

## Abanyole Cultural Perception on Widows' Sexuality

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**Abstract:** A global survey on the sexual situation of widows reveals that there is a general infringement on widows' sexuality in many traditions and cultures. The aim of this study was to ascertain the prevailing cultural perception on widows' sexuality. Interview and Focused Group Discussion schedules were used to collect data from respondents. The findings were descriptively presented as narrated themes. This study established that traditional *Abanyole* perception of widows' sexuality which is characteristically male-centered stigmatizing females is rife. The study recommends that *Abanyole* engage the culture in light of contemporary realities to avert female subjugation that characterizes widow sexuality.

**Key Words:** Widow, Sexuality, widowhood, Culture, Gender, Trajectory, women, sex.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on the *Abanyole* cultural perception on gender and sexual script as reflected upon by the respondents to this study. It is part of a study entitled *Christian Perception on Widows' Sexuality among the Abanyole of Emuhaya, Western Kenya*, carried out among *Abanyole* of Emuhaya, Western Kenya between April 2016 and April 2017. The first step taken is to describe gender differentiation, then an explanation of the expected sexual scripts is undertaken, after which, highlights are made on widowhood sexual scripts and finally, an exploration on the attitude and views on widowhood among *Abanyole* is explained.

### II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A concept of culture has been a preoccupation of the academic field of anthropology. This field has advanced several definitions of culture. Anthropologist Gary Ferraro (1998) explores over 160 definitions given in the field to draw his own that culture is, "everything that people have, think, and do as members of a society" (Ferraro, 1998, 18). He notes that culture is shared, learned, affects physical bodies and biological processes, changes and help people to adapt to their environments increasing their chances of survival. He as well observes that there are common features found in all cultures of the world. This view resonates with p'Bitek's idea that, "[c]ulture is philosophy as lived and celebrated in a society.... And all these institutions are informed by, and in fact built around the central ideas people have developed, ideas about what life is all about; that is their social philosophy, their world view" (1986, 13). It is thus important to establish *Abanyole* sexual constructions as Villanueva (1997, 18-19) aptly puts:

It is very important to acknowledge the influence of sexual constructions in shaping sexuality. ... emphasized the importance of culture in defining, shaping, and promoting sexuality, including the maintenance of socially stigmatized patterns. Goettsche did not include in the definition social norms or sexual scripts ... which are specific for each individual's culture and personal experiences, and how these affect the concept. He acknowledged though, that while sexuality is a potential in all human beings, the ways people feel, think about, express, and experience sexuality are socially constructed and therefore influenced by external and internal processes which together create and change sexual scripts....

There is a renewed focus in the recent research to define the concept, sexuality. As observed by Villanueva (1997, 17) sexuality is an elusive subject for a precise definition prompting many researchers and commentators in the field to avoid or assume common knowledge. However, she underscores the need for a precise definition. She then pursues Goettsche's definition to emphasize sexuality as an individual capacity with bodily orientation that is socially constructed involving emotions and is influenced by external and internal processes.

Hillman (2012, 11) broadly defines sexuality as a term representing any blend of "sexual behavior, sensual activity, emotional intimacy, or sense of sexual identity." He goes further to explain that,

Sexuality may involve sexual activity with the explicit goal of achieving pleasure (e.g., hugging, kissing) or orgasm (e.g., petting, oral sex, intercourse), sensual activity with or without the explicit goal of

sexual pleasure (e.g., hugging, dancing, wearing body lotion to feel attractive or feminine), or the experience of emotional intimacy within the context of a romantic relationship. Thus, sexuality is commonly associated with a variety of issues and concepts including body image, self-stimulation, love, libido, intercourse, homophobia, relationship satisfaction, marital satisfaction, desires for sexual and sensual experiences, and participation in high-risk behaviors. It also is important to note that sexuality encompasses thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that may lead to positive or negative feelings (e.g., consider body image, masturbation, and sexual abuse).

However, in a quick rejoinder Villanueva (1997, 19) invokes Gagnon and Simon to allude that, By looking at the metaphor of sexual scripts, we are defining sexuality (1) as emergent in relationships and situations rather than as universal essence; (2) as needing to be constructed rather than needing to be controlled; (3) as a shader of conduct (as when sex is used to satisfy needs for affection, protection, and gender-validation); (4) as a contingent (dependent on our particular lives) rather than a necessary (mandated by some inevitable internal energy) form of human behavior; and (5) as an aspect of life that is qualitatively different for children and adults.

In Asia the attitude on women still show subjugation. In India subjugation was cardinal principle. Day and night a woman must be held by the protector in a state of dependence as directed by Manu. The protector is a male kin such as the father, husband and the son depending on her marital status. The rule of inheritance was patriarchal tracing decent through male to the exclusion of the females (Onkware, 2004). Hillman (2012, 15) recognizes that,

Sexual power and privilege are distributed differently between Japanese men and women, and particularly so in older aged cohorts. In Japanese society, it is often expected that husbands will seek sexual partners outside of marriage, and that wives will remain true to their husbands. It also is important to note that even when the older Japanese wives reported that they had sex with some frequency with their husbands when they were younger, the wives' ability to communicate any sexual interest or desire was limited solely to indirect measures.... Because it is considered taboo and immodest for Japanese women to discuss or show any interest in sexual behavior, the wives in the study indicated that they would prepare certain foods for their husbands (e.g., broiled abalone and surf clams) as a nonverbal signal that they were interested in having sex. These foods are not considered aphrodisiacs per se in Japanese culture, but rather as symbols of fertility.

In Africa, most of the societies are patriarchal and patria-local. This provides that the male gender is given preeminence in decision making and resource a location. However, at the same stroke of a pen, it ensures the security and dignity of a woman. Magesa (1997, 133) depicts that in Africa, "[m]arriage and other forms of legal sexual unions are meant to ensure procreation and the preservation of life and the life force through sexuality and its physical expression in sexual intercourse." As a result, "the generative power through sexual intercourse is closely controlled to ensure its full procreative potential." According to Magesa, in African world view, sexual intercourse has a spiritual dimension and is under the male custody. Consequently, the sexual act is communally managed through prohibitions and taboos. The giving and receiving of bride wealth establishes "the right of exclusive sexual access to the woman by the husband" and secures her a place permanently in the new society sealing the marriage that even death cannot end. The bond of marriage survives the death of either spouse through polygamous, leviratic, ghost or surrogate marriages and sometimes women to women marriage and widow inheritance unions that are established for life fostering purposes (1997, 123-124, 127). Magesa's observation exposes four important and interrelated elements in the African world view on widow's sexual life. First, death of a spouse does not terminate a marriage, especially if when the surviving spouse is a woman. Thus African marriage vows are for eternity and not just a life time. The security of the widow to stay in her matrimonial home is guaranteed by way of bride price. Second, sexual intercourse is sacred and enjoyed exclusively within some marital arrangement. Hence any such practice outside such arrangement is scorned. Third, men are the custodians and managers of sexual intercourse and related activities. This gives the male the dominance in the initiation and determination of the practice. Finally, there are alternatives to ensure that normalcy of life, especially sexual, resumes with minimal disruption following the demise of a spouse. This is through its various marital and quasi-marital arrangements. As such, one wonders how this is undertaken among *Abanyole*.

