



Socio-Economic Implications of Widow Inheritance Rituals

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ABSTRACT

Widow inheritance is a prevalent cultural practice among some Asian and Sub Saharan African communities and has been found to affect the lives of widows. The general purpose of this study was to establish socio-economic implications of widow inheritance rituals. The objectives of the study were to: describe the rituals associated with widow inheritance, decipher the underlying cultural meaning and value of widow inheritance rituals and explore the socio-economic implications of widow inheritance rituals. The theoretical framework was anchored on Clifford Geertz theory of the interpretation of culture. This theory puts emphasis on the uniqueness of a ritual that one may not find even in a similar culture. The uniqueness derives from their loci. Descriptive research design was adopted in this study. The study population was 214 people of Kagan clan in Homabay County. Simple random sampling was used to select 48 widows, 7 Luo elders and 10 HIV intervention officers. The study sample therefore, comprised a total of 65 key informants. Interviews and questionnaires were used to collect data from the sampled respondents. The test-retest approach was used to determine the reliability of the research instruments and validity of the instruments was ascertained by presenting the questionnaires and interview guide to experts who are authorities in the study area for scrutiny and advice on the instruments. Qualitative thematic analysis was the main method adopted in analyzing data. The researcher found out that despite the original good intentions of widow inheritance rituals, the current practice involving professional inheritors, an alternative as cleansing ritual, has made widows vulnerable to HIV and AIDS and the practice was degrading and humiliating the widows. The study concluded that widow inheritance has got adverse effects on widows' socio-economic lives. Therefore the study recommended that community based education targeting the Luo elders, widow inheritors and inherited widows should be enhanced so that safer sexual practices are adopted even as widow inheritance rituals continue. In addition, widows and inheritors empowerment through education is necessary to enable them make informed choices.

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1. Introduction

Widow inheritance or levirate marriage is a socio-cultural practice in which a widow is obligated to be married to a male family member of her deceased husband. It is well known in the Hebrew tradition and is practised in varied forms in patriarchal cultures across the world. It is widespread in India and in sub-Saharan African countries like Senegal, Uganda, Malawi, Zambia, Nigeria, Cameroon and Kenya (Ntozi, 1997). The prevalence of widow inheritance ritual in some Sub-Africa communities has been found out to have adverse socio-economic implications among widows. It contributes to the risk of HIV spread and leads to adverse socio-economic burden on the part of women yet it has not deterred the practice. This implies that there is underlying meaning and value attached to the practice (Agot et al., 2010).

According to Kuhr (2014) widow inheritance is one of the major obstacles to family food security. Kuhr (2014) further reports that in Ghana, Nigeria and Ivory Coast, women, who are often considered subordinate to men, are rarely able to control their deceased spouses' land. This means they also cannot profit from gardening or sell the land, putting women at a severe, continued economic disadvantage.

The issue of the right to own land by the widows to empower them economically has not been fully realized among Luo of Kagan which warrants the study.

In Tanzania, the cultural practice of widow cleansing and inheritance have been identified to elevate the HIV/AIDS prevalence in some communities (UNESCO, 2015). According to UNESCO (2015) during antenatal clinic attendance, women who had been confirmed as HIV positive were often blamed by the society for infecting their spouses. The researcher deduces from UNESCO (2015) that this stereotyping about HIV and AIDS has persistently caused discrimination and stigma, especially against women because of gender customs which brand women as agents of HIV transmission. The impact of cleansing rituals associated with widow inheritance therefore needs to be delved into especially in the context of stigmatization and discrimination towards widows who have contracted HIV and AIDS in Kagan.

Among the Luhya people of Kenya, Ige and Quinlan (2012) observe that the final funeral rituals of widow inheritance were undertaken forty days after the burial of the late husband.

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The ceremony happened at night and the marriage was consummated that very night with the brother of the deceased. The following day, the widow shaved her pubic area, signifying the cutting of ties with the deceased husband and marking a new beginning. Although some contemporary Luhya are against widow inheritance, the practice is still present. Furthermore, refusal to undergo the widow inheritance ceremony can make the widow's life difficult and even lead to stigma. Concerning the widow inheritance rituals among the Luo, several researchers have euphemistically mentioned these ritual activities in passing because sexual intercourse is considered a taboo topic that many do not want to speak about. This study, therefore sought to explicitly outline these ritual activities amongst the Luo.

