

## **Culture as Tool of Widow's Plight in Africa: A Study of Bayo Adebowale's Lonely Days**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Prejudices against women in Africa are culturally deep-rooted. Cultural practices in Africa have consistently impinged on the dignity and rights of women in Africa. This paper explores some of the practices presented in Lonely Days by Bayo Adebowale that impinged on the dignity and rights of women in Africa. Some of the practices that make life worst for the widows in Africa are: false accusation, cap-picking ceremony and widows' path. These practices worsen the condition of widows who deserve compassion not cruel treatment. The paper quotes different instances of widows' suffering caused by cultural practices from the text where Kufi village is used to symbolize Africa. The paper recommends among other things: cultural practices should be ignored as they are contradictory and widows deserve to be taken care of considering the life they going into.*

**KEYWORD:** culture, tool, widow, plight, Africa.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In many cultures, prejudices against women are in fact deep-rooted. Widowhood practices are among the prejudices that have consistently impinged on the dignity and rights on women in our different cultures in Africa. However, widowhood rituals in the majority of African societies are now only reserved for widows with complex guiding rules, not for widowers for whom the culture or tradition has prescribed little to no mourning customs. Without a doubt, every successful marriage ends when one or both of the partners pass away. The loss of a spouse, however, might be the most severe life crisis since it ruptures many of the strongest emotional ties that were developed over a lifetime. Ironically, though, when a woman loses her husband, the impact of his passing is sometimes more overpowering on the woman. This is due to the fact that the woman is

primarily traumatized and disordered by such growth as a result of the terrifying experiences she would face as a result of widowhood ceremonies. Therefore, “widowhood rituals” refers to the ceremonies held for a woman when her spouse passes away. These rights serve as guidelines for the widows’ behavior, including how others should treat her, as well as the rituals the widow performs on her own behalf or on behalf of the widowed person.

### **Widowhood practices in Africa**

In giving a general overview of African culture as it affects the right of women in Africa. Lasebinka (2001) observes “In Africa, the widow is oppressed, suppressed, afflicted, neglected, suspected and insulted”. She adds that it is rare to discover a Yoruba man who dies naturally, whether he was a polygamist or a monogamist, the wife quickly becomes a suspect. Unfortunately, the situation described above is not exclusive to Yoruba people. According to Tei-Ahontu (2008), there is a belief in the Ga traditional territory of Accra, Ghana, that regardless of how natural a person’s death may appear to be, there is unquestionably a cause.

As a result, one of the horrific nightmares that a woman may experience after her husband passes away in various African cultures is the scandalous accusation from the deceased husband’s relatives of having a hand in the man’s death, regardless of how peaceful they might have lived, especially when the women had not been in a good relationship with them. When this occurs, the widow is frequently forced to swear on a Juju, spend the night before burial in the same bed with her late husband’s body, or even be forced to drink the water that is drained from the husband’s body as a sign of her innocence. The health risks posed by infectious and contagious diseases in today’s world have made it necessary to physically and psychologically become dehumanized. The death of the widow’s spouse announces a period of incarceration and hostility for her as she may have enjoyed every measure of freedom and goodwill while her husband was alive Tei-Ahontu (2008). During the grieving phase, she is unable to move freely, and culture bans her from using anything more than torn, worn out eating intestines made of gourds to eat. She is not expected to be joyful, laughing, talking or playing with others during this time because she is expected to be filthy and abhorrent and she is expected to be treated indifferently by everyone else. She is also required to continuously weep and lament over her deceased husband. She is required to wear mourning clothes, which is frowned upon and might result in death or social exclusion. All of these and more, in Okoye’s (1995) opinion, distinguish her as a creature at war with the outside world until she frees herself by performing all widowhood rites, marking her out as an outsider in the normal community of men.

The widowhood rite that depersonalizes, dehumanizes and blatantly violates the woman’s claim to dignity is the washing ritual, which is thought to cleanse the widow and help her reintegrate into the society from which she had been essentially excluded since her husband’s passing away. The widow is presented to a ‘ritual cleanser’ who will engage in sexual activity with her to remove

what is thought to be the taboo set over her, as is the case in some locations in Anambra state. This is always under the rigorous control or supervision of the 'Mada' who are the land's daughters. Samuel (2009) opines that the concept of widowhood has persisted to be horrifying experiences among Edo people of South-south Nigeria, as widows face grave health risks in addition to other degrading circumstances. Ironically, the 'Mada' as previously indicated who oversee the implementation of these widowhood customs are themselves women, possibly feature widows. Amadi (2002) has expressed her consternation in the fact that it is not only that these dehumanizing widowhood rites are enshrined in the culture and tradition of the people, but also;

That women who are daughters of the lineage (Umuada)

Have been socialized to accept and uphold these

Traditions by being administrators that administer

These dehumanizing and subjugation rites to follow women

Ezeigbo (1996) also shares in Amadi's deep consternation by the saddening observation with regards to his community-Arochukwu in the present Abia state, Nigeria that in accordance with tradition, it is the daughters of the family who are also wives and mothers in other households that are in charge of administering or overseeing the administration of similar ordeals to other women. Amadi (2002) emphasizes that this circumstance merely allows the 'Mada' who have now attained the lofty rank of quasi-demigoddesses, to exert their own control over other women, who are supposed to be the guardians of culture, may have gained the respect of the men in their community and now wish to maintain their position of authority.