Conversely, Maseno (2014) draws from an exploration of the culture of widow's sexual cleansing among the Luo of Kenya in the context of HIV/AIDS. She demonstrates how widows are exposed to the virus that is claiming their lives. The culture is based on a patriarchal view of widows' sexuality that women are a property of men. The bad omen of death on the widow has to be warded off through a sexual union with a mentally ill man to pave way for the widow's remarriage. This culture is prevalent in most of African communities (Perry, et al., 2014). This is clearly documented by Kirwen (1979) in his study on leviratic marriage in four African cultures and Owen (1996) in her book, *A Widows World*.

Hillman (2012, 13- 14) cites a study carried out on various societies' cultural beliefs and practices on older people having sex which demonstrates a general approval and acceptance. Sex and sexual activities among men and women was common and acceptable in most traditional societies in the world. The women have an

upper hand in that respect as demonstrated by the statistical data provided. Age is maintained to be a non issue as well as transitions such as menopause and physical attractiveness as far as sexual status is concerned. Accordingly, this research sought to establish cultural response to widows' sexuality among *Abanyole* of Emuhaya, Western Kenya.

### III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### **Gender Differentiation among *Abanyole***

Villanueva, in her study on females' sexuality in Puerto Rico, observes that, Sexuality, being a complex and individual phenomenon influenced by social norms, culture, and personal experience, is said to be socially constructed. All these affect the way individuals define, feel and perceive their sexuality. Therefore, diverse sexualities exist even within the same environment (1997, 2).

Alati established in his study on the worldview of the *Olunyole* speech community that *Abanyole* are a patriarchal community where "men are expected to take a central role in the leadership and organization of social units and cultural activities" (2016, 133). The same train of thought was taken by all my respondents who noted that there is a gendered distinctive and predictable pattern of behavior among *Abanyole*. Important observations made were relating to sex differentiation and gender preference. *Abanyole* people socialize their children depending on their gender. This ranges all the way from the attires that they put on, toys, games, company, roles and duties assigned in homes.

Boys are raised up for tough and challenging up market tasks that are meant to earn a living for the family while girls are raised for the routine domestic chores for maintenance of the family. This way of socialization instills in the boys a sense of superiority while girls are made to perceive themselves as subordinates to the male, especially in a family setting.

Family currency was pegged not only to the number children raised but also their gender. Hence, gender preference is conspicuous among *Abanyole* people as in other societies in the world. Male children are preferred against female. This is evident in the treatment of women who do not bear male children. Salome (***not her real name*** O.I.) was sent packing from her matrimonial home for giving birth to a girl for the second round while she had no male child. However, Asiachi's story is slightly different. Her mother bore five girls. Her father loved them so much. But the extended family hated them and her father for that. They insisted that the father drop his pastoral responsibility for a second wife in order to bear male children for the posterity of his name. His father decline and kept his word to his death.

Hence, couples that do not bear male children are despised. Women are always on the receiving end of such. Their husbands are encouraged to marry second wives or engage in extra marital affairs with other women in order to have a male heir. Men who refuse to engage in such behavior are castigated as being under a spell cast by their wives. The extended family, especially mothers-in-law, refers to the girls in a demeaning way. They call them frogs or toads (Salome O.I.).

Such preferential attitudes flare up especially in intense emotional events like funerals. Janipher and Oruko (***not their real names***) lost their son, a third year student at a local university. He was survived by his two sisters. In her eulogy, his grandmother did not mince her words. She noted that contemporary women kill children in their bosoms using contraceptives. She wanted to bear ten children but she only managed seven, one died and she has six. Her son, instead of bearing ten or so, suppressed them. He has lost it all! He now has nothing! This incidence shows that gender discrimination is rife among *Abanyole*. Women are not considered at the same level as their male counterparts (Observation made on 13/2/17 by the researcher while attending a funeral service in the study area).

On intimacy, affection and sexual intercourse, the Focus Group Discussions observed that *Abanyole* men are socialized to be the initiators of sexual activity and remain in charge, while their female counterparts are expected to remain innocent, naive and ignorant girls yet, available, ready and able to quench their spouses' sexual thirst.

#### **Intimacy and Sexual Intercourse among *Abanyole***

*Abanyole* as other African people groups display a particular cultural feature that characterizes their sexuality. This characterization is referred to as sexual morality.

Generally, sex is considered as sacred. Hence, the taboos allied with and the language used to refer to intimacy and sexual intercourse. The sacredness of intimacy and sexual intercourse were further entrenched in the socialization process of their children. *Abanyole* expected that girls remain virgins until their wedding night, and then the couple would engage in sexual intercourse. Sibelenje, 75 (O.I.) and Osore, 72 (FGD Esibila widows) observed with nostalgia the strict discipline that young men and women in Bunyore were brought up with. This is how they recollected on the issue.

*Abanyole* young men and women were required to be virgins at the time of marriage. This was stricter for the bride. To ensure this, the young girls would be instructed never to allow themselves to have sexual

intercourse before marriage. To enforce this, the girls were kept under a surveillance of a respected elderly woman, a grandmother or just an appointed caretaker (*omukonia*) who is respected in the clan.

The girls slept in her house or a common house that served as a dormitory. In this dormitory, the girls reported at 6:30 p.m. and adhered to strict code of regulation that included check-in time and other moral behavior. The girls slept on a big continuous bed made of rafter and suspended permanently in the house from wall to wall known as *esirili*. The caretaker who was an elderly woman would have a number of girls under her watch.

A young man wishing to befriend and betroth any girl under her care would approach the old woman and the old woman would allow him to meet the girl. The man would even be allowed to sleep with the girl but the girl was under obligation never to allow the man to penetrate. The act was referred to as *okhusota* [to be intimate]. Sex was strictly reserved for marriage. And in the event the man had sexual intercourse with the girl, which the *omukonia* would easily tell from the sound, both parties were punished. The man would not leave the house until his parents brought a sheep and he would be forced to marry the girl or the girl would be married off as a second or third wife. Such a girl would also not be married in a traditional *andere* (wedding) ceremony but would just elope.

The girls would also be subjected to routine examination by the *omukonia* to ensure that they preserve their virginity. And upon marriage the aunts and grannies of the groom would demand to ascertain that the bride was 'untouched'. Upon confirmation and consummation of the marriage the bride would be sent to her parents with gifts to her grandmother and the mother. The bride's arrival and the nature of the visit were announced by the gifts and the women of the village would break in song and dance to serenade the mother of the bride:

Solo: Nyina mwana yeteya [Her mother trained her well]

All: Aah yeteya [Yes, she trained her well]

Solo: Nyina mwana yeteya [Her mother trained her well]

All: Aah yeteya [Yes, she trained her well]

Solo: Yefulungulule mufwebweywe [She is glad and honored]

All: Aah yeteya, yefulungulule mufwebweywe, Aah yeteya. [Yes, she trained her well, she is glad and honored, for she trained her well]

It is evident from these sentiments expressed that *Abanyole* concept of sexuality is that sexual intercourse is strictly within a marital union. There is a clear demarcation between sexual intimacy and intercourse. Individuals can get intimate without necessarily indulging in coital penetration. Yet such acts are reserved for those intending to marry or already in marriage otherwise they are only welcome within specified social boundaries and on a limited scale. Sexual intimacy among *Abanyole* is taken to be a reserve for married couples. The HIV/AIDS scourge and strict widowhood rituals and monitoring, especially of those that profess Christian faith, makes it difficult for widows to 'legally' explore their sexuality. Widows reported to go against the norm would earn serious public admonition and condemnation as the FGDs participants unanimously exclaimed.

