

TANGAZA COLLEGE

THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN AFRICA

**AFRICAN AND CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON
WIDOWHOOD RITE**

A Case Study In Ghana

BY

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STUDENT'S DECLARATION


I, the undersigned, declare that this Long Essay is my original work achieved through my personal readings, scientific method and critical reflection. It has never been submitted to any other college or University for academic credit. All sources have been quoted in full and acknowledged.

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family especially my parents, my first educators; and all my Friends in Ghana and in Kenya my source of love and encouragement.

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION:

One of the earliest Christian movements to arrive in Ghana was the Catholic Church, which made its debut in around 1899. The missionary zeal couple with the dedication of the local catechist and clergy enabled the church to make significant inroads into extensive stretches of the country, such that as at now, *"Ghanaian Catholic population is 12.18% of the total population which is about 20 million."*¹ Against the relative success, in the absence of any deliberate moves to integrate the strong local traditions, the church's teachings remained a largely foreign concept to many.

Early missionaries, it would appear, had failed to grasp the significance or import of the local, albeit enriching cultural practices, which they dismissed outright as devilish or as fetish. Rituals pertaining to widowhood are particularly poignant here. A new convert would find it conflicting and difficult to reconcile what one believes compelling in the traditional values and the new Christian teaching. The situation becomes even worse for the hapless widow who faces severe challenges related to the loss of a loved one, material and emotional deprivation and then the conflicts between cultural and spiritual welfare. It therefore remains the onerous duty of the pastors and theologians and religious scholars to revisit the issue, study the matter, and come up with some solution to this burning problem.

This research study aims at taking a critical look into the subject, seeking out the meaningful components of the traditional practices and reconciling them with the church's teachings and liturgy. It is anticipated that the findings will contribute in some way to the other efforts that are being made to formulate an acceptable

¹ Catholic Directory of Ghana, 2000.

procedure in the rites aimed at giving the widow some solace following the traumatizing loss.

The research focuses on the Akan community, made up of several groups that are widely spread throughout Ghana. The afflictions and the indignity that befall the widows among these distinctive groups are similar in many aspects. Some references will, however, be made to relevant issues on the subject emanating from other ethnic groups, in order to elucidate certain points.

The study begins with the background of the Akans and their culture, in particular as it pertains to rites for bereaved widows. It goes on to sift through the cultural practices to find out possible applications and integration into the church's liturgy. Finally, a look is made into what the support groups within the civil society, government agencies and the church itself can contribute to ameliorate the plight of the widow.

CHAPTER ONE

1:0 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In the course of my studies here in Kenya, I was assigned to work with a group of youths in Limuru. And one Saturday while waiting for the group to come, I over heard some women sharing among themselves some of the terrible experiences they went through as a result of the death of their husbands. I became interested in the issue and when I went back home to Ghana for my holidays break, I decided to find out the situation in Ghana especially among the Akan widows. And to my surprise, the situation is more serious than I thought. So this gave me the chance to study this problem.

During my research for this work, I realised that the number of young and old widows in most of the communities is growing rapidly, because AIDS has killed many men. Some of the widows never hesitated to share with me their sad experience which they have or are still undergoing after the death of their husbands, as one widow told me: *"When my husband died, I was accused of using witchcraft to kill him; I was tortured to confess and then banished from the village."*² Loneliness, rejection, the role being both the mother and father to the children, sexual deprivation by nature, and the apparent absence of God in their suffering are the common cry of these widows.

1:1 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The perception is that the Catholic Church in Ghana has a special role to play in redressing the issue of widowhood rite. There is an acute need of inculturating some of the beliefs, which the local people value, especially those which do not

² An interview with a 60 year-old widow held captive after the death of her husband who was a chief in Yapei village. 2004-June.

contradict the Gospel message. Thus the objectives of this study, is focused on the following:

- ◆ To illustrate the traditional widowhood rites, the problems that have resulted from some of those rituals, and the conflict that emerges when coupled with beliefs and practices.
- ◆ To propose a Christian model of widowhood rites or inculturated widowhood rites that can be replaced with that of the purely traditional one for the Christians.
- ◆ To suggest some ways in which the church can help widows to cope with and go through this most painful and difficult moments and come out of it as a whole, loving, and caring person.
- ◆ Finally to propose ways and means by which help can be mobilised from government agencies, civil and charitable organisations, the Church, counsellors and individuals in support of the helpless and traumatised widows.

1:2 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The issue of widowhood rite and its inculturation into the Christian domain is one of the hottest debates in the Catholic Church in Ghana. Some of the Dioceses are already in the process of discussing a possible alternative of Christian widowhood rites. It is in line with this that this research work wishes to use this opportunity to write and contribute to the debate already started by some bishops in the country. So as future pastoral agent, it is a way forward for me to prepare myself adequately with an in depth knowledge of the contemporary burning issues in my community and locality.

This will serve as a guideline and manual for me and many others who are preparing themselves to guide the people in our ministerial priesthood to become aware of and try to understand and help those widows out there and those who follow and are struggling with the dynamic and traumatic experience of losing one's husband.

1:3 SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The methodology to be employed in this work will include the descriptive and comparative approaches. In these approaches I shall depend largely on available literature, fieldwork and in-depth interviews, or participatory observation basically in the traditional aspect of this work.

