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## **Widowhood: The Concept and Right to Remarry in The Kassena Culture**

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### **Abstract:**

*A good marriage is the most rewarding experience that life can offer; it is almost comparable to a heaven on earth. Besides providing for safe and secure sexual fulfillment, it also takes care of many other human necessities like those of companionship, affection and security. However, a good marriage does not simply happen. It has to be worked out. Community influence, social context and individual attitude play a pivotal role toward marriage. The hopes of many spouses are always dashed when the unfortunate thing of death occurs. Many of these people who face the wrath of family members of their late spouses are the widows. Most women in the Kassena Nankana West District remain unmarried after the death of their husbands; though some of them may still be very young and can remarry. This is because very few widows seem to be aware of their rights. Thus, this research seeks to investigate the concept of widowhood and the right to remarry in the Kassena Nankana West District. This study adopted a qualitative, phenomenological research design to understand and describe the lived experiences and the essence of widowhood. The study is designed to focus on the widows' descriptions and constructions of widows' experiences, challenges and survival strategies in relation to their right to remarry. The study has shown that widowhood rites are those rites that a surviving spouse has to go through at the demise of a partner. The fact that all the respondents expressed virtually the same view about widowhood rites means the practice has gained roots in the study area, and therefore has become common knowledge among the people. The study brought to the fore the widowhood rites that turn to prevent women who have lost their husbands from remarrying in the Kassena traditional area. Based on the results, the study recommended that, the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ) should design practical and interesting programmes to educate the Ghanaian public on women's rights and the concept of widowhood and the right to remarry.*

**Keywords:** *Widowhood, widowhood rites, remarriage, culture, Kassena*

### **1. Introduction**

According to Johnson and Shyamala (2012) a good marriage is the most rewarding experience that life can offer, it is almost like a heaven on earth. Besides providing for safe and secure sexual gratification, it also takes care of many other human needs like those of companionship, affection, security etc., it helps both spouses to feel adequate, desired, approved and complete to a degree which is not available in any other form of human relationship (Forbes, 1999). However, a good marriage does not simply happen. It has to be worked out. Community influence, social context and individual attitude play a pivotal role toward marriage (Barber, 2004).

However, the hopes of many spouses are always dashed when the unfortunate thing of death occurs. Many of these people who face the wrath of family members of their late spouses are the widows. Steps are taken in many countries to challenge the abuse of widows and to change the cultural perceptions of widowhood (Young, 2006). The position of women which consists nearly half of the population of the country is not so good and the position of a widow is even worse.

Widows are considered to be a marginalized group in most societies because they occupy a very low social status in some societies (Chen, 2008). Consequently they have to face severe social, economic and cultural deprivations. Widowhood necessitates establishment of new relations within the family, with the kin group and with the community. If such new relationships appear difficult to emerge, widows often have to take refuge in charitable houses or camps and stay away from their families. The historically bore out perceptions of widows is that they are "inauspicious dependents" on society, despite their rights in law, which are rarely exercised in practice.

Widow re-marriage is considered a taboo in the Hindu religion. . Widow re-marriage among the Hindus is not common. People marrying widows are considered to be of inferior status. Rules for the re-marriage of widows differ from one group to another. Generally in India, lower-ranking groups allow widow re-marriage, particularly if the woman is relatively young, but the highest-ranking castes discourage or forbid such. Christians and Muslims, however, remarry widows (Malik,

2013). Christian widows are allowed to remarry; this is evident in the case of Boaz and Ruth, where Boaz remarried the wife of Mahlon, the son of Naomi (Ruth, chapter 1-4). In Islam, re-marriage of widows has been greatly emphasized. At the same time, it has also been often stated that people, who bring up orphans are very dear to Allah. This should give a very good idea, as to what is the reward for someone who gets married to a widow and supports her children from her deceased husband (Etim, 2013).

Remarriage will change the belief about family responsibilities and obligations (Coleman, 1997). The victim would be unlucky to have married a woman who carries a curse of ill-luck. In some communities in Ghana, it is this belief that underlines the treatment that a woman goes through at the death of her husband (Oduro, 2007). In these communities, there is a strong belief that such a woman is likely to bury a second and a third husband, after which the fourth, if she can find one, will survive. She must therefore, purge herself of the ill-luck that has bedeviled her. The period for such purging differs from one society to another, but what runs through most of the widowhood rites is that the woman must be put through a certain amount of discomfort. If she is not liked by her in-laws, the sister in-laws in particular make it their business to generally make life unpleasant for her, especially if they believe their brother had been extremely good to her and as a result had neglected them.

