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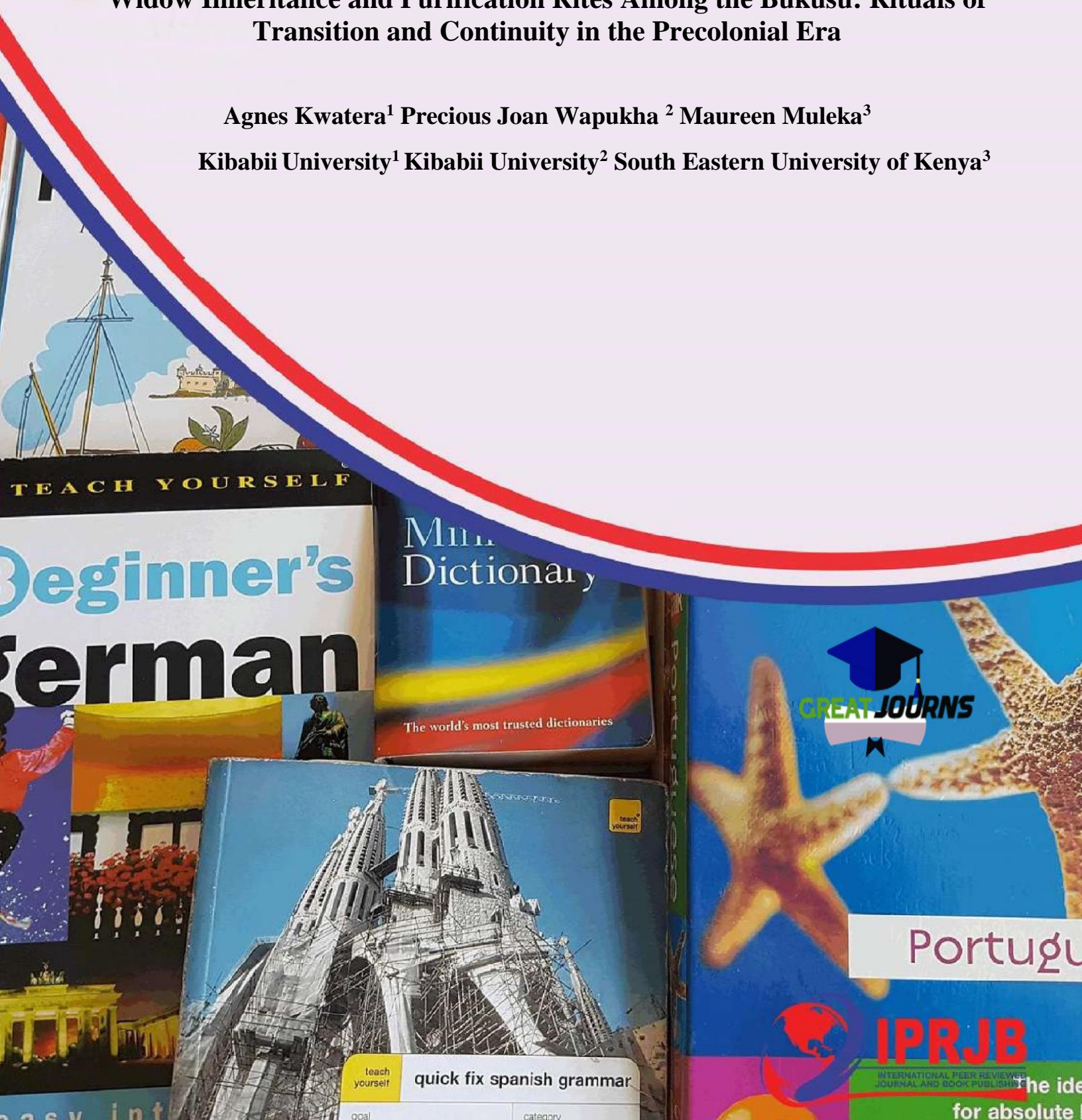
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Widow Inheritance and Purification Rites Among the Bukusu: Rituals of Transition and Continuity in the Precolonial Era

