



## **Examining The Effects of Widowhood Rites Practices: A Case Study Among The People of Talensi and Nabdam In The Upper East Region of Ghana**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Some practices are barbaric, atrocious, backward, immoral, commoditization and an abusive violation of the sexual and human rights of the powerless. Widowhood rites are performed at the fresh funeral and during the final funeral rites. Widows prefer to be inherited by their grandsons so that they are free to choose a man of their choice and still hold on to their deceased husband assets. The Talensi widow would strangle a goat and part of the skin is used to cover the private of the dead for burial. The Nabdams would slaughter a sheep and an elder will slaughter it. In both cases older women served as the enforcers and custodians of such practices. The purpose of this study was to examine widowhood rites practices among the people of Talensi and Nabdam in the Upper East Region of Ghana. The study employed ethnography research method. Purposive sampling technique was used to sample twenty (20) widows from Talensi and Nabdam. The study recommended that Ghana's widows need to lead in the reporting of violations of their rights to the appropriate state institutions responsible and follow up to ensure justice is delivered. Non-governmental Organizations and Community-based organizations which are advocating for the abolition of widowhood rites should collaborate with traditional authorities to modify the practices.

**Keywords:** Widow, widowhood rites, Talensi, Nabdam, Abusive Violation

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world, widows continue to be among society's most vulnerable people. It is estimated that there are 245 million widows worldwide.

A widow's inheritance, alternatively referred to as a bride's inheritance, is a cultural and social practise in which a widow is obligated to marry a relative of her deceased husband, most frequently his brother. Illustrations of widows Inheritance can be traced all the way back to ancient and biblical times through the practise of levirate marriage. This is a widespread practise in Africa. Zambia, Kenya, South Africa, Uganda, Malawi, Tanzania, Senegal, Angola, Ivory Coast, Congo, and Nigeria can all be mentioned as countries that promote the practise. In most areas where widow inheritance is practised, it is intended to provide financial assistance for the widow and her children, as well as to maintain her late husband's money within the family bloodline (Ember & Ember, 1999). For example, the Luo people of Kenya have practised widow inheritance for centuries. The widow is inherited by the deceased man's younger brother, who offers protection, financial assistance, and parental care for her children. For members of the Luo community, inheritance is a means of preserving life in the deceased's home, where the widow and her children continue to reside. Widows are unable to begin working on the property until they inherit it. In South Africa, customary law vests the family of the deceased man with property succession rights, and property is typically owned by men. Women's property rights are severely restricted (Berchie & Maaledoma, 2021). Widow inheritance was significant since women did not have the right to hold or transfer property under customary law. As a result, it insured that widow, and their children were cared for following their husbands' deaths (Iddrisu, 2022).

These practises are not without their drawbacks. While a widow in Uganda does not have official inheritance rights, she may remain on her family property and continue farming and grazing cattle for the remainder of her years in her capacity as guardian of her husband's children. Widows could also rely on their sons' protection after they reached adulthood. Among the Igbos of Eastern Nigeria, the first move made upon a husband's death is to demand that his widow surrender all her late husband's possessions and goods (Fasoranti and Aruna, 2007). The widow is compelled to take an oath promising not to seize any of her deceased husband's property. The widow is expected to select an heir from among her late husband's relatives. Most widows accept the levirate relationship because the children's ties to their father's

community must remain intact to protect the sanctity of kinship and ensure the remnant family's social legitimacy within the larger familial structure.

Additionally, most widows do not have the right to return to their birth house, as relatives may refuse to shelter a separated widow, and if a widow insists on leaving, her family must refund her wedding price. Each year, the Zambian Police's Victims Support Unit (VSU) reports over 1,000 cases of property theft, the majority of which involve widows and orphans. According to the Zambian non-governmental organisation (NGO) Women and Law in Southern Africa Trust (WLSA), property snatching is one of the top five legal issues that Zambians report.

### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

In African communities, men have a subservient superior relationship to women. It involves a system in which men have more power and resources than women. As a result, women are relegated to the background, denying them their rights and advantages (Luke, 2001). Violations of the above rights have a negative impact on widows' and children's lives.

Most women enter such marriages under the threat of losing their possessions and children. Most inheritors favour the practise to allow them to inherit the deceased's property if it is considered that he accumulated it (White et al., 2002). Proponents of the custom claim it prevents promiscuity and may even placate the deceased's spirit, saving the family from retribution (Ligomeka, 2003). Widow Inheritance (WI) has hidden economic, social, and psychological consequences. Maintaining the deceased relative's property in the family under the excuse of safeguarding the bereaved children and wife amounts to social discrimination, economic deprivation, and "property grabbing." For financial, psychological, and personal reasons, this is done in defiance of the widow's rights. In 1990, UN-CRC Securing a child's rights is a vital entitlement that is rarely protected, jeopardising their future success (CEDAW, 2003). This has deteriorated the socio-economic position of afflicted widows and children, who already suffer tremendous financial and social restraints. In this setting, widow inheritance increases poverty and lowers the family's ability to provide for children.

In the literature (Fasoranti and Aruna, 2007), a widow's experience of deprivation, servitude, and humiliation was described as traumatic. According to Afigbo (1989), when a spouse dies, the widow is the main suspect and is treated cruelly. Afigbo (1989) believes that if the deceased's spirit is not appeased, misfortune may befall the family. This could be a clan

member's death, disease, or other tragedy. The deceased's widow is responsible for removing these calamities. In this instance, the wife is obligated to follow tradition to avoid more calamities. Conversely, when a wife dies, a man is almost immediately provided a replacement to console him and ease his grief (Fasoranti and Aruna, 2007).

According to the 2010 Population and Housing Census, women outnumber men 12:421,770 to 11:801,661. Because women are the majority in Ghana, any issue affecting them is a "majority" national issue that must be addressed.

A widow might either remarry to the nearest male relative of her husband, in which case she would receive all the protection and care ordinarily accorded to wives, or she could receive collective protection and care from her deceased husband's family if she decided not to remarry. In such circumstances, the widow was offered financial and labour assistance by the late husband's relatives (Luke, 2001).

Brown (1992) noted that in Ghana, like in most African countries, the death of a spouse is seen as a significant event requiring a sequence of rituals and ceremonies to mark the departed spouse's spiritual separation from the surviving spouse. According to this widespread belief, marriage was unique and something special should be done to commemorate the end of that uniqueness and the loss of a partner. Brown (1992) argued that a widow who suffered grave repercussions was guilty, while anyone who did not was innocent.

Widows of all ages, ethnicities, and cultures are likely to face many forms of prejudice, neglect, cultural and psychological oppression, and abuse (Owen, 1994). They are isolated from society and subjected to damaging traditional practises. Between 15 and 20% of widows are under 45. Many have young families or ageing parents to care for. In Nepal, Women for Human Rights revealed that 67% of widows were aged 20–30. Widows are sometimes the most mistreated in communities (Widows Rights International, 2006). In some communities, notably Ghana's, widows are compelled to marry their late husband's siblings or enter polygamy and are frequently sexually abused by male relatives (Oduro, 2007). Oduro added that the worrying element about this issue is that advocates and government bodies cannot accept tradition. While these behaviours are common in most African countries, including Ghana, little research has been done in Ghana. Also, prior publications have not attempted to compare tribes and ethnic groups. As a result, this study sought to examine the effects of widowhood rites practices among the people Talensi and Nabdam.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Conceptual Issues

#### 2.1.1. Widows, Widowhood and Widowhood Rituals

Widows are ladies who have been married but have lost their husbands. Apart from that, widows are so diverse that there is no way to forecast a woman's lifestyle, support system, or identity.