The woman is normally not supposed to sleep in bed during the first forty days of the death of her husband, and so she sleeps on a mat on the floor. During the first forty days, the widow is confined to the house, usually that of the husband's family, unless special permission is given for her to continue with the widowhood rites in her own house. She cannot engage in any economic activity for a considerable length of time, and she may have to wait for six months or even a year before going about her normal business, especially if she is self-employed (Oduro, 2007). With the Christian widowhood rite, the leader or pastor prays over the clothes (usually black) the widow will use during the time she mourns her husband. This could be between one (1) month to one (1) year, she is not restricted in anyway as she is allowed to carry on with her normal activities.

Dolphyne (2005) indicated that at the first anniversary of the husband's death, the woman discard her mourning clothes and starts normal life again. In some communities, there is an end-of-widowhood ceremony at this time involving a slaughtering of a sheep and feasting. A widow in such a community cannot discard her mourning clothes until she has performed this ceremony. If she cannot afford a sheep, drinks and other things needed for the ceremony on the anniversary of her husband's death, she continues in mourning clothes until she is able to do so.

It is believed that in some parts of the world (Africa and Asia), widowhood rites are practices that any bereaved spouse has to pass through on becoming a widow or a widower. It could be stated arguably that, the practice is gender biased. Apparently, it is normally women who go through this practice. In an event where the man has to pass through them, the treatment is likely to be different. This practice in Africa is observed by a lot of traditional societies, but then there may be differences in the form it takes. Widowhood rites in Africa and for that matter Ghana tend to carry in their wake, aspects of human rights violations. Human rights activists, women advocacy organizations and government security apparatuses, however, appear to be concerned with rape and defilement issues to the neglect of widowhood rites. This study will describes in details how widowhood rites are performed for men and women and also the right to remarry in the Kassena traditional set up.

## 2. The problem

It is worth noting women's complex roles in the socio-economic sector which contribute enormously to the growth of the economy. As a result problems which women face are likely to have serious repercussions on the whole economy. Widowhood rites are not only practiced in Ghana, but everywhere in Africa. Some of the rites take away the right to remarriage by most widows.

As observed, most women in the Kassena Nankana West District remain unmarried after the death of their husbands; though some of them are still very young and can remarry. This is because very few widows seem to be aware of their rights. Thus, this research seeks to investigate the concept of widowhood and the right to remarry in the Kassena Nankana West District. And the following are the objectives of the study; to describe the practice of widowhood rites in the Kassena traditional set up, to assess why widows are prevented from remarrying in the Kassena traditional area and to assess the contributions made by national and international institutions on the rights of widows.

## 3. Materials and Methods

The study was conducted in the Kassena Nankana West District in the Upper East Region. The District has a growth centre being Paga (the capital) where most social and economic activities meant to supply the entire district population is located. The Upper East Region lies in the northern zone of Ghana and it is one of the smallest of the ten (10) administrative regions in Ghana (KNWDA, 2014).

The District according to Nyarko, Wontuo, Nazzar, Phillips, Ngom, and Binka, (2002) covers an area of 1675 km<sup>2</sup> close to Ghana-Burkina Faso border. It also shares boundary with Kassena Nankana Municipal to the south, Sissala East to the West and Bongo to the East.

This study adopted a qualitative, phenomenological research design to understand and describe the lived experiences and the essence of widowhood. The study is designed to focus on the widows' descriptions and constructions of widows' experiences, challenges and survival strategies in relation to their right to remarry. In the case of this study, the only condition

for someone to experience “widowhood” is to become widowed. Therefore, a phenomenological design was adopted to identify widows within the district to describe their subjective, lived experiences, the social and psychological characteristics of widowhood and the real meanings they hold.

The population involved all widows in the Kassena Nankana West District irrespective of age and level of education. A cross-section of the general public was engaged. This included widows, widowers and family heads. For exhaustiveness, the district was zoned into three areas (west, central and east). This study’s participants were sixty (60) individuals. Thirty (30) widows (10 each from the 3 zones) were selected. Also, 5 (five) widowers were selected from each of the zones. The widowers were included in this study to help the researchers know if there are differences in how women and men are treated when their spouses are deceased. The widows were carefully selected individuals who have experienced widowhood in the Kassena Nankana culture; the selection was done using the purposive and snowball sampling methods. These sampling techniques were employed because of the peculiar nature of the participants. The study also conducted three (3) focus group discussions for chiefs and elders in each of the zones. The traditional leaders participated in this study because they are the custodians of their culture and tradition and this study is basically about an aspect of the culture of the people of Kassena traditional area.