1:4 THE AKAN PEOPLE:

The Akan people occupy practically the whole of Ghana, south and west of the Black Volta. Historical accounts suggest that Akan groups migrated from the north to occupy the forest and coastal areas of the south as early as the thirteenth century A.D. Some of the Akan ended up in the eastern section of Côte d'Ivoire, where they created the Baule community. The Akan groups in Ghana include the Ashanti, Akim, Akwapim, Brong, Kwawu, Assin-Twifo, Wasa, Fanti-Agona, Nzima, and Ahanta.³

The Akans were traditionally religious people before the white man brought the message of the Gospel to Ghana. Though outsiders describe their religious outlook as "totemistic or even fetishistic", there is no doubt that their religious thought is essentially theocentric and theistic. God is at the centre of every aspect of their life. That is not to say that it is either monotheistic or polytheistic. So much

³ P.K. SARPONG, *Peoples Differ: An approach to Inculturation in Evangelisation*, Accra 2002, 66.

depends upon the angle from which things are viewed. If one considers the fact that there is only an acknowledged Creator who holds sway over all other beings, then one is right in concluding that the religious outlook is monotheistic. If, on the other hand, other deities and spirits besides God, to whom public cult is directed, are taken into account, then one can conclude with some measure of justification that it is polytheistic. These conceptions of theism or pneumatic religious outlook are not incompatible.⁴

There is a universal God, *Onyame*, but this does not exclude gods associated with a particular region or spirits, *Abosum*, by whom a priest may be possessed. (This lack of exclusiveness makes it possible, say, for a fetish priest to be a Roman Catholic). But there is no doubt of the existence of the Kingdom of the Dead, *Asamando*. So custom requires that great attention be paid to the proper conduct of burials and funeral celebrations. Death is the one great certainty. Traditional religion does not require regular attendance at particular buildings. Religion is not something that is remembered for one hour a week. The Gods and the spirits of the ancestors are always present. It is against this background that Akan people have welcomed the Gospel message.

1:5 FAMILY, KINSHIP TIES AND MARRIAGE

The system of kinship and lineage arrangements that pertain in the Ghanaian society, are mainly three fold: the *matrilineal* type, well known among the Akans; the *patrilineal* system, existing among the Ga-Adengbe, Ewe, and several ethnic groups in the northern part of the country; and the *double descent* system, well

⁴ P.K. SARPONG, *Ghana In Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture*, Accra-Tema 1974, 12.

documented among the Fanti.⁵ It should be noted, however, that the prevalence of a particular lineage system, does not preclude entirely the connection of a persons with the other side of the lineage arrangement.

Beyond the statement that a kinship system groups people on the basis of blood and marriage relations, and that rights and obligations arise as a result of this relationship, and because my focal point of this work is mainly on the Akans, it is necessary to examine the descent system that is well known in Ghana which is the matrilineal system among the Akans.

In terms of the size of the population that is involved, the matrilineal system is by far the most predominant lineage arrangement in Ghana. It is also the least understood among western visitors to the country. As in the case of several social institutions, the matrilineage has an ideology or myth that serves as its charter of operation. It is related to the Akan theory of procreation. This theory is to the effect that during mating, it is the mother who provides the "blood", while the father provides the "ntoro" or the "spirit".⁶

This explains why among the Akans, blood is thicker than the *ntoro* as Akan proverb has it, "chicken follow the hen not the cockerel."⁷ As a result of this, the matrilineage is seen by the Akan as the unilineal descent group. That is why marriage would not have been permitted at all if the father had been a member of the uterine group. Virtually, all discussions in terms of the matrilineal system among the Akan begin and end with the *obaapapanin*- the *aberewatia* (the elderly woman –

⁵ G.K. NUKUNYA, *Tradition And Change In Ghana: An Introduction to Sociology*, Accra 1992, 33.

⁶ M. ASSIMENG, *Social Structure Of Ghana: A study in Persistence and Change*, Accra 1999, 76.

⁷ SARPONG, *Ghana In Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture* 78.

grandmother). For, it was from the womb of the old woman that the living *abusua* (lineage) has emerged.⁸

As I have pointed out, kinship is important and basic in traditional societies, and we should remember that it is sustained by marriage. When a couple is joined in marriage, their respective lineages and families automatically become affinal relatives while the children of the union are kin to all those mentioned above.

Marriage is usually a group affair and the ceremony involves, besides the couples and their immediate relations, distant kinfolk, neighbours and friends. Nor is their involvement limited to the ceremony. It is necessary during the preliminary negotiations which culminate in the ceremony. That is why according to Ghanaian marriage is between families and not individuals. This view adds significance because in our extended family system, the interest of the relatives in the marriage means that the two families have become affinal relations and their children from the marriage become real kin of the two sides.

Again, marriage with a member of one's own village is preferred to marriage with an 'outsider', *ohoho*. The reason being that, the character and family background of the parties involved are known to their respective parents and this enables them to make a careful choice. It is also said that such marriages enable the parents and other kin of both spouses to take a personal interest in and help in the care of their children. But undoubtedly the most important factor is the strength of matrilineal ties in domestic organisation.⁹

Apart from localizing the sense of the kinship, the Akan clan system provide closer human co-operation, especially in times of need." For example, in times of

⁸ M. ASSIMENG, *Social Structure Of Ghana: A study in Persistence and Change*, 76

⁹ A.R. RADCLIFF-BROWN, *African System of Kinship and Marriage*, Ely House London 1950, 252

marriage, the dowry payment is shared by all the members of the clan. "When a man gets married, he is not alone neither does the wife 'belong' to him alone. So also, the children belong to the corporate body of the kinsmen, even if they bear only their father's name.¹⁰

For the Akan, dowry plays an important role in cementing the marriage relationship and the birth of the child is the climax of sealing the marriage relationship. Once a child is born, the husband and wife belong completely to one another, and the bond between the two families and communities is sealed.¹¹ After the birth of a child, marriage should not in any circumstances be broken, marriage makes binding demands that extend beyond the present life.

Though marriage is a joyful event, it also has some sorrows. Among others, death of the spouse is the major cause of sorrow in marriage. The death of the husband has more grief than the death of a wife. When a man or woman has died there is mourning, burial, cleansing and inheritance. Cleansing and inheritance ceremonies take place some months or even up to one year after burial.