Sex education was part of the socialization that children got from the onset. Young boys spent most of their times with elderly men either grazing or working in the fields and at evening's bonfires. The girls would be assisting other female members of the family in their domestic chores, working in the fields or during evening time as they retired to bed under their grannies' or *omukonia's* supervision. Such moments would be seized as opportune time, depending on the age and context, to transmit holistic sex education for the clan's posterity. For example, according to Sibelenje (O.I.), boys and girls were required to acquire a mastery of their genealogies to establish family relationships in order to acquaint themselves with the clans they can marry from. They were also taken through lessons on how to go about sensuality, intimacy and sexual intercourse. They were specifically taught acceptable sexual behavior and the consequences of deviating from the norm.

*Abanyole* people do not have initiation ceremonies for girls. But during their male circumcision, which was a communal ceremony, the candidates would be grouped together for nursing by an elderly man. Specialized socialization, which prepared the candidates who had undergone initiation for community responsibilities for the protection and perpetuation including the custody of procreation – sexual intercourse, was offered. For instance elder Osore (FGD Esibila) observes that unmarried men would be discouraged from having sexual intercourse with married women (including widows) or with strangers for this reduced their ability to sire children and endangered their life.

Men would be taken through genealogies to be aware of the blood ties that govern marital lines. This was accompanied with strict regulations on how they ought to relate with females in the same family line. They were prohibited from engaging in sexual activities with relatives for that would bring a curse (*esiluchi*) which would destroy the clan. The culprits and their close allies would suffer from strange and untreatable ailments (*ebila/chisila/olubo*). This meant that the power of life and death of the clan was in the hands of its people. They would either appropriately direct their life-force and multiply and subdue the earth, or indulge and head for self

destruction. They were, therefore, charged with the responsibility of steering the community's posterity by being good stewards of the gates of life – their sex organs. As the Bukusu adage would have it, 'All open doors are yours, but all closed doors are out of bounds for you'. Every *Omuniyole* young man was encouraged to find his own wife (or wives) with whom to explore sexual relations and discouraged from any kind of illicit sexual affairs which amounted to obliterating ones name from the clan's chronicles.

*Abanyole* girls, though they did not undergo any initiation ceremony, they received the same education. This was passed to them by *abakonia* (caretakers) and other elderly women that were charged with such responsibility and all who got an opportunity to do so. The girls spent most evenings with either a grandmother, *omukonia* (caretaker) or any elderly woman. This time was spent mostly listening to stories, sayings and songs. These stories, sayings, proverbs and songs carried a lot of meaning. They were used to teach moral lessons that often related to expected sexual behavior of *Abanyole*, but specifically of women. They also taught and enhanced general social life in the community.

*Abanyole* people had an expected sexual behavior that would be referred to as *Abanyole* morality. As earlier stated, this is imbedded in their philosophy on sex and sexuality. They believe that sex is sacred, holding the key to life and death. This is demonstrated through their extensive taboos and euphemisms related to sex, sex organs and sexual activities.

Generally, sex as a subject is not for public deliberations or attention. Issues relating to sex are treated as private. And if one must refer to them in public, then coded language, for example *okhukona* - 'to sleep', [to have a sexual intercourse with] and *okhukalusibwa/okhukalusia* - 'to inherit' (sexual intercourse by/with a widow) are invoked. Anyone who goes against this norm is considered ill-mannered (cf. Adamo 2005 and Alati 2016).

Among the *Abanyole*, sex is a private activity. *Abanyole* way provides that before one marries, he must construct a cottage, *Esimba*, preferably far from the parent's house, where consummation takes place. Because *Abanyole* traditionally relied on the sun for lighting, nights were the appropriate times for such an act. The darkness and closed doors are employed to heighten the mystery. Children are kept in that house only up to time they are weaned. Upon weaning they were relocated to the grandparents' house.

Traditional homesteads also provided for the required environment for mystery attached to sex. The head of the family's hut was at the center and the wives huts overlooking. This made it difficult for the wives to know where the man spend a night [of course unless if he was with you in your house] and impossible for the children to think or imagine their parents' sexual life. Therefore to *Abanyole*, a public sexual act is demeaning, prohibited and scolded at in the strongest terms possible. Issues of pornographic materials are alien to the traditional *Abanyole*.

Sexual intercourse was restricted within a marriage context. Any such encounter outside of this provision was deemed illicit and is discouraged and anybody caught in such act was subjected to public scorn. For women it was worse. Women caught or discovered to be engaging in sexual activities with anyone besides the husband were subjected to prescribed punishment such as being deserted by their husbands in their homesteads or sent back to their parents depending on the gravity of the offense and their status in the community (FGD elders).

The only time a woman was allowed, within prescribed perimeters, to have sexual intercourse with another person was in the event that the husband was proven beyond reasonable doubt to be impotent either through erectile dysfunction (*esichili*) or low sperm count (*likangala*). In such situation the clan would identify a close relative who would be known for the purpose of siring children for his 'brother'. This would be preceded by sending a price (a cow) to the wife's parent that permits her to find someone to sire children for the family commonly known as *ing'ombe eyobulimo/eyobwibi/eyolwibulo*. This price allowed for the wife to have healthy and 'legitimate' children (Informal conversation with Rev. Otenyo, L/L Sichenga, Pst. Abysai Teka and Rev. Jephric Omuka at Hassango COGEA (K) 17/11/16). The criteria for selection of an appropriate candidate were the known character of the individual and blood kinship. The man can never claim the children or even share the information under whatever circumstance. Such a relationship is only to serve the purpose of keeping the name of a brother by providing an heir (O.I. Thomas Anjichi)

*Abanyole* also understood sex activity not only as within marriage but also between a man and a woman who are not relatives, of age and with mutual consent. Homosexuality, lesbianism and bestiality were sexual perversions and as such deemed abominations (*esiluchi/omusilo*) among *Abanyole*. *Abanyole* practice exogamous marriages. Thus, they do not marry within their family line or relatives. Genealogy is followed strictly and any marriage found to violate this regulation is dissolved forthwith. This is communicated by the elders giving the woman a white chicken with a basket of grain to take to her parents. Those who disobeyed were believed to be under a spell and their marriage would end abruptly and in chaos or a tragedy. The deviant ones were finally allowed to marry and have healthy children by removing part of the grass thatching and covering their roof top, *es'suli*, with a piece of broken pot (*lichio*). Sex activity should be between people of age

and willing. Rape cases, especially of minors and the elderly would be considered a curse among *Abanyole* (Opapa O.I.; a conversation with Rev. Otenyo *et al*).

Bride price secured the needs of both parties in a marital relationship and guaranteed the man's lineage. It guaranteed the bride's place and needs in the groom's clan, whatever the circumstances – including death. *Abanyole* receive and pay bride price only once [any other subsequent marital relationships a woman engages in are but temporal]. A wife actually belonged to the clan. And in the event the husband passes on, her needs, including intimacy, were the concern of the clan. Every clan took care of its widows. Those elderly widows with grown up and responsible sons who would take care of their livelihood did so while their in-laws presided over matters requiring a husband/father such as bride price negotiation etc (Etemesi O.I.) Etemesi observes that this is still the position in the contemporary *Abanyole* but with lots of modifications courtesy of HIV/AIDS, age, individual's social status and religious persuasion and commitment. He noted that there are those who follow the cultural path of inheritance, those who opt for remarriage and those who choose to remain celibate.