The population included all widows in the Kassena Nankana West District irrespective of age and level of education. A cross-section of the general public was contacted. This included family heads and widowers. Purposive and snowball sampling was employed to select the widows and widowers. Snowball sampling was used because by identifying a widow who has been remarried or ever been denied the opportunity to remarry helped the researchers to identify other widows for the study.

### 3.1. Ethical issues

Informed consent was sought from community leaders and study participants. Great care was taken to include only those who consented and the information part of the informed consent was taken very seriously. All the study participants were repeatedly told the purpose and methods of the study. Care was taken to exclude those who either failed to understand the purpose of the study or did not consent to the study.

### 3.2. Analytical framework

The study used the sex and gender, the actors and structures and the educational level approaches to analyse the lived experiences of the widows in the Kassena Nankana West District.

Sex and gender analysis says being either a man or a woman influences the manner in which the law applies to either of them regardless of the provisions entrenched in the Constitutions on equality before the law. Even within the society, the roles played by men and women are different or are expected to be different. This approach was used to investigate whether one’s sex operates as an inhibiting factor to exercise one’s right to remarry. The actors and structures approach enabled analysis of how different actors interact with different structures, in this case men and women, families and societies. The study examined the influence of structures on actors and structures as some choices are sometimes affected by legal, economic and the social structures. This approach is relevant but it has its own limitations as some structures may not deal directly with widows such that their influence may not be effectively examined. However, families may prove to be more influential on the widows’ exercise of their right to remarry than any other structure because of the nature of the relationship that exists between them and the widows. The educational level approach enabled analysis of how the educational levels can influence the treatment meted out to widows and how educational background impact on remarriage of educated widows.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Characteristic of Respondents

A total of sixty (60) respondents participated in this study; thirty (30) of the respondents were women who have lost their husbands, fifteen (15) and another fifteen (15) were widowers and family heads respectively. The table below presents the characteristics of the respondents.

Category	Male	Female	Total
Widows	0	30	30
Family heads	15	0	15
Widowers	15	0	15
Total	30	30	60

Table 1: Characteristic of the Respondents

Ages of the widows for the focus group discussion participants ranged from 30 to 81 years with the mode falling within the 46-55 years range. About three-quarters of the widows (22) were over 45 years of age.

Ages of the widowers and family heads interviewed range from 35 to 90 years with modal mark falling within the 46-55 years range. Just like the widows, about three-quarters of the widowers and family heads (24) were over 45 years of age.

The Table 2 below shows the educational status of the widow participants. Nine (9) of the participants had never been to school. Eleven (11) participants out of the 30 have had basic education and eight (8) had secondary education. Only two (2) attained diploma education.

Category	Number	Percentage
No formal education	9	30
Basic school	11	37
Second cycle	8	26
Tertiary (diploma)	2	7
Total	30	100

Table 2: Educational Status of Widows

The table 3 below presents the educational status of the widower participants. Seventeen (17) had never been to school. Ten (10) participants out of the thirty (30) had basic education and only three (3) had secondary education. None of the respondents had attained tertiary education.

Category	Number	Percentage
No formal education	17	57
Basic school	10	33
Second cycle	3	10
Tertiary	0	0
Total	30	100

Table 3: Educational Status of Widowers and Family Heads

#### 4.2. Widowhood Rites in the Kassena Nankana West District

##### 4.2.1 Perception and knowledge about widowhood rites

The researchers sought to find out from study participants their knowledge about widowhood rites in the area. The following are some views expressed by respondents. One participant was of the view that;

'Widowhood rites are customary/traditional practices women have to go through when their husbands die'.

This was corroborated by another respondent thus;

'Widowhood rites are described as rite perform upon the loss of your husband or wife'.

Others also had similar responses given, although in different forms. These were expressed by respondents during the interview session with family heads and non-widows/widowers. For instance, another respondent observed that;

Widowhood rites are performed when you lose your husband or wife.

While another opined that:

Widowhood rites are performances a woman goes through when her husband dies.

