The Widow, the Will, and Widow-inheritance in Kampala: Revisiting Victimisation Arguments

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Résumé

Dans les analyses des héritages des veuves, elles sont souvent représentées comme les victimes des préceptes sexuels patriarcaux. Notre étude a exploré les expériences du veuvage à Kampala. Le travail ethnographique sur le terrain a mêlé les observations des participants, les entrevues individuelles semi-structurées et les discussions de groupes. Les veuves sont de nature hétérogènes. De nombreux maris sont morts intestat. Les maris excluent communément leurs femmes de la rédaction de leur testament. Un des rites funèbres d'un Muganda est la purification de sa veuve. Les veuves obtiennent un omukuza — levirate- gardien. Nos données contestent la sexualisation déclarée des relations levirate entre les veuves et leurs gardiens. Le coût de l'échange et de la possibilité de nouvelles perspectives est au ccntre même de la sexualisation des processus chez les veuves. La signification que l'on donne au veuvage a des propriétés transformatrices. Loin d'être un concept rigide, la sexualité des veuves se transforme peu à peu du fait du HIV/SIDA, des mariages mixtes, des synchronisations religieuses, des morts fréquentes et de la pauvreté. Si certaines veuves sont les victimes de circonstances menant à des activités sexuelles avec leurs levirate-gardiens, en revanche, beaucoup d'autres ont défié la sexualisation de la relation avec leurs gardiens. En revanche, quelques-unes ont tiré des avantages de leurs relations avec leurs levirate-

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gardiens. La victimisation n'est qu'une des nombreuses significations liées au veuvage.

Abstract

Widows are often presented as victims of patriarchal sexual dictates in analyses of widow-inheritance. Our study explored experiences of widowhood in Kampala. Ethnographic fieldwork combined participant observation, semi-structured individual interviews, and focus group discussions. Widows are heterogeneous. Many husbands died intestate. Husbands commonly exclude their wives from will-writing. A Muganda man's last funeral rites include widow-cleansing. Widows get omukuza — levirate-guardian. Our data contest overt sexualisation of levirate relationships. Exchange and opportunity cost are crucial to sexualising of processes within widowhood. Meanings associated with widowhood are transforming. Rather than a frozen construct, sexuality of widows is changing because of HIV/AIDS, intermarriages, religious synchronisations, recurrent deaths, and poverty. While some widows felt victims of circumstances leading to sexual activities with levirate-guardians, many others challenged sexualising the levirate relationship. A few benefited from sexually engaging with levirate-guardians. Victimisation is only one of many meanings interloped within widowhood.

Introduction

Widow inheritance is among the cultural practices that are blamed for furthering the sexual transmission of HIV in patriarchal societies in sub-Saharan Africa (for example, Asiimwe, Kibombo and Neema 2003; Malungo 1999, 2001; Ntozi 1997; Okeyo and Allen 1994). Variously portrayed as backward, primitive, immoral, commoditisation, abusive violation of the sexual and human rights of powerless, victimised women (for example Izumi 2007; Limann 2003; Sossou 2002; UN / DAW / DESA 2001), widow inheritance has largely come under the attack of human rights activists, international health policy makers, and feminist scholars; many of whom are outsiders from the Western world or the local urban core. This study is based on the Baganda[1] — one of the African societies reported to practice widow-inheritance in the literature (see Ntozi and Nakayiwa 1999, 157, 159; Mukiza-Gapere and Ntozi 1995, 198). This article revisits, explores, and problematises the model that positions widows as victims of patriarchal dictates imbued with the exploitation of their personhood, property, progeny, and

private rights, as suggested by Uche Ewelukwa:

> The study of widows reveals the painful position of women as both the defenders and victims of culture. This position reveals their agency in perpetuating practices dehumanising to them and in overturning entrenched customary and religious practices. More importantly, the paradoxical position of women calls for deep introspection into how we perceive, understand and ultimately ascribe value to practices embedded in cultures outside our own. Perhaps an understanding of the minds and lives of these "other" women would lead to more meaningful public dialogues, resulting in more constructive approaches to improving women's rights in the Third World (2002, 430).

The Study

Nyanzi and Emodu-Walakira (2008) discuss the research methods in detail. Briefly, fieldwork was conducted in 2006-07 in Kasubi-Kawaala — a peri-urban slum on the margins of Kampala city. Using snowball, purposive, and theoretical sampling techniques, thirty-five widows and nine widowers were recruited into the study by a team comprising an anthropologist (SN), a public-health nurse (ME), a social worker (WS), and a community-health nurse.[2] All the participants were Baganda by ethnicity. Data collection triangulated ethnographic participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. All formal interviews were conducted in Luganda, recorded on audio-cassette, transcribed verbatim, translated into English, and entered into computer for thematic analysis using Atlas.ti (Scientific Software Development, Berlin). Demographic details of participants were collected using a mini-questionnaire and subjected to descriptive statistical analysis with Epi Info (CDC, Atlanta). Pseudonyms are used in this paper to protect the identity of participants.