Among the Luo people, widows are barred from official remarriage and are also not allowed to have other sexual partners before they are inherited. Instead, the widows from the Luo community are persuaded to get an inheritor (substitute husband) from the lineage of the late spouse via *ter* (culturally-endorsed remarriage), a condition culturally referred to as widow inheritance. Through *ter*, the inheritor (*jater*) assumes the economic responsibility of the late husband's family, plus the wife, in order for the late husband's property to remain within the family (Gunga, 2009; Ntozi 1997). In this context, the deceased's wife is considered as property of the family. Nevertheless, among the Luo people, the widow stays as the deceased wife, and not the inheritor's wife. The Luo culture of *ter* also involves cleansing of the widow as a requirement for returning her normalcy into the society, a way of diffusing the malevolent spirits and averting *chira* (punishment due to taboo violation). The meaning and value attached to the cleansing role of *jater* in avoiding *chira* needs to be re-examined.

A study by Onyango (2009) found that widow inheritance among the Luo has evolved to the extent that a number of men were no longer fascinated in inheriting the widows of their late brothers. This has given rise to a category of men locally termed as a professional *joter* basically translating to professionals in remarrying. These men are known for not providing material assistance for the widows they stay with. They are merely opportunistic aiming to profiteer from the resources left for the widow by the deceased husband, in addition to one more sexual partner. Professional *Joter* have multiple sexual partners which increases the risk of infecting several widows with disease. The socio-economic impacts of the current widow inheritance practices and emergence of a professional *jater* is one of the aspects discussed in this work. This study focused on widow inheritance among the Kagan people of Homabay County in Kenya.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Widow inheritance (*ter*) as a ritual, is a major causative factors of the spread of HIV/AIDS; this coupled with associated increasing economic burdens on widows should have discouraged the practice. However, the persistence of widow inheritance rituals has continued amongst the Luo people in Kenya regardless of the ravages of HIV/AIDS.

According to National AIDS and STI control programme (NASCOP) over 80% of HIV spread in Kenya is conveyed by means of risky sexual contacts promoted by traditional rituals. It is also estimated that the prevalence rate among adults in Homabay county was the highest in Kenya at 27.1% in the year 2012 (National AIDS Control Council, 2014). However, *ter* is still prevalent, which implies that that this ritual is meaningful and significant among the Luo. Since *ter*

is associated with sexual intercourse, it makes it a taboo topic and so many do not want to talk about it. This study therefore aims to highlight the meaning, significance and socio-economic impact of widow inheritance on the widow among the Luo of Kagan.

1.2 Research Questions

- i) What are the rituals associated with widow inheritance?
- ii) What are the underlying cultural meaning and value of widow inheritance rituals?
- iii) What are the socio-economic implications of widow inheritance on the widows?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The general purpose of this study was to establish socio-economic implications of widow inheritance rituals.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The findings of this study are of significance to the various stakeholders in the public health and to NASCOP. Having the knowledge of a clear understanding of the impact of widow inheritance rituals among the Kagan people of Homabay County would be very relevant. First it will examine the cultural meaning and value of widow inheritance in relation to socio economic implications. Secondly, the study will enable the Luo council of elders to review some of the activities which are not in sync with the current socio economic realities. Finally, it would form useful reference material for other researchers in this area or readers in general.

2. Methodology

In this study the data was collected using interviews schedules and questionnaires. The interview schedule was used to collect information from the Luo elders and the widows. The open ended questions in each interview schedule were used to gather information related to widow inheritance rituals, their underlying meaning, value and socio-economic implications on the widows. The study used one questionnaire for the HIV/AIDS Intervention officers. Questionnaire consisted of information related to health implications of widow inheritance rituals.

Validity was established through discussions with experts. The reliability of 0.75 was established for the questionnaires for the HIV/AIDS Intervention officers using Pearson's product moment correlation test. To ensure reliability of interview schedule, the researcher personally led the respondents through the areas to be covered during piloting. The interview schedule was systematically modified as the interview progressed during try-out. The study utilized qualitative thematic analysis in analysing the qualitative data

3. Results of the Study

Data obtained from the data collection instruments were systematically analyzed and presented as follows:

Research Question 1

What are the rituals associated with widow inheritance?