Thus, widowhood refers to the state of having lost one's husband. Widowhood entails a set of expectations regarding the widow's acts and behaviour, as well as the conduct of others toward the widow. According to Aderinto (2001; Fasoranti and Aruna, 2007), widowhood is an anxious mourning and grieving time in the life of a female spouse who has lost her husband (Tilahun, 2015). A man's or a woman's reaction to the death of a husband or wife is culturally established, and each society sets the rationale of widowhood and mourning ceremonial customs. This is followed by widowhood rituals, which are done by or on behalf of the widow from the moment of her husband's death.

Following the death of a husband, rites for the surviving widow can be harsh; these rituals may oblige the widow to shave her hair, discard the garments and jewellery she wore during her husband's lifetime, and frequently perform further ceremonies. Widows are compelled by tradition to endure agonising rites such as drinking the water used to wash the dead and being refused sleep, food, and adequate care. Widows are also barred from maintaining personal hygiene and are frequently secluded without the ability to roam, predisposing them to obesity and many types of cancer (Tilahun, 2015). Frequently, widows are inherited by their late husbands' brothers in-laws or other close male relatives.

As such, my operational definitions of widow, widowhood, and widowhood rituals are as follows: a widow is an individual who has lost a male spouse due to death. Widowhood refers to an individual who has been married but has lost their spouse due to death. Throughout the widowhood era, from the death of a husband until the mourning ceremony, certain behaviours are required of widows based on their sociocultural norms. This is known as the widowhood rite. It is also frequently undertaken symbolically in order to fulfil the society's cultural customs or to degrade widows and widowers at the expense of honouring and sustaining the community's cultural practises.

### 2.1.3 Widowhood Rites in Africa

Numerous authors have examined the process of widowhood and the rituals associated with it in the African environment (Nyanzi and Sossou, 2002; Nwogu 2015; Oluwatusin 2014; Manala 2015; Limann 2003; Geekie 2011; Tasie 2013; Durojaye 2013; Olukayode 2015).

Sossou and Nyanzi (2002) explain that widowhood rites, as practised in a number of traditional African societies, are the rituals associated with the mourning of a spouse's death. Mourning is often accompanied by a succession of life experiences that have far-reaching consequences. Several of these actions have been described as barbaric, horrible, "backward, immoral, and an egregious violation of the powerless' sexual and human rights."

According to Nwogu (2015), widows are subjected to unpleasant, traumatic, and demeaning treatment during and after their mourning rites. In various regions of Nigeria, including Anambra, Imo, Abia, Enugu, and Ebonyi States, widowhood ceremonies and practises exist. These practises are dehumanising, demeaning, barbarous, obnoxious, out of step with the times, and extremely unethical. The death of a woman's husband signals severe suffering, maltreatment, and violations of her human rights by community cultural actors, especially her spouse's family. The lady is required to wail and cry loudly in response to her husband's death, demonstrating a profound sense of loss. In some societies, women are compelled to cry aloud throughout the day and night. However, men are not expected to cry in public or demonstrate outward grief in the same way that women are. The widow is the primary suspect in her husband's death.

According to Oluwatusin (2014), widows with uneducated in-laws suffer more at the hands of their in-laws because they exploit the guise of fostering culture to dehumanise the widows. The study's findings indicated that widows were compelled to take an oath due to their in-laws' illiteracy, indicating a link between education and fundamental human rights in connection to widowhood. It is undeniable that widows in Ekiti State face stress as a result of dehumanising widowhood ceremonies, economic difficulties, and child welfare due to antagonistic in-laws. As a result of the foregoing, the various widowhood rites constitute a flagrant violation of widows' fundamental human rights, as they are denied the freedom to wear whatever clothes they desire, as well as the requirement to remain indoors and shave their heads, indicating

dehumanisation due to the violation of their rights to human dignity, freedom of choice, movement, and association.