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ABSTRACT

Globally, millions of women and men experience widowhood each year, with a high prevalence among elderly populations. Among the Bukusu, as in many African societies, widowhood is governed by strong cultural customs relating to mourning, inheritance, gender, and social life. While widowhood is predominantly perceived as an individual psychological shift across the globe, in Africa, it is often a collective and ritualized event that is designed to socially, symbolically, and structurally marginalize women. Among the Bukusu, customs like widow inheritance (*khulabana*) and purification rituals, along with social isolation, serve to bolster clan solidarity and spiritual continuity. These practices, however, often restrict autonomy and increase the vulnerability of widows to patriarchal domination and emotional, economic, and physical abuse. This study sought to understand the socio-meaning and gendered relations surrounding widowhood rituals using Symbolic Interactionism and Feminist Theory. It relied on a historical research design alongside case studies conducted in four sub-counties of Bungoma, collecting data from 205 participants through interviews and focus groups. Primary oral testimonies and secondary archival materials were both analyzed thematically. The findings indicate that indigenous institutions were transformed by colonial and postcolonial changes, which simultaneously entrenched patriarchal systems that continue to marginalize widows. Customary norms, whether bolstered by legal changes or contemporary rights-based initiatives, are in fact, deeply entrenched and tend to violate protective legislation. Widows encounter emotional distress, social alienation, and denial of succession rights, particularly when they resist widowhood rituals. This research addresses a significant gap in scholarship by documenting the experiences of widows in Bukusu society and illustrating the interplay of socio-historical factors and contemporary traditions that define widowhood. The study calls for culturally appropriate frameworks that incorporate the rights, mental health, and gender equity needs of widows within the context of modern African settings aligned with ancestral values.

1.0 Background to the Study

Social and cultural practices serve to organize the intangible components of our societies in different parts of the world. These practices incorporate community customs and rituals. One form of treatment that illustrates cultural widows' practices is the mourning of widow, which encapsulates the societal view towards grief, gender roles, and inheritance (Srinivasan, 2015). Widowhood impacts more than 258 million women worldwide, a majority of whom live in low- and middle-income countries and experience economic, social, and legal marginalization (UN, 2021). Research by Srinivasan (2015) along with other studies, including Baum et al. (2021), demonstrate that owing to longer life expectancies and prevailing lower socio-economic independence, women endure widowhood more acutely than men.

In America, social interactions associated with widowhood, according to Carr & Utz (2001), are characterized as more personal and psychological changes than social or collective shifts. While there is social isolation for American widows, there are legal safeguards in the form of joint marital property laws, widow's pensions, life insurance, and bereavement counseling. Concerning public displays of mourning, societal expectations limit it to the scope of the funeral alone, after which time widows are not expected to depend on others for support. The expectation is clearly to promote moving forward and remarriage or long-term partnerships is generally viewed in a positive light.

Across the African continent, the status of widowhood remains highly sensitive and is perhaps one of the most culture-specific and gendered politically meaningful signifier of socio-political identity. Within the larger East African region, Uganda emerges as a unique example in the interplay of legal, customary, and religious dimensions of widowhood that increasingly infringe upon the rights of widows. As Limann (2003) indicates, there is a popular custom in Uganda where widows are subjected to ritual seclusion in which they do not leave the house dressed in mourning clothes and are enclosed with the deceased's relatives. In conjunction with these rituals, the women are performed what is referred to the cleansing rite which aims to purify the widow from her sins and, additionally, shield the community from her paranormal filth. Many cultures involve what is called symbolic sexual bathing with a male relative, and critics have denounced this as gendered violence masked as cultural practice.

In Kenya, as is often the case with many other African cultures, widowhood is a condition framed by grief rituals, socio-cultural norms, and property relations which situates widows at the crossroads of societal burdens and extreme vulnerability. The case of the Bukusu of Bungoma County in Western Kenya illustrates the interplay of sociocultural practices with widowhood. The Bukusu, who constitute a sub-ethnic group of the Luhya, have historically centered patriarchal arrangements and communal obligation as foundational to social structure. In this sense, widowhood among the Bukus is characterized by a succession of important customary rites and rituals which serve to mourn the deceased spouse while honoring social bonds (Wekesa, 2021). Moreover, such rituals are important for social order and the transmission of culture among the Bukusu people. These activities impose an orderly sociocultural system of mourning, provide social support for the widow and her family, and perpetuate the ancestral customs. Widows among the Bukusu actively participated in communal farming and other economic activities which reinforced social solidarity. They also contributed to the upkeep of homes and