The Heterogeneity of Widowhood

Contrary to common homogenous projections of widowed individuals as marginalised, weak, powerless individuals, the range of expressions and enactments of personhood available among our study participants revealed immense diversities even among this small sample size (see also Buitelaar 1995; Potash 1986; Moore and Stratton 2003). Differences were evident in age, gender, education

attainment, social class, income levels, health status, evidence of access to wealth, and number of dependants, — all of which factors differently interplayed with and thereby impacted upon their experiences of widowhood.

The questionnaire data revealed a range of demographic characteristics. The narratives of these thirty-five widows and nine widowers confirmed that gender differentiated how men and women go through the challenges and opportunities that come with widowhood. Generally widows reported that they faced more restrictions, and endured the most humiliating rituals in relation to dressing codes, eating food, personal hygiene, sexual activity, ritual seclusion, isolation, discrimination, and oppression than widowers (Sossou 2002, 202; Ewelukwa 2002, 427).

Religion was variously played out on specific components of the widowhood experience, including burial procedures, mourning rites, funeral rituals, inheritance processes and outcomes, and the post-funeral existence of differently widowed and orphaned individuals (Amadiume 1987; Sossou 2002). Seventeen of the forty-four participants were Roman Catholic, thirteen belonged to Protestant Church of Uganda, eight were Muslims, six were Born Again — two of whom reported that they were originally Roman Catholic and converted after losing their spouse. The religious leaders and ethos of each family played a central role in the processes of disposal of the corpse, closure for family members, and offering differing levels of support to the survivors. For example, funeral masses with appropriate scriptural readings, prayer recitals, funeral songs sung by church choirs or commercial gospel bands, *Dua* Islamic prayers, special services with benedictions such as anointing oils or holy water sprinkled by priests into the grave and upon survivors, giving the heir a bible or rosary or some other religious paraphernalia were variously reported by participants. These performances highlighted the roles of religious affiliation in facilitating processes of dealing with death among individual and collectives of believers. Apparently, each specific formal faith provided some structure to the performances of the final rituals of closure with the dead. However, they were always negotiated in the light of customary scripts dictated and mandated by clan structures, kinship cleaving, and responsibilities to culture, precedence, or ancestors. There were varying degrees of dependence on the institutions in the reli-

gious affiliations, among the participants. While some totally and solely appropriated the available religious provisions, others synchronised these with customary provisions, or secular support networks. This echoes Marie-Antoinette Sossou's description of another setting:

> It is also important to note that African peoples carried substantial elements of their cultural practices, including widowhood into the New World's religions that they embrace. The result is that widowhood practices in West Africa today are a bewildering and confusing mixture of traditional African practices and practices borrowed from Christianity and Islam (2002, 203).

While widowhood is associated with older age in developed countries (Moore and Stratton 2003), in sub-Saharan Africa, there is evidence of growing numbers of widowed younger people especially due to epidemics including HIV/AIDS, natural disasters, famines, war, and civil unrest (Potash 1986; Ntozi 1997; Mukiza-Gapere and Ntozi 1995). The age range of our participants was twenty-six to eighty years, with a mean age of slightly over thirty-nine years. Two people were less than thirty years, twelve were equal to or less than forty years, thirteen were equal to or less than fifty years, eleven were equal or less than sixty years, four were equal or less than seventy years, one was seventy-one years, and one was eighty years old. Position on the generational hierarchy affected what, why, and how individuals negotiated their widowhood experiences. For example, younger widows often faced the challenge of fending for young dependant orphans and fighting off (mostly unsolicited) sexual advances from both in-laws and other males; some even had to challenge older co-wives about claims over property inheritance. Many older widows reported that they no longer had sexual appeal, and thus underwent neglect or isolation by their in-laws who felt they had nothing to gain from them. Some older widows and widowers reported that they sought support from their adult children. A few reported that even though they were elderly, it was them who were taking care of ill adult children suffering from terminal conditions including HIV/AIDS, and some of these children had left orphaned grand-children for the older widows. While remarriage was an alternative strategy for survival for younger widows, some older widows returned to their

natal homes, or otherwise remained in the deceased husband's home and became pillars of support for others within their communities.

Education attainment is supposed to enhance opportunities for earning an income. Among our sample of forty-four, twenty-four had attained some primary school education, fourteen stopped at O level, one had A level qualifications, and three had post-secondary education. Two reported that they had no education at all. We compared these data with information about employment. Twelve of forty-four reported that they had no formal sources of income. In keeping with the social economic terrain of this geographical space, sixteen of forty-four were involved in petty commercial trade in the neighbourhood market area, offering services as cooked-food vendors, retail shopkeepers, roadside stall sellers, or middlemen who bought cheaply in bulk and informally re-distributed domestic wares to local stalls, kiosks, shops, or individuals using both barter and monetary exchange. There were two commercial drivers, one taxi-guide, three traditional birth attendants, three lay brick-makers, two subsistence poultry farmers, and one social worker. Invariably, because the men attained higher levels of education, they were engaged in better paying jobs than the women. The three participants with post-secondary education were all widowers. The unemployed were all widows. Because gender division of labour within this context prescribes men as providers and women as nurturers, at the death of a spouse, the widow lost her companion's provision, and the widower lost his wife's nurturance abilities.