Similar studies to Oluwatusin (2014) have been undertaken in a variety of contexts, including Manala (2015), Limann (2003), Tasie (2013), Durojaye (2013), and Olukayode (2013). Manala's (2015) study examined a few African widowhood ceremonies and traditions, as well as their perceived benefits and drawbacks, as articulated by African widows in several pertinent studies on the issue. According to the article, "Because death has a detrimental effect on the lives of those left behind, rituals are thought to have therapeutic significance in assisting the griever in moving on with her life." Certain mourning practises are supposed to also have the purpose of expunging the widow's bad luck or misfortune, which causes people to discriminate against or dread her.

Tasie (2013) emphasised the positive impact of widowhood rites in his community. He makes the following argument in his study:

... Widowhood rites in Africa are not primarily intended to de-womanize African womanhood or impoverish and subjugate women; they are also not associated with so-called male chauvinism. Rather than that, widowhood rites are often intended to benefit the widow in general.

The findings classify the Isiokpo tribe's widowhood customs into two broad categories:

To begin with, the links between a deceased husband and his living wife must be severed. For the Isiokpo, the ghost spirit lurks (sic) around the homestead immediately after death, haunting the living and performing his obligations to his surviving kinfolk.

2) Second, certain components of the ceremonies are geared toward arming the widow with the strength and bravery necessary to cope with the life of self-reliance to which she has been subjected because of the breadwinner's death.

Limann's (2003) research on the Ugandan experience with widowhood rituals and women's rights In Africa, like many other traditional customs, it is ingrained in the cultural beliefs of the majority of African communities. The findings suggest that widowhood rites have a variety of beneficial objectives. Among the Iteso, for example, women are confined to their homes throughout the period of mourning out of fear that they will commit suicide as a result of their

grief and pain over their husbands' deaths. The act of a widow felling a tree to show that she has immediately assumed the position of a husband and must thus accept his obligations serves as a psychological boost to prepare a widow for the difficulties of being a single parent.

Additional studies include Geekie (2011), which focused on widows in Tanzania's Kilimanjaro region.

According to Geekie (2011), the majority of elements that appear to minimise the structural obstacles of widowhood in Tanzania include education, social support, having an outside job, having children, and close links between the widow and her husband's clan.

The study's findings illustrate how widows in the Kilimanjaro region face marginalisation, which jeopardises their social and economic stability, as well as that of their children. As a result of male preference, women face numerous disadvantages as a result of this, including access to school, work, position within the clan and community, access to land, and access to the law.

Durojaye (2013) recently examined how a widow is subjected to varying degrees of demeaning acts or ceremonies in the name of Igbo customs and tradition. According to the articles, many of these violations include denial of inheritance rights, hair shaving, drinking from the water used to bathe the deceased spouse, and sitting and sleeping on the floor.

Olukayode (2015) conducted a recent study in which she examined widowhood rituals in Nigerian communities. While the practises varied by community, the same patterns were observed. According to the findings, widows face numerous demeaning practises as a result of the patrilineal nature of Nigerian culture, which is male dominated, as well as the fact that the country's customary rules are similarly skewed in favour of men, and women have been disadvantaged since time immemorial. This explains why society has had sympathy for males and seeks to assist them when they lose their marriage, whereas the same society suspects women of murder.

### **2.1.5 Widowhood Rites in Ghana**

Numerous scholars have conducted research in Ghana on widowhood customs. Among these are Goody (1962); Sackey 2001; Antwi 2015; Kondor 1993; Amlor & Atta 2016; Amasiatu 2009; Azumah 2010; Yager 2010; Azumah (2010), Yager (2010), and Amasiatu (2009), who



noted that widows in Ghana are forced to undergo purification rituals that include bathing in cold water, sitting naked, shaving their heads, and even having sex with a designated individual.

They explain in their findings that in Ghana, the death of a spouse is a significant affair that requires the following of a series of rites and ceremonies designed to represent the departed spouse's spiritual separation from the surviving spouse. They stated that these are the rites that widows undergo.

**Defacement:** This is accomplished in a variety of ways, including the need to shave the hair, which is generally regarded as a woman's crowning glory, the wearing of a black gown, and appearing unkempt and unattractive to demonstrate the extent of her mourning following the death of her husband.

