WIDOWHOOD & RESILIENCE: AKAN WIDOWS’ EXPERIENCES OF CHALLENGES & SURVIVAL

By: Rose Korang-Okrah

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Rose Korang-Okrah, Ph.D.
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PRESENTATION OUTLINE

- Ghanaian Cultural Context & Demographics
- Theoretical Framework For The Study
- Akan Categories Of Ontological Beings
- Customary Notions Of Marriage
- Inheritance & Property Rights
- Research Results: Challenges
- Research Results: Coping & Survival
- Akan Widows’ Resilience
- Cross-culturally Knowledgeable & Competent in Research & Practice
Discriminatory property rights laws and androcentric traditional and social customs pose diverse challenges and stresses for Akan widows in Ghana. These include violations of their property rights, coercive subjection to the observance of customarily gendered-constructed rites-of-passage (widowhood rites “kunadie”), confrontation by in-laws and economic issues. All these challenges greatly impact on the widows’ psycho-socio-spiritual functioning. Most of the times, research on widowhood highlights negative outcomes but the 20 widows studied employed protective factors (such as, social support & Spiritual/Religious) as coping strategies towards healthy functioning.
LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Identify some of the key challenges confronting vulnerable populations such as women from other cultures and know the standards for practice with such clients.

- Understand and appreciate how vulnerable, marginalized groups of women (widows) in different cultures apply their faith and belief in God as a tool for survival strategies.

- The need to be Cross-Culturally knowledgeable and culturally competent in research and practice with culturally diverse clients.
Ghana is located on the south coast of West Africa encompassing approximately 92,101 square miles (238,540 km²).

Former British colony, a unitary republic with a democratically elected parliament.

Almost half of Ghana’s population (48.5%) lives in the rural areas (UNdata, 2010)

Ghana is a multi-linguistics country including 100 ethnic groups speaking more than 50 languages and dialects.

The focus of this research is the Akan. The Akans, who speak Twi, constitute about 53% of Ghana’s population of approximately 25 million.

Ghanaians report strong religious involvement: 69% are practicing Christians; 16% are Muslim; 8% follow indigenous religions & 7% are in other faiths.
AKAN CATEGORIES OF ONTOLOGICAL BEINGS

The underpinnings of the Akan concept of being (ontology) have spiritualistic characteristics.

The Akan “traditional” religious thought is basically theocentric and theistic in nature with the Supreme Being, God, at the center of it all.

Akans use the objects around them to create cultural symbols to portray their beliefs about God.

Some of the Akan names and appellations used for God are: “Onyankopɔn or Nyankopɔn” (the Omnipotent); “Onyame or Nyame” (God, Our satisfaction); “Otwieduampɔn” (Fortress, Stronghold, Anchor); domankoma (Infinite, Inventor); ɔbɔadeɛ (Creator); Ananse Kokuroko (The Great Spider; The Great Designer); “Awurade” (Lord); “Ohene” (King); “Okokuroko” (The Almighty); and “Agya Nyame” (Our Father God).
The Akans regard marriage (*awadee*) as the union between two or more families or communities primarily for the purpose of procreation, but also to increase the families’ resources and continue their traditions.

All marriages (Ghana) require the consent of the two families involved; for the establishment of a permanent relationship between the couple.

Customary marriage rites must be performed completely before weddings & marriage registration.

The asymmetrical obligations and rights within the traditional Akan marriage (home).
Women and their children are not considered members of their husbands’ & fathers’ lineage.

Inheritance always starts with the uterine brothers. Siblings who share the same mother (same uterus). They could be from same father or different fathers.

Considering the successor to any estate in the matrilineal lineage, genealogy comes first, and then gender with men having precedence over women.

Women are the last resort only if there are no possible inheritable males including nephews.

Succession and inheritance laws stress lineage, sex, age and other personal qualities.

The successor holds the “family” property in trust for the ancestors (Nananom nsamanfo), the living (ateasefo) and the future generation (nkyirimma).
How do statutory and customary laws deal with inheritance by women?

**Akan Customary Laws:**

- A body of unwritten, shared, long standing and influential rules concerning acceptable standards which govern personal status, social organizations and communal resources.

- Govern issues dealing with Akan marriage, land tenure, property, property rights and laws governing succession and inheritance have remained essentially unchanged for more than hundred years.