Given the massive levels of lack and poverty within Kasubi-Kawaala, most of the widows often lamented their struggles to make ends meet, and the challenges of adequately providing for their orphans and other dependants using small incomes which they often supplemented with returns from the sales of subsistence produce, occasional gifts, and hand-outs from friends or charity organisations. Some of the widows belonged to rotating savings and credit organisations (ROSCAs), micro-credit lending institutions, or local women's groups. Many others reported that they feared joining these local financial institutions because the women lacked the security or prerequisite collateral to get meaningful sizeable cash amounts that were necessary to return profits when invested,

they dreaded the eventuality of having their meagre property confiscated if they failed to refund the borrowed monies in time, or they abhorred the public shame and social ostracisation that followed failure to meet repayment obligations. Therefore, they struggled on their own, and in isolation, often failing to cater for the unending multiple needs of their households (see also Owen 1996). The widowers, on the other hand, reported a different challenge — namely, taking care of their orphans. The routine of housework, the chores of childcare, the obligations of providing love, security and emotional nurturance to children were particularly challenging for younger widowers. Older ones reported loneliness, and struggling to find meaning in life after the loss of a wife (see also Moore and Stratton 2003).

There were variations in the reported number of children supported at the time of interview. While sixteen participants reported having at most four children, twenty-six participants were supporting between five and nine children, and two had at least ten or more children. Adoption of orphaned children, or those whose parents were too ill or poor to take care, was common. Some widows were raising the children of co-wives who were either deceased, estranged from their progeny, or remarried elsewhere and thus unwilling or unable to further support them. In many cases, control over the inheritance brought with it the responsibility of supporting all the deceased husband's children — including those conceived in other sexual unions. Some participants had lost the charge of their children who were either in the care of in-laws, the natal family, adult siblings or co-wives. Some others had been thrown off the husband's property, along with their children. In discussions about the challenges of widowhood, the question of raising children was most commonly mentioned.

Fears and Superstitions about Writing a Will

In an attempt to establish whether husbands played any role in determining the course of the sexual lives of their wives after the death of the husband, we asked participants about the will of their deceased spouse. "Did your spouse leave a will?" This was followed by a number of probe questions dependent on the answers provided by participants. For example: If so, did you participate in its writing? Did you know about it? Who kept it? Did he mention anyone

to take care of you after he died? If not, why did he not leave a will? And how did people know how he wanted his property distributed? How was the heir chosen?

None of the widowers reported any of their wives leaving a will. Four widows reported that their spouses wrote a will before dying. Six widows claimed that they did not know for sure whether or not he wrote a will. The rest were sure that their husbands did not leave a written will. These findings reveal that will-making is highly gendered within this setting. Men are more likely to write wills than women. However, there is a general tendency not to write a will by the time of death.

Data from the interviews and discussions highlight the prevalence of taboos, fear, and superstitions concerning will-making while one was still healthy. There was consensus that most people put off the act of writing a will because of the notion that it brought death nearer. In their discussions they often used cautionary exclamations such as, "May God forbid it to happen, but ..." and "To talk about it is not to bring it." There were superstitions that when one talked so directly about death, they were possibly inviting him.[3] This confirms the findings of other scholars. According to Uche Ewelukwa,

> ... the belief that making of wills hastens the death of a testator makes wills an unpopular mode for the disposition of property. A woman who persuades her husband to make a will is suspected of plotting his death and is in danger of being accused of murder in the event of her husband's death (2002, 434).

Furthermore, Mukiza-Gapere and Ntozi state:

> In the past, death was feared, unexpected even by the sick and never planned for. Anyone who tried to plan for their own death or that of relatives was referred to as *enkunguzi* (prophet of doom) and never tolerated by the society (1995, 197).

Most participants reported that they did not discuss wills when their spouses were still living because in addition to the taboo against personalising the possibility of death, bringing up the subject had connotations of greed or interest in the inheritance, property, wealth, and other possessions of the partner. It was particularly more difficult for women to raise the topic because of deeply entrenched gender asymmetries of property ownership (see also Ewelukwa 2002). In marital unions, men generally owned more

material wealth, land, financial capital, and investments that were passed on as part of the inheritance than women. Many widows therefore reasoned that initiating conversations about the husband's will had potential to incite suspicions of the wife's interest in his early death. It was similar to articulating a prophesy of doom upon one's own spouse. In discussions it was presented as vile, evil, wicked, calculating, or greedy.