**Dethronement:** This is expressed literally by her sitting on the floor for the duration of the grieving period.

**Confinement:** This is a condition in which a widow is confined to a small, unventilated, and unfurnished hut to mourn her husband's death. She is expected to mourn constantly throughout this period for her loss by living in an unclean environment. She is expected to eat with unwashed utensils and she may be required to release her waste while in such confinement.

**Establishment of Innocence:** The culturally established customs for determining the extent to which a wife is responsible for her husband's death differ by society. To establish her innocence, the woman may be forced to drink the water used to bathe the corpse.

The widow is compelled to wear black or white and is compelled to cry routinely.

This is performed in order to dissolve the connection between the living and the dead.

A widow is forced to sit on the bare floor or mat, symbolising an apparent decline in status.

Under customary law, the widow is expected to continue this behaviour for a period of up to one year.

Antwi (2015) conducted a similar study to ascertain the nature and consequences of widowhood rites as practised in selected Akan communities in the Akuapem-South

municipality on widows who undergo those ceremonies. The study concluded that no component of the rites could be regarded as dehumanising, cruel, or humiliating, as the widows made no complaint about their ordeals, and there is no requirement to report any ordeal to any authority. In conclusion, the study discovered that widowhood rites practised by the residents of Akuapem-South municipality are an effective emotional and psychological support mechanism for widows coping with their husband's death.

According to the study, cultural traditions compelled widows to undergo the rites for the following reasons:

- I. fear the unknown implications of refusing to undergo the ceremonies.
- II. to meet cultural needs.
- III. To pay tribute to the deceased husband's (spouse's) love for him/her.

Every one of these factors, or a combination of them, makes widowhood cultural practise mandatory for any woman (spouse) who loses a husband (spouse).

Sackey (2001), Goody (1962), and Kondor (1993) say that widowhood rites are among the most significant rites of passage, describing how ceremonies are held for a person following the death of his or her spouse.

Goody (1962) observed four stages of burial rites among the Lo Daga people (in Ghana's Upper West Region), each of which included widowhood traditions. These are (1) "the preparation and disposal of the corpse, (2) the bereaved and other members of the community's mourning, (3) the separation of the living from the dead, (4) the reassignment of certain peripheral duties of the departed."

Sackey (2001) also indicates that widowhood rites among the Asante, an Akan sub-ethnic group, consist of three stages: separation, liminal or transition, and integration. Additionally, she writes that "ceremonies marking these several stages contain observances and taboos intended to symbolically reflect, among other things, the changed status of the living spouse and to assure the deceased's safe transfer into the world of the dead." "The 'kunaye' is complete when the ayikese (last rite) is done one year after the husband's death."

Amlor and Atta (2016) recently performed research on widowhood ceremonies. While the people acknowledge that some widowhood practices, such as hair shaving, dressing in tattered

clothing, and eating from broken bowls, are outmoded and should be abandoned, they insist that aspects of these practises that meet their needs and purposes should be maintained, improved, and preserved for posterity. According to the study, some effective widowhood habits include the following: The ceremony of separation, which severs marital links between the woman and her departed husband, is said to provide a psychological boost for the widow, preparing her to take on male tasks following her husband's death and preparing her to face the trials of being a single parent. A widow is confined to her home as a result of the anguish and trauma caused by her late husband's death, for fear that if she is left alone, she will commit suicide or injure herself. Additionally, the tradition is thought to instil dread, moral discipline, and deter infidelity, as men are believed to die if they engage in sexual contact with a widow who has not finished her rites.

### **2.1.6 Widowhood Rites among Ethnic Groups in Upper East Region of Ghana.**

Several scholars or authors have conducted research on Upper East Region widowhood ceremonies (Akurugu 2012; Tonah 2009; Lyndsay 2004; Dery 2016; Ayagiba 2010; Anafo 2010;).