The African women, as epitomized in the 'Mada', have, however, grown extremely pitifully oblivious to their own future in stability as a result of their indoctrination in the institutionalization of these behaviours in varied cultures. This just serves to confirm the idea that society has been covertly biased against African women's ways of thinking and perspectives on life. Ironically, it is mistakenly believed that the adoption of these ceremonies was done in order to safeguard the widow, her family and society as a whole. In light of the aforementioned, culture and society have covertly perverted people's thinking and perception against them, necessitating an urgent need for reorientation. However, widowhood customs have 'completely become outdated', as a result, increased coordinated attempts should be made to eradicate them entirely in the current world, which is teeming with cultured and sophisticated minds.

About the Novel

*Lonely Days* is a tale that exposes the unsavoury traditions and rituals that widows in Africa are made to endure. By describing Yerimi and other widows from Kufi village and their traumatic and agonizing experiences after losing their spouses, the author exposes this cruel custom. Yerimi, a powerful widow in Kufi village, is the main character of the text which is about her experiences as a lonely lady. Yerimi is the widow of the brave and successful hunter, Ajumobi. The three kids she has are named Segi, Alani and Wura. Yerimi like women in other African societies, must deal with a number of rites and practices after her husband's passing away, as well as accusations of murder. Yaremi is now left on her own to deal with life as a widow after going through all of things.

Woye, a young boy, is Yaremi's grandchild and Segi's son. He stays with Yaremi during these trying times. The boy assists Yaremi in both her market business and the creation of the coloured goods she sells to make living. Yaremi is required to choose a new husband after a brief period of remembering the good times, grieving for her deceased husband, and attempting to cope with the new life of loneliness that the death of her husband provides. A day before she must choose a new spouse during the cap-picking ceremony, Dedewe, Fayoyin and Radeke-three widows whom Yaremi used to feel sorry for before she too became a widow, visit her to give her comfort and encouragement.

Due to the loss of her husband and the affection she still has for, Yaremi has become rigid and quickly uncompromising. To the great shock of the people, Yaremi rejects all three of the men who introduced themselves to in front of the entire village; Ayunwale, a well known drummer, Olonade. A successful wood carver and Lanwe, a successful farmer who is also Ajumobi's half brother. The elderly were 'overwhelmed and speechless'. Due to her act of obstinacy, 'a conspiracy' is sprouting that could cause her to be shunned or completely eliminated from Kufi village. Before being expelled from Kufi, Yaremi makes the decision to depart and head back to own birthplace of Adeyipo.

Segi, Yaremi's first child and daughter, pay her mother a visit a week after the new husband-picking incident to console her and inform her that there was 'no cause on earth for' a second marriage or new husband. Woye, Segi's little son who has been residing with Yaremi, is concerned with the current problems. Woye decides to accompany his mother when she departs for her husband's home with ambition of attending school. Yaremi then gets ready to leave Kufi, but she waits for Alani, who has not been seen in ten years, to make a 'timely appearance'. Ibadan is where Alani resides. Alani is shown the farmlands of his father by uncle Deyo, a friend of Yaremi's spouse, which have been abandoned since his passing away. It is the son's responsibility, according to uncle Deyo, to take care of his father's possession. When fire burns, it succeeds itself with wood ashes;

Despite all these Alani is not moved. The next day, he approaches his mother, Yaremi and explains to her that he cannot stay in the village to tend any farm. He has a booming carpentry business in the city which he wants to face squarely in a bid to marry a pretty city girl who is now heavy with pregnancy and also to take his mother to his home in the city in the end.

#### About the Author

Bayo Adebowale was born on 6<sup>th</sup> June, 1944. He is a Nigerian novelist, poet, professor, critic, librarian and founder of the African Heritage library and cultural centre, Adeyipo, Ibadan, Oyo state, Nigeria.

