



Linguistic Strategies and Rites of Widowhood in Yorubaland

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Abstract

The present research examines the linguistic strategies and rites associated with widowhood in Yorubaland, and how these elements contribute to the construction of cultural identity, provide social support, and influence the grieving process. It further explores how globalization and modernization have influenced language choices and widowhood rites in contemporary Yoruba society. A qualitative research approach is employed. This gives room for an in-depth exploration of the cultural and linguistic dimensions of widowhood in Yorubaland. The study adopts Labov's (1972) principles of Sociolinguistic patterns as its theoretical framework. Labov's (1972) "Sociolinguistic patterns" helps in understanding how social structures and expectations influence the linguistic strategies employed by widows and the community during the mourning period. Findings show that the language of widowhood is laden with symbols of mythic origin, which particularly depict the traditional beliefs of the Yoruba clan. Findings also show that the language is replete with nominal clauses of mythical representations deployed to construct cultural identity, provide social support, and influence the grieving process. Findings further show that despite various changes in the modern Yoruba society, like many other traditional practices, widowhood practices have continued to exist silently and openly. The study concludes that the language of widowhood is a signification of the agony the widow passes through during the rites of widowhood.

Keywords

Linguistics, Strategies, Rites, Widowhood, Yoruba land, Myth

INTRODUCTION

Widowhood is a universally recognized phase of life marked by the loss of a spouse: It is a significant and intricate aspect of cultural and social dynamics. The Yoruba people, an ethnic group in Nigeria with a rich cultural heritage, have long-standing traditions and practices associated with widowhood (Adekanye, 1988). This study delves into the linguistic strategies and rites that shape the experience of widowhood in Yorubaland, aiming to unravel the profound interplay between language, culture, and the grieving process. In Yoruba society, where language is a potent vessel of culture and tradition, the rituals and linguistic expressions surrounding widowhood carry deep-rooted meanings. The mourning period is not only a personal journey for the widow but also a communal experience, bound by linguistic norms and cultural expectations (Washington, 2014). Understanding the linguistic strategies employed during this period and the associated rites provides a nuanced insight into the Yoruba worldview and the ways in which they navigate grief. The study recognizes that language is not merely a tool for communication but a vehicle for expressing emotions, beliefs, and societal norms. By examining the linguistic dimensions of widowhood in Yorubaland, we aim to shed light on how words, expressions, and communicative acts contribute to the construction of meaning and the preservation of cultural identity.

Furthermore, widowhood rites in Yorubaland encompass a tapestry of ceremonies and symbolic actions, often guided by linguistic traditions. These rites, deeply embedded in cultural and religious frameworks, play a crucial role in providing support, guiding the grieving process, and reshaping the social identity of the widow. An exploration of these rites offers a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic interplay between language, culture, and the rituals associated with loss. As Yorubaland undergoes social transformations influenced by globalization and modernization, the study also aims to capture any shifts or adaptations in linguistic strategies and widowhood rites. This historical and contemporary perspective provides a holistic view of the evolving nature of widowhood practices, highlighting the resilience of cultural traditions amid changing societal landscapes (Fasoranti & Arunah, 2007). In undertaking this study, we embark on a journey to unravel the intricate tapestry of Yoruba widowhood, where language serves as a bridge connecting the personal and the communal, the past and the present. Through a comprehensive analysis of linguistic strategies and rites, we seek to contribute not only to the academic understanding of cultural practices but also to the preservation and appreciation of the rich cultural heritage of the Yoruba people.