The study aimed at describing the rituals associated with widow inheritance in Kagan of Homabay County. The study findings were presented as rituals before inheritance, rituals during inheritance and the post inheritance period rituals.

Rituals before inheritance

Following the death of a husband, one respondent explained that a strip of banana fibres (*Okola*) was tied by the widow around her waist to strengthen her during bereavement. In the meantime, the rod that formed the peak of the grass thatched houses in the home (*osuri*) was removed to confirm that the home was kingless or lost its head. It was equivalent to flag flown half mast. This was a sign that the homestead normal function was disrupted. In addition, the

widow was expected to shave her hair as another ritual undertaken before widow inheritance. According to Perry, et al. (2014) the widow shaved her head twice. The first marked the commencement of the bereavement period four days after burial and the second shaving was carried out to liberate the widow(s) from the taboos associated with bereavement. Perry, et al. (2014) further states that nowadays, however, most widows do not heed to shaving twice, which was carried out at different periods. Shaving was performed once and for all, and only a portion of the rear part of their head was shaved in a symbolic way.

After shaving ritual, a widow selected a male relative or the elders sought a suitable man who was a relative of the deceased man to inherit her in the *tero chola* (inheritance ritual). The male relative was expected to inherit the bereaved wife as a replacement of the dead husband in form of *Jater* (inheritor). Awuor (2015) corroborates this information, explaining that the widow was usually inherited by the younger brother of the deceased husband; however, in the absence of the younger brother, the husband's cousins or one of the husband's older brothers could also be widow's inheritor. The widow selected her soon-to-be inheritor prior to the inheritance day. These findings are in line with study of Otumba (2015) who asserted that a Luo widow freely chose a man from the clan to inherit her and to be her guardian. However, if the widow failed to come across her favourite choice, the elders (old men and women) decided on someone with whom she could stay with. The choice of inheritor was based on his ability to provide material support for the widow and how responsible he was in the management of his family affairs (Onyango, 2009).

The widow was also required to buy new items such as mat, petticoat, blanket and pants from her resources in preparation for the widow inheritance. Further the married daughters of the deceased came back home a day before the widow inheritance took place. A young widow was also expected to pay a visit to the parent's home and spend only one night. Before the widow's departure from the parent's home, a goat was slaughtered, portion of the meat was cooked and eaten by her parents and she carried the remainder to her home. Old widows also selected men who were about their age before leaving for their natal home. The old widows, together with her senior-most son, visited her parent's home and spend only one night. Before departing the following day, a goat referred to as *chola* was slaughtered, and a portion of it cooked and eaten together with the parents. The remaining meat was carried by the widow back to her home where she was married. Meanwhile the prospective inheritor was expected to sleep alone in the house of the widow as he waited for the widow to return from her parent's home. Sourcewatch (2012) emphasizes that the widow's inheritor to be (sing. *jater*, pl. *joter*) waited and slept in the house of the widow while she paid a visit to her parent's home.

Rituals during inheritance

In response to the domain of rituals that take place during widow inheritance, one respondent highlighted that upon arrival from parent's home; the young widow cooked special meat from her parents and ate it together with inheritor. The respondent continued to confirm that a special mat was then spread down the floor of the widow's house where the inheritor and the widow slept together that night. This ritual was known as *chodo okola* (cutting the belt of banana fibres tied around the widows' waist). They engaged in sexual intercourse that night to consummate the marriage on this special mat. During bereavement period, the banana fibres

(*Okola*) were fixed round the widow's waist was a sign of impurity. The widow was only allowed to discard the banana leaves from her waist after the ritual of *chodo okola*. The cleansing ritual of (*chodo okola*) was accomplished by way of mandatory sexual intercourse carried out by inheritor. The cleansing ritual identified and discussed above was further corroborated by Oluoch (2013) who agreed that sex was central to the cleansing ritual.

