

## BOOK REVIEW

Joanna Davidson and Benjamin N. Lawrance, eds. *Pathos and Power: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Widowhood in Africa, Past and Present*. Ohio University Press, 2025. 340 pp. \$36.95. Paperback. ISBN: 9780821426432.

*Pathos and Power* is an ambitious and carefully curated volume that offers a sustained interdisciplinary examination of widowhood in African societies. Organized into three thematic sections of four chapters each, the book brings together twelve essays that interrogate widowhood as a social, cultural, political, and legal institution across precolonial, colonial, and contemporary contexts. The volume's structure, combined with its visual materials, makes it both accessible and analytically rigorous, and positions it as a significant contribution to African studies, gender studies, history, anthropology, law, sociology, and related fields.

The contributors provide fresh perspectives on widowhood while revisiting African societies through methodologies drawn from the humanities and social sciences. Collectively, the essays reflect a high level of scholarly rigor, foregrounding the lived experiences of women who, following the death of their husbands, are often deprived of material security, autonomy, and social recognition. As editors Joanna Davidson and Benjamin N. Lawrance observe, “a woman cannot be sure of inheriting anything at all by custom,” particularly in societies such as the Central African Republic, where widows rarely retain rights to their late husbands' property (15). This observation frames the volume's broader engagement with structural inequality and gendered dispossession.

One of the book's central strengths lies in its originality and its attention to discourse. Several chapters analyze how power and dominance shape representations of widowhood in literature, popular culture, media narratives, and international humanitarian NGO reports. These representations often condition widows' claims to agency and livelihood, reinforcing their marginalization. By framing widows as historical and social actors, the volume demonstrates how they have frequently been objectified or rendered invisible in policymaking across time and space. At the same time, it highlights the growing prominence of widowhood as a theme in contemporary African literature, particularly in Adrienne Yabouza's *Co-wives, Co-widows* (Dedalus Ltd, 2021), which illuminates the struggles faced by widows in the Central African Republic through the characters Ndongo Passy and Grekpoubou. Several chapters stand out for their empirical depth and historical reach. Sarah J. Zimmerman's contribution addresses the understudied subject of widowhood on Gorée Island and in Senegambia during the Atlantic era, noting that “female-headed multiracial households were ubiquitous on an island

where residents engaged in serial monogamous, polygynous, and polyamorous sexual practices” (43). In a complementary historical intervention, Mariana P. Candido and her co-authors, in “Law and Widowhood in Nineteenth-Century Angola,” emphasize the limited scholarship on African widows before the twentieth century. Drawing on examples from Angola, Senegal, Nigeria, and Guinea, they demonstrate the diversity and complexity of widowhood practices in West and Central Africa (63).

The chapter “Owning and Resisting” examines dowry practices and inheritance in traditional Muslim marriages, identifying widowhood and property rights as “the central issue of Western Sahara” (86). The author explains that *mahr* or *sadaq*, paid by the groom to the bride, is typically negotiated by mutual agreement. However, in contexts such as Mauritania, a widow’s dower is formally calculated, and inheritance is divided according to Islamic jurisprudence upon the husband’s death (92). This analysis underscores the tension between religious doctrine, customary law, and women’s lived experiences.

Wallace Teska and Richard L. Roberts focus on early colonial French Soudan, drawing on quantitative data from levirate disputes adjudicated in the *Tribunaux de Province*. Analyzing conflicts between widows and “ordinary” men, the authors demonstrate how these disputes contributed to the development of African legal frameworks that mandated three levels of native courts—village, provincial, and *cercle* or district courts—distinct from French judicial institutions (103). Their identification of 112 levirate disputes between 1905 and 1913 linked to Malian communities highlights both the prevalence of such conflicts and the legal strategies employed by widows (102–103).

Fisayo Ajala’s chapter, “Widows of the State,” offers a timely contribution to African military and gender studies. Focusing on widows of Nigerian soldiers killed during the Boko Haram insurgency (2013–2018), Ajala examines how these women navigate trauma, social marginalization, and bureaucratic obstacles that impede access to state benefits. Based on interviews and field data, the chapter estimates that approximately “ten thousand soldiers are estimated to have died in the war,” while noting that their widows lack formal recognition within military institutions (260).

Ajala further observes that “within the context of significant battlefield casualties, widows have challenged the legitimacy of war,” even as the government continues to frame their husbands’ deaths as heroic sacrifices (260). Overall, *Pathos and Power* is a cohesive and important contribution to the study of gender, power, and social justice in Africa. By foregrounding widows’ experiences across diverse temporal and geographic contexts, the volume challenges dominant narratives and expands the analytical scope of African studies. It will be of particular interest to scholars and students concerned with gendered citizenship, legal pluralism, and Africa’s social histories.

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