engaged in communal work, which illustrated the embodiment of social equilibrium as well as culture within Bukusu society. However, the effects of colonial and post-colonial relations have modified these indigenous frameworks (Wekesa, 2021).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Widowhood among the Bukusu of Bungoma County reflects complex socio-cultural and historical developments spanning from pre-colonial to contemporary times. As is the case in many traditional societies, widows faced acute socio-economic marginalization in the form of mobility restrictions, sheltering within relatives' houses, and no opportunities for productive work or property ownership. After the death of a husband, a woman was 'inherited' by the nearest male relative, so she had limited autonomy over her personal choices. The adopted strategies subjected these women to arrangements that clash with desires and longing for emotional stability, trapping them within dependent family structures devoid of care. Moreover, marrying outside the clan came with extreme social withdrawal and excommunication from communal support systems which is harsh by any standard. During this time, the archaic order was disrupted through the imposition of Western legal and administrative systems alongside the social order. These shifts transformed gender roles, ownership of property, family relations, and often disrupted the traditional systems of aid that widows relied on. The colonial period altered some aspects of governance and land tenure systems, but simultaneously reinforced patriarchal systems that denied widows formal acknowledgment and legal safeguarding under the emerging governance structures. The developed concepts of widowhood by scholars such as Wekesa (2021) and Afari-Twumasi (2016) have mostly focused on legal frameworks and gender violence, neglecting the historical changes that have led to the current situation of residing with widows. Thus, this research aimed to fill this gap by historicizing the socio-cultural practices and the lived realities of widows among the Bukusu of Bungoma County since 1800.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

This research draws upon Symbolic Interactionism and Feminist Theory, which together provide a framework for understanding the socio-cultural construction and lived experiences of widowhood among the Bukusu people of Bungoma County. Symbolic Interactionism, as articulated by Blumer (1969), based on Mead's ideas, is concerned with how meanings are created through social interaction. It accounts for the identity and social role construction involved in Bukusu widowhood rituals, which comprise mourning, cleansing, and inheritance. Intersectional feminism as advocated by Crenshaw, Butler, and hooks, focuses on the patriarchal inequalities, cultural and legal frameworks that discriminate against widows. Feminist Theory elucidates the intersectional aspects of layered widowhood vulnerabilities owing to age, class, and kinship structures. Collectively, these theories make it possible to examine the changes in widowhood practices while highlighting the agency, identity, and activism of widows within the ever-evolving socio-cultural and historical framework.

1.4 Research Methodology

To examine the socio-cultural practices related to widowhood among the Bukusu people of Bungoma County in Kenya, this study looked into the period 1800 to present using a historical

research design with an accompanying case study approach. The historical design offered a longitudinal perspective into the development of traditions, policies, and attitudes concerning widowhood, and case studies added to the rich description of shared and individual experiences. The study population consisted of widows two years or more post widowhood, community elders, chiefs, pastors, active youth, and community development officers. Using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques, 205 participants were obtained, including those from socially stigmatized emotionally withdrawn widow circles. Primary data was collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Key informant interviews with local leaders such as chiefs, pastors, and elderly widows offered contemporary and historical insights on widowhood. FGDs with widow councils together with elders and youths provided intergenerational and collective perspectives from precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial eras. The interviews were carried out from April 15 to May 3, 2025. They were conducted in Bukusu and Swahili with English translations where necessary. Apart from the interviews, I performed a content analysis of books, dissertations, archival records, and policy and journal articles from Kibabii University and other public repositories. These secondary sources helped me understand the cultural shifts, the impact of colonialism and missionaries, and gender reforms that took place post-independence. I thematically analyzed the data based on the emerging themes identity, marginalization, resilience, and transformative processes of widowhood. Ethical approvals were obtained from Kibabii University, NACOSTI, and local administrative elders were consulted to ensure safe and culturally appropriate passage to the study region.