As defined by Akurugu (2012), these are the rituals that a survivor's spouse must go through in order to become a widow. It was evident from the results that the participants were well-versed in the practise of widowhood ceremonies. Findings from the study revealed that different families have different practises when it comes to widow bathing. Cold and hot water are sometimes used to bathe widows.

When a husband is buried, widows in some societies refrain from drinking water from their yards until that time has passed. People tend to forget about the widow while they are preoccupied with mourning the deceased. If she is lucky, she has a nice friend who will go get her some water if she is thirsty. The widow is acting as a mentor to the ritualist, sitting next to him like a teacher. She is escorted outside to see her husband's body before it is carried to the family cemetery for burial, where she is buried. Serving her food in a calabash means that the widow may accidentally invite ants onto her mat as she eats. If this happens, she must report the bite or else she will perish (she is threatened). Again, the fortuneteller is called in for help in understanding what happened. When her husband died, the widow was bitten by an ant, which was seen as a source of shame on her side. According to Ayagiba (2010), the widow is

forced to bathe and dine at a garbage dump while wearing only leaves over her private parts. The crowd gasps in horror as they glimpse her almost-naked body as she exits.

According to the 2009 study by Tonah (widows), men and women in Kasena society undergo two distinct sorts of widowhood rites.

It is customary for widows to meet in the kitchen (Kalgungo) immediately after the death of their husbands. In the kitchen, she is given a reed mat to sleep on as well as a millet drink in a calabash. Her drinking water is kept in a little pot in the corner of the room. Until her husband is buried, she spends her nights in the kitchen, receiving water from a widow at the rear of the room.

According to Lyndsay (2004), there is a prevalent practise in Ghana's Upper East Region of stripping the widow naked and bathing her in a garbage dump with hot and cold water thrown at her, which might result in her being scalded. According to the article, this is a common occurrence in the Kassena-Nankana District, and the burning of a widow as a punishment for adultery is considered a sign of infidelity. People in Ghana's culture have a bias against women, so it's possible that a woman holding the cold water will purposefully delay throwing it after the hot water has already been thrown, causing the body to be burned in violation of Ghana's 1992 Constitution's Article 26 Clause 2.

According to Anafo (2010), wife-to-be widows are subjected to a series of rituals to keep the spirit of their deceased spouse at bay. However, this notion changes from group to community. To perform these rites, the deceased's family and close friends gather to pay their respects at the end of their lives. According to her, the belief system of the people influences religious variables, determining widowhood customs. In the Zuarungu area, for example, it is believed that the spirit of a deceased person does not return to the ancestors until the last burial rites have been performed.

An investigation conducted by Dery (2016) into widowhood rites among the Talensi of Ghana's Upper East reveals that widows who participate in these ceremonies do so out of respect for tradition and to demonstrate their innocence, with the majority doing so for the sake of comfort.

Dery (2016) found that widows go through the following stages during their widowhood rites:

- a. time in which the widow is not permitted to engage in activities that she might otherwise enjoy.
- b. To make her look unpleasant during the funeral, her hair was shorn short. Shaved heads can be found at a garbage dump.
- c. Putting on leaves from a shea tree while sitting on the ground or on a mat is a form of dethronement.
- d. Ritual cleaning involves washing in a river or garbage dump with other widows. As a widow gets bathed in the public eye on a garbage dump, it is embarrassing.
- e. Sitting on the ground, widows go through a lot. Widows are said to be disloyal to their departed husbands if an ant bites them and they react.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study utilized a qualitative research method with ethnographical research approach to understand the widowhood rites practices among the Talensi and Nabdam people. Ethnographical research is a method of representing a culture that not only describes its practises but also analyses their functions and purposes, describes the circumstances under which practises occur, and suggests a greater significance and deeper understanding of the culture's routine practises in their natural environment. (Scott W et al,2009.). Qualitative research aims at describing, making sense of interpreting, or reconstructing in terms of the meanings that the subjects express. This research design was descriptive research because it was aimed to describe the widowhood and widow inheritance practices in Talensi and Nabdam Districts. The study is both exploratory and explanatory in nature by explaining the practices as it is in both districts and providing a comparative analysis for both districts.