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH PROBLEM

Widowhood, is a complex and multifaceted experience that intertwines with cultural practices and societal expectations. In the Yoruba culture, marked by its rich linguistic heritage and deep-rooted traditions, the period of widowhood is a critical juncture shaped by a myriad of linguistic strategies and rites. Despite the centrality of language in Yoruba society, there exists a notable gap in the scholarly exploration of how linguistic expressions and rituals converge to influence the lived experiences of widows. The research problem at the heart of this study revolves around the need to comprehensively understand the linguistic strategies employed during widowhood in Yorubaland and the intricate rites that accompany these linguistic expressions. While widowhood is undoubtedly a personal journey, it is also inherently communal, interwoven with linguistic norms that contribute to the construction of cultural identity and the negotiation of grief. The lacuna in existing research lies in the lack of a systematic and in-depth analysis of how language functions as a vehicle for cultural transmission and emotional expression during widowhood in Yorubaland. The specific linguistic nuances, communicative acts, and rituals that characterize this phase remain largely unexplored, hindering a holistic understanding of the interplay between language, culture, and the rites associated with loss. Furthermore, as Yorubaland undergoes socio-cultural transformations, propelled by globalization and modernization, it is crucial to investigate whether there are discernible shifts in linguistic strategies and widowhood rites. This raises questions about the adaptability of cultural practices in the face of evolving societal dynamics and how these changes impact the support systems and coping mechanisms available to widows.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions that will guide the study are:

- (1) What are the linguistic strategies and rites associated with widowhood in Yorubaland, and how do these elements contribute to the construction of cultural identity, provide social support, and influence the grieving process?
- (2) How have globalization and modernization influenced these linguistic strategies and widowhood rites in contemporary Yoruba society?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The exploration of linguistic strategies and rites during widowhood in Yorubaland holds significant implications for various stakeholders, ranging from academics and cultural historians to policymakers and community members. This research is poised to make valuable contributions in several key areas: This study contributes to the preservation and documentation of Yoruba cultural heritage. By unraveling the linguistic intricacies and rites associated with widowhood, it adds to the collective understanding of cultural practices, ensuring that valuable traditions are not lost or overlooked in the face of modernization. Also, scholars and researchers in the fields of linguistics, anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies stand to benefit from a comprehensive analysis of the linguistic dimensions of widowhood in Yorubaland. The findings will enrich academic discourse, providing a unique case study that can be compared with other cultural contexts. Similarly, understanding the linguistic strategies and rites associated with widowhood is crucial for empowering widows and communities. Insights from this research can inform support systems, counseling services, and community initiatives that aim to enhance the well-being of widows during the grieving process. Equally, policymakers and advocacy groups concerned with the welfare of widows can use the findings to inform culturally sensitive policies. Recognizing the importance of linguistic expressions and rituals in widowhood can lead to more effective support systems and interventions tailored to the specific needs of Yoruba widows. In addition, the research delves into the intersectionality of gender, language, and cultural practices, offering a nuanced perspective on the experiences of Yoruba widows. This understanding is essential for challenging stereotypes and fostering a more inclusive societal dialogue on gender roles and expectations. Also, given the ongoing impact of globalization, the study provides insights into how Yoruba cultural practices, specifically those related to widowhood, adapt to contemporary changes. This has broader implications for discussions on the preservation of cultural identity in a globalized world.

CONCEPT OF WIDOWHOOD IN YORUBALAND

Widowhood holds significant cultural importance in Yoruba society, reflecting the communal nature of the culture. The community plays an active role in supporting widows during their mourning period, emphasizing shared grief and

collective responsibility. Widowhood in Yorubaland is accompanied by a series of rites and rituals. These may include specific mourning ceremonies, prayers, and symbolic actions that hold both cultural and spiritual significance. The performance of these rituals is considered essential for the well-being of the widow and the harmony of the community. Language plays a crucial role in the expression of grief and support during widowhood. There are specific linguistic expressions, words, and phrases reserved for discussing the loss of a spouse. These linguistic strategies contribute to the communal expression of empathy and solidarity. Widows in Yorubaland often face societal expectations regarding their behavior and appearance during the mourning period. There may be specific dress codes, restrictions on certain activities, and guidelines for social interactions. The observance of these expectations is tied to the preservation of cultural identity. The concept of widowhood underscores the importance of community support. Fellow community members, family, and friends rally around the widow, providing emotional and practical assistance. This support network is crucial for helping the widow navigate the challenges of grief and adjustment. Widowhood rituals in Yorubaland often have religious dimensions, with prayers and ceremonies invoking spiritual blessings and protection for the widow. The involvement of religious leaders and the incorporation of religious practices highlight the interplay between cultural and spiritual elements. The mourning period is seen as a time of transition for the widow. After the completion of rites and rituals, there is an expectation for the widow to reintegrate into the community. This phase may involve further ceremonies symbolizing the completion of mourning and the beginning of a new chapter in the widow's life. Widowhood practices are as old as Yoruba Society itself as they are observed across different Yoruba communities and across different categories of people. A widow is expected to express her sorrow of losing her husband through wearing black clothes, crying and often falling into the ready hands of others surrounding her to prevent her from injuring herself (Adekanye, 1988). She is also expected to go into seclusion seven days during which she is not expected to take a bath or change her clothes. As a sign of severing bonds between her and her late husband, she may be expected to unweave her hair, have a low cut, shave or scrape her hairs depending on the type of practice prevalent in such Yoruba community.