1.5 Widow Inheritance (Levirate Marriage) Practices

The Widow Inheritance or levirate marriage was a common practice among the Bukusu community from 1800 to 1894. It was a marriage custom practiced by not only the Bukusu people, but other African tribes too, which was based on the continuity of lineage and equilibrium in the society (Makila, 1978). The widow had to give birth to children in the name of her dead husband, and they were culturally considered as his descendants, achieving the sociological requirement of continuity (Barlow, 1939; Were, 1967). The male relative who inherited the widow, traditionally a brother, did not assume the modern emotional or marital role of husband, but accepted the title of caretaker or substitute for the deceased (Simuli & Gábor, 2025).

While intended to prevent economic exploitation of widows, this practice often placed them in subordinate roles within the polygamous family structure (Meekers, 1992; Andretta & Oboler, 1987). In some instances, this denied freedom resulted in forced sexual activity, loss of land, and denial of inheritance rights (UN Women, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2023). Wanyama (2005) and Nyanzi et al. Wanyama (2005) analyzes the violence and psychological trauma women face due to cultural norms during the fight for personal autonomy or public health considerations such as HIV/AIDS. Focus was placed on widow inheritance during the HIV pandemic, especially the ritual of sexual cleansing, which attempted to liberate a widow from the deceased's 'spiritual pollution' but posed considerable health risks (Mabumba et al., 2007). Moreover, legal frameworks in Kenya and other countries have attempted to strike a balance between statutory and customary law. For instance, the 2010 Constitution of Kenya, with its provisions on gender

equality, has faced stiff customary resistance to change from the social structure in many rural areas (Federici et al., 2020; The Guardian, 2022). In many communities where social norms prevail, the legal right of women to inherit and own property is mitigated due to widow inheritance is severely restricted (Cooper, 2012; Stewart, 2017). All of these highlight the need for well-defined, culturally sensitive approaches that balance rights-based and tradition-based legislation to address the obsession with slavery in culture. A respondent noted that;

Among the Bukusu community, the cultural practice of widow inheritance, commonly known as *khulabana*, was distinctly framed by concepts of lineage continuity, spiritual equilibrium, economic sustainability, as well as the sacred preservation of *esimba* (clan lineage). The death of a husband would not imply the extinguishing of a marital bond; instead, it would symbolize a shift that required collective effort to restore social and cosmic balance. Societally, widows were considered gateways not just to a husband's home but vital vessels of lineage, wealth, and fertility. To allow a widow unclaimed by the family was interpreted as inviting *khutebe* (disorder or misfortune) within the clan and disrupting the harmony of the ancestral spirits (O.I Janet Wanyama, Sirisia 21/5/2025).

A wife was a man's property, and she also belonged to a household. Widows were cared for within the family to protect the children and sustain the lineage, but these women are more often than not abused due to the widow inheritance systems. Inheritors often abuse their power and resort to sexual, or property exploitation, which results in severe social and economic vulnerability for women (Otieno & Muga, 2024). The absence of a willing or suitable inheritor often placed widows into desperate circumstances, at times forcing them into idolization or dependence on their extended kin and patriarchy, which results in further sidelining and abuse (Otieno & Muga, 2024). More often than not, family laws have been ineffective in protecting widows from exploitation. Like most African countries, Kenya has outdated and discriminatory family laws that hinder women's rights due to the existence of pluralistic legal systems which apply protective laws obnoxious (The Guardian, 2024). Customary practices undermine gains made in women's rights vis-a-vis inheritance and property ownership, which exposes widows to opportunistic disinheritance and eviction despite constitutional guarantees on gender equality (Otieno & Muga, 2024). There is a need for social change and legal reform such that these widows are empowered with the respect and autonomy that they deserve. Active dismantling of the systems which place women in subordinate positions requires the targeted provision of education, economic opportunities, and legal aid (Wandibba & Ikanda, 2024). The Bukusu people have for centuries practiced widow inheritance *khulabana*. The practices of widow inheritance and *khulabana* are customary among the Bukusu people. *Khulabana* arises from the communal principles of lineage continuity, maintenance of social cohesion, and the protection of a family's history and order. In relation to Bukusu culture, a man does not exist as an individual entity, but rather as a constituent of an *esimba* (lineage). Death in this context signifies a form of social rupture or a disruption that requires social healing. Such practices are common in kinship systems of most African societies, which continue to be predominant in structuring social interactions and duties (Radcliffe-Brown & Forde, 1950; Goody, 1971). The function of widows

marriage was to stabilize the deceased's lineage, provide caregiving for widows and children, and maintain family property (Ngubane, 1977). In contrast to most sections of the society, among the Bukusu, khulabana did not take a romantic view, rather focusing on the social obligation meant to preserve clan harmony and identity.