The study employed purposive sampling technique to sample twenty (20) widows from Talensi and Nabdam.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.1.2 Death and Funerals in Talensi and Nabdam Districts.**

Funerals in both districts are in two parts; the fresh funeral (burial rites) (*“Ko – Mahre”*) and the final funeral rites (*Kuu –kpee Maling*). There are however differences in how such

funerals are performed depending on the age of the dead. A minimum of three days are set aside for fresh funerals whilst seven days are located for final funerals. However, there are sectional variations in the number of days set aside for both funerals.

The age of the dead has considerable influence on burial processes and the rites performed for the widow. Respondents explained that younger people are usually buried quickly because their death is considered abnormal and unexpected. The quick burial is also necessary to avoid further disasters/deaths and allow for a speedily recovery from the shock. In the case of normal/elderly death (family head, Clan head, Tindan, and Chiefs) their bodies are usually kept for a considerable period of time. The reason for this is that their death calls for certain sacrifices to be performed before burial can take place. That apart, all relatives from far and near will have to be informed of the death before they can go ahead with the burial. In the case of widowhood rites, respondents reported that the days allocated for funeral differ but the processes remain almost the same. For instance, the days of the funeral for the younger men are far shorter and the rites for widow is also shorter than that of older men where a lot of time is allocated for celebrating the life of the deceased. Also, the days of rites of confinement in older people funerals widows go through the rites for between five – seven days whilst that of younger people funerals widows go through for much shorter between one – two days.

#### **4.1.3 Widowhood Rites in Talensi and Nabdam Districts**

In both Talensi and Nabdam districts, respondents were unanimous on what constitutes widowhood rites. They described widowhood rites as the rites given to the dead and surviving relatives to aid his transition to the next world and the survival of the living. It also symbolizes the rites performed for both widows and widowers upon the loss of a spouse. Some simplified it as the rites a woman goes through when a husband dies.

However, there were obvious differences observed in the way rites were practiced among both districts. Interaction within the specific tribes further revealed district/tribal level differences. For instance, the aspect of holding a calabash (a local guard normally used for drinking water) which is key element in widowhood rites is handled differently among the two districts. Whilst in Nabdam district every widow undergoing widowhood rites holds the calabash to observe the death of her husband, in Talensi, not all sections observes this ritual. The Taleng group in Talensi district does not observe this ritual whilst the Namoo group actually does.

#### 4.1.4 Widowhood Rites in Talensi District.

According to the respondents contacted in Talensi district on widowhood rites, rites are performed for widows in both the “*Kuu– Mahre Maling*” (fresh funeral Rites) and “*Kuu – kpee Maling*” (Final Funeral Rites). Most of the rituals performed especially during the fresh funerals are done on the day of or at the point of burial.

Widowhood rites in the Talensi community last for 8 days (3 and 5 days for fresh and dry funerals respectively). During the “*Kuu–re Mahre Maling*” (fresh funeral rites), the widow will wear a piece of cloth on her private part only called “*Voak*” that is strip naked, sleeping and sitting on the floor or a piece of mat with other women in the funeral. The widow will dress like that for three days in the funeral house. When it was time for burial of widow’s husband, the widow with her first daughter and her male child will come out in front of the house where the public is gathered to perform a rite by climbing a sheep to the ground while sitting on the sheep half naked an elder will kill the sheep and part of the skin will be used to cover the private part of the husband for burial. This is called “*Kumboo – suuoloko*”. One elder and an old woman will bring the widow in to a round room (“*Zong*”) where the dead husband will be kept. The old woman will boil water in a local pot which the widow together with those who buried the dead called (“*Bayaah*”) will use the water to bath the dead husband where the widow will put the water on her husband three times. This is called “*Kumboo – soo – wuu*”.