> Namugga: As a woman, how do you start talking about the man's will? He will think that you are interested in his riches. Ah, it is difficult.
>
> Nantume: Yes. In fact when people are asking about the will it is better to pretend not to know about it because they might think that you influenced his death.
>
> Silvia: And if they believe in witchcraft, it is even worse. They will say that you bewitched him to die because you wanted to take his property.
>
> Meeme: Also if you have children in a home where there are other wives, and your child is made the heir, it is better that you keep quiet about the will. People can say that you killed the man so that your child can become the heir and you start enjoying his wealth.

Many widows reported they preferred not to know *a priori* who among the sons was chosen to be heir, in case it was not their child, as this knowledge could lead one into dangerous acts such as maliciously plotting the death of the heir, poisoning him, or smearing his reputation before his father in order to influence a change in the selection of another child as heir.

In the few instances where a will was present, none of the deceased husbands had made any pronouncements about the fate of their wives regarding choosing a new marital spouse for them. In conversations however, some husbands had mentioned a friend or relative to whom the widow could turn for financial help, advice and support in the eventuality of death. Most of these conversations were private and only known to the wife. In a few cases, the widows reported that their husband had actually formalised this connection by appealing to these individuals to "take care of the family if I die before you."

Instead of a written will *(ekiraamo / eddaame),* participants' narratives highlighted the importance of the "spoken will"

(yalaama mukwogera) which the deceased husband's relatives commonly solicited, assessed, confirmed, and acted upon to decide about his inheritance, widow(s), and orphans. Similar to the written will, the spoken will was always confirmed by at least two or three witnesses who were not the wife or children of the dead man. In the absence of either form of will, the clan leaders or lineage heads in conjunction with the adult children (usually exclusively daughters)[4] made decisions about the heir, distribution of the property, and settlement of debts.

Choosing Omukuza *at the Last Funeral Rites*

In customary practice,[5] a period of mourning and bereavement which followed the burial involved specific rites, taboos, and observances for the widow. These include the widow neglecting her bodily hygiene — she refrains from combing or trimming her hair, bares her shoulders, ties a special belt made from banana stems around her waist, publicly wails and audibly laments her losses (see also Limann 2003; Kagwa 1934; Roscoe 1911). According to key informants from the Kasubi Tombs palace, a woman must wrap up herself as one in menstruation *(okwesabika nga ali munsonga),* in order to keep away the ghost of her dead husband, from the time of first knowing about his death, through his burial, and until the last funeral rites when she is cleansed *okumwabyako olumbe* (literally meaning "to burst the death off from her"). Participants reported that in the past, people honoured the need to spend a period of at least a year in mourning, that is, between the burial and the last funeral rites. During this time, a household head would process the announcement and approval to hold the last funeral rites — *okutambuuza olumbe* through the different clan hierarchies.

However, with the drastic increases in death rates over the years, rises in the cost of living, widespread financial hardship, rural-urban migrations, breakdown in extended family ties and modernity, participants explained that the strict adherence to this custom decreased. Some people put off the last funeral rites ceremonies using excuses of lack of finances or the absence of a coordinator. Many others resorted to conducting the last funeral rites simultaneously with the burial, that is, on the night following the burial, family members and close kin performed some select appropriate rites. The following day an heir was installed, together with

the appointment of *omukuza* (plural: *bakuza*) — levirate guardian and his female counterpart — *lubuga.* In our study, while twenty-nine of the forty-four widowed participants reported finishing the last funeral rites ceremonies of their deceased spouses, thirteen reported that they had not yet, and surprisingly two claimed that they did not know whether these customary rituals were completed. In most cases, the *omukuza* was chosen at night by the husbands' clan mates during a meeting which the widow(s) did not attend because they were not clan members. The choice was dependent on having enough wealth, being responsible, compassionate, or a close friend to the family. During fieldwork, it was often evident that many participants were not certain what the customary role(s) of the *omukuza* and *lubuga* were. The majority of widowed individuals in the study reported that they never got any support from the *bakuza* who were chosen for them.

> Nakatudde: They gave us *omukuza* but it was just performing because people choose a *mukuza* at every last funeral rites ceremony. But apart from hearing his name announced on that day, there has been nothing from him. He never returned to see us since 2003. He is useless, if you want to know.
>
> Interviewer: How did he become the *mukuza*?
>
> Nakatudde: The clan members chose him because he was the oldest person around. After giving out property, he left with the things he got, but never ever returned.

Among the last funeral rites are rituals of purification and cleansing of all the orphans, widows, and the entire household — *okufulumya olumbe.* Sexual cleansing of widows during these ceremonies has been reported in other African contexts (Malungo 1999, 2001; Potash 1986). In our study, among those who underwent cleansing rites, three widows reported that they enacted symbolic forms of ritual sex with a male relative of the deceased husband who was not necessarily the appointed *omukuza.* Two of them reported that they sat on the floor, stretched their legs which were jumped over by the male in-law. The third widow reported that she tricked her brother-in-law by dropping her inner belt onto the floor at the entrance to her room so that the unsuspecting in-law stepped over it as he entered the room.