The inheritor was to be the widow's only lawful sexual companion. According to Luke (2001) the inheritor was to function as a husband in all aspects, as well as standing-in as the fatherly figure to the children of the widow. When an old widow returned from her parent's home, her prospective inheritor prepared the cooking fireplace. She prepared the supper, ate together and slept together without sex. The remarriage of the old women who had reached menopause was not the same as those of younger women. Their marriage was only symbolic with no sexual intercourse involved. The old widow sought an old man who would come to her house, chat with her and eat together with her. When it was bedtime, the 'inheritor' left for his own home but left behind his clothes in the widow's house. As far as a young widow was concerned, it was a norm that for any man to inherit her, sex intercourse was mandatory. Onyango (2009) affirms that the inheritor had to leave his belongings in the widow's house. Leaving behind of some belongings was done with the intention of creating awareness to the guests that the inheritor and the old woman were cohabiting.

Meanwhile the daughters of the deceased normally came back home on the day of the *tero chola*. The daughters of the deceased slept at the brother's houses or homes. All other children also spend in the sons houses that night. Even the children were made to believe that the rituals were for their own benefit as well as the widowed mother (Oluoch & Nyongesa, 2013).

Post inheritance period rituals

The researcher sought to find out the activities that take place immediately after widow inheritance. The following day after the night ritual, the inheritor had to leave some of his belongings inside the widow's house. That same day, the inheritor started constructing their new house within her home, assisted by the widow. Currently no new houses are built but only one of the iron sheets of the roof is replaced. Onyango (2009) affirms that the following day after the ritual, the inheritor was to construct a new house for the widow where they would put up together. If the deceased husband had constructed a home for the widow, the inheritor came to the home and constructed an extra house for the widow in her home. The kinsmen were invited and served with food and drinks during construction of the new house.

It was the view of another respondent that in the modern times, if a widow found out the inheritor was not prepared to assist her construct a new house, he would be told to leave so that another man could be found to do it. Therefore, changing these men until the right one was obtained could sometimes result in trouble for the widow. Oluoch & Nyongesa (2013) further asserts that currently many changes have occurred. At the present time inheritors do not actually build new houses as was done long-ago, they simply removed and replaced one iron sheet on the roof of the widow's house. This symbolized the change of house. As a reaction to post inheritance commitments, another respondent argued that the inheritance relationships were not based on commitment and permanent ties of marriage but on prescribed roles. Widows were believed to be married to their deceased husbands even after

their death and therefore, the inheritor could not even claim children in case an inheritance relationship ended. Inheritors were simply playing or filling in the role of the dead husband.

In the post inheritance rituals, a different respondent highlighted that once the inheritance ritual was completed the widow could leave and marry somebody else of her choice. In response to the post inheritance life, one of the respondents clarified that a widow could send an inheritor away if he failed to fulfil her needs or had otherwise become undesirable and she could then look for another inheritor. If this new inheritor did not provide livelihood needs, she would tell him to pack and go away and so on. In one year, the widow would have cohabited with even five inheritors. If at all he was not a relative from her late husband's clan, she would just change them. This is because these were just men she had found; they were not officially married but only cohabiting with. In these cases, Okoko (2000) asserts that inheritors were used to assist the widow fulfill sexual rituals and, to a larger extent, offer the widow emotional and a bit of economic assistance. This was more so in cases involving professional inheritance, the inheritor and widow would agree on the terms and conditions of the relationship. If the professional inheritor did not meet her expectations or did not perform his roles as agreed, the relationship would simply come to an end.

Research Question 2

What are the underlying cultural meaning and value of widow inheritance rituals? As a response to the value attached to the custom, one respondent underscored that the custom was justified on the strength of it ensuring that the resources were utilised within the patrilineal family. In addition, the practice ensured the continuity of the deceased's family and also to support the kids of the late husband. It was also necessary as a basis for protecting the widow and her children. This notion is affirmed by Olanisebe and Oladosu (2014), who contend that the custom of widow inheritance was a means through which widows and their children were supported economically, as well as keeping her deceased husband's riches within the family cycle. When the custom was initially instituted, men were the providers whereas women were in charge of the household tasks, therefore when the husband passed away; she had no one to provide for the family left behind. Since her in-laws would not wish that a stranger outside the blood line of the family to inherit her late husband's wealth, she was expected to be inherited by a close male relatives. Another respondent said that the practice was believed to ensure that a young widow's sexual needs and welfare were provided for. They were inherited for the purpose of companionship. The custom of the Luo widow inheritance was intended to ensure that the widow got economic support in addition to meeting her sexual needs. This is in line with the rationale of widow inheritance among the Yoruba which was basically to make sure the widow's welfare within the family was catered for since the widow was considered as an inheritance of the late and should be well taken care of even after the death of the husband (Olanisebe & Oladosu, 2014).