##### 4.2.2 Performance of widowhood rites

The participants described the various processes involved in the performance of widowhood rites in the study area to indicate their knowledge on the practice. The following are some expressions by the participants;

Widowhood rites start immediately a woman loses her husband. She is ushered into a kitchen (Kalgungo) in the company of other widows. A reed mat (kasoro-sara) is laid on the floor of the kitchen as her bed and she is served a millet drink in a calabash.

Another continued:

'She is then isolated from her family throughout the funeral. She is not allowed to eat or drink water at her will unless determined by the lead widow. She is dressed in leaves of the shea tree (sungu) or ebony tree (kokono), a fibre worn around her waist; one is used to tie her forehead and a third tied below her breasts'

One corroborated:

'During the funeral rites of my late husband, I was given a stick and calabash and ushered into an inner room (Dinia) accompanied by other widows. The floor of the room is covered with leaves of the shea tree and I was made to sit and sleep on these leaves throughout the process. At dawn, I was escorted by my escort (Kadiko) and other women to my best man's (yingeno) house while pito is brewed and a special meal (viini) is prepared from the seeds of vegetables (viiyu) and mixed with beans and other ingredients. We came back late in the evening. Upon reaching our house, all lights were put off. I was escorted three times around the pots located in front of the house'.

She paused and continued in tears; 'I was subsequently ushered in by the custodian, my calabash was snatched away from me and smashed in the yard and my stick was used to whip me in the inner room. The leaves that were used as a mat were gathered and buried at the forecourt and I was made to bath on them in the glaring eyes of everyone'.

In an interview with the family heads and the widowers, they confirmed what the widows had narrated as some of the rites performed. They added:

The hair of the widow is shaved usually by a male on a rubbish heap (tampuure); Shea butter oil smeared on the head and hot water poured on it while women sing dirges.

#### 4.2.3 Widowhood and Remarriage

The following are the views expressed by respondents on the issue of remarriage in the Kassena Nankana West District.

Because of the bride prize system, my ability to initiate decisions is restricted. Because the family of my late husband (late husband himself) paid the bride prize, my economic and spiritual resources are controlled by him/his family.

Another added that 'after performing the last funeral rites of my late husband, I told my family head that I would want to remarry. I was told to go ahead only if I know I killed my late husband'.

Yet another widow puts it this way 'Because you have killed your late husband, you now want to enter in prostitution'.

The interview sessions with the family heads and some non-widow participants revealed that no widow is allowed to remarry in our tradition. Because they (husband/his family) paid for the bride prize, she becomes a property of the husband's clan and for that matter a family member has to inherit her. However, if she refuses to be inherited, she is chased away and the bride price has to be restored to the husband's family, after which curses are pronounced on the widow.

In the words of another non-widow 'widows do not have the choice of remarrying because we paid high bride prize to her family. She can only be allowed to remarry outside our clan if her family is ready to pay back the cows and everything they collected from us as bride prize'.

One more non-widow asserted that 'It is a taboo to marry a widow who has remarried and lost the second husband, because the perception is that the third man will definitely die. Due to this, widows are not allowed to remarry'.

#### *4.3. Contributions of National and International Institutions on the Rights of Widows*

Surprisingly almost all the respondents to the instruments seem not to have adequate knowledge about institutions that are advocating for the right of women, especially widows. These were some of the views expressed by a respondent; 'I heard that there are people who help women, but I do not know their names'. Similar responses were given by other respondents. Some of the participants indicated they do not know about people fighting for the rights of women.

### **5. Discussion**

The study has shown that widowhood rites are those rites that a surviving spouse has to go through at the demise of a partner. The fact that all the respondents expressed virtually the same view about widowhood rites means that they all have substantial knowledge about the practice. It also means that the practice has gained roots in the study area, and has therefore become common knowledge among the people. Several researchers (Nukunya, 1969; Kirwen, 1979 and Tonah, 2009), emphasized this point when they noted that; widowhood rites are ceremonies performed by a living spouse at the death of his/her partner. It is also believed to ensure the smooth transition of the spirit of the deceased spouse. Widowhood is a condition in which one loses his or her spouse through death.