1:6 Succession Law

Ghana, which has ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of discrimination against Women (CEDAW), has made some reforms in legislation. The Intestate Succession Law II 1991 enacted new provisions for sharing matrimonial property equitably so as to give the widow and her children the appropriate portion. This law criminalized the ejecting of a widow and children from the matrimonial home except in a case where a court order has been issued.

¹⁰ NUKUNYA, *Tradition And Change In Ghana: An Introduction to Sociology* 45.

¹¹ J. MBITI, *Introduction To African Religion*, Nairobi 1992 119.

But implementation and enforcement of this reform has been impeded by the cost, the bureaucracy, the corruption of officials, and the problems that illiterate and defenceless widows encounter in their attempt to obtain letters of administration and getting their documents processed. To make this more effective, the church once again, can take the initiative to ask the lay professionals who are knowledgeable in these laws to help and give free education on these issues to the widows so that they can gain some awareness of their rights.

But before this law, inheritance of property, for the majority of Ghanaians, has been regulated by the customary law of the person who has died or by the type of marriage the deceased contracted during his life time. If an Akan man died, his property was inherited by his sister's children (usually the boys) or his own brothers by his mother that is the members of his maternal family. The wife and children of the deceased were not considered part of his maternal family and therefore were not entitled to any of his property. This customary law did not take into account the role and or the contribution of the wife and or children in the acquisition of the deceased's property.¹²

What happened in such situations was that the wife and children were deprived of any share in the deceased's property and were in some cases thrown out of the family home, thus becoming destitute in the process. Very often the nephew or family member who inherited the deceased's property may not have contributed in any way to the acquisition of the property. Widows here are normally free to go to their family if for instance they are old. But when they are young, whether or not they have children, they can stay and get married to the successor of the deceased

¹² M. OWEN, *A World of Widows*, London 1996 51

husband. In this case, the children that will be born out of this marriage are not considered children of the deceased, but of the living couple.¹³

Many a time this marriage does not take place since the widows normally refuse to marry the successors of the deceased husband. But whatever the case, the idea is that the successor is suppose to be responsible for the material needs of the widow and the children but not her sexual needs if they are not married. So among the Akans, the issue of widowhood inheritance is not as strong as we see it in the patrilineal families like the Luos of Kenya or some of the patrilineal ethnic groups in northern Ghana where the successor must inherit the widow to continue the procreation process of the deceased husband. Widows no longer feel obliged to remarry into their dead husband's descent group.¹⁴

During this period, the successor is expected to look after the surviving children and their mother but there have been several instances where these successors have failed to carry out their obligations and by the time the children grow up, the property would have been mismanaged or totally decimated. The wife's contribution was not recognized nor taken into account. Customary law did not take into account the situation where the sons who inherited may not be the natural children of the surviving wife. In such a case, there is no guarantee that the wife would enjoy any of the property if there is no legal guarantee of the wife's right to the deceased husband's property.¹⁵

¹³ OWEN, *World of Widows* 56

¹⁴ G.K. NUKUNYA, *Tradition And Change In Ghana: An Introduction to Sociology* 155.

¹⁵ OWEN, *World of Widows* 61

1:7 Akan View of Death

In Akan cultural heritage the death of an individual makes an extremely big difference not only to the deceased relatives but also to whatever association one had during his lifetime. Among Akans it is the norm for dead bodies to be kept in the mortuary for weeks or months until relatives are adequately organized to give a fitting burial ceremony to the departed soul.¹⁶ Such preparations normally take the form of an expensive coffin, shroud, food and refreshment for invited guests, provision of music usually by a hired band, publicity on the radio and television. Where necessary, many families do take loans purposely to cater for all these expenditures. This is especially so if the deceased was in good-standing relationship with his circle of associates prior to his death. In that case, sympathizers from the deceased's religious, professional, political and other forms of affiliations will mobilize financial donations, transport, etc. just to attend the burial or funeral of their departed colleague regardless of the distance.¹⁷

The reasons death and customs accompanying it are given much importance by Akans are many, but principally it is because of their worldview that a meaningful life is found in maintaining harmony with the spirit of the dead relatives-the "living dead". The manner of funeral rituals, express feeling of sorrow and loss as well as emphasize the belief that death was not the end of the person's existence.

Therefore, the spirit of the deceased will continue to influence the lives of his living relatives with blessings or curses depending on how he was treated by the living.¹⁸ It is believed that the dead have the same desires, such as money, food,

¹⁶ S.T. ANKRAH, *Death And Funeral Rites In Contemporary Akan Society*, 3

¹⁷ P. K. SARPONG, *Ghana In Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture*, 39.

¹⁸ J. MBITI, *Introduction To African Religion*, 119.

drinks, clothing, so all these are placed in the coffin or beside the grave. In case of a tribal king or chief, weapons and servants are necessary to accompany him.¹⁹ Hence in pre-colonial times people were executed and buried along with a great man. It is in line with this that the family of the deceased husband expects the woman to go through these rites of widowhood to do honour to the deceased husband. But failure on the part of the woman to go through the rite is considered to be a disgrace and bad omen to the deceased family. Hence hatred and abuses are meted out to the widow until she finally goes through the rite. So in the next chapter, I am going to talk about how the practice is being done today among the Akans and the traumatic experiences that accompany the rituals.

¹⁹ E. D. SOPER, *Religions Of Mankind*, Cokesbury: Abingdon 1938, 67

CHAPTER TWO:

2:0 TRADITIONAL WIDOWHOOD RITE AND PRACTICE

The widowhood rite is the official performance of the rite of separation between spouses following the death of either one of them. The Akans call it *Kuna*. Which means (*kumu-na*) husband is “scarce” (*ekumu ho aye na ama no*). This is so because among the Akans a man is legally allowed to marry more than one woman. In its etymology then, among the Akans it is the woman who has problems getting another husband. Therefore, Kunadie is understood by the Akans as a rite that the woman performs following the death of her husband, both as means of separating herself from her dead husband and also as a way of waiting for another man to come into her life. Hence, the widowhood rite tends to be more demanding on the woman than on the man.²⁰

2:1 Who is a widow or widower

“Widow” is a harsh-sounding and offensive word to many women. In common English usage, a “widow” is a woman who has lost her husband by death, and has not remarried and a widower is a man who has lost the wife.

