual. The Church was very critical of its members during these circumstances. Wives of Church workers and converts were not to be subjected to widowhood rituals. When a female member of the Church lost her husband, members of her group assembled in her home to share her grief. Christian widows were to sit on a chair and receive condolences from friends and relatives.

The Luo society had the worldview that a wife was communal in the sense that she was literally owned by the society. This was based on the rites and practices surrounding the whole concept of marriage. For instance, negotiations for marriage, and payment of dowry were in many cases a joint effort of members of the bridegroom’s family. Hence in the event of the demise of the husband, a widow was seen as having lost a base and therefore members of the family had to come in to fill this vacuum. Death of a spouse did not dissolve marriage; therefore, woman should not remarry but have an inheritor (Oluoch 2013). However, this paper does not envision a difference between remarrying and having an inheritor apart from the fact that certain rites involved in marriage (for example dowry payment) are not performed in the case of inheritance. According to Oluoch the arrangement is the cohabitation

Took part in sexual cleansing?

	Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Did not take part in the cleansing ritual	15	30.6	30.6	69.4
Took part in Traditional cleansing	34	69.4	69.4	100.0
Total	49	100.0	100.0	

(Source Field Data, 2022).

Table 4.2: Took part in sexual cleansing

The study shows that majority of women took part in the sexual cleansing ritual as per the community requirement. Among women who took part in the focused group discussion, 69.4% (34) confessed that they took part in sexual cleansing, and 30.6% (15) indicated that they did not take part in the ritual. In the focused group, discussion women who had participated in the cleansing expressed that following the community tradition was the best thing after the passing of their husband. They also expressed that apart from sexual cleaning there are other

rituals that they had to undergo when their husband died. For instance, widow rites were conducted after the death of the husband. Widows confessed that their acceptance to the community and family did not only depend on how well they conform to the tradition but also on cooperation with their in-law's demands hence living them with no choice but to accept the rituals. The rituals entail shaving the hair, (*Tero Chola*), and changing the house, (*Loko Ot*) which must be done after the death of the husband and require a man.

Do you agree with the following statements regarding inheritance?						
S/N	ITEMS ON Psychological Wellbeing of Widowhood	N	Range	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Before engaging in sexual ritual the congregation used to respect me but today the story has changed.	36	4	124	3.44	1.611
2	I have lost the companionship I used to enjoy when my husband was alive because of the ritual.	36	4	110	3.06	1.433
3	I was forcefully cleansed by my in-laws	36	4	137	3.81	1.527
4	I feel people look down on me because am with an inheritor and went through the ritual.	36	4	114	3.17	1.298
5	My in-laws and people around me treat me like an outcast because I am inherited by an outsider	36	4	97	2.69	1.167
6	The number of suitors that come to me for remarriage is few especially the young unmarried ones because of the sexual ritual	36	4	121	3.36	1.496
7	I am worried I might have acquired a Sexually transmitted infection during cleansing	36	4	107	2.97	1.540
	Valid N (listwise)	36				

(Source, Field Data, 2022)

Table4.3: Psychological Wellbeing of Widowhood

From table 4.8 above items, 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6 have their mean (\bar{x}) score above the criterion of 3.00, hence were accepted by the respondents as possible for deterioration of psychological wellbeing of the inherited widows. While items 7 and that is below the criterion mean of 3.00 were rejected as psychological well-being of an inherited widow. Other problems that were also identified were anxiety, the desire to commit suicide, aggression and depression. For instance, some widows explained they have experienced intimate partner violence and emotional abuse by the inheritor which made the desire to die.

The study sought to examine the strategy used by the widows to examine the coping strategy used by the widow. The strategy was divided into two parts how widows cope with widowhood and how they cop up with inheritance. The study shows that both strategies were very detrimental to their psychological wellbeing.

What are the coping strategies of widows to widowhood stress?

	N	Range	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1 Cognitive Restructuring	35	4	122	3.49	1.337
2 Problem Solving	36	4	163	4.53	1.055
3 Express Emotion	36	4	114	3.17	1.298
4 Social Support	36	4	111	3.08	1.519
5 Self-Criticism	36	4	119	3.31	1.546
6 Problem Avoidance	36	4	130	3.61	1.626
7 Social Withdrawal	36	4	120	3.33	1.394
8 Wishful Thinking	36	4	148	4.11	1.466
Valid N (listwise)	35				

(Source Field Data, 2022)

Table 4. 4: What are the coping strategies of widows to widowhood stress?

The results in Table 4.11 showed that the range of the means for the nine coping strategies was from 3.31 to 4.53; whereas the standard deviation ranged from 1.055 to 1.526. The close values of the means and the low values of the standard deviations are indications of homogeneity among the respondents. Hence, research findings from these data could be relied upon, and generalizations could be accepted with minimal error. The study support Enekeme (2014) who noted that widows tend to withdraw themselves and have wishful thinking during the time they are bereaved. There are defence mechanisms that take place during the bereavement cycle, especially during the bargaining stage.

Conclusion

Based on the study findings this study concludes that inherited widows experience both negative and positive psychological well-being depending on the inheritor. Inheritance, provide widows with the emotional support that enhances their psychological well-being some widows also receive financial and labour support from the inheritors that help them cope with the loss. However, inheritance has also a negative impact on the psychological well-being of a widow including the risk of HIV infection, emotional abuse and exploitation of the widow.

This study recommends the following.

1. There is a need to create awareness of mental health among the widows
2. The church should come up with an alternative that enables young widows to meet their sexual needs in a dignified way.
3. The church should stop condemning windows that opted for widow cleansing. This will enable them to open up and seek help when having psychological problems.
4. More HIV and AIDs awareness should be created by the government and economic support for the widows is required to reduce their vulnerability.

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