1.6 Purification Rites and Widowhood Rituals

The experience of being coerced into a widow cleansing ritual, as described in the testimony. *"When my husband died, I was told by his family that I had to undergo the cleansing ceremony."* *"They forced me to go through it"* is a lived reality for many widows in Kenya and other parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. Such rituals are opened as a part of culture that should clean up widows and enable their lives to go on, but they generally dominate the intention of the widow, perpetuating patriarchal control and denying women their will (Wandibba & Ikanda, 2024). There is a particularly sexual cleansing where a widow is supposed to engage in unprotected sex with a selected male as part of the widowhood rituals to drive away the ghost of the late husband. Research has revealed that such practices cause a lot of trauma to the widows and bring about the possibility of sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV/AIDS (Makoni, 2019; Adedini et al., 2022).

Kimeu (2022) presents first-hand accounts of some widows who were humiliated or were denied social interaction made the attempt to fight against these traditions, showing how these practices have placed the social honor of the clan above the well-being of the women. On the same note, a study conducted by Frontiers in Global Women's Health also revealed that social stigma and the fear of rejection by their communities influence most widows to accept situations silently when they are pressured into doing so (Adedini et al., 2022). Such practices are also a contravention of several rights such as the right to dignity, the right to autonomy over their own bodies, and the rights to be free of gender-based violence. Similarly a respondent noted that;

When my husband died, I was told by his family that I had to undergo the cleansing ceremony. It was a tradition they said, to purify help and me 'move on.' However, I did not want to do it. I had no choice in the matter. They forced me to go through it. They said it was to show respect for my husband and for the ancestors. They told me to stay away from people for a few days and avoid touching food that others would eat. I was bathed in a mixture of herbs and ash, and one of his relatives gave me a drink that they claimed would 'calm the spirits.' Afterward, I was expected to sleep with one of the men in the family for a night as part of the cleansing. They said it would help me reconnect to life and stop being 'unlucky' (O.I Jennifer Wasike, Bumula, 18/5/2025).

The Kenyan Constitution as well as the Marriage Act gives women property rights and the freedom to reject harmful cultural practices. Nevertheless, there is inconsistent enforcement, especially in rural settings, which will tend to apply customary law in the application of the statutory law. The legal loophole makes widows susceptible to being abused and exploited. The

practice of widow cleansing using medicinal plants is common among most of the people in Africa, including the Bukusu, like the one described. These are herbs, which in most cases are assumed to cleanse the widow both spiritually and physically, and they form the main practices of the rite of passage between mourning and recovery. Yet, as stated by Mbiti (1991), although these customs may have profound spiritual meaning, they might be harmful to the health of an individual. Ritual consumption of herbs may include the introduction of toxins or have an adverse reaction, particularly when not consumed under modern medical care. Ngubane (1977) reveals the significance of the integration of traditional medicine with ritualistic activities in most African cultures, which has the downside of cultural meaningfulness, although the detrimental side effects may not be considered.

According to Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940), these rituals are usually based on community beliefs that medical symptoms are a part of a spiritual healing process, yet they do not take into account the risks associated with the herbal medicines. The reaction of the in-laws of the widow who assert that the vomiting and sickness were normal indicates a general view that illness that is accompanied by physical agony is accompanied by spiritual clearing or cleansing (Goody, 1971). Nonetheless, the latter views overlook the negative health effects implied by the stomach illness that is introduced in the story.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2019), there is a danger of legalizing herbal remedies before they are thoroughly screened, especially within communities that continue to practice traditional methods. The prevalence of cultural practices and the health hazards, such as cleansing ceremonies, as seen by UNAIDS (2020), may lead to the spread of infectious diseases, such as gastrointestinal diseases, which thrive in unhygienic conditions. Such practices are still changing with the increased awareness of women's rights and health hazards, and it is incorporated into the cultural fabric. According to Raseroka (2021), even after reforming the legislation and changing social views, in certain communities, widow inheritance practices continue to exist, and sometimes, in the best interest of the widow in terms of physical and emotional security, they are not respected.