The Sexuality of Widows

The data about the sexuality of these widowed people contained tensions between a dominant discourse which challenged the sexual activity of widows on one hand, and local perceptions of widows as potentially sexually loose such that it was risky for them to get close to men whether married or not. Generally, there was consensus that widowers were expected, even encouraged to renew their sexual activity or indeed remarry a short while after mourning their dead spouses. However, the sexual choices of widows were relatively more restricted even when they were still of reproductive age. In order to pass as proper respectable women, widows had to spend longer times in mourning, and thus unattached to another man. Common desexualising stances claimed widows were asexual simply because of the normative positioning of proper sex only within the context of marital union. While discussing the customary apparel prescribed to widows in mourning, Sossou (2002, 203) states: "many mourning customs therefore diminish a widow's attractiveness by desexualising her through dress codes and placing taboos on her participation in social activities" (see also van Os 1995). Sossou further explains:

> ... a widow who manifests interest in a member of the opposite sex is in danger of being regarded as a prostitute.... Hence the need of many widows for male companionships and sexual relationships is barely recognised except in negative terms (2002, 203; see also Muller 1986).

However, in our study, some widows reported heightened vulnerability immediately after the death of a husband, so that it was easy to fall for charades of love and care from unscrupulous men mainly interested in the inheritance (see also Obbo 1986).

> Namwanje: Immediately after the death of the husband, when the wife is without support, it is very easy to get tempted and you fall into such acts hoping for much in the future. But it is not good to act early because you are still vulnerable. It is a strong violation against the marriage. It is Satanic and I do not want to hear about it because it is shaming.

Concerning the initiation of sexual relationships with widows, many participants argued that it was the men who started. Some claimed that it was not cultural for women to initiate sexual relationships unless they were prostitutes selling sex. Many discussed

the sexual relationship as an end product of processes of exchange with the man offering support, financial assistance, material gifts, help with raising the orphans, advice, or companionship to the grieving widow. Out of guilt of being a consistent receiver and in attempt to negate the possibility of coming across as an ungrateful parasite, the widow easily gave in to the sexual advances from the man. Other widows were reported to offer their sexual services as a means of maintaining this support from the man — reciprocating support.

In most cases, the widows reported that they preferred to engage in sexual relationships with outsiders to their deceased husband's family, clan, or lineage. Those few who were open about their sexual experiences after they were widowed stressed it was with other men who were not their in-laws; a few being remarried or cohabiting, and some having regular sexual partnerships with men who did not live with them. Unlike men who had no social restrictions against bringing a new sexual partner into the marital home, participants reported that widows were mostly unable to do the same because both in-laws and adult children would not permit this abuse *(kive),* despise *(kujooga),* or display of unruliness *(fujjo)* to the dead man.

The majority of study participants opposed the practice of any sexual interactions between the widow and her in-laws, saying it was immoral *(mawemukirano),* ungodly, degenerate *(bugwenyufu)* not cultural for the Baganda, a sign of having a weak heart *(bamitima minaffu)* and over reliance on men to provide because of unwillingness to earn an income for oneself as a woman. For some, it was wrong based on a script in which monogamy was the norm. Thus, "they both know it is wrong because the man has his wife already." A few reasoned in line with unequal power relationships between the widow as a woman and the levirate guardian as a man.

> Alice: It is a violation of her human rights since she expects help from the man asking for sex. If she says no, he may stop giving the help. It is not fair on her.

Others argued that it was rather unfair for the women to rely on men in the hope of offering them sex. In focus group discussions there was debate over the possibility of younger widows seducing men, including wealthy brothers-in-law, as a strategy for survival since the men would support them if a sexual relationship were established.

Many participants reported that sexual relationships between a widow and her brother-in-law were a common occurrence, providing anecdotal examples. They repeatedly stressed that it happened because the two individuals approved of each other, but not because it was a cultural practice. Some argued it was even advantageous because the inheritance was kept within one family. When it came to actually giving examples, only four participants knew of widows who had actually remarried their in-laws, and gone on to have children with them. Generally, participants knew about it happening elsewhere to someone else, but not to them.

> Saidat: That act of the *omukuza* and widow having sexual relationships is common. But for me, Allah is good that I have never seen any of my dead husband's relatives coming to me for those things. In fact they don't even come just to visit. In most cases it is the men who initiate it. And since the women don't have support, they give in.