#### **Cultura Practices that Subject Widows to Hardship in the Text**

i. False accusation and superstitious belief: the text presents Ajumobi's death, the husband to Yaremi as appearing to be natural. After returning from the farm, he complains of headache, he then returns to bed and does not get up again. The resident of Kufi, his hometown, coincidentally heard a hawk hooking from an iroko tree that evening. As a result, rumours begin to circulate that Ajumobi did not pass away naturally. As it is stated in the text: 'This woman has killed her husband! She turned into a hawk and killed her man! That is not an ordinary bird, for sure, on the roof of the house' (LD, P.43). through this false accusation, the author demonstrates how superstitious beliefs cause people to falsely accuse widows in Africa, not just in the Yoruba society to which Adebowale belongs. The text's narrator informs us of how 'sympathisers' behave even before Yaremi makes an explicit charge in the quote below:

She was scanned by mourners in all directions. All eyes followed every footstep she took with hostile closeness. And all ears listened, ready to catch her every word in a set-trap. These, obviously, were not people merely sitting in silent sympathy in the presence of death, but people who were fully bent on humiliating her and destroying her reputation. (LD, P. 3).

The above quotation shows that even the mourners are motivated by the desire to humiliate Yaremi and harm her reputation since they hold her responsible for the death of her husband. Despite her innocence, the mourners accuse her of being the cause of Ajumobi's passing away thereby using her as a scapegoat. Furthermore, her late husband's extended family participates in maltreating her: 'Then followed, after few days the extended family's mockery heaped on her like the strange showers of January rain.... (LD, P. 3-4). Yaremi is further described as:

Yaremi's eyes twinkled. She did not know whether to begin to shed tears of sorrow or tears of gratitude. It must be tears of sorrow. Sorrows from the abyss of a troubled heart. Yaremi's face instantly shadowed in deep misery and the whole world immediately went blank before her eyes. (LD, P. 1)

The passage above shows how Yaremi felt when she lost her husband even though has not stopped his relatives and people of Kufi from accusing her of having a hand in his death. Apart from Yaremi, Adebowale talks about the suffering and humiliation through false accusation that Dedewe, Fayoyin and Radeke, three other widows, have experienced. In the same vain, these three widows have also been blamed for the death of their husbands by people of Kufi. Dedewe, for instance is subjected to sobbing nonstop throughout the night as she ponders on the humiliation she went through in the hands of her husband's relatives. The following passage says all about her plight:

Confess, confess, confess. Ask your husband to have mercy. Kneel down and beg him for forgiveness. Confess Dedewe, to avoid the punishment of heaven. The punishment of heaven comes down furiously and mercilessly like a burning inferno. The guilty ones cannot escape it! Confess Dedewe. To the sin of jealousy and to the sin of adultery. The sin of defamation and disparagement. Those big lies you used to tell against him to spoil his good name! (LD, P. 26)

The aforementioned passage demonstrates how Dedewe has been subjected to torture in order for her to confess her purported misdeeds. They have gone too far by locking her alongside her husband's body in the hope that she commits suicide out of guilt over his death. This superstitious notion is useless because the poor widow, who is completely innocent, has not done anything.

The second widow, Fayoyin, too suffered. When her husband passes away, people give liberation to lick in an effort to atone for all the crimes they believe she has committed. As if this was not enough, they the present her to mourners, who are seated with gloomy, miserable faces. People do things that go against their culture's rules out of hatred for her, including sprinkling cold water on her hair and calling a barber who immediately gets to work. He clenches his teeth and starts scraping with a 'sharp crocodile nacet' blade while supporting Fayoyin's head between his thighs. Through the following words, the elders support the barber:

Cut the hair down to the root. Even if the skin on the head has to be bruised in the process! Bruise it, for goodness sake! We hope your razor is sharp enough to do the job the way we want it done? Cut this woman's hair totally down to her scalp! Sprinkle her head with wood ash and oil it with paraffin ointment. (LD, P. 27).

The above passage shows just how awful the maltreatment of that defenseless widow was. By the time the barber is done, Fayoyin's appearance has drastically changed. The author reveals the extent to which the suffering experienced by widows in the Yoruba community is generally harsh, humiliating and dehumanizing via the maltreatment of the character of Fayoyin.

The third widow, Radeke, kneels before her loving husband's body and sings the customary song of mourning and innocence. People curse the murderer they believe she is despite her pleas. The narrator describes it to us in these words:

Darkness never ends for the rodent entrapped inside a calabash container. Forever the killer will be hungry and be perpetually in debt. She will be ridiculed in public places like a lunatic. Like a ram caught in the thicket, she will remain immobile. Not progressing. Not retrogressing. Just waiting confused, at crossroads of life! (LD, P. 28)

Radeke is impliedly referred to by the personal pronoun 'she' in the aforementioned quotation, despite the fact that this is not explicitly stated. As the narrator continues to explain, though, things start to make more sense thus: 'They cursed the women they thought was the killer of Radeke's husband all through eyeing Radeke herself suspiciously' (LD, P. 28).