The Greek word for “widow” - *chêra* - comes from the Indo-European root *ghê* which means “forsaken” or “left empty.” (The English word “widow” also originates from this root.) *Chêra* is related to the preposition *chôris* meaning “without” or “apart from”, and is used adverbially to mean “separately” or “by itself”. Thus, the original meaning is a person “without” or “left without.” *Chêra* can

²⁰ Minutes recorded on the meeting of liturgical commission of Kumasi ecclesiastical province on widowhood rite. Wednesday, April 21st 2004.

mean not only a widow in the modern sense of the word, but also “anyone destitute and miserable; anyone living in solitude.”²¹

The Hebrew word for “widow” - *almanah* - has its roots in the word *alem* meaning “unable to speak”. *Almanah* was used especially to refer to the widow as helpless or exposed to oppression, and harsh treatment. The widow was the “silent one.” The word for “widowhood” - *almenuth* - meant “silence” and the term expressed in poetic form exactly the legal status of the widow in the ancient world: she was not spoken for.²²

The Greek word for “widow” - *chêra* - comes from the Indo-European root *ghê* which means “forsaken” or “left empty.” (The English word “widow” also originates from this root.) *Chêra* is related to the preposition *chôris* meaning “without” or “apart from”, and is used adverbially to mean “separately” or “by itself”. Thus, the original meaning is a person “without” or “left without.” *Chêra* can mean not only a widow in the modern sense of the word, but also “anyone destitute and miserable; anyone living in solitude.”²³

In modern times, the word “widow” frequently connotes not only marital status, but also social and economic status. In many parts of the world, a widow is often “left without” money and financial support as well as (or as a result of being) “left without” a husband. The word has strong social and economic connotations more appropriate to a widow than a widower. Thus, the more passive and impoverished status of women means that a widow who is “left without a husband” is potentially a person “left empty.” Widows are likely to suffer from loss of their

²¹ B.B. THURSTON, *The Widows: A woman's Ministry in the Early Church*, Minneapolis: fortress, 1989 10.

²² THURSTON, *the Widows: A woman's Ministry in the Early Church*. 9.

²³ THURSTON, *The Widows: A woman's Ministry in the Early Church*, 10.

financial support, property, health and even their own identities, after their husband's death. This situation is almost uniformly the case on the African continent, whence the Akan situation is no different.²⁴

2:2: Why a widow goes through the rite

In view of the fact that marriage brings a special bond of love between married partners and that at the death of one of them there is a disruption of this union, there is the need for a separation of the love bond through the performance of certain rituals. This is meant to avoid any occurrence of the living partner having to come into contact with the spirit of the deceased and vice versa.

It is believed that the rites are performed in order to prevent the spirit of the deceased spouse from haunting the surviving spouse. Symbolically, it is also meant to dissolve the marriage and to spiritually separate the surviving spouse from the deceased spouse. Again, the rites are intended to encourage the surviving spouse to take courage and take things in his or her stride and stand firm during the period of grief and mourning while taking cognisance of the difficulties that lie ahead in the absence of the deceased spouse.

2:3 Mourning, purification and separation

Notwithstanding, the painful memories and experiences that the death of a partner brings to the living partner, the widow is also, most often, further subjected to many hardships. During the time of her widowhood, the widow for example, must abstain from food, not take her regular bath, walk bare-footed, wear a designated dress, shave off her hair and not engage in sex. These practices are imposed on the widow as a symbolic demonstration of her being in a state of mourning and show

²⁴ A. M. REGGY-MAMO. *Widows: The Challenges and The Choices*. Nairobi, 1999, 5

true sorrow for the departed husband. It must be said, however that at times some families take this opportunity as an occasion to harass and punish the woman; in the traditional way of thinking, there is no death from natural causes alone. Whenever death occurs, people try to seek out who has caused the death. As professor John Mbiti explains:

*“Paradoxically, every human death is thought to have external causes, making it both natural and unnatural. People must find and give immediate causes of death. By far the commonest cause is believed to be magic, sorcery and witchcraft. This is found in every African society, though in varying degrees of emphasis; and someone is often blamed for using this method to cause the death of another”*²⁵

During this time of the mourning, women grind hot red hot peppers into powder, and throw it into the eyes of the widow. Customarily, the dead man's married sister does it because they believe the widow had a hand in the death of their brother. Though it is not a tribal custom, some of the Akan clans do it.

In connection with the restrictions and the subjection into these difficult rituals during the period of mourning, at one point the widow may have to go through many others such as a special and final purification in the form of a ritual bath. This purification rite is considered necessary as, with the death of the husband, the widow becomes impure. Traditionally, the special and final ritual bath also becomes the final act of separation between the dead and the living, even though the

²⁵ J. S. MBITI. *African Religions and Philosophies*. New York: Doubleday, 1970, 204

state of mourning may have to continue for some time until the widow becomes free to lead her normal life once again.²⁶

2:3:1 Rituals for Men

In the cultural set up of the Akan people, what a man goes through in the rite of widowhood is very different from that the woman experiences. Since some men have more than one wife, at the death of one of their wives they do not experience as much separation. In any case, the man still has to perform certain rites for the dead wife. He provides items like beads, cloth and *danta* for the deceased's father as if he was just about to engage her. Again, he provides items for bathing, e.g. soap, sponge, basket, panties, etc., he also provides a "house" for the woman, i.e. coffin and then cover cloth which they used to cover themselves.