Those with little children requiring a father figure and support in education and other matters would either identify one of the in-laws to fulfill such roles as the husband or stay alone and just receive due assistance without such attachment. Those with a problem of making ends meet were left with limited choice without getting into some sort of marital arrangement.

Newly married women were not spared the blight of widowhood. Young widowed women in the clan were taken care of by their immediate family members who made them not to return to their parents. Those with at least an heir (i.e. a son) would choose either to enter into another marital arrangement or not depending on their status. Every widow would be taken care of depending on her choice. Those who had no heir would be the concern of the clan. She would be talked to, to the effect that she finds at least from her in-laws a favorable one who could marry her and bear children for the late relative. If need be, the clan or the family would intervene by providing a husband to ensure that the name of their deceased relative is not blotted out of the clan by ensuring an heir. Enormous responsibility and precaution accompanied any prospective sexual relationship one postulated to have with a widow. Thus, if sexual activity within marriage was deemed sacred, then sexual activity with a widow in a re-marital arrangement was much more (Sibelenje O.I.).

Finally, sexual intercourse was deemed sacred because it primarily served as a means of life perpetuation and procreation. *Abanyole*, therefore, perceived sexual intercourse as sacred. They did not consider sex as an indulgence. This makes it remote for them to think of sex toys for self gratification; oral sex or sex involving any other organ besides sex organs; and any sexual activity with any other thing other than a human of opposite sex in a marital relationship. *Abanyole* did not fancy or fantasize about sex as shown by their lack of words, the euphemisms, the attitude and the decorum that is used to refer to experiences such as orgasm. Also the feelings of sexual arousal or drive were never spoken of or overtly expressed, especially by the women. And acts such as exposing ones sexual organs would constitute a promiscuous behavior and one would be reprimanded forthwith. Hence, *Abanyole* maintained the sacredness of sex without deifying it (FGD with elders and Esibila and Kima widows).

Alati (2016, 134-136) notes idioms in *Abanyole* lingua that reinforce gender-based cultural inequality and depict cultural constraints regarding the separate behavior of men and women. He observes that "In the *Olunyole* conversation, male dominance and authority over the female counterpart is evident in the expressions related to sex and sexuality." The wife is expected to give into the husband's desire for sex without questioning. Sex is perceived to be a man's right and a wife cannot deny him. Any wife who fails on this is reprimanded by both families in a formal clan gathering and sent back to her parents. Women are also not expected to openly express sexual desire and emotion. Any woman who does so is regarded as immoral. This subjugated position of women continues in widowhood as she is expected to be inherited by the husband's close relative.

However, one would wonder, if sex is a private activity, how did the in-laws get to know the details? What is the impact of women not being allowed to express their sexual desire and its overflow into widowhood among *Abanyole*? In *Abanyole* worldview things pertaining sex are private to the extent that they are discussed in hushed tone within specified social circles only when there are issues of concern. In such situation sisters/brothers in-law, aunties and grannies intervene with a view of providing a solution. The matter became public only if the involved parties fail to co-operate, resulting in flaring tempers. One thing that is clear here is the communal nature of sex among *Abanyole* – as a power house for perpetuation of family life. This gives family members the 'right' to intervene as need arise.

With the expression of sexual desire among *Abanyole*, women are expected to conduct themselves with decorum. Innocence and lack of interest in sexual activity among women is prized. Hence, girls learn, live and act so as to fit in the society. They have to wait for someone to ask for their hand in marriage, who prizes her innocence and expects her to remain so. This greatly inhibits their development as sexual beings. They learn not to express and explore their sexual feelings. They resent sexual feelings as evil and a source of conflict to be greatly ignored and avoided. In widowhood, the woman who has not developed a clear perspective on her sexuality suffers double tragedy by either indulgence or resentment.

### **Effects of irresponsible Sexual Intercourse**

*Abanyole* philosophy explicitly relates the effects of irresponsible sexual behavior. Generally sex, among *Abanyole*, is regarded as a life-force in the community with power to bring forth life or death. Thus responsible sexual behavior enhanced and perpetuated individual and communal life while irresponsible sexual activities and behavior destroyed it. These made vigilantes of every member of the society for it was everyone's concern to guard and protect life.

Irresponsible sexual behaviors are collectively referred to as *omusilo/esiluchi* meaning the 'profane thing'. They include bestiality, homosexuality, lesbianism, masturbation, fornication, rape, incest, and adultery. Each of these abominable sexual behaviors differs in their nature and weight. But on general, they reduced the individual's and hence the community's life force.

Adultery, for example, was believed to responsible for incurable illness and sudden deaths especially among men and children. It was believed that it is dangerous for a married woman to have sexual activities outside her marriage. It endangered her life and could render her temporarily infertile due to 'mixing of blood.' Worse still it exposed her husband to potential sudden death in the event the husband falls ill and the secret lover visits him or shares a meal at a ceremony. Promiscuity among husbands led to sickness, *chisila* which would result in the death of their children if not treated.

Young men who fornicated with girls in their clan were wary of eating meat and taking milk in the community's functions. This was because of a belief that sharing in anything from her bride price would lead to untreatable illness (*olubo*) and subsequent mysterious death. It was not uncommon for men and women to die of meat garrote or be taken ill in memorial ceremonies. The trend taught the wise to walk prudently: lead a life of chastity or avoid eating at and even attending memorial ceremonies, or else seek a tradition herbalist's intervention.

### **Widows and their sexuality**

This section considers *Abanyole* perception on widow sexuality. The respondents were required to give their views on the identity *Abanyole* accords to widows and the resultant expected sexual behavior expected of them. The following issues emerged for consideration: perception of women, engendered perception, categories of women and their perceptions, categories of widows and their respective perceptions and widow expected sexual behavior.

#### **Perception as Women**

*Abanyole* have a generally mixed perception of a woman. They sing praises on how a woman is a precious and honorable thing and at the same times use derogatory terms to refer to her. But the most prominent notion is that women are second best and as such, inferior to men. There was a general observation among the respondents that women were assigned mean duties and not included in serious matters of the community.

Elders' FGD described *Abanyole* attitude toward a woman in the following terms as summarized below:

On one hand a woman is an important person in the society as:

- Sign of men's status in the society – husband, father, elder, wealth [such as land & property].
- Manager of the family affairs (first wife) and respected by the husband, co-wives, children and the clan.
- Custodian of culture as volunteer vigilante.
- Caretaker of family wealth/properties.
- Protector of the husband – as cupbearer and advisor.
- Sign of family honor in the clan – Therefore families made collective effort in selecting the best from the best family and clan.

On the other hand, *Abanyole* do not accord a woman much respect:

- You cannot give a [your] stool/chair to a woman (*Omukhasi sasinjilwanga tawe*)
- You don't tell your wife "I am sorry". It is a sign of weakness.
- You do not bow before your wife (a woman).
- Women are part of the property that men own.
- Woman's duty is to bear children and cook for the men (domestic).
- Women were not involved in conversations and decision making process – just bring food and warm water for their beer and leave quietly.
- Women were required to respect their in-laws.
- Women are peace ambassadors and treaty seals [signets] – given as price in marriage.
- Their currency goes up/down with child bearing, wealth creation and behavior.
- Was expected to respect and give space to their men.