- According to the Akan customary laws, property is divided into “moveable and immoveable,” and further sub-divided into “ancestral,” “family” and “self-acquired.”

- Ancestral or family property cannot bequeath to anyone but the self-acquired could be, only while the person is alive.
How do statutory and customary laws deal with inheritance by women?

Statutory laws:
- Relatively recent formal laws exist side-by-side with older, customary laws
- Chapter 12 of Ghana’s Constitution promises to protect fundamental human rights and freedoms regardless of race, place of origin, political opinion, color, religion, creed or gender.
- Ghana has ratified more than 20 international human rights treaties.
- The purpose of the Provisional National Defense Council Law (PNDCL 111, 1985) is “to remove the irregularities in the customary law relating to intestate succession.
- Twenty-seven years since its adoption, a number of problems still persist in relation to widows’ property rights and inheritance.
How do Akan widows experience widowhood?

Bereavement and widowhood rites:

- In discussing the challenges of widowhood, some women described bereavement. One woman explained:

  Challenges, Challenges! Living as a single, widowed woman is not easy... But by God’s grace, I met my husband when I had lost both my parents to death. He then filled the gap and became my intimate friend as well... The vacuum his death created can never be filled. I have no one to talk to or share my worries and joys with and that make me feel very sad and lonely. Even some trusted friends cannot have time for when you need to talk to someone.

- The traditional period of bereavement for widows extends until one year after the husband’s death.
Bereavement and widowhood rites:

- During bereavement periods, 10 of the 20 participants (3 Moslems and 7 Christians) observed the Akan cultural rites-of-passage widow (widowhood rites - *Kunadie*). Their experiences of widowhood rites varied. A widow from a rural area described a positive experience:

  Going through the rites taught me many things which I learned from the women who took care of me through the widowhood rites. They taught me many things I never knew about the Akan culture. It really opened my eyes. Going through the rites prepared me to stand on my own feet without the man. Sometimes I feel so sad, lonely and broken but when I remember what they taught me, that encourages me to move on, because I have five children to take care of alone and nothing I do will bring my husband back.

- Others described very negative experiences, for example,

  I see the widowhood rites as an infringement on the woman’s rights, reducing women to something else less than human, controlling their freedom and coercing them to go through the rites else they face consequences. Therefore in fear many widows have to do that to avoid those consequences. Why don’t they do this to widowers? Haven’t they also lost their loved ones? So what is the difference? There are certain things widows do not have to do because eventually, those inhumane treatment have a big toll on their lives.
Widowhood & Challenges from In-Laws:

During bereavement 13 widows described bitter or problematic relationships with their in-laws, for example:

- My in-laws really tormented me, fighting with me physically over the houses and plots of land my husband left behind. This house (the one we are living in now), was not completed when my husband died. Exactly 40 days after his death the family ordered me to move out of the completed house where I had lived with my husband and children to come into this uncompleted one. I asked for some time to prepare but they poured insults upon insults on me so I quickly looked around for money, roofed this one and moved in. My in-laws took almost half of all that my husband left me and my children. At a point they even claimed that I had forged my husband’s signature to alter his will... My brother-in-law even accused me of killing his brother. I was sad and felt so insulted by that baseless accusation... I left everything to God. Within the last four years, that brother-in-law has lost two wives all during childbirth. Now he would see how painful it is and realize that people who lose loved ones need care and love not the baseless accusations he was leveling against me.
Economic Issues:

- Both younger and older widows experienced significant economic problems. One widow from a rural area described her experience of raising her children single-handedly and in poverty:

> My greatest challenge now is my children’s education and my greatest worry is poverty. I have never worked anywhere apart from my farm work. I never went to school. So soon after my marriage, my husband took me to Sefwi to work on the cocoa farm… My husband’s family used my husband’s cocoa farm as collateral for his funeral so I don’t get any money from there… Sometimes, I go to bed on empty stomach because the little I get I give to the children first. Poverty is crippling everything that I am supposed to do, especially for my children’s education. Since I never went to go to school, I want to see all my children go to school. All my six children are in school but last year the 3 older ones were sent home for one month because I couldn’t pay for their school fees. The school authorities have understood my plight and have allowed me to pay in installments which I am even struggling to pay. Hmm, I know God is in control.
What Resources Do Akan Widows Draw upon for Coping & Survival?