From both the widowed and non-widowed, it is clear that widows always perform certain rites when one loses a partner. These findings are similar to the findings of Akurugu (2013) which indicated that, the Kassena's, female widowhood rites start immediately a woman loses her husband. She is ushered into a kitchen in the company of other widows. A reed mat is said to be laid on the floor of the kitchen as her bed and she is served a millet drink in a calabash. Shea butter oil smeared on her hair and hot water poured on it while women sing dirges. The purpose of this rite is to ward off any evil spirit from attacking the widow (Ayagiba, 2009).

Awedoba (2012) also supported the views expressed by the respondents that widows are always ushered into a room where the floor of the room is covered with leaves of the Shea tree and the widow is made to sit and sleep on these leaves throughout the process. Part of the leaves that served as her 'pillow' are burnt and used to prepare a millet meal for her.

The above views from the respondents go to confirmed Akurugu, (2013), and Gunga, (2009) findings that, widows are culturally permitted to have a surrogate husband after their husband's death. They are not allowed to remarry but such unions are referred to as 'remarriage' with the result that widows are not allowed to have any other sexual partner except the surrogate husband who is normally from the late husband's family. Also, Ayagiba (2010) and Awedoba (2012) explained that a widow is regarded as a prostitute or a whore if she intends to remarry another man (outside the husband's kinship). Because of the bride prize system, women's ability to initiate decisions to remarry after the death of their husbands is restricted (Fayorsey, Adongo, & Kajihara, 1994).

Majority of respondents expressed their unawareness of institutions advocating for women's rights. This goes to affirm that, in Ghana, women who have been pressing for laws liberating women from these discriminative practices realised to their dismay that widows are still ignorant of their rights (Dolphyne, 2005). Martey (2005) opines that most women opt to go through widowhood rites out of fear of either being haunted by evil spirits, especially those of the deceased spouses or for what other people in society might say against them. In the African traditional setting, it is not just easy to disregard these things or to wink at them. The very thought about them could bring discouragement that in turn could lead to depression.

The study found that with regard to sex and gender roles in society, men and women do not go through the same rites. Men in the study community basically do not perform any rite at the death of their wives. Those from polygynous relationships were not even regarded as widowers. This is in line with findings of Matiea, 2010 in her study in rural Uganda which revealed that men were not even seen as widowers at the death of their wives, especially if they were from polygynous homes.

Actors and Structures played a very key role in the observance of these rites and remarriage in of widows in the Kassena culture. The study found that family heads and members of the deceased husband's family objected to the remarriage of widows. This could be due to the fact that if the widow remarries outside the deceased's family, she might have to go with some of the dead husband's property. This, the family is not ready to tolerate. In a study in Zimbabwe by the Human Rights Watch, (2016), it found some traditional leaders such as chiefs strongly opposed the right of the widow to remarry after her husband has died. This is the case especially with chiefs who are often illiterate or semiliterate. Illiteracy blurs one's vision to the extent that they deny issues which have been decided upon long ago by the courts of law. Marriage and inheritance are closely related because the right to inherit is dependent upon validity of a marriage. Evil practices such as dispossessing the widow of her matrimonial property emanate from unacceptability of the widow's right to remarriage.

An appreciable number of the participants in the study did not go to school, this could be the reason why they went through the rites without questioning it. The educated widows covered in this study had same widowhood rites and treatments as their uneducated counterpart. Education did not have any effect on what happened to a woman at the death of her spouse.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study brought to the fore the widowhood rites that turn to prevent women who have lost their husbands from remarrying in the Kassena traditional area. The practice though acknowledged by both the widows and the non-widows as not being helpful to women is still practiced for fear of the spirits of their ancestors harming them for not performing the rites. There was also lack of awareness by community members (especially women) that these practices are against the fundamental human rights of the women.

One of the biggest challenges to the promotion of widow's rights to remarry stems from the fact that, people are ignorant about or even show apathy towards the plight of widows. One big step in reversing the prevailing trend of massive violation of widowhood rights is through publicity, so as to raise awareness about the plight of widows in the District. Based on the results of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- The Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ) should design practical and interesting programmes to educate the Ghanaian public on women's rights and the concept of widowhood and the right to remarry. These programmes should particularly border on the dignity of womanhood through film shows, drama and radio discussions in the two major local languages in the District.
- Non-governmental Organisations and Community-based organizations which are advocating for the abolishing of widowhood rites should collaborate with traditional authorities to modify the practices, especially aspects that prohibit widows from remarrying.
- Government should enforce provisions on the promotion and protection of women rights in both national and international instruments to which Ghana is a signatory.

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