A barren woman was cared for due to her industry and respect (willingness for husband to marry other women to bear children). A man was free but within limits, to marry several wives. He had a homestead, *litala* (several houses) i.e. could marry another wife, but a woman had one house.

They are weak thus not entrusted with the clan secrets until proven (i.e. past child bearing [as they graduate to be clansmen] and astute).

These sentiments were agreed upon by the widows' FGD but the *MYW's* FGD thought that most of these attitudes are barbaric, backward, and retrogressive. The *MYW* leaders' **FGD** noted that some of these attitudes that demean and violate women rights, which are human rights, have to be eliminated through sensitizing both men and women on the development potential that lies with promoting women's affairs. This opinion was echoed by Ongundu, Emuhaya District Gender and Social Development Officer, who observed that the region is lagging behind in development because of the negative attitude men have toward women that translates into their generally low self esteem (**O.I.**). This greatly affects widows' sexuality particularly the component of sensuality, given their diminished awareness of and lack of appreciation for their own body. Hence, majority withdraw from public life and neglect personal make up fearing accusation for preying on other women's husbands.

Socialization among *Abanyole* is gender specific. Hence, *Abanyole* have generally embraced a strong engendered perception of individuals. Relationships, duties, responsibilities and dealings among *Abanyole* are always gender specific. *MYW* chair lady Luanda Sub-County (**FGD**) reported that in South Bunyore and its environs it is a taboo for a woman to plant trees, bananas and a boundary hedge. This notion is depicted with respect to Nigeria in Adimora-Ezeigbo's novel, *Children of the Eagle*. The author uses the four daughters of Ugonwanyi, (Eaglewoman), as vehicles to dissolve one of the assumptions of patriarchy over a part of Igboland that women cannot preside over boundary issues. In general all the ten engendered assumptions, including sex enjoyment as a preserve for the male species, which are held in Igboland of the *Children of the Eagle* are characteristic of *Abanyole* culture.

Consequently, *MYW* feels that *Abanyole* socialization has something inherently wrong. It is hell-bent to the woman's disadvantage. They point out that, "Men wanted to rule over women, they over burdened them with numerous tasks (including parenting and livelihood), they have usurped all leadership and administrative positions and discourage their women from pursuing gainful employment and advancement yet they are failing in their responsibility as heads of the families." Hence, observe that "there is need to re-examine our socialization with a special focus on how we are raising up men" (**F.G.D.**).

However, the story on gender power relations among *Abanyole* would be untrue to assume that females to be only and always inferior. Gender is not the only determinant of one's relative power. Thus, *Abanyole* women also exercise domination to other women and even to men at all levels in their own way. Females are generally prized as source of labor, wealth (bride wealth) and social security for their families, especially aging parents. As such, they make decisions, give pieces of advice, give orders and send people on errands (Cattell 2007).

### **Categories of Women and their Perceptions**

*Abanyole* have various categories of women and related perception. A widow perception greatly depended on the perception of her just before her husband's death. They include: *omukhaye*, *omukhasi*, *omukumba*, *omukhana* and *indakwa/es'salang'ongo* (translation/explanation is subsequent). *Omukhaye* is a homestead maker with a proven track record of astuteness, self-respect, courtesy and decorum demonstrated in showing respect to her husband and in-laws, and sensibility in conversation. Her age and experience command community's respect to assert herself (Cattell 2007). Most of women in this category have grown up children and grandchildren. The litmus test of this was the ability to successfully transition the family from monogyny to polygyny and to manage well a polygynous family. Such a woman was held with high regard among fellow women and could be involved in clan's serious deliberations and decision making. She becomes a tribesman, *omuta*, hence a custodian of the clan's way of life. This is the ideal woman that every *Omuniyole* women aspire.

Such are the women referred to in Igbo clan, as notes Nwachukwu-Agbada citing his own earlier work that, [W]omen as a collective constitute a formidable force in the politics of any Igbo clan. And as I had had to state elsewhere, In practically all Igbo communities, women in their natal villages – addressed as "umuada" or "umumboto" – wielded legal, decisional rights comparable to those of a modern supreme court. The "umuada" were last arbiters; they equally had right to intervene, even uninvited, when they believed that there had been a miscarriage of justice (2011, 89).

*Omukhasi* refers to any married woman. She was respected by the community as one having settled on a decision to start a family. Young men were discouraged from making suggestive jokes to such. Each ones' currency depended on the status of her family of origin, current family [especially the husband], the amount of dowry paid, position in marriage and kind of ceremony held, children born, especially male. They at least belong to the clan of marriage although they were still treated as aliens.



*Omukumba* refers to a barren woman that could not bear children for whatever reason. This category was the most disregarded. They depended mostly on the good will of their husbands and the extended family. Because of the value attached to life and children among *Abanyole*, a barren woman was considered a waste of the husband's time and resources. *Abanyole* women, especially the mothers-in-law, would insult her as a good for nothing woman just wasting the husband's time and filling his latrine. She was expected to assist her husband find another wife to bear him children, or to raise up children born out of wedlock. Her currency depended purely on submission, industry, wealth creation and management. But even so, she would always be reminded, at every opportune moment, that she is a good for nothing time waster. *Omukumba* among *Abanyole* was better than *omukhana* to the extent that she had a place to call her home and a potentially 'appropriate' graveyard.

*Omukhana* refers to all unmarried women from their teenage that is of a marriageable age. Sometimes used together with a locality to signify the natal home of *omukhaye/omukhasi*. Example is *omukhana Mutongoi* referring to a lady who hails from among the Tongoi people. This compound term referred to married women. But *omukhana* purely refers to unmarried woman ranging from teenage. They are a little lower in status than *omukhasi* because they do not belong anywhere but more favorably rated than *omukumba* in so far as she has a hope of marriage and procreation. Those of marriageable age are always reminded that they do not belong at their natal home.

*Indakwa [etakwa]*, *ling'ang'ule* and *es'salang'ongo* are derogatory terms that refer to women of disrepute. They show no respect to their husbands and in-laws; some are drunkard, promiscuous, and quarrelsome. Such were separated from the husband's homestead and left on their own. In some cases they are beaten and send to their parents for good, or could be required to bring a sheep for sacrifice [restitution] depending on the offence committed. They generally have no regard in the community.

Suffice it to note from Cattell who explains that,

For women the exercise of power and experience of powerlessness occur most commonly in daily life, particularly in family relationships and everyday household and work settings. Concerns often focus on personal autonomy or the capacity to make decisions about one's own actions; the ability to gain and control material resources such as food, clothing and money, for self and children; and human resources, or getting others do what you want them to do (2007, 99-100).

### ***Widow Categories and the respective Perceptions***

*Abanyole* worldview categorizes widows into two main groups: the older and younger widows. This is because for *Abanyole* every one is important and deserves equal treatment, at least theoretically. Widows are generally categorized variously according to age, family, health, and general behavior. Hence, the categories older and younger widows, family and childless widows, healthy and sick widows, and reputable and reproachable widows.

Older widows, according to *Abanyole* worldview, are widows that are widowed past child bearing age. This age varies from one individual to the other. It is normally tied to the menstruation. And because sex among *Abanyole* is primarily for procreation, women who are past menstruation consider themselves and are considered as older widows. This is because they are past child bearing age. They normally describe the state as *okhurula khumukichi* (literally, no longer playing). This implies that they no 'longer' experience sexual urge. Most of the widows in this category switch to involuntary celibacy mode either by 'choice' or due to public demand, especially of their grown up children (Esibila widows', elders' FGDs). Widows who participated in this study held a view that widows in this category should cease any contemplation relating to sexual activity. They argued that such activities bring disgrace to their hitherto grown up children and their families.