The man, after providing these items, will sit by the corpse, to keep watch over it from morning till evening. The man and the corpse remain together in a room. The idea behind this is that if the husband offended her, he will use that opportunity to apologise to her. Where she offended him, he tells her spirit he has forgiven her or he will try to reconcile with her²⁷. The man will bathe three times a day and must fast by eating light food except in the afternoons when he could be given food made from maize. Before he eats, he bites hot pepper three times and spits them away. In Akan, there is *bofunu* "a cord" which is tied to the waist of the man between forty days and at most three months. This implies that he is not to use his manhood during those days. If after the forty days and up to three months the

²⁶ OWEN, *World of Widows* 16

²⁷ B.POTASH, *The widows Among the Matrilineal Akan*, Stanford 1986, 225

chord is not worn out on its own, the man's caretaker would have to cut it off from his waist.²⁸

During the burial, the man is not allowed to go to the cemetery. He only sees the body (wife) off to the outskirts of the town. He is expected to carry a pot containing eight stones and breaks it up on reaching the outskirts of the town, then he turns back heading towards home and never look back. This signifies that they have severed the relationship forever. During the specified period of this rite, the widower does not share his room with anyone else except the man assigned to look after his needs or perhaps a family member. Normally, after eighty days following the death of the wife, the man is purified or cleansed with a leaf called "adwera" and he is covered with white clay (*hyire*). This means he is now free and can go about his normal duties/activities. If he is from a royal home, a sheep is slaughtered and used to prepare a meal for the entire family. Then he is free to have sexual intercourse with any of his wives, if he has any, or may look for a woman.

2:3:2 Women's Rites

when a man dies, his family is expected to send a delegation with drinks to inform the wife of her husband's death. Then the woman bereaved has to find a place of abode for herself, which means that she has to leave her matrimonial home. She is then expected to give *adendie*, meaning a cloth, a mat, a pillow, a bucket, sponge, soap and underwear to the family of the man in preparation for the funeral of the man who is being laid in state. She also provides a mat, a bed sheet, a pillow and a blanket. She does so because it is believed that when the man reaches his destination, he will have to rest or sleep after the day's journey.

²⁸ An Interview with Mr. P.K. Aansali. A member of the Ecclesiastical province of Kumasi steering committee on widowhood rite. June 5th 2004.

She places three coins of Ghanaian cedis in a handkerchief gives it to the dead husband as he lies in state. She is expected to stay between forty days and at most one year without the company of a man as she goes through the widowhood rite. On the day of burial, the woman dresses up in mourning cloth (Black) while her hair is shaved off. The widow has *nnoa* placed around her neck, wrist and ankles. There are leaves called *nyenya*, together with a chain of snail shell, dried okra and pepper. She holds galbanum (*prekese*). And a string made from plantain is tied to a finger and some of it behind her.²⁹

As in the case of the man, she carries a pot with eight stones in it and breaks the pot at the outskirts of the town or village during the funeral procession for the dead husband. She is not to look back upon breaking the pot. This is a sign that she has separated herself from the dead husband. On the 40th day, she is asked if the husband owed her anything, or if she owed the husband anything or any other person was indebted to the husband or vice versa. This is to help the husband's family to settle any indebtedness of the deceased husband. After this a cord is then put around the waist of the widow for forty days or at most one year. It means that she cannot have any sexual relations with any man as long as she has the cord around her waist. The woman is asked at the end of the year if she will marry the successor of the deceased husband. If she responds in the affirmative then it is the responsibility of the successor to break the cord from her waist. But if she responds in the negative, then the customary rite of divorce is performed and the woman's family takes the responsibility of having the cord broken. The widow is supposed to

²⁹ An Interview with Mr. P.K. Ansah.

eat only such foods as are harvested above the ground such as grain (rice, maize etc.) for forty days. That is the period of fasting for her.³⁰

Moreover, the widow is purified after the end of the one year with the droppings of a buffalo and then covered with white clay. The severity of this rite, differs from community to community. In some of the communities, the widows are required to stay indoors sitting together if there are several widows, or alone if there is only one. The widows are stripped naked, wearing only leaves to cover their private parts, and must sit on a reed mat, for days or even weeks. Widows may not cook, and must eat and drink from a designated bowl or cup to avoid “polluting others.”³¹

Some of the mourning rites may include “ritual cleansing” through sex with certain designated individuals. These could be the “first stranger met on the road”, or brothers-in-law, or the heir. These coercive acts and others such as scarification (scarring) with unclean instruments are life-threatening as well as degrading in the context of HIV/AIDS infection.

2:3:3 Traumatic experience and problems

Apart from the traumatic and painful experience of losing a husband, friend and a father to their children, widows are subjected to many other traumatic experiences. As one widow told me in the course my data collection, “the *nephew made the widow sit on a chair outside the house, whilst the possessions were divided. In another case, the widow obtained a court order to protect the property of*

³⁰ POTASH, *The widows Among the Matrilineal Akan* 225

³¹ Interview with Thompson Tosha, Small Enterprise Development Advisor. July 2004.

her husband, but when she returned home she was butchered by her husband's nephew in the compound"³²

Many widows in some of the communities are rejected and expelled from the family immediately on the death of the husband, or after some days of the rites of bathing, shaving and burial. *"During the raining season I had only a small corner of a shed to rest in. when the rain came I had only to collect the water in a bucket and throw it outside and then sleep on the wet floor so that I got a fever. I had no money for medicine and I nearly died."*³³ In the rural areas, widows are too terrified of their in-laws to try to seek remedies through the courts or even applying for social welfare help. They are destitute indeed.