The first day during the dry funeral called “*Kpea –kpagre*”, that is when the elders in the community will gather at the funeral house to make provision for pito brewing and also to select a woman who will perform the final funeral rites called (*Poayameris*) that is the sister of the dead husband.

The second day called (“*Kure – Dam kwaag*”) is the brewing of the funeral “pito” (a local alcoholic beverage). This is also the day that the “*Poayameris*” begins the widowhood rites by putting on the “*Voak*”(a piece of wrapper which is tied round the waist of the widow and then passed in – between her thigh covering only pudenda (genitals). A rope is tied around the widow’s neck (*miie yaa*) and she made to sit on a local mat through the funeral.

On the third day called (“*Dam – biihug and kuu –gbee*”), the widow and her children will perform a rite called “*Teeoko*”, where the “*Poayameris*” feeds the widow to initiate the process of monitoring her every move and feeding. This practice of feeding the widow is done daily; morning and evening throughout the funeral period.

On the fourth day (“*kuu – baat, Dam nyuu and Pakore zuug – kogre*”), the soothsayer (“*Bakolog*”) is called to the funeral ground to inquire of the ancestors whether they should drink the pito or not (which is to say whether to proceed with the funeral or not). Later in the day the elders will inform the widow to come to the rubbish dump site for a man to shave her hair.

On the fifth day (“*Pakore and kpiibihis miih yeegre*”), the widow’s sister – in – law will go to the back of the house to prepare T.Z. for the widow to eat and she will remove the rope tied around her neck. This marks the end of the widowhood rite for the widow.



*Picture 1: An interview with Sepaat Tindan and his Elder in Talensi District.*

*Source: Field Study 2017.*

They explained that during the “*Ku – Mahre*” (fresh funeral Rites), widows are taken through the following processes in no particular order.

1. Indoor confinement (normally between 1-8 days depending on the age of the dead husband). This is done to ascertain whether the widow is pregnant or not and discourage abortion. Others mentioned that this is to prevent the widow from harming herself or committing suicide. Essentially, confinement in this research refers to total restriction of the widow’s movement to a particular place throughout the mourning period. This implies that the widow is denied freedom of movement except around the compound and sometimes within the four walls of a room in which she is confined. Confinement of the widow was



found to be the commonest widowhood practice among the Talensi. The practice among this sub-ethnic group is such that, on receipt of the news confirming the husband's death, staying indoor within the confines of the family house or the matrimonial home depending on the residential pattern in place, is mandatory for the widow in question. This is regarded as the greatest honour and mark of respect accorded to the dead. All forms of outings, business or social engagements are automatically suspended, outlawed and forbidden for as long as the mourning period lasts. Interviewees also explained that confinement is to ensure proper guidance, monitoring and supervision of the widow throughout the mourning duration in order to avoid the negative consequences such as the abortion of the unborn baby and eventual death often associated with non-adherence to widowhood rites. For instance, among the Talensi, it is believed that refusal of the widow to remain indoor during widowhood and exposure to sunlight or rainfall will amount to her untimely death

2. Practice of sitting on the mat by widow in the company of old widows ("*Pakore Ma*"). Respondents explained that in mourning, one is not permitted to sit on a chair or stool and that this special mat is a symbol of widowhood and can easily be identified. They added that, the mat is also an illustration of the falling standards from a wife to a widow. Sitting on the mat with only the "voak" is also to test the innocence or otherwise of the widow. It is believed that if whilst sitting on the mat, she is bitten by an ant or any crawling insect, then she has a hand in the death of her husband but if she is not bitten, then she is innocent.

4. A Goat is strangled to death and part of the skin is used to cover only the private of the part of the dead for burial which is termed as ("*kumo-suuoluko*").

3. Puts on "voak" or "liiug" (a traditional piece of cloth that only covers the private parts of the widows).

4. Holds a calabash (usually a new one) and a knife and stick in one hand. They explained that among the Talensi, the calabash is a symbol of the husband and she has to hold her husband