Similarly, the mourning period varies from one community to another. She is to sit on a bare floor or a mat at best (Fasoranti and Arunah (2007). While in some Yoruba communities, she is expected to eat from broken plates and cooked with broken pots (Fasoranti and Arunah 2007). At the end of forty days, three months, four months as the case may be, the final rites are performed on the widow. In contemporary Yorubaland, the concept of widowhood is not static; it evolves with societal changes. Globalization, urbanization, and shifts in gender dynamics influence how widowhood is perceived and experienced. Balancing traditional practices with modern realities presents challenges and opportunities for adaptation. The concept of widowhood also reflects broader gender roles in Yoruba society. Expectations placed on widows and the support they receive intersect with cultural norms related to gender, highlighting the complex interplay between cultural traditions and evolving societal dynamics. In essence, the concept of widowhood in Yorubaland is a multifaceted phenomenon that intertwines cultural, linguistic, religious, and social elements. It reflects the interconnectedness of individuals within the community and underscores the significance of shared experiences during times of loss. Understanding the concept provides insights into the rich tapestry of Yoruba cultural practices and the resilience of traditions in the face of changing times.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF WIDOWHOOD IN YORUBALAND

1. Pre-Colonial Period

In the pre-colonial era, Yoruba society was organized into city-states with rich cultural and religious traditions. Widowhood practices were deeply embedded in the socio-cultural fabric, guided by both indigenous beliefs and the worship of deities. Widowhood rites were conducted to ensure the spiritual well-being of the deceased spouse and the widow. These rites often involved rituals performed in sacred groves, reflecting the Yoruba belief in the interconnectedness of the spiritual and earthly realms.

2. Role of Religion and Deities

Yoruba religion, with its pantheon of deities (Orishas), played a significant role in shaping widowhood practices. Specific deities were associated with the protection and guidance of widows during their mourning period, and ceremonies were conducted to appease these deities. The involvement of religious leaders and priestesses in conducting rituals underscored the spiritual dimensions of widowhood. Widows were expected to participate in these rituals to ensure the peaceful transition of the deceased to the ancestral realm.

3. Colonial Influence

The colonial period, marked by the intrusion of European powers, brought about changes in Yoruba society. The imposition of Western norms and legal systems influenced the practice of widowhood, often leading to clashes between traditional customs and colonial regulations. Missionary activities and the spread of Christianity introduced new perspectives on mourning and widowhood. Some Yoruba individuals embraced Christian funeral practices, while others continued to adhere to traditional rituals.

4. Post-Independence Era

After gaining independence, Yorubaland, along with the rest of Nigeria, experienced social and political changes. Modernization, urbanization, and increased education levels influenced how widowhood was perceived and practiced.

While traditional widowhood practices persisted, there were instances of adaptation to changing societal norms. The influence of urban centers and exposure to diverse cultural influences contributed to a more dynamic landscape of widowhood experiences.

5. Contemporary Challenges and Adaptations

In the contemporary era, Yoruba society continues to grapple with the interplay between tradition and modernity. Widowhood practices face challenges such as economic pressures, changing gender roles, and the impact of globalization. Some widows may find it challenging to adhere strictly to traditional practices, leading to adaptations and innovations in how mourning is observed. Community support remains crucial, but the dynamics of that support may evolve in response to the changing social and economic landscape.

6. Legal Reforms

Nigeria's legal system, influenced by both customary and statutory laws, has undergone reforms addressing issues related to widowhood. Efforts have been made to protect the rights of widows, particularly in cases of inheritance and property ownership, challenging some traditional practices that may disadvantage widows.