2:3:4 Violence

Physical and mental violence, including sexual violence and rape, are common occurrences at the onset of widowhood. Sometimes as part of the mourning rite, or associated with some of the ceremonies (for example, having to sit naked, having to take off all clothing by the river, being left alone and destitute, widows are frequently vulnerable to extreme sexual abuse and violence).³⁴

"I was raped by two or three men who were sent by my brother-in-law to get me to leave the house. My husband's brother had already taken my son, but my little daughter was only 4 years old and she witnessed this terrible thing that happened to me. No one wanted to help me. Later, when I lay bleeding on the floor, the brother came and shouted through the door that it would be worse for me if I revealed what

³² Report from the NGO women's ministry – Northern Sector, Based in the Bolga-Region of Northern Ghana.

³³ An interview with a childless widow aged 53 in Brong Ahafo region July 2004.

³⁴ OWEN, *World of Widows* 10

had happened."³⁵ The mental anguish caused by such physical abuse, the sudden destitution, homelessness, starvation and insults lead a considerable number of widows to commit suicide. Suicide by a widow is usually made to look like an accident so it is very difficult to research on it.

2:3:5 Shame and Stigma

Widows are generally regarded as bearers of bad luck. They are frequently accused of having used witchcraft to kill their husbands. A widow is always a suspect, and to avoid such suspicion she must demonstrate her grief and penance by wearing special cloths, avoiding people and all social occasions such as weddings and parties. Indeed even her on-time friends now shun her, claiming that she poses a threat, and that she may cast a spell on them to destroy their children as well as property. All these are used as an excuse to deny her badly required support. This reaction is often the result of the widow refusing to remarry to any of the deceased husband's male relatives. This is not just a question of men against widows, but even mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law unite in their bitterness that a "wicked woman has deprived them of a son or a brother."

As explained above, few widows, especially those in the rural areas would dare attempt to get their problems resolved through the courts, or to apply for relief through the social welfare agencies. In this research work, one of my interviewees told me that a widow was murdered by her in-laws after she complained to a human rights lawyer that her brother-in-law had sold all her husband's land on which she depend for living.

³⁵ An interview with A 23 year old widow in Atebubu district June 2004.

2:3:6 Strategies for Survival

Prostitution is often the only means of survival, but these widows often die early from HIV/AIDS and the opportunistic illnesses associated with this infection. TB is a big problem. Widows rarely have sufficient funds to buy medicine or follow course of a healthy diet. The drugs have to be paid for, nor can the widows meet the hospital bills. This situation normally arises as many widows have little or no formal training but minimal educational background. The lucky ones get some help from NGO's to engage in some income-generating projects such as small scale farming, soap making and a few others.

CHAPTER THREE:

3:0 CHRISTIAN MODEL OF WIDOWHOOD RITE

The Christian Widowhood Rite ought to take into consideration the Christian sense of death. Death is a universal phenomenon. The Akan proverb, *owuo atwedee, baako nforo*, literary translated means “No one mounts the ladder of death alone.” This seems to explain the fact that death comes to every person, family and society at large. Death, as it is, brings sorrow to the bereaved family members, especially those who mourn for the dead. They all stand in need of God’s consolation and support in their moment of anguish.

Jesus, the Lord of Resurrection, brought the dead back to life. This was the case with Lazarus and the son of the widow of Naim. Again, as man, Jesus, the son of God, showed pity and comforted those who mourned. With the two sisters, Mary and Martha, Jesus mourned at the death of their brother Lazarus. More than just comfort could give, Jesus gave Lazarus and also the son of the widow of Naim back alive to their families, and thus, by His resurrection and power over death, Jesus has made us, as well, victors over death. For him, indeed, is the one *“who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”*³⁶

In the case of a married couple, death is also a time of heart-breaking separation of a bonded love in which both partners have grown and integrated it into their life. The faith the Christian holds in the resurrection of the dead and the human efforts to bring comfort to those who mourn must be seen to help sustain the bereaved members of Christ’s faithful. These, virtues, at the same time, are to enable

³⁶ 2Corinthians 1:4 (Revised Standard Version)

the bereaved rise above themselves into a greater hope that, even as they share in the comfort of Christ, who comforts us in all our afflictions, they will, one day, meet their beloved ones in the brightness of the heavenly splendour of the Lord. Therefore, the Christian widowhood rite must aim at bringing out this hope of the resurrection and comfort to the widow.

3:1 Biblical Illustrations

In ancient society, the notion of an independent woman did not exist. She depended either on her father or on her husband. She wore clothing to portray her identity. She was not heir to her husband or her father. A widow could marry again except in a case where she was the wife of a priest.

The scriptures warn against exploiting widows and God was in their defence: *"they kill the widow and alien; the fatherless they murder."*³⁷ The widow had no defender in the law court and was therefore at the mercy of indiscriminate judges. Crimes against widows abound in the Old Testament: *"To turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be their spoil, and that they may make the fatherless their prey."*³⁸ Jesus spoke about the essence of giving assistance to the widow as a pious act *"they devour the houses of widows and, as a pretext, recite lengthy prayers. They will receive a very severe condemnation."*³⁹ The early church saw the need of widows for which reason there arose the ministry of deacons. (Acts 6:1-7) The help for widows is considered as genuine religion: *"religion that is pure and undefiled before God and Father is this:*

³⁷ Psalm. 94:6 (New American Bible)

³⁸ Isaiah 10:2 (Revised Standard Version)

³⁹ Mark 12:40, Luke 20:47 (African Bible)

to care for orphans and widows in their affliction and keep oneself unstained by the world."⁴⁰

3:2 The Position Of The Church On Widowhood Rites

Christian churches have different ways of dealing with widows and widowhood rites. The churches' general position on widowhood rites is that, widows should be left 'free' either to remarry or to live alone without a marital partner on the death of the husband." Furthermore, the churches in general, "encourage the Christian communities to take care of all the widow's needs except that of procreation." But Africans argue that the widow's procreative needs are as important and as real as her needs for food, clothing, shelter, gardens, and school fees, for it is only through her continuing fertility that she can maintain the integrity and continuity of the family begun with her husband, fulfil her sacred obligation to participate fully in the procreative process, and in addition, prospects for looking forward to the care and support in her old age.⁴¹