Consequently, widows widowed at such a period feel embarrassed at the very thought of engaging in any relationship or activity that will communicate to the public that they are sexually active. Also the majority of such widows are involved in various leadership positions in the community. Such social positions put pressure on the widow not to pursue sexual pleasure but rather direct her energies in serving the community, from whence they draw immense satisfaction and fulfillment (Esibila widows' FGD).

Some widows at such age would have ceased from sexual activities with their own husbands. Therefore the idea of pursuing sexual activity is remote in their mind. Many widows and women involved in this study, most of whom are in this category, for one reason or another, hailed widow celibacy. This is even after they noted gender discrimination affecting widows in their widowhood. They noted that widowhood is an opportunity to live out ones dream without male interference.

However, the participants in this study made a quick rejoinder that not all widows in this category have ceased experiencing sexual urge or successfully inhibit it. They noted that there are those who, in fact, experience an increase. They noted that some keep secret relationships, even with men who are much younger than their sons. They hailed the traditional set up that ensured sanctity by providing a means for of meeting such needs in a legitimate and open way.

One of the widows in Esibila FGDs related a story about her widow friend in her mid-sixties who came to her seeking to terminate a pregnancy. She was worried that her son would chase her from her home if she bore this child since her husband had passed on long ago and the pregnancy was from a secret relationship. The widow asked her friend why she was keeping the relationship. Her friend replied that her vagina does not feed on *ugali*. She needs a man to meet her sexual needs. The widows in the group agreed that widows as other women experience sexual urges which fluctuate with age and individual traits. These require community empathy.

The widows and elders involved in the study noted that widows' sexual attitudes and behavior are as diverse as are women. This notion is reflected on as the case among Niger women by Nwachukwu-Agbada who cites Amadiume to explain that,

Sex was not forced on a woman; she was constantly surrounded by children and other people [...] The sanctity of motherhood meant that women were treated with respect. One woman might desire an intense relationship with her husband, another might see marital obligations as a necessary but loathsome duty. Some might abandon their relationship with their husband and shun "men and their trouble". Indigenous architecture and male/female polygyny made these choices possible. (Nwachukwu-Agbada 2011:89).

Suffice it to say that there is no single pattern of widow's sexual behavior. Yet as Amadiume notes, there is a way out to meet every one's need: the indigenous architecture. This is done by entering into a legitimate arrangement within which felt needs are met rather than living a lie.

Younger widows are the other category of widows. This is a wide category. It generally comprises of all widows who are of child bearing age. These are the majority among *Abanyole* widows, as noted by Swaka, the Assistant Chief of Esibakala Sub-Location (Conversation 24/2/2017). The same sentiments are echoed by the senior pastor Ebusiratsi C.O.G. and confirmed by the Chief Evangelist of the Kenya Israel Church.

Widows in this category can suffer a great deal. One such widow confided that apart from the pressure of providing for her family, a widow is expected to deal with legal issues related to benefits and succession of properties to secure the future of her children. She finds this to be a very emotionally exhausting experience. She has to complete endless forms, queue for hours in administrative offices and required to seek several letters from administrators most of who are men. This long, winding and tedious exercise exposes the widow to potential snare. Suggestive talks and sexual advances are made towards such women especially when those attending to them discover that they are vulnerable widows (Tefena – *not her real name O.I.*; MYW leaders FGD).

This category of widows also comes under stringent scrutiny by their fellow women for fear of their husbands. Their ways in the village become every one's concern. They are hunted by men who want to satisfy their sexual appetites and the laggards who want to derive financial benefits. At the same time every man that seems to empathize with their situation is suspected.

The other concern for widows in this category is loneliness and lack of intimacy. It is notable that above all, when a widow loses her husband, she has lost a close friend and a sex mate. Thus two of the problems that she has to deal with are those of loneliness and sexual urges. Though as Kirwen, correctly observes from his study on levirate marriage among the Luo people, companionship and intimacy is only a recent consideration in marriage.

The Luo did not marry for companionship; may be these days they do - in fact, none of them was lonely! They married as a sacred duty in order to partake in life and the act of passing on the gift of life by which one is immortalized. Full life implies carrying out social responsibilities; but it can only be realized within the institution of marriage, where one shares in the procreation and nurturing of life (1987, 59).

May be these were assumed and not stated as reasons for marriage. But whatever the case, they are not part of the categories in the discourse on marriage. The two widow categories discussed above have other two sub sets: widows with Children and those without.

Widows could be without Children as a result of barrenness, death or recent marriage. Such a widow was given special care. Everyone in the community was willing to help because they were deemed a source of blessings. Some had properties that they would bequeath those who had expressed kindness to them.

Whatever the category of a widow, her needs were secured within *Abanyole* philosophy on marriage. This is clearly captured in Nyarwath's description of Luo understanding of marriage, which resonates with that of *Abanyole* as established in all the FGDs. It explicitly demonstrates the perpetual nature of marriage and the guaranteed posterity that a marriage bond gives to a couple and their offspring:

You see, when people marry, there is the unspoken agreement that this relationship will survive his untimely death. That is, the man's family pledges to carry on the marriage by caring for the wife and children in the event of the husband's death. This is a very sacred and essential part of our marriage. This is why the families of both the bride and the groom are very concerned that the partners are properly selected and carefully scrutinized prior to any agreement for marriage (Nyarwath 2012, 95).

### ***Widows' Expected Sexual Behaviour***

Nyarwath (2012) presents what can be referred to as classical or ivory tower perspective of the customs relating to widowhood. They tell us that customarily, one can assume full responsibility of a widow and her children devoid of sexual relationship alias honorific home guardianship. This is a characteristic of a classical perspective that appeals to the ear but is rarely part of the everyday life. In other words, the philosophy does not resonate with reality, at least, according to the respondents in this study.

*Abanyole* would generally expect a widow to either remain celibate or continue sexual activity within acceptable parameters. These options are theoretically a preserve of the widow, at least in consultation with her family. This is because according to *Abanyole*, as for other African communities we eternally belong and owe our livelihood to one another as crystallized by p'Bitek:

Man cannot, and must not be free. 'Son', 'mother', 'daughter', 'father', 'uncle', 'husband', 'grandmother', 'wife', 'medicine-man', and many other such terms, are the stamps of man's unfreedom. It is by such complex terms that a person is defined and identified. They order and determine human behavior in society. The central question, 'Whom am I?' cannot be answered in any meaningful way unless the relationship in question is known (1986, 20).

### ***Voluntary Celibacy***

Voluntary celibacy is where the widow 'opts' not to enter any relationship that involves sexual union. Among *Abanyole* there is no such regulation as to require one to cease sexual activity. But it is generally respectable for and expected of women of a certain age to conduct themselves with decorum. And because of the publicized nature of and the norms relating widow remarriage, some widows 'choose' celibacy.