7. NGO and Advocacy Initiatives

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and advocacy groups in Nigeria have been actively involved in addressing the challenges faced by widows. They work to raise awareness, provide support services, and advocate for legal reforms to protect the rights and well-being of widows.

In summary, the history of widowhood in Yorubaland is a dynamic narrative shaped by cultural, religious, colonial, and contemporary influences. The practices and rituals associated with widowhood have evolved over time, reflecting the resilience of Yoruba traditions in the face of changing contexts. The challenges and adaptations witnessed in contemporary times highlight the ongoing negotiation between tradition and the realities of the modern world.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Due to the exploratory nature of the study and the emphasis on understanding the nuances of linguistic strategies and rites, a qualitative research approach will be employed. This allows for an in-depth exploration of the cultural and linguistic dimensions of widowhood in Yorubaland. Participants will be selected purposefully to ensure representation from diverse age groups, socio-economic backgrounds, and geographical locations within Yorubaland. This will provide a comprehensive view of the linguistic and cultural practices associated with widowhood. Widows, community leaders, religious figures, and linguistic experts will be identified as key informants. Their experiences and insights will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the linguistic strategies and rites. Semi-structured in-depth interviews will be conducted with widows and key informants. These interviews will explore personal experiences, linguistic expressions, and participation in widowhood rites. Open-ended questions will allow participants to share their perspectives freely. Focus group discussions will be organized with community members to capture collective viewpoints on linguistic expressions and widowhood rites. These discussions will provide insights into communal practices and shared cultural understandings. Linguistic experts will conduct a textual analysis of relevant cultural and religious texts, including prayers, chants, and rituals associated with widowhood. This analysis will unveil linguistic patterns and the cultural significance embedded in these texts. The study will adopt Labov's (1972) principles of Sociolinguistic patterns as its theoretical framework. Labov's (1972) "Sociolinguistic patterns" can aid in understanding how social structures and expectations influence the linguistic strategies employed by widows and the community during the mourning period.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Prior to any data collection, participants will be provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, methods, and potential outcomes. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants, and their confidentiality will be strictly maintained. Cultural sensitivity will be prioritized throughout the research process. The researcher will navigate the cultural nuances of widowhood respectfully, ensuring that the study contributes positively to the communities involved.

DATA PRESENTATION AND CATEGORISATION

The data are presented in line with the research objectives. Four widows were interviewed. Their interviews are labelled 1-4. The interviews are further categorized into two sections. The first section, which comprises interviewees 1 and 2 respond directly to our research question one, while interviewees 3 and 4, respond to research question 2 as stated below.

Research Objective one: What are the linguistic strategies and rites associated with widowhood in Yorubaland, and how do these elements contribute to the construction of cultural identity, provide social support, and influence the grieving process?

Interviewee 1: (Anonymous)

I was forced to marry my husband's brother two days after the death of my husband. I was very sad as everything was taken from me and my husband's mother began to torture me as I and my children were left with nothing. She called me all sort of names such as witch, cock, masquerade, eagle, and serpent, among others. Also few days after the death of my

husband, all hairs on my body were shaved including the public and private parts as well as facial and body hair after the burial of my husband. I was made to wear black for 9 months compulsorily to show that I was mourning my husband and to show how much I love and respect him. My Husband's brother also began to beat me up and maltreat me, leaving I and my children helpless.

Interviewee 2: (Anonymous)

When my late husband's family heard of the death of their son, my husband; they took away every single thing and left nothing behind, even a broom. They also requested for his salary from his workplace. They denied me of my right to have any of my late husband's property just because I had a female child. They claimed that assuming my child was a boy, they would have acknowledged that and given me something but considering I had a girl, it was in my place to take care of her. Also because of my status as a widow, I was treated like an outcast in church as I was not allowed to participate in the family outing because of the absence of my husband. I had a one day vigil where I was told to stay awake or run mad. During this vigil, I was asked to make certain pronouncements such as, "eseke orun peyinda (the dead should turn back)", "Ara aye ko ni ibasepo pelu ara orun (the living has no relationship with the dead)", mo yago pelu re titi laelae (I am parted from you forever).