In an answer to the meaning and relevance of the tradition of widow inheritance, another respondent explained that the practice continues even in the present day because widows fear *chira*. *Chira* being an indigenous illness resulting from not following Luo customs, the psychological phobia of contaminating the offspring with cultural uncleanness, and the successive desire to defuse it, were the main reasons behind widow inheritance rituals. It was further asserted that *chira* would negatively affect the widow or other

members of her extended family, especially the children. Therefore widows were coerced into maintaining the tradition by family members in the lineage of the late husband so that they were not adversely affected by *chira*. According to Gunga (2009) widow inheritance rituals involve cleansing as a precondition for reinstating the widow into normalcy so that she could be accepted back into the society. The cultural practice was a means through which the widow was neutralized of the perceived cultural impurity occasioned by the death of her husband to avoid breach of Luo taboo. In this cleansing ritual sex was central.

In an answer to the importance of the tradition of widow inheritance, respondent explained that the widowhood rituals were justified among the Luo because they were intended to meet the perceived needs of late husband, his relatives and his children. The practice ensured that the spirit of a deceased husband did not return to trouble those who were left behind. According to Nyarwath (2012) marriage was not dissolved after the death of a spouse; for that reason, the woman remained *chi liel* (wife of the grave). As a result, a woman would be inherited and not remarried outside the extended family. Marriage was a binding engagement involving the partners and their extended relatives. When death occurred, the family of the late husband had an obligation to provide a suitable replacement so that the spirits of the deceased does not haunt the extended family members.

As a reason for the custom, another respondent articulated that the union of widow inheritance took place to provide heir for the deceased. Traditionally, widow inheritance was mandatory for all widows except for the old widows who were past menopause and could not bear more children. The old widows' inheritance was merely symbolic. The cultural custom of widow inheritance therefore guaranteed continuity of the lineage of the deceased husband. Among the Luo community, an inherited widow continued to stay on the farm of the late husband, and children born from this union belonged to the deceased rather than the inheritor, took on the name of the deceased husband to continue his lineage. Inheritance played a crucial role to the children who would see an inheritor as fatherly person in the home and it also ensured that the widow was respected in the village, since widows without husbands were looked down upon in the Luo society. And when there was a fatherly person in the home then the community and even children respected the widow. VOA news (2009) and Otumba (2015) pointed out that the reason for the widow inheritance was to guarantee that the heredity of the late husband who died before producing an heir would not die out.

Another reason advanced was that the cultural practice ensured the inheritor gave economic and social support to the widow together with her children. According to Olanisebe and Oladosu (2014) widow inheritance practice resulted in taking over the responsibility of the widows by the male relatives (inheritors) of the late husband's family. The practice was therefore seen as a mechanism by society of ensuring proper care of the widows. The duty of the inheritor was to take care of, and not take over his brother's home and family. The widow referred to him as the brother in-law.

Another motive for widow inheritance is to relate well with the in-laws. A widow could not visit the married daughter's home or the home of her daughter in-law's parents if she was not inherited. The above reason is affirmed by Dilger (2006) who pointed out that the cleansing attributed to widow inheritance lifted the impurity of the children after the death of their father and hence was a necessary precondition

which allowed the widow and her children to resume their everyday lives after the funeral. Gunga (2009) further asserts that in Luo land that widow inheritance was carried out to cleanse the widow who was regarded as unclean and therefore the ritual of inheritance through sexual contact could cleanse her. Before the ritual was undertaken, the widow could not freely mix with other women or carry somebody else baby lest the child died suddenly.

Widows disclosed that they participated in widow inheritance to enable the daughter in-laws to be inherited in case of the death of the sons. The son's house had to be put in order so that in the event of his death his wife could be inherited. Reggy and Mae (1999) had similar view and they articulated that widows should not follow Christianity blindly when it came to Luo tradition but should make sure that they put their houses in order. Widows preferred to be inherited because of fear of not being accepted by their deceased husband's families. Whereas a growing number of widows were willing not to engage in the rituals, scores of them were still engaging in this custom to be consistent with societal traditions. Still some practiced because of being coerced to participate by their own families, their late husbands' families or the conviction that participation in the rituals would protect their children and themselves from facing misfortunes or illnesses or being ostracized in the society (Perry, et al., 2014).