- **Social Support.** All widows reported that without the emotional and social support from family, friends, and church members they could not have survived the trauma of bereavement. An experience from one widow:

  *My parents contributed a lot to my survival. My family, my brothers and sister were all around me and supported me to stand strong through the early years of that tragedy. It was a tremendous support.*

- **Taking leadership/advocacy roles.** 4 women indicated that they had already taken it upon themselves to educate and support new widows. One of them reports:

  *I already work with widows. I was doing that before I became one, but this has strengthened me and given me new insight...I used to go out to widows to console and aid them financially when I could. However, from how people reacted to me when I became a widow, I have realized that I wasn’t doing much for them at all, even financially. Now, whatever I was doing for them, I am going to do more.*
Self Sufficiency: Two of the widows used their capabilities to be self-sufficient to improve their livelihood and that of their children. One of them from an urban area described her experience:

*I have always been living a self-supporting and independent life which I learned from my mother as a child. I lost my parents when I was 17 and being the oldest child, I became the mother figure for my siblings before marrying at age 23. I took the responsibilities of caring for my siblings before I married and continued thereafter so I was equipped and knew how not to depend on others, not even entirely on my husband...I do some petty trading to add to my monthly income to support my family and other very poor widows...So seriously, if it was left with such things as utility bills, and even my children’s school fees and others, I will not necessarily miss my husband because even when he was alive I was already doing things of that nature.*
Religiosity/Spirituality. Widows described their relationships with God, their quest for meaning and understanding of the challenges confronting them, as well as the meaning of their involvement in the community of such believers.

- One woman from an urban area whose husband died tragically in a motor vehicle accident described:

*It’s God. It’s just by His Grace, I wouldn’t have survived. The love I have for my husband could have destroyed even my faith in God when he died. But it has been 10 months since he died. God’s ways are not our ways. On the day that my husband died I had been dry-fasting and it was all prayers even when I had no money. I believe God’s time is the best and God does not hate me. It is in the Bible that God will never give us what we cannot handle. I know my burden is heavy, but I believe God will give me the strength to carry it through. This time I am more involved in church and community activities than ever. Those keep me busy and I love doing that.*
Religiosity/Spirituality: 17 widows described how their turning to God in total trust and involvement in church and community activities positively help their coping process.

One widow from a rural area described:

*When my husband died, I never thought I could survive till today that I am talking to you. It’s just by the Grace of God. Look at a widow with 6 children, the 7th in the womb and without any source of income or financial support... But turning my focus on God and strengthened my relationship with Him changed everything. I do joke with my prayers, my church attendance and receiving the Holy Communion. I get involved in cleaning the church premises as well as visit the old women in community to give them words of encouragements. I reflect a lot during my quiet time with the Lord to find answers to my existence and what I should do. I know, feel and see answers to my prayers... And that’s what He does for me everyday. By His grace, I’m alive!*
Resilience Factors Discussed in the Literature:

Walsh (1998) defines resilience as “the capacity to rebound from adversity strengthened and more resourceful... the qualities of resilience enable people to heal from painful wounds, take charge of their lives, and go on to live fully and love well” (Spirituality and religion can be significant resources in individual and family resilience.)

In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, [spiritual], social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided in culturally meaningful ways. (Culture is relevant to resilience) (Ungar, 2008, p.225)
AKAN WIDOWS’ RESILIENCE

Resilience Factors Discussed in the Literature:

Factors validated:

- The factors validated in the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC) included personal competence, trust in one’s instincts or tolerance of negative effects, positive acceptance of change, control and spiritual influences.

- Factors included in the validation of the Response to Stressful Experiences Scale (RSES) included positive appraisal, spirituality, active coping, self-efficacy, meaning/learning and acceptance of limits.

- Link with the resources that Akan widows applied for healthy survival and functioning.
Social Work's emphasis on a holistic view for understanding the depth and breadth of the client, individual, family, community or system in the context of its bio-psycho-social-spiritual, historical environment and cultural experiences.

Rocha (2007) emphasizes the need for social workers with policy practice skills – as a special intervention designed to make changes in the political arena, especially those clients at the larger systems levels.

Cultural competence – Understanding the cultures of clients and how their policies work and the impact on people’s lives.

Evidence-based research, practice, education and policy

- Then evidence from field (research incorporates into classroom education and vice-versa).
THANK U

 COMMENTS?

 QUESTIONS?