1.9 Psychological Trauma and Social Isolation Post-Cleansing

The seven-day isolation period is framed as a time for personal examination and spiritual growth; however, in reality, it enforces silence, control, and confinement, particularly regarding women's movement and independence. Goody (1971) describes such practices as systems of social control within a framework of dominating cultures that see women only as a means of ensuring reproduction for the lineage. Feminists like Amadiume (1987) have examined rituals surrounding widowhood to argue that women are coerced into grieving while within a socially prescribed solitary confinement. This notion aligns with Oyewumi's (1997) argument about conventional gender roles, which tend to depict widows as ritually "polluted," necessitating a combination of dehumanization and confinement.

The emotional toll of such isolation is profound. As Khaemba (2009) reports, many widows from Western Kenya experience psychological abandonment, bewilderment, and deep humiliation during the period of seclusion. This form of "grief work" is meant to help the widow cope, though, paradoxically, it only serves to deepen her sorrow. Instead of care, the widow is often

greeted with a silence that deepens the perception of her invisibility during a time when society should provide care. Additionally, rituals are seldom voluntary. They are culturally mandated under the much-feared khutebe (misfortune), which creates a sensation of being entrapped in a curse for widows, like the one in this story, who are caught between grief and compulsion.

The fear instilled by ritual warnings such as the threat of ancestral anger functions as a form of spiritual discipline that discourages emotional autonomy. Oyewumi (1997) argues that such cultural narratives reinforce women's subordinate status by making their pain invisible and their silence sacred. Consequently, as in the narrative, widows often experience depression, anxiety, and a profound loss of identity, as they are isolated not only physically but emotionally. Khaemba (2009) found that many widows in Western Kenya, particularly among the Bukusu, report symptoms of psychological distress feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, and chronic fear directly linked to their mourning experiences and the taboo against open grieving.

Furthermore, Raseroka (2021) argues that cultural practices must evolve to account for the psychological wellbeing of women. While tradition is valued, the cost to mental health particularly in terms of prolonged silence and stigmatization has increasingly come under scrutiny in both academic and policy circles. There is a growing call for culturally sensitive reforms that honor ritual without undermining women's mental and emotional health. A widow noted that;

I never felt so powerless in my life. The ritual took away not just my dignity, but also my peace of mind. I felt like I was living in a shadow of grief, not allowed to express my pain or even seek comfort. It was as if my suffering was not real, as if the only thing that mattered was following their customs at the cost of my own humanity (O.I, Nelima Khasoa, Chwele 19/5/2025).

The feelings of powerlessness and invisibility expressed in the narrative mirror what Amadiume (1987) terms the “ritual subjugation of widows,” wherein women’s emotional needs are sacrificed to uphold patriarchal kinship structures. In these systems, the widow becomes both a symbol and a vessel cleansed not for her own healing, but to serve the continuity of her husband’s lineage. As Oyewumi (1997) argues, these practices not only limit women's agency but also actively erase their subjectivity, reducing their experience of grief to a series of prescribed behaviors monitored by male authority.

Although these traditions hold ancestral significance, there is increasing recognition, both within communities and among scholars of the need to reform them in ways that protect the widow’s emotional and psychological wellbeing. The challenge lies in balancing cultural continuity with compassion, autonomy, and human dignity.

1.10 Recommendation of the Study

Advocate for legal and policy changes that are sensitive to the cultures and practices of the people, yet guarantee widows their rights to inheritance and property ownership.

Set up programs aimed at psychosocial rehabilitation and economic empowerment that mitigate reliance on others and heal emotional scars inflicted by detrimental cultural traditions associated with widowhood.

Involve community and religious leaders in educational dialogue to change the practices associated with widowhood and advance women's rights at the community level.

1.11 Suggestion for Further Studies

Researchers could undertake an ethnographic comparison of widowhood among various Kenyan ethnic groups such as the Luo, Kikuyu, Kalenjin, or Maasai, and map out the contrasts and similarities in the traditional treatment of widowhood.

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