Research Objective two: How have globalization and modernization influenced these linguistic strategies and widowhood rites in contemporary Yoruba society?

Interviewee 3: (Anonymous)

My name is Anonymous, I am from Okwu- Amaraihe community in Imo State. I have three girls (two twins and a girl). When my husband died; I still had a month old baby. My husband, who hails from Abia State, died on the 6th of March, 2006. I was forced to marry my husband's brother two days after the death of my husband. I was very sad as everything was taken from me and my husband's mother began to torture me as I and my children were left with nothing. I wailed throughout the night my husband died and almost entered the grave as a result of shock. Few days after the death of my husband, all hairs on my body were shaved including the public and private parts as well as facial and body hair the day after the burial of my husband. This shaving must be done in the backyard of the house as no one is meant to see me. The shaving was done compulsorily by fellow widows or women of the husband's family (members of the umuada). The shaving is done with a razor blade which must be sharp and firewood must also be burning in the backyard to burn all the hairs. All the dishes and plates I use during this period must be touched by no one and thrown away immediately I was done. I was made to wear black for 9 months compulsorily to show that I was mourning my husband and to show how much I love and respect him after which everything would be burnt. A couple of days after the burial rites of my husband, I was told that I must marry my husband's brother as it was necessary to continue the family's lineage. I had to marry the brother who took all the property my husband had left behind. Everything went well for a while until I found out that this man I married; my husband's brother had another wife outside, he just wanted to marry me for the property and inheritance. He began to beat me up and maltreat me. He did not sleep in the house leaving I and my children helpless. My children miss their father and keep asking me „Where is daddy daddy.

Interviewee 4: (Anonymous)

This respondent requested that her name be withheld for confidential reasons, just her testimonial was given. My husband died on the 20th of November, 2008. He wasn't sick, he complained of a serious headache with which he drove himself to the hospital. He died climbing the staircase and when his family members heard of this news, they took away every single thing and left nothing behind, even a broom. They requested for his salary from his workplace and when I confronted them about their behaviors, they simply said it was because I have a female child ; that assuming if my child was a boy they would acknowledged that and given me something but considering I had a girl; it was in my place to take care of her. I begged and pleaded with my late husband's family members but they accused me of killing him as he was not sick when he died. They even gave me a deadline that I would die within three years but I thank God that this is the ninth year since my husband died and I am still alive. My girl child would be fifteen by next month. It is just unfortunate that she had to grow up in such circumstances as I had to quit my daily job to take care of her. I face several challenges daily because of my status as a widow. There was a particular day we had family outing in church and it was just those women who had husbands that were allowed to do anything. I cried so much that day that „how could such happen in a church"? The rest of us widows were told to sit down and not participate. I really miss my husband but all the same I thank God.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In interviewee 1, the language of widowhood is laden with symbols of mythic origin, particularly depicting the traditional beliefs of the Yoruba clan. For instance, the symbols of "witch", "masquerade", "cock", "eagle", "Òsòròngà", "Eleye" (Owner(s) of the Sacred Bird), "Ìyánlá", "Àgbàlagbà" (The Wise and Formidable Elder), and "serpent" as seen in interviewee 1 above, are all suggesting the superstitious beliefs of the Yoruba race. The word "witch" in Yoruba, means "Àjé". Àjé is a Yoruba word that signifies the biological and spiritual power of African women that has myriad potential, including but not limited to, powers of elemental, biological and artistic creation; healing; destruction; spiritual and physical development and fortification; and political organization and empowerment (Drewal, 1990). Washington (2014), defines Àjé as "a force that is beyond definition, but English approximations for Àjé would be Power, Creation, Cosmos,

All. *Àjé* is feared and revered by many. *Àjé* “represents rather the mystic powers of womanhood in their more dangerous destructive aspect. Other related symbols in interviewee 1 above such as cock, eagle, *Òsòròngà*, *eleye*, and *Ìyánlá*, also attest to the mysterious power of the woman in Yoruba cosmology. The adoption of these mythic symbols to delineate the woman as the source of the husband’s demise has devastating effects on the psychology of the widow.