Research Question 3

What are the socio-economic implications of widow inheritance on the widows?

The study examined the some of the health implications of widow inheritance rituals on widows. As a response to the psychological effects of widow inheritance rituals, one respondent admitted that most widows experienced significant depression during the first year after death of their partners. This was basically brought about by the unexpected loss of the husband and feelings of loneliness. Eboh, & Boye, (2005) indicated that in every African society, the widow went through some degree of psychological, emotional and spiritual hostility whether she was young or old, literate or illiterate a Christian or non-Christian.

As a reaction to the third question, one respondent argued that most inheritors were not providing health care support to the family of inherited widows. It was in the opinion of this respondent that only a few inheritors assisted in payment of school fees and not many provided funds to assist children to access proper health care when they were sick. A synthesis of views which was derived from the respondent was that most inheritors were not good, were irresponsible and not helping the widow's family in supporting the nutritional and health care needs of the widow's children. This affected the children's education and such children were withdrawn and showed apathy toward learning (Awuor, 2015).

It was an opinion of one respondent on the health implications that some widow inheritance rituals and practices were oppressive and humiliating to widows. Women in Kagan suffered due to stressful conditions they underwent when their husbands died, this stressful circumstances made widows to suffer a lot of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual challenges. The respondent articulated further that some widows were not enjoying their best of health because of the pressure of compliance with the widowhood rituals. Many restrictions on widow by the society made it hard for widows to articulate their point of view in matters to do with their psychosocial well-being.

In response to the health implications of widow inheritance rituals, another respondent postulated that the rituals had significant negative impact on mental health of the widows. Some of them displayed higher levels of depressive symptoms and experienced traumatic grief following the death of their husbands. They were therefore at increased risk of poorer physical health, mental health, and health behaviours displayed through weight loss and increased alcohol consumption and sometimes drug abuse.

In reaction to the health implications of widow inheritance rituals, one respondent highlighted that most inheritors did not go for HIV/AIDS testing and hence high chances of infecting widows with the disease. Most inheritors had multiple women sexual partners and if they were infected with an ailment then they could share it out to several widows since they did not know their HIV status. This is an indication that widow inheritance custom contributed to high prevalence of HIV/AIDS among widows in Kagan clan. An implication drawn from this respondent was that widow inheritance worsened the HIV pandemic. The inherited widows were infected with HIV if the inheritor was HIV positive. Consequently, children were left orphans and some suffered from hunger when their parents infected with HIV died. The findings are in line with the report of Odundo & Owino (2004) who affirmed that widow inheritance was a significant factor in the transmission of the HIV and AIDS epidemic among the Luo in Nyanza.

The findings from one HIV intervention officer indicated that widow inheritance contributed to high prevalence rate of HIV/AIDS among widows since most inheritors did not go for joint HIV testing with the widows and this led to increased chances of infecting widows. The research findings also revealed that the cost of treatment of widows infected by HIV and AIDS was high which called for adoption HIV preventive measures for instance use of antiretroviral based treatment for the widows who tested HIV-negative and yet engaged in widowhood sexual rituals.

Traditional Africans including Luos embrace principles of mutual respect, communality and caring for people. However, in practice they do not treat widows the same way. The reaction of one respondent to the economic implications was that, widow inheritance was highly problematic since it was associated with land ownership rights. It is deduced from this respondent that widows who resisted inheritance were often rejected in the community, their lands taken and left homeless. For a number of widows in this state of affairs are left with no other option other than compliance with the inheritance practices. This often resulted in widows' desperation to care for their children.

In response to the third question on economic implications of widow inheritance rituals another respondent explained that the enduring patriarchal system among the Luo was clearly evident in the widow inheritance practice as a tradition. This was often the fundamental reason for the widow inheritance acceptance. An implication drawn from this respondent is that widows are often hindered from using or owning property such as cattle or land which could have made them independent. Even though objection to such gender-based unfairness are becoming more and more apparent, lots of widows were still subjected to male domination and were not able to oppose due to the resources attached to widow inheritance.