There were a few widows in the study who narrated experiences of their brothers-in-law attempting to sexualise their interactions, usually based on the men offering gifts and consequently supposing that this entitled them to sexual services from the widows. Rather than yield, these widows took various avenues to shield off the sexual advances. Most common was the claim to possibly be HIV-infected, thereby appealing to the man's logic and notions of fear of contagion with an incurable virus. It was remarkable that some widows were challenged on these grounds by the men retorting that the availability of condoms meant protection from infection, while the growing availability of antiretroviral therapies meant that HIV and AIDS were no longer life-threatening conditions. A few other men were reported to deny the possibility that such a healthy-looking and beautiful woman was infected with the virulent virus. However, on the main, this reason put off some brothers-in-law and other men from further pursuing their sexual interest in particular widows. Other common strategies that widows appropriated against these often unsolicited sexual advances were moralising based on religious convictions, appealing to shaming the man by emphasising their widowhood or recalling memories of the dead husband, or indeed referring to the man's marriage. A few widows said they threatened to report to social elders, or recourse to the law.

Because of commitments to supporting their children, and being good role models by setting an example of sexual abstinence or chastity, many widows reported that they chose to refrain from any more sexual activities. Among older ones, the decision was based upon "losing sexual appeal," being "too old to bear anymore children and thus no longer attractive to many men who want children," outgrowing the need for sexual engagement. Generally, many claimed that they felt society expected them to remain chaste as an honour to the dead husband.

The tension between the expectations of chastity because of the death of a husband and the suspicions of uncontrollable sexuality of widows is captured by Marjo Buitelaar:

> The sexual experience of widows, on the contrary, renders them suspicious. While as a sexually experienced and therefore "real" woman the widow is less ambivalent than the virgin, in her case it is predominantly her unleashed sexuality that makes her an anomaly. The symbolism that surrounds the ambiguous position of widows is imbued with fear of uncontrolled female sexuality. This makes the widow a powerful symbol of disorder and destructive potential (1995, 8-9).

Furthermore, Buitelaar narrates:

> A Moroccan proverb says: "A woman without a man is like a public bath *(hammam)* without water," meaning that she will get hotter and hotter while there is no sperm to cool her off. This proverb aptly illustrates the image of the widow found in different societies as a woman who, having tasted the sweetness of sexual pleasure, is not willing to resign herself to chastity, but develops powerful sexual propensities and needs (1995, 3-9).

Discussion

Mapping the varied terrain of the everyday lives of the widowed participants in our study strongly points to the diversities of experiences that different individuals encounter when they lose a spouse. Widows and widowers are not a homogenous group. Their experiences are influenced by an interplay of several complex factors including age, gender, type of marital union, number of children, location, education level, employment status, individual ingenuity, access to resources, availability of support networks,

health status, and number of dependants. Within our study context, there were examples of powerless, marginalised, disadvantaged widowed individuals, directly juxtaposed with resourceful, powerful, successful over-comers who were also widowed. And within these categorisations, nothing was static because, for example, even among the seemingly more disadvantaged individuals there were also stories of success, progress, and achievement. Likewise the more advantaged participants also shared narratives about their struggles with lack, unfair systems, ill-health, or loneliness. This study disrupts the neat binary supposition that rural dwelling necessarily means lack of access to, while urbanity means access to power and better negotiating leeway out of abusive exploitative cultural dictates. According to Ewelukwa,

> ... the educated, urban women may have the option of escaping to the city and thereby avoiding the harsh demands of the custom.... Particularly for rural women far removed from the modern centres of power, legal recourse does not exist as a viable option (2002, 440).

Rather than providing a simplistic polarised portrait of widowhood, the data here highlight the heterogeneity of this sub-population group. This diversity is a strength that can be built upon to bring widowed people together to provide and draw support from one another in their own associations. Those with successes can share their stories and strategies with others going through similar challenges. Those with setbacks can seek counsel, information, and support from a network of others who have gone through similar experiences. These associations would give better visibility to the widowed, provide a forum for them to launch their issues, and a platform bridging them to policymakers, advocates, legislators, programme developers, and projects aiming at intervening in their plight. Giving visibility to this diversity also has the potential to facilitate de-stigmatisation of widowhood, by bringing to the fore the various dimensions to this status; not everybody is widowed because of HIV/AIDS.

Similar to other contexts (Ewelukwa 2002; Sossou 2002; Mukiza-Gapere and Ntozi 1995), the participants' narratives revealed that will-making was not common practice, even when the eventuality of death was brought closer by terminal illness. Because many husbands died intestate, it was impossible to lay

claims over their wishes concerning the demands they made of their wives, family members, or wider kin group members. The husbands of these widows did not leave any mandates for them to have sexual intercourse, or provide sexual services to any of their kinsmen, clansmen, or male agnates. This finding begins to disrupt the myth that, among the Baganda, widows are bound to fulfil sexual obligations to their husbands even in death. It problematises the notion of widows having sexual rituals with in-laws as a "duty" to their dead husbands. If the husband does not oblige the wife to offer sexual services to his lineage members when he dies, if in fact he most often does not even make a will, and if he does not instruct his relatives to demand these sexual services from his wife, where then do these myths emanate? What justifications are made for these actions, or claims thereof, particularly in the literature? The easiest target: "Blame it on the culture!"