Alternatively, another way advocated by the Catholic Church is that a widow should be free to remarry as a new wife in a new lineage, but, to be implemented, this alternative depends its implementation on such factors as the dictates of one's ethnic group, the descent and inheritance rules followed, the presence or absence of children, and the age of the widow.⁴²

⁴⁰ James 1:27 (New Revised Standard Version)

⁴¹ M.C. KIRWEN, *The African Widows*, Maryknoll: New York 1979, 12

⁴² KIRWEN, *The African Widows* 13

Still, another alternative proposed by the Catholic Church is that the widow be allowed to continue to live in her husband's homestead, or in that of his male relative, or in her father's as a single person without any specific marital partner. This alternative also leaves the widow with an undefined and insecure position within the society, especially if she is still young. It provides her with no stable marital relationship in which to fulfil her procreative needs albeit all their major social ramifications.

The Catholic Church, in particular, is silent on burial rites of mourning and cleansing. She only articulates songs of sorrow at the funeral house before burial, the priest's celebration of mass in Church, and performance of the Christian burial rituals which accompany the religious songs and responses. Any other post burial rites of mourning, cleansing and inheritance are purely left to the widow and the family of the deceased. The Church in Ghana has not yet come up with clear Christian inculturated solution to the African widowhood rites.

3:3 PROCEDURES FOR CHRISTIAN WIDOWHOOD RITES

The Christian Widowhood Rites involve a journey in which the widow or widower travels through a period of time, starting from the very moment of the death of one's partner, the moments of mourning and purification, to the final stages of separation and thanksgiving when the curtains for the rites are drawn. From the very moment the death strikes, the widow travels down a journey of faith. The faith, at times, could become so badly shaken by certain happening before the death that could not be ratified.

It is also a moment of purification, not in the sense of one being impure and contaminated because of the death of the partner, but because of experiences of one's shortcomings which could not be properly remedied in the course of their union before the death of either of the partner's. A widow would need to brace herself for the challenges of the imminent loss and grief, and the ability to stand up against her conscience because she may, in one way or another be inclined to blame herself for the loss of the husband. These stages are meant to bring back the peace and tranquillity so much needed for the widow and to draw God's strength and support from the Christian community to help her to start regular life after this great loss. So these stages that I am going to propose will be the rite itself.

3:3: A Rite of presentation to the Christian community

In the first place, the widow will be formally presented to the Christian community in the first days following the death of the husband. This rite of presentation is to invite the church to support the widow in prayer and to help her spiritually and, materially as well. If circumstances may not permit the rite from taking place in the church, it could be arranged and carried out in the home of the widow in the presence of as many of the faithful as possible.

3:4: B periods of mourning and purification (strengthening of faith)

This is the second stage which starts after the burial. This is a period when one feels the great loss, deep grief and mourning for the bereaved. It is also a moment when faith is challenged due to the loss. Sometimes past memories of hurt feelings and experiences enjoyed earlier with the deceased and that broke one's

inner peace and which perhaps could not be remedied before the death of the loved one. This could be a period of prayer, penance and retreat to help remove the stain and inner guilt and serve as a moment of purification of mind and healing. These become memories to help and restore inner peace to the bereaved.

3:5: C Separation and thanksgiving

This is the stage of final separation and thanksgiving bringing the entire rites of separation, purification and thanksgiving to their final moments. It will take place when the widow is psychologically and spiritually prepared. It may be several months after or specifically on the day marking the first anniversary of the death of the husband, or even earlier if she finds it fitting.

CHAPTER FOUR:

4:1 CLUBS OF WIDOWS

There are several widows' clubs operating in Ghana. Some of these groups or clubs are locally set up. One example of such is the Movement for the Empowerment of Widows' Rights (**MOTHEWR**). This movement was founded to counter the hardships and discrimination that widows in polygamous marriages experienced throughout the country, especially in the rural arrears. The movement seeks to change existing attitudes and practices through diplomacy, tact and skill. They conduct research; they develop programmes of community visiting to gather the true facts about mourning rites. They explore ways of educating women about their rights, run courses and hold local meetings with the leaders in the community who are responsible for interpretation of the cultural practices.

The **widows ministries** is another grass-roots association of widows which is church and welfare oriented. Their motto is Jesus Christ- the Husband of Widows. It was set started in 1992 and now has about 4000 widow members. They have 30 groups in 13 villages and towns. The Director visits the group on a regular basis to discuss problems. They get some of their funds from a German development agency. Their activities are mainly directed towards finding shelter and food, counselling, training, income-generating, providing loans, paying children's school fees, and caring for orphans. They do, however, have a lawyer who has offered to give voluntary representation to any widow who has been mistreated in any way. The Widows' Ministry successfully lobbies trade associations to give apprenticeships to

orphans, and find other members to look after children when the widowed mothers die leaving them completely destitute.⁴³

4:2 The Church

In the past, widows did not experience economic deprivation. When a man died, his family cared for the widow. This is no longer the case, especially in towns and cities. Now it is upon the churches to find tangible ways to support the widow and her children so that she can retain self-respect and capabilities as a member of the body of Christ. this example can be seen from 1Timothy 5:9-11,14, it is clear that certain widows(those with no family left to support them) were to be 'put on a list' for the church assistance, under conditions of age and lifestyle. Apparently many urban churches in Ghana do not give any specific assistance to widows, although some fundraising has been done on a case-by-case basis.

Since the care of the widows has long been an important mission of the church, a widow has every good reason to count on her church as the resource most likely to extend comfort, emotional support and spiritual guidance. Many have been disappointed, and not without reason. The church repeatedly refers to a woman-headed family as a "broken home" even when a widow and her children feel that they are getting on well in spite of their painful loss. Said one widow: *"In many of our churches, widows are sidelined. We feel left out because most church activities cater for couples. At times, our families are treated as if we are in a second-class, whereas we are not."*⁴⁴

⁴³ Report from the NGO *womens ministry* – Northern Sector, Based in the Bolga-Region of Northern Ghana.