A further reaction to this question according to another respondent was that the custom of widow inheritance was acknowledged as a key hindrance to economic wellbeing of

widows. According to this respondent, women's accessibility to land was basically through their male spouses. When the husband died, and the widow had only daughters or no children, widows would most likely fail to secure land of the late husband. Many a times, the family of deceased husband would not care for the widow together with her children. Widow inheritance was therefore acknowledged as a key impediment to family foodstuff security. In response to the third question another respondent articulated that widows normally accepted to be inherited in order to conform to the Luo traditions, in addition to resources and economic driven reasons as basis for their decisions. In this context, many asserted that they had no option other than accepting the custom otherwise they would not access the late husband's land or estate. In addition, if a widow had no son, unless she was economically stable, she had hardly any reason for rejecting inheritance, as land was subject to a patrilineal ancestry arrangement.

According to another respondent the denial of access to property was an indication that the widows' right to property was highly violated and this created frosty relations between widows and their in-laws. In addition, refusal of the right to property ownership left the widows economically weak. These findings are supported by Mwenya (2015) who reported that the widows remaining resources were spent haphazardly by the inheritors and in-laws and some resources were forcefully taken. Another respondent further alluded that most inheritors did not provide assistance in terms of food, clothing and finance. It was further reported by the respondent that inheritors hardly provided clothing for the children. From the interviews with the widows, one of the widows disclosed that after burial, the bereaved families were rarely assisted. After burial nobody offered assistance. The widows stood alone with their children. The inheritors also did not help widows instead they just wanted to squander their property. Some inheritors were drunkards and they always demanded high-quality food and often complained when presented with strong tea and vegetables on the table. Generally most of the inheritors were negligent and hence not responsible. These experiences affected the widows economically due to lack of both moral and material assistance.

Summary of Results

The findings on the rituals associated with widow inheritance established that there were rituals conducted before widow inheritance, during widow inheritance as well as post inheritance period rituals. Those rituals done before widow inheritance included; tying the strip of banana twine (Okola) round the widow's waist, a widow shaving her hair, family arrangement for *jater* (inheritor) and purchase of new items such as mat, petticoat, blanket and pants by the widow in preparation for the inheritance. After identifying the prospective inheritor, the widow proceeded to her parents' home to spend one night. Before her departure, a goat known as *chola* was slaughtered and portion of the meat was cooked and eaten together with her parents. She then carried the rest back to her home.

The findings from the study on rituals done during widow inheritance found out that, the widow's prospective inheritor waited and slept in the house of the widow alone as the widow was visiting her parent's home. Further, the married daughters of the deceased came back home a day before the widow inheritance took place. Upon arrival from her parent's home, the widow cooked and ate the meat with inheritor.

After that they engaged in sexual intercourse that night. The old widows who had reached menopause too cooked and ate together with the inheritor after return from her parent's home but spent the night without sex. The inheritor only prepared a fireplace for cooking. The research further established that the post inheritance rituals were; the inheritor left some of his belongings inside the widow's house, the inherited widow shaved her head and the inheritor began building their new house assisted by the widow. Once the inheritance rituals were completed the widow was at liberty to leave and remarry outside the family.

The research further found out that the custom was a means of comforting the widows and to ensure that a young widow's sexual needs and welfare were provided for. The practice also guaranteed continuity of the deceased's family and ensured that the inheritor gave the economic and social and support to the widow and her offspring. Most widows preferred to be inherited because of fear of not being accepted by their deceased husband's families. The psychological fear of adverse curses (*chira*) that may result in the death of her children and the deceased family members compelled widows to complete the tradition. The practice further ensured that the spirit of a dead husband did not return to haunt those who are left behind. In addition, the practice was carried out to protect and retain the family's wealth. The rituals purified the widow and her children and thus were necessary precondition that allowed the widow and children to depart from the funeral and continue with their daily lives.

From the study findings, it was established that the rituals exposed widows to some degree of psychological, emotional and spiritual hostility in addition to significant negative impact on mental health of the widows. Some of them displayed higher levels of depressive symptoms and experienced traumatic grief following the death of their husbands. Most inheritors were not providing health care support to the family of inherited widows. The rituals of widow inheritance worsened the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The inherited widows were infected with HIV when the inheritor was HIV positive.