However, contrary to the claims of scholars such as Ntozi and Nakayiwa (1999) who assert that widow-inheritance is a cultural practice in Buganda, many study participants emphatically stressed that this practice is not customary of the Baganda, and that when it did occur, it was either because the two concerned adults mutually consented to it, or otherwise the widow was overpowered by her brother-in-law's insistence, or indeed the greed of the in-law led him to trick the widow into sexual interaction as a means to handing over control of the inheritance to him. In speculation, some people supposed it was possible that the widow was won over by the generosity of the brother-in-law if he was providing material, financial, or other support to her and the orphans. Participants stressed that where widows engaged in sexual activities with their in-laws it was generally because of individual personal choices, rather than cultural customary practice. They argued it was more rare than common that in-laws remarried the widow. Most remarriages were with people unrelated to the deceased husband. Many widows reported that, unlike the widowers, there were many restrictions on their chances of remarriage even when it was to men of no relations to the deceased husband. Not only did their in-laws and (often adult) children refuse them to bring any new sexual partners into the deceased husband's home, but also the widows feared the ridicule and public shame from the community engendered through gossip, rumours, banter, and open

confrontation. Some reported that their former negative experiences when married had put them off the idea of remarriage. Others felt that their "excess baggage" of orphaned children was often a deterrent to men who might otherwise have been interested in sexual relationships with the widow. A few younger ones had remarried — one taking her three children into her new marriage, two sending them to live with their maternal-grandparents. Many widows chose to remain single, and were the household heads in their homes. They lived to run their homes, support their orphans, and make ends meet on a daily basis. This confirms Betty Potash's point:

> A common misconception is that most widows are involved in conjugal relationships. The reality is that many widows live without spouses ... (1986, 1; see also Obbo 1986, Mukiza-Gapere and Ntozi 1995).

Regarding sexualised cultural practices involved in widowhood, some scholars distinguish between sexual cleansing (Asiimwe, Kibombo and Neema 2003; Malungo 1999, 2001) of widows and widow-inheritance or levirate marriage. This distinction is important because it highlights the ambivalence of meanings associated with the label "widow-inheritance." It contributes to the complexity of teasing apart the range of possible practices attached to this label, their over-laps, differences, and inherent tensions within specific contexts. Potash (1986, 7-8) elaborately discusses the definitional challenges of working out the different practices carried under the umbrella terms: "widow-inheritance," and "levirate marriage." In Buganda, there is evidence of the possibilities of a widow engaging in sexual or sexualised activities with her in-laws during rituals of completion *emikolo egy'okumala olumbe* in the last funeral rites ceremony. This sexual cleansing does not equate to levirate marriage or widow inheritance because, other than performing the symbolic rites with the widow, the man in question rarely ever develops a further relationship with this woman. In the cases where last funeral rites were conducted, none of the participants reported furthering relationships with the male members of their deceased husband's clan / lineage who performed the ritual cleansing.

Most widows negotiated alternatives, including outright refusal based on religious convictions against the whole customary

function, ignorance of the expected customary processes, claims to modernity and progress which negated the necessity of indulging in the entire repertoire of traditional rites, shortness of time in relation to long distance travel back to their urban dwelling from the rural cites of burial where the husband's corpse lay and where the last funeral rites were held. Other common explanations for refusing to engage in lengthy last funeral rites included falling out with in-laws such that there was no interest in going to the length of the full customary rituals, breakdown in the extended family networks, lack of funds to conduct separate last funeral rites for each individual dead member of the lineage such that several peoples' rites were piled together and attached to the ceremony of a more prominent lineage member. Where the rites of cleansing did occur to study participants, the widows reported that they resorted to other symbolic performances rather than sexual intercourse, including the in-law jumping over the widow's out-stretched legs, or her inner belt. Other symbolic acts of ritual sex — including urinating in the same spot as the widow, using traditional medicines, jumping over the levir's spear — were reported among rural Baganda living in Masaka district (see Nyanzi, Nassimbwa, Kayizzi and Kabanda 2008).

Similar to other settings (Ewelukwa 2002; Malungo 1999, 2001; Asiimwe, Kibombo and Neema 2003; Nyanzi, Nassimbwa, Kayizzi and Kabanda 2008), the perceptions towards and practices involved in the sexual cleansing of widows have altered in light of the sexual transmissibility of HIV. Because people are more aware of the risk involved in exchanging sexual fluids through unprotected sex, they use alternatives, including getting protection from traditional healers and spiritual mediums, or altogether refraining from the customary script and instead replacing it with Christianised or Islamic versions. There are alternatives to sexual cleansing, which negate the need for sexual violation of widows in the name of Kiganda culture. The widows in our study revealed they were resourceful enough to appeal to these other avenues, as active controllers of their sexual lives, rather than submit to the whims of an implicit customary sexual more of widow victimisation.