⁴⁴ Oral interviews of widows in Tachiman in the Brong Ahafo Region. Ghana may-June 2004.

Despite the apparent neglect of widows in some urban churches, not all widows are so disadvantaged. For many widows, the church has filled a void. “When they come to church, they find comradeship within the community of believers.”⁴⁵ Some of the churches have set up the following programmes for widows.

- ❖ Fellowship: Set up widows’ fellowship- a forum for widows to come together and share their common concerns.
- ❖ Money: Every member contributes to a fund for help of widows and orphans with the payment of school fees, etc.
- ❖ Legal Assistance: If any widow has a case in tribal law or in a civil court, legal advisors are sent to take up the case for these widows, especially in training the trauma healers and counsellors.

4:3 Trauma Healing

A support group consisting of people who share similar experiences, interest or concerns can be organised to come together to help heal one another. Through their shared experiences there arises an atmosphere of acceptance and understanding that their burdens do not have to be carried alone. Here a special bond develops among the members who help each other to find more effective way of coping with the situation. Some churches have established viable support groups for widows and the Catholic Church can just as well emulate such help groups.

⁴⁵A. M. REGGY-MAMO. *Widows: The Challenges and The Choices*, 107

4:4 Pastoral Recommendations

In addition to the stages of the Christian widowhood rite, the following recommendation is also worth considering in pastoral situations. Following the death of a spouse, a widow should never be subjected to sexual cleansing. From among the approved Christian method of cleansing, the widow's freedom to choose her way of life whether to remarry or remain single should prevail.

However, the traditional charity of taking care of the widow and orphans by the church and members of the deceased family should continue. The widow can and should be helped to clothe, feed and educate the orphans. In case the widow decides to remarry or just move out of the homestead, and she is capable of looking after the children by herself, she should be allowed to retain the custody of her children and property.

The grabbing of a widow's property must be discontinued. Where necessary the property of the deceased should be justly apportioned to the widow, the orphans and the parents of the deceased. In sharing out this property, the welfare of the widow and the orphan should be the prime consideration. The mourning practice of wearing black clothes, as a sign of grief should continue until the stipulated time which ends the rites.

In addition to wearing black clothes and scarf during the one year mourning period, the Christian widow should be given a small wooden cross with the sign of crucified Jesus on it as sign that she is in grief over the death of her husband. In the place of sexual cleansing, the Christian widow should just be washed with holy water, and wear the cross around her neck if she wishes to, and be set free to lead her normal life. In cases where the widow has agreed to remarry in the deceased

family, the widow's freedom to choose her spouse must be respected. Widow inheritance should be restricted to such men as those who are willing, capable of looking after the widow's needs and must be single as well as HIV negative.

The fact that human beings are grouped into human societies, clans, communities, and families and are, thereby tied to and governed by certain regulations in such institutions before being regenerated into God's family, realisation of the success of this Christian widowhood rite as a substitute to the traditional one, should prevent any conflict with traditional authorities.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

I have always appreciated how God speaks in his word to the issue of widows and how he lays out in such practical terms the manner in which he wants his people in the nation of Israel and in the body of Christ to care for them. This message will be a reminder of how we are called upon by our risen Lord to have compassion for the widows among us in our own generation.

In concluding this work, I wish to take this opportunity to review some basic spiritual principles for Christian families. As regards to husbands, Paul wrote, *"If any one does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."*⁴⁶ Husbands are called upon by God to provide for their wives and children not only when they are alive, but also after they die. It is morally wrong to leave them with no resources so that they end up indebted to the state, the Church and creditors not only financially but also emotionally. In this day and age there are many godly men and women in the

⁴⁶ 1 Timothy. 5:8 (Revised Standard Version)

Christian community who can be approached to give wise counsel about making a will and estate management that will protect and provide for their spouses and descendants.

As Christian parents, if fathers neglect their financial responsibilities to the spouses and children who are still dependent upon them at the time of death, the spiritual image of our loving heavenly Father in his provision for us, his spiritual children, is not to mention a fallen humanity. It leaves our children with emotional and spiritual consequences in the years to come as they feel the deep fear of abandonment and of the loss of protection and provision.

Again, while the traditional widowhood rite as a whole is a good ritual to aid the process of healing, at least from a psychological point of view, it is obvious from the above that women, relative to men are not treated humanely or fairly. The ritual itself is good. It is a healthy way of bidding farewell to spouses after death but it tends to be very unfair to the woman. She has to go through rigorous and sometimes dehumanising practices and rituals to which the men are not subjected to; it even lowers the woman's dignity to a considerable degree.

It has been observed that a widow's is driven into a total dilemma. She remains physically alive, but emotionally dead. It is clear from the above, that, a widow undergoes social, psychological, emotional, and financial abuse. This oppression against women is uncalled for. As a church in Africa and Ghana for that matter, our concern for widows should be very crucial. We have a duty to help the widows, talk to them, write information about them, counsel and guide them to look at least 'beyond the grave' and material possession.

Finally, as part of its social teaching, the Catholic Church in Africa should study and embrace the positive elements in relevant traditional practices, rather than condemn them wholesale. The teaching should be extended to the faithful. Pastors and theologians should advise the church when it goes wrong in matters of culture and educate widows on their rights.

It is my hope that the suggestions in this work can help in a way to bring to the attention of the church to plan a more strategic way of coming to the aid of the widows. And for the whole Christian community, it is also important for the church to teach them that God has a secret stairway to every heart. Widows should meet God and discover His spiritual identity. It is only through this that widows may accept themselves and the inevitable situation they find themselves and hence tread on a healthy path.

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APPENDIX 2: GHANA MAP