"This is the highest expression of respect and honor that a widow can accord her late husband", observed widows in FGDs. The widow becomes a wife of the grave and commits herself to single handedly carry out the late husband's aspirations (FGDs). Such widows upon notable family success will pride themselves of their fidelity to the grave as they castigate the ones who remarry to provide for their family or while giving counsel to other widows. This is indeed puzzling as captured in Cattell's explanation of the situation among the Abaluyia women. She states that, "One interesting puzzle is the way dominant classes or groups maintain dominance without constant coercion, or why subordinate groups or classes accept and even actively participate in their own oppression" (2007, 100).

According to MYW leaders' (FGD) most men who approach widows for union have only one aim, to exploit them. Men are simply concern about the property that the deceased would have left behind, for the lucky ones. They also noted that others are just about gratifying their sexual appetites without giving the slighted thought to the responsibilities thereof. They decried the sort of men that the contemporary society is breeding today who shun responsibilities. They, therefore, strongly recommended that for those women who can find something to do for family sustenance, celibacy is the best option. The MYW (FGD) also regretted that many widows are preyed on by government officers who demand sexual relationship for them to be assisted in processing the deceased's benefits.

Both Kima and Esibila widows (FGD) concurred with the MYW leaders' sentiments on celibacy as a preference. They noted that most widows are lured into relationships which do not add value at all to their livelihood. They instead find themselves with more problems to care about such as illness, children and low self-esteem.

It was also noted that not all widows that claim celibacy are actually celibate. Some of them kept 'secret' relationships with family members, friends, and even religious leaders. Asked for the reasons for keeping such relationship secret most respondents noted the shame that it would cause to the family, especially the children given the social status of the persons involved. All respondents observed that this behavior is worse than the open choice of sexuality in remarriage. The elders (FGD) observed that there is actually no legitimate barrier as to why one should not continue with sexual activity within prescribed perimeters.

On the other hand, celibacy does not negate sexuality. Even those who choose abstinence following the demise of their spouses are capable of satisfying their sexual needs. As Hillman explains, sensual activities that generate a sensual pleasure are part of sexuality. He lists examples of sensual activities such as,

[T]aking a hot bath or shower, noticing the breeze against one's face, having a massage, listening to music, lighting candles, getting one's hair done, eating a wonderful meal, molding or shaping clay, dressing up in beautiful clothing, splashing in puddles, lying in a feather bed, wearing silky underwear, singing in a resonant choral group, holding hands, using fragrant body lotions, dancing, engaging in foreplay, feeling muscles warm and loosen during exercise, or appreciating artwork (2012, 11).

He, however, observes that, "While sensual activities may induce sexual excitement, the inherent goal of the activity is not sexual intercourse or climax." His sentiments resonate well with that of majority widows involved in this study (FGDs). They all pointed out variety of means by which they are meeting their sexual needs without being intimate or engaging in sexual intercourse. They include involvement in church work, and

community work, keeping oneself busy with domestic chores, hanging out with other women, working on decorations and a good meal, singing and listening to good music and motivational messages, and working on their fields.

This is how Osore (Esibila widows' FGD) and Odinga (O.I.) reported to draw a lot of satisfaction and personal appreciation from their service in church:

I experience a lot of pleasure from the warming of my spirit as I serve people in the church. There is inexpressible peace and elation I derive from waiting upon the clergy and the needy in church. Every time I find an opportunity to prepare a meal for the clergy and serve the needy I do it with all my energy and skill and return home an exhausted yet fulfilled woman. I always seek opportunity to do this for it gives me, as a widow, a window to appreciate myself.

Similarly, Salome (*not her real name* O.I.) reported to experience a lot of pleasure through spiritual discipline of devotions. "I feel my spirit warming up as I read the word of God, sing praises to him, make prayers and surrender to his will. I feel his comforting hand around me as I know that he is in charge of my life. It excites and fulfills me so much." She also observed that her involvement in the church choir gives her a lot of pleasure. The songs they sing, the dancing and especially her percussion give her all the pleasure she requires. In view of that, the experiences listed here are substitutes for sexual pleasure but they do not in themselves give sexual pleasure.

### *Sexuality within Marriage*

The second expected behavior is that the widow continues with her sexual life with a new partner. *Abanyole* expect that after burial and observation of the required death rites, the widow remarry if she is to continue with her sexual activities. As noted earlier, though it is well acknowledged that sexuality encompasses "any combination of sexual behavior, sensual activity, emotional intimacy, or sense of sexual identity," [male or female] popular western culture of the media and advertising has reduced the concept to imply "penetrative heterosexual intercourse" (Hillman 2012, 11, 22). Such is the case among the contemporary *Abanyole*. Sexuality to them means penetrative sexual intercourse. This is state despite the traditional *Abanyole* sophisticated sexual discourse that encompasses broad understanding of sexuality embracing intimacy (both emotional and sexual), sensuality (experiences of pleasure –sexual or otherwise) and sexual intercourse.

The widow chooses her suitor from within her husband's family, clan and only outside these peripheries if none among them is willing to take on her. The union is commissioned and blessed by the family upon satisfying all the requirements. This is the legal institution within which a widow can engage in sexual activity. Any other form of sexual escapade is a breach of the norm and is illegal.

Such has been the acceptable institution within which one could engage in sexual activity among the *Abanyole*. *Abanyole* believe in the importance of marriage. They acknowledge the far reaching needs it meets that they can't imagine a sound adult life outside such a union. In fact such an individual that opts against it is regarded with suspicion. Even those who hailed celibacy did not do so because of any innate evil in remarriage but the corrupt trend of husbands exploiting widows instead of taking their responsibilities as men (Elders' & MYWs' FGDs).

Indieka (O.I.) explained that so long as two people agree to live together in some sort of marital relationship, then such agreement is binding and no one should interfere with it. Thus widows and widowers just as any other singles have a right to enter such relationship for the sake of maintaining sexual purity of the society. He noted that his church has no legislations for marriage that bars widows and widowers from pursuing sexuality following the demise of their spouses. He noted that such legislation would only complicate the situation and life for the widows.

It is worth noting that the middle-aged and older widows crave for intimacy, sensual pleasure and intercourse to a varied degree despite popular stereotyping. This might be with or without the explicit goal of achieving sexual pleasure and with or without a partner. Osore recalls that "Life too sweet and too bitter for one to be alone. Everyone needs a hand, just in case". This could be another spouse, a true comrade or an intimate group for a widow. Hence, there is a need to honestly engage widows on this matter to expand the horizon for meaningful and fruitful living.

### *Reasons given for the expected Widow's Sexual Behaviour*

Respondents in this study stated many reasons for a sexual behavior expected from widows according to the ways of *Abanyole*. These reasons are a blend of both *Abanyole* cultural and the Judeo-Christian beliefs and practices. The reasons include the perception that sex is a need, sex is sacred, the need for maintain family line and purity, for good health and posterity, averting early and sudden deaths, and for accruing respect and honor.

### *Sex is a Need*

According to Madanji (*not real name* O.I.) sex is need according to *Abanyole* cultural manual. Its agency is assigned to the men yet the intensity of urge and its fulfillment is also experienced by their female counterpart. As a result, widows are perceived as women on the loose. All widows involved in this study observed that there is an intense monitoring of widows among *Abanyole* compared to other categories of women. The reasons given include a perception that widows have intense sexual urges and are poor, and as such in need of men to bail them out. These make them a loose lot, requiring stringent measures to check their behavior.