On the economic implications the study showed that many widows were subjected to the rituals and were unable to resist due to the resources that attached to widow inheritance. Widows were often not allowed to own or control resources such as domestic animals or land which could have lead to their self-reliance if they did not comply with the custom. The inheritors hardly provided assistance in terms of food, clothing and finance for the children. Some inheritors were drunkards and they always demanded good food and complained when presented with strong tea and vegetables on the table. Children's relationship towards their inheritor fathers was generally poor. Majority of the children were not happy with their inheritor fathers due to the mistreatment from some of them.

4. Conclusions

From the study findings it was concluded that the custom of widow inheritance had socio-economic implications. In the traditional setting, widow inheritance under the guardianship institution involving brothers-in-law or cousins had good intentions to assist the widow. However, the current changes in the widow inheritance practice involving the hiring of professional inheritors as an alternative cleansing ritual, has made widows vulnerable to HIV and AIDS. The study concludes that this cultural ritual could spread the HIV-AIDS disease among widows and inheritors.

The practice is hence degrading, humiliating, and inhuman against basic human rights entitled to women.

Another conclusion that can also be drawn from the study findings is that the custom affects widows' rights to access to property, food security, and health-care and by extension their economic empowerment. This is because the practice normally ensured the property rights such as land of the late husband was entrusted to the community and not the widow. The scenario is worsened by the fact that most widows were often not authorized to own and inherit land, housing and property. This implied that when their husbands pass on, they often have no home and no land. The issue of the right to own land by the widows to empower them economically is yet to be fully realised among the Luo widows.

5. Recommendations

On the basis of the study findings the following recommendations were made. The first objective was to highlight and describe the rituals associated with widow inheritance. It is clear that the widow inheritance rituals have not been abandoned completely by Luos of Kagan despite Christianity and modernization influence. Some aspects of this custom are still being practiced. The study therefore recommends that community based education targeting the Luo elders, inheritors and inherited widows to adopt safer sexual practices even as safe widow inheritance rituals continue. Through education, widows and inheritors should be empowered to make informed decisions. Literacy levels of women should be enhanced so that they do not participate in the retrogressive cultural practices associated with widowhood cleansing.

The second objective was to decipher the underlying cultural meaning and value of widow inheritance rituals. The rituals have good intentions to give economic and social support to the widows and their offspring. The custom was also carried out to protect and retain the widow's family's wealth. Traditionally, widow inheritance was perceived as a way of continuing the family's lineage, more so if the widow is of child-bearing age. The study therefore recommends that the social and economic assistance to the already inherited widows and their orphaned children should continue. The message about the support to the inherited widows should be communicated through the same elders who perpetuate the rituals. The elders should preach the support to the widows in churches and funerals, which are the inheritors' hunting sources.

The third objective of the study sought to explore socio-economic implications of widow inheritance rituals among the Kagan. It was established that wife inheritors who carried out the rituals escalated the spread of HIV/AIDS and were not providing health care or financial support to the widows and their children. The resources such as land or cattle were tied to compliance with the widow inheritance rituals. Widows' right to land and property ownership are often violated. The widows are therefore unable to resist participation due to the resources that accompanied the rituals.

This study therefore recommends that in funeral ceremonies the people should be honest in informing the public the cause of the husband's deaths which occurred because of HIV/AIDS. This would ensure that those who aspire to inherit can do it at their own risk. The risk messages should consist of fear appeals in order to direct the target groups down the pathway of danger control. In that regard, it is further recommended that people should find out the cause of the death of the widow's husband before rushing and

competing to inherit the widow. Stripping sexual component of widow inheritance and transforming it into symbolic inheritance should be encouraged in Luo society.

The study further recommends raising the elders' awareness because the elders are the custodians of the oppressive traditions that deny widows and their children access to land rights after the death of the widow's husbands. The elders who participate in the awareness raising meetings should facilitate the organisation of informal meetings with their fellow elders and other relevant audiences in their villages to highlight the need to strengthen the protection of rights, particularly with reference to widows. A further recommendation is that the community should be sensitized not to grab property of their deceased relatives but to let their widows inherit for it will help empower them economically. In addition, the widows should be counselled on how to take care of the property left for them to avoid cases of misuse.

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