In interviewee 2, the language use differs from what we come across in interviewee 1. The use of language here seems to be in support of the widow. It is a general belief that the spirit of the deceased is still around the premises of the widow, and can harm the widow if certain rites are not carried out. During the process of widowhood, the widow is usually led to make certain incantations in order to dismiss completely the spirit of the late husband. Those incantations are replete with nominal clauses. For instance, the incantations expressions “*èsèkú òrun pèyìndà* (the dead should turn back)”, “*Aráayé kò ní ibásepò pèlú ará òrun* (the living has no relationship with the dead)”, and “*mo yàgò pèlú re tíí láéláé*” (I am parted from you forever), all typically exemplify nominal clauses. The headword in each of the clauses denotes the deceased and the separation that should exist between the dead and the living. These expressions could also have demoralizing effects on the widow, who could be of the opinion that the spirit of her late husband is after her life. Hence, in response to research question 1, it is evident from our analysis above that mystic and traditional symbols, as well as nominal clauses of mythical representations are the linguistic strategies deployed to construct cultural identity, provide social support, and influence the grieving process.

Meanwhile, interviewees 3 and 4 respond directly to research question 2 as they describe how globalization and modernization have influenced these linguistic strategies and widowhood rites in a contemporary Yoruba society. Despite various changes in the modern Yoruba society, like many other traditional practices, widowhood practices have continued to exist silently or openly in spite of modernization. In the Nigerian society, as in many other African societies, human greed exist in many families and the death of a male member of the family offers an opportunity to the other male of the extended family to increase their holding of the scarce and inelastic commodity ‘land’. The commodity now in question can expand to other items of properties. Its acquisition, that is, the ownership of the scarce commodity, land, basically controls the treatment of widows. The implication of this is that, the in-laws could throw the widows and their children out or falsely accuse widows of killing their husbands so as to acquire the late man’s properties and land. All other activities serve the same purpose and any mystification and other rituals and superstitious sanctions are geared towards the oppression of the widow. The Yoruba widow, in the course of fulfilling funeral rites, is subjected to a greater agony than the grief of the loss of her husband. The travails of a widow begins immediately her husband breaths his last breath as seen in the examples of interviewees 3 and 4. She is made to go through various traditional rites, most of them were very wicked and dehumanizing. In the example of Interviewee 3, the widow was forced to sleep with her husband’s brother as the custom demanded. She was also severely tortured by her mother in law. Eventually, they snatched all the late husband’s properties from her, leaving her with nothing to take care of herself and her children. In the example of interviewee 4, they accused the widow of killing her husband as he was not sick when he died. They even gave her a deadline that she would die within three years of her husband’s demise. The most devastating experience was the segregation she received from the church when she was forbidden to take part in the activities lined up for other women because she was a widow. Hence, one would have expected that these traditional practices which are very inimical to the health and emotions of the woman would have diminished if not absolutely eradicated in the face of civilization and modernization. However, reverse seems to be the case with most Yoruba communities that strongly believe in the repercussions of abandoning the said traditional practices in the name of civilization, modernization or Christianity.

CONCLUSION

The present research examines the linguistic strategies and rites associated with widowhood in Yorubaland, and how do these elements contribute to the construction of cultural identity, provide social support, and influence the grieving process. It further explores how globalization and modernization have influenced these linguistic strategies and widowhood rites in contemporary Yoruba society. A qualitative research approach is employed. This gives room for an in-depth exploration of the cultural and linguistic dimensions of widowhood in Yorubaland. The study adopts Labov’s (1972) principles of Sociolinguistic patterns as its theoretical framework. Labov’s (1972) “Sociolinguistic patterns” helps in understanding how social structures and expectations influence the linguistic strategies employed by widows and the community during the mourning period. Findings show that the language of widowhood is laden with symbols of mythic origin, particularly depicting the traditional beliefs of the Yoruba clan. Findings also show that the language is replete with nominal clauses of mythical representations deployed to construct cultural identity, provide social support, and influence the grieving process. Findings further show that despite various changes in the modern Yoruba society, like many other traditional practices, widowhood practices have continued to exist silently or openly. The study concludes that the language of widowhood is a signification of the agony the widow passes through during the rites of widowhood.

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