Cap-picking ceremony: another cultural practice that worsens the widows' plight is the pressure put on them by the African society to get married. The importance of marriage is evident through the message delivered by the other widows, namely Dedewe, Radeke and Fayoyin when they advise Yaremi to engage in a new marriage: 'No woman's life is ever complete without a man to pop her on in the arduous journey of this world' (LD, P. 111).

The three widows advise Yaremi and show her the necessity of choosing a husband in order to make her life full of sense. To make the matter worst, Yaremi was forced by the community to be part of the cap-picking ceremony where all widows would have to choose a new husband by just picking his cap. Thus:

The last cap-picking ceremony took place ten years back, when three widows of the village-Fayoyin, Dedewe and Radeke- had the opportunity to choose new men to replace their dead husbands. It was that time, a solemn occasion, devoid of any ostentation and flamboyance... but today's ceremony carried with it a noticeable pomp. The crowd was ready; the village rara chanters had braced up; the flute on the alert; and the mistrels were poised for a great show. (LD, P. 109). Yaremi is the latest widow to get husband through cap-picking ceremony and the ex-widows knowing really how difficult it is for to choose just a cap to replace her loving husband prayed and visited Yaremi on it. The narrator states:

Dedewe, Fayoyin and Radeke sat among the crowd in their capacity as ex-widows, earnestly mumbling prayers for their young colleague who was today going to be placed on trial. They know how difficult it was going to be, closing an old familiar chapter of life, and opening a new unknown chapter. They had visited Yaremi at home the previous night and had counseled her, pledging their solidarity and support. (LD, P. 111).

The above quotation shows how widows are maltreated because they had to accept the dictate of their tradition. As the three widows testify:

... but we quickly re-adjusted and embraced the demands of tradition. The tradition of our people is the guiding light opening our eyes to many things. It reshaped our attitude and transformed our behavior. (LD, P. 111).

In spite of what they go through, the widows gladly accept it because their tradition says so. The narrator continues: ‘we picked new caps, following the dictates of tradition. We wore the caps’ (LD, P. 111).

The widows accepted their fate because their tradition dictates and they surrendered because they have nothing to do.

Widows Road: another important cultural practice presented by the author is widows’ road where a road was reserved to be used only by the widows. One notices how difficult things are for the widows because the road is described as:

The narrow river road at Kufi upon which the high foliage sprinkled drops of sunlight had been the widow’s road, long before Yaremi ‘ever became a widow. This lonely road sloped right in front of the Old St. Andrew’s church building, through a region of forests hammed with tall palm trees and the giant Araba, straight onto the village stream. Lines and twined round trees along the road and raised their heads as they approached the top, like snakes about to strike. The road, thenceforth, meandered through stony pavements and crooked laterite hedges and was slippery and lacerated with gulleys during rainy season... (LD, P. 20).

The aforementioned passage demonstrates how the narrator describes the widows’ road to further suggest the misery the widows are subjected to by the cultural practices. A widow has to be taught how to use the road as the narrator puts:

Take time. Take your time. This road is muddy. You know it is a special road. The widows’ road. If flatten your feet on this road, you are in trouble. If you tip-toe on this road you are doomed. You just must learn to take one step at a time; gently, gently, millimeter by millimeter, like the cautious millipede, on this road of life. (LD, P. 21).

The narrator adds ‘the road is slimy and greasy-short in length and crooked in shape, like the walking stick of an old man’. (LD, P. 21).



Even though, the widows are made to use this road as symbolic of lack of freedom to use any road of their choice, the road gives relief and a sense of belonging to community. The narrator continues:

Here on this road, widows were free to raise their voices, like birds just released from captivity and returning to the village. It was their habit to sing improvised songs of sorrow- their voices quivering with emotion, drifting through the bush, before anybody ever met them and... (LD, P. 21).

## **CONCLUSION**

This article dealt with how widows suffer in Africa as a result of tradition and culture. Adebowale portrays Yoryba culture which puts widows in great danger. It is evident in the text that four widows- Yaremi, Radeke, Dedewe and Fayoyin faced a lot of hardship after the death of their husbands. Widows need compassion from their communities but African society as presented by Kufi village puts them in great danger. The article explores on three of such instances from the text which are false accusation, cap-picking ceremony and widows road. These and many others make widowhood a difficult thing to withstand in Africa.

## **Recommendation**

The researchers make the following recommendations:

Traditional practices must be ignored as they also contradict themselves. For instance, the widows accused of killing their husbands should not be integrated if at all the accusation has substance. If what they are asked to do is meant to cleanse them, they should be set free but the tradition accuses them and still members of the same community troop to marry them.

Widows need sympathy and compassion: since they lost their husbands, the society should pity them and make them feel part of it.

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