Pointing to the fluidity of widows' sexuality, especially the young, Osore (FGD) wondered what will befall the current generation where women are widowed at a very young age. She noted that the elderly women are able to manage their sexual urges since they can control their agency. She warned that unless God came to the aid of the contemporary society, ailments related to sexual behavior are bound to wipe out our generation. She explained that widows have sexual needs to be met. She noted that one widow, in her sixties, expressing the reality of sex as a felt need responded to her advice to desist from keeping secret sexual relationship by exclaiming, does a vagina feed on *ugali*!

Consequently, as Madanji (*not his real name* O.I.) observed, some widows resort to a double life. They keep secret sexual relations while they in public claim to be celibate. He notes that some do so with members of the community such as religious leaders, close relatives and domestic workers. Just as with Opapa, he rubbishes widow celibacy, especially for religious purposes as a sheer joke. He claims that sexual urge for a widow is human and should be met just as other necessities for a healthy living.

Others withdraw completely from public life fearing misconception and false accusation. As such they cease or slow down on rendering their services to the society. This position can retard their personal growth and that of the community. As Ongundu observes, widowhood experiences among *Abanyole* weakens their ability to engage in gainful activities for the development of the society.

Consequently, the very thought that widows, as other older citizens, should/have cease(d) sexual activity impacts negatively on their access to reproductive health. According to Atiti, they cease to seek such information and services as they believe they do not need such information or to use protection (O.I.). This puts the widows and their potential partners at risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases and infections as well as conceiving unwanted pregnancies which may eventually lead to deaths related to unsafe abortions.

### *Sacredness of sex*

Sacredness of sex is another reason cited for the expected widow's sexual behavior. As earlier explained, *Abanyole* perceive sex to be a means of life and death. Thus, it requires a proper safeguard. The expected widow's sexual behavior should ensure that the name and the family of the late husband prosper and increase. It is also to assure the widow of her place in the society. Widows who subscribe and master this philosophy graduate to become caregivers for other widows as custodian of *Abanyole* ways of life.

### *To ensure Family Purity*

As earlier noted, sex among *Abanyole* is a means for procreation. Family purity is very important to *Abanyole*. This is assured through observing sex codes. Issues of incest, single parenting, a family with children belonging to different father from different clans/families, were not entertained. It was honorable to have children belonging to the same father and if he passes on and there is need for having other children, they had to belong to the same family/clan. This required that widows either subscribe to particular sexual behavior: celibacy, or have someone of her choice who is related to her deceased husband.

### *Good Health and Posterity*

Good health and posterity is another reason for the widow observing a sexual code. It was generally noted by the respondents that sex code is made to ensure good health and prosperity of the widow and that of her children and the community at large. The widows who made themselves available to men were seen not only to be in danger of contracting venereal diseases but also endangering involved families, especially if such arrangements were not undertaken in accordance with tradition. Hence, ardent voluntary vigilantes were always in place to ensure that no such thing happens.

### *Perpetuation and Preservation of Life*

*Abanyole* have held on to understanding of the mysterious nature of sexual activity, and more so that of a widow. The mourning and burial practices and required ritual cleansing which widows are subjected to attest to this fact. It is believed that inappropriate sexual relationship would result in early and sudden deaths of culprits. To avert early and sudden deaths, probably as vengeance from the deceased husband, proper procedure is followed and herb concoctions administered to both families.

Opapa, 82 (O.I.), observed that families are subjected to strange and incurable ailments and sudden deaths related to widow inheritance and sexual activities with widows and widowers. She noted that she has had to avert many such impending deaths by administering concoctions. Hence, observing a sexual code is seen to preserve and perpetuate life among *Abanyole*.

#### *Increase Widow's Currency*

Observation of *Abanyole* sex code by widow increased their currency in the community, hence their respect and honor. Widows that took their time to mourn their husbands, gave them befitting burial, and after burial rites managed their family and estates well earned respect and honor from the community. The litmus test to the widow's morality came after the burial of her husband. It was expected that the widow would either uphold celibacy or remarry within the husband's family/clan as would be feasible. Higher premium was placed on voluntary celibacy but younger widows and those without proper means of livelihood would be encouraged to remarry so as to appropriately manage their sexual life.

Thus, *Abanyole* worldview as other like cultures world over has viewed female sexuality as being inferior to that of males. It is taken as something to be controlled through restrictions on female behavior, practice, enforced modesty and chastity. *Abanyole* culture places restrictions primarily on women, without applying the same on men. The condition worsens when the woman in question is a widow and more so when she is thought to be non-compliant.

### **IV. CONCLUSION**

This study sought to ascertain prevailing cultural perception on widows' sexuality among *Abanyole* of Emuhaya, Western Kenya. These entail the general behavior, space, expectations, treatment, provisions and practices ascribed to widows as gendered beings. Of critical importance is whether widows among *Abanyole* are in charge of their sexuality or as it were, it serves and is orchestrated by men. It was of interest to also ascertain contemporary cultural practices related to widowhood to 'see' how they reflect on the identity and social space accorded a widow and by extension, a woman, among *Abanyole*.

Various sources, both primary and secondary, identified both historical and contemporary cultural characterization of widows' sexuality world over, as earlier shown in the literature review and cited works. The study established that *Abanyole* widows suffer gendered stigmatization from their cultural milieu. A woman is regarded as a weaker vessel deriving her identity from her father, husband or son in that order. She is raised to be given away in marriage. Thus, she is considered an alien in her natal home. Upon marriage, as an acquired asset, she has to maintain her social space, domestic chores, until proven able to participate in decision making process as a listener and only later as a custodian. And as a custodian, the woman assumes conveyer and vigilante responsibilities that consume, propagate, justify and cement female stigmatization.

Gendered stigmatization and humiliation wielded against females is epitomized in the culturally expected sexual behavior among *Abanyole*. An ideal wife is the sexually naïve woman, submissive and ready to satiate her husband's sexual desire. Such a woman is expected to be reserved and modest as far as sexual urgency is concern. Her obedience reaches its zenith in her ability to sacrifice her personal needs and aspirations for the sake of her husband and family. The degree of subjugation and kind of sacrifices to be made among *Abanyole* vary depending with the status of the female in question.

As a result, widows have had to put up with various degree of dilapidation depending on their status in their family and clan. As women, and as such aliens in their matrimonial home, they struggle with property inheritance and general family livelihood. The highest degree of humiliation is that which touches on their sexuality. As a lesser sex they have to either contend with the cultural inheritance way where they 'choose' their 'spouse' from the deceased husband's clan if they have to continue sexual expression or embrace 'voluntary' celibacy on being widowed.

Consequently, widows suffer in silence and have to learn early enough either from the senior fellow widows and women 'gatekeepers' their rightful place in the society and the befitting sexual behavior. Those who do not toe the path are maligned and eventually smoked out of their matrimonial homes for threatening the very existence of the community by their sexual escapades. The worst frontier for widows is their own grown up children who, as earlier demonstrated, are always against their widowed mothers' dating and remarrying.

The researcher recommends a review on the manner in which children, especially girls, are socialized. Family enhancement programs need to be developed to sensitize *Abanyole* on appropriate ways of rising up children to embrace a liberated view on widow sexuality. *Abanyole* would also do well to tap from Indigenous Knowledge (I.K.) on nurturing young people to embrace the responsibility of blossoming and jealously guarding their sexuality for the posterity of the society. This has to be blended in with the contemporary scientific knowledge to prepare its people to appropriately address issues on sexuality during life trajectories such as widowhood.

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