Another dimension to the victimisation debate is the place and role of the *omukuza* in the widow's life. If he is not a levirate husband, or indeed a widow-inheritor, what is the *omukuza* to the

widow? Does he have any rights to the sexual and reproductive functions of the widow? Our data challenge the customary sexualisation of the *omukuza* in contemporary Buganda. To begin with, we find that the term "guardian" is perhaps a better estimation of the meaning of *omukuza* whose root *okukuza* means "to grow," "to raise," "to groom," or "to make important." In this case, the role behind the term perhaps applies much more to the orphans than the widow(s). By extension, the *omukuza's* role was perhaps more about assisting with the raising of the orphans than meeting any sexual obligations to the widow(s). During the last funeral rites in Kiganda custom, the clan leaders instruct the male *omukuza* and his female counterpart — *lubuga* to give heed to the proper raising of the deceased man's offspring. From the narratives of our study participants, many did not receive any help or support whatsoever from the people appointed in these positions. Many widows lost contact with these people after the last funeral rites. A few widows reported that they were in touch with the chosen *omukuza* who mainly played the social role of representing the orphans' father at ceremonies, such as weddings and graduations. Only two widows reported that they received meaningful support from their *bakuza.* Generally, due to extensive poverty, breakdown of extended familial ties and resultant obligations, disruptions of traditional social networks enforced by rural-urban migration, and urban lifestyles, widows hardly received any support or involvement from the people appointed to be *bakuza.* With growing capitalism and dependence on monetary incomes, participants explained that Kiganda society is more individualistic, and thus these widows had to rely on their own abilities to tap into available resources and support networks than wait for *bakuza* to intervene in their plight.

In a bid to gain sympathy and as a strategy for survival, some widows performed at helplessness targeting at wealthy individuals to be moved to the point of providing some support or assistance. Admittedly there were some destitute widows. However, there were also others who played out this role to appropriate audiences towards beneficial or lucrative ends. According to Kenda Mutongi,

> By expressing their grief publicly — usually in ways that focussed on their social and economic needs — Maragoli widows ... sought to redress their grievances ... they consciously presented themselves as "poor widows," as ideal-

> ized stereotypes of suffering females who were believed to become needy and helpless at the death of their husbands. They told their stories in ways calculated to solicit sympathy. And this usually worked to their advantage since it placed men in the difficult situation of having to defend their "ideal" masculinity. Only by helping guarantee the economic livelihood and social status of bereaved widows could men uphold their self-image.... By presenting their grief publicly so as to solicit relief for their sufferings, widows were actively able to turn what men saw as stereotypical feminine behaviour: emotionality, helplessness and weakness — into strengths (1999, 67-68).

This conclusion is confirmed in our study: social relationships involving men and widows were informed by a reciprocity suggesting that the widows were more than passive recipients of male charity. Rather, they actively re-constructed how they articulated their losses in ways that would benefit them. However most participants agreed that due to poverty, individualism, greed, selfishness, and emancipation of women, many of these plight performances often generated nothing more than verbal consolations, or advice. The frequency of widowhood also resulted in its normalisation, such that people were no longer moved to compassion as previously when death was a minimal occurrence.

Notes

[1] In local lexicon, the people are Baganda, their language is Luganda, their kingdom is Buganda, and the derivative adjective is Kiganda.

[2] Widowhood is highly stigmatised among younger adults because of its associations with possible HIV infection. Therefore, some widowed individuals did not publicly identify thus. We relied on insider knowledge of long-term residents and cultural leaders to locate people who had lost a spouse, although this was not common knowledge. Thus, we asked key informants and participants to inform us about any widows or widowers living in the study area. This method was relevant to the qualitative methodology which aimed at deepening our understanding of local practice and knowledge. In response to critiques of using snow-ball sampling because it undermines the value of statistical analysis, this is not a quantitative study, the sample size is too small to justify meaningful statistical

analyses, and we are not making claims to generalisability or representativeness.

[3] In the Kiganda legend of origin, death is a male personality called Walumbe who lives with Gulu, the father of the woman Nambi who married the first Muganda man Kintu. When Kintu visited to seek permission to marry Nambi, Gulu cautioned them to pack lightly and travel very early before Walumbe awoke and insisted on following them back to earth. As they began the journey, Nambi remembered she forgot to carry millet for her chicken. She returned to fetch it despite Kintu's warnings not to, found Walumbe awake, and he followed her to earth. Mentioning death could invite him back. Thus the local philosophy of death.

[4] When a man dies intestate, it is from his male kin — usually sons, nephews, or younger brothers that an heir is selected. In order to facilitate fairness, brothers are often asked to leave the meeting because it is from among them that an heir is selected. This allows the clan meeting members to openly discuss the good and bad qualities of the different sons. Therefore, it is commonly daughters who contribute to such meetings.

[5] While not reifying dynamic concepts such as "custom," "tradition," or "culture," we use these terms as they were presented by study participants. Otherwise, we agree with the literature about the constantly changing character of these constructs.