

# Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

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## Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the [UNHCR's Refworld](#) website.

6 November 2012

**NGA104217.E**

Nigeria: Ritual whereby a widow drinks the water used to clean her husband's corpse; consequences for a widow's refusal to drink the water; whether a widow's refusal is interpreted by others as responsibility for her husband's death  
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

### 1. Overview

Various sources emphasize that mourning rituals can vary widely across the country and may differ according to ethnic group (Idialu 2012, 6; WPD 5 Oct. 2012) or location (ibid.; Researcher 5 Oct. 2012). According to the Director of Widows for Peace Through Democracy (WPD), a UK-based advocacy organization for widows in developing countries (n.d.), there are many other factors that influence widowhood rituals, including age, income, education, and more, such that it is impossible to generalize about practices in Nigeria (5 Oct. 2012). Similarly, some academic sources note that widowhood rites may vary in severity depending on the woman's situation (Aransiola 2010; Onyekuru 2011, 357). A sociologist at the Obafemi Awolowo University in Ife-Ife writes in a 2010 publication on widowhood practices among the Yoruba of southwest Nigeria that the higher a woman's social status, the less intense are the rituals to which she is subjected (Aransiola 2010). Similarly, in a 2011 academic-journal article on cultural practices associated with bereavement in southeastern Nigeria, a researcher in the Faculty of Education at the University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, indicates that in the southeast, rituals are "more severe" for women who are less educated or younger with very young children than for more educated or older women (Onyekuru 2011, 357).

### 2. Ritual in Which a Widow Drinks the Water Used to Clean Her Husband's Corpse

Sources from 2010 to 2012 indicate that the ritual in which a widow drinks the water used to clean her husband's corpse continues to be practiced in various locations and among various groups in Nigeria, including:

- Edo State (Historian 5 Oct. 2012);
- Delta State (Delta State 2010);
- some eastern states of Nigeria (*Leadership* 27 Aug. 2011);
- the southeast of Nigeria (Onyekuru 2011, 356);
- among the Igbo ethnic group (Samuel 2009; Researcher 5 Oct. 2012); and
- among the Yoruba ethnic group (Aransiola 2010).

However, some sources suggest that this ritual is no longer as prevalent as it was in the past (*Vanguard* 27 July 2012; Researcher 5 Oct. 2012).

#### 2.1 Purpose of Ritual

Sources indicate that a widow undergoes this ritual to prove that she was not responsible for her husband's death (*Leadership* 27 Aug. 2011; Aransiola 2010; Onyekuru 2011, 356). The academic-journal article on bereavement practices in southeastern Nigeria states that in the southeast, it is believed that, if a widow contributed to her husband's death, "some very terrible things will happen to her" after participating in this ritual (ibid.). According to a Toronto-based Nigerian historian who has done field work in Edo State on widowhood rites, the ritual is initiated by the family of the deceased if they have reason to believe that the widow was responsible for her husband's death (Historian 5 Oct. 2012). A Toronto-based Nigerian researcher who has also researched and published on widowhood rites in Edo State indicated in a telephone interview with the Research Directorate that if a woman is not on good terms with her husband's family-i.e., his parents and brothers-the family may suspect her of having killed her

husband, especially if her husband is the oldest son in his family and his heirs stand to inherit the family's property upon his death (Researcher 5 Oct. 2012). A family member would contact the village priest or chief to express these suspicions and pressure the widow to participate in some form of ritual to prove her innocence (ibid.).

## 2.2 Refusal to Participate

According to the historian, a widow's refusal to drink the bath water of her deceased husband would "of course" be taken as an admission that she had killed her husband (5 Oct. 2012). The historian and the researcher both indicated that the consequences for refusing to participate in the ritual depend on whether the widow has her own family members (brothers and other male relatives) who are able to protect her (Historian 5 Oct. 2012; Researcher 5 Oct. 2012). If she has no such protection, her life would be in danger (ibid.; Historian 5 Oct. 2012). In this situation, a widow would generally have to move away from her village with her children to save herself (Researcher 5 Oct. 2012).

According to the researcher, in Christian areas of the country, local churches may intervene to support widows and protect them from being forced to undergo "oppressive" mourning rituals (5 Oct. 2012). Similarly, the historian provided an example of a woman who was smuggled out of her home and village by the church because her deceased husband's family had attempted to force her to perform the ritual and had tried to kill her son, the heir to her husband's family property (5 Oct. 2012).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

## References

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- Vanguard* [Lagos]. 27 July 2012. Ebele Orakpo. "Not Yet Uhuru with Widows' Rights - Eleanor Nwadinobi." <[www.vanguardngr.com/2012/07/not-yet-uhuru-with-widows-rights-eleanor-nwadinobi/](http://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/07/not-yet-uhuru-with-widows-rights-eleanor-nwadinobi/)> [Accessed 4 Oct. 2012]
- Widows for Peace Through Democracy (WPD). 5 October 2012. Correspondence sent by the Director to the Research Directorate.
- \_\_\_\_\_. N.d. "Our Vision." <<http://www.widowsforpeace.org/>> [Accessed 22 Oct. 2012]

## Additional Sources Consulted

**Oral sources:** Representatives of Widows' Rights International and the Widows Development Organisation were unable to provide information for this Response. Attempts to contact the following organizations were unsuccessful: Nigeria National Human Rights Commission, Centre for Elimination of Violence Against Women, Rose of Sharon

Foundation.

**Internet sites, including:** *African Journal of Social Sciences*; All Africa; Amnesty International; Association for Women's Rights in Development; Australia – Refugee Review Tribunal; eoi.net; Elombah.com; Factiva; Forum on Public Policy; *Harvard Human Rights Journal*; Human Rights Watch; United Kingdom – Border Agency; United Nations – Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights; United States – Department of State; Women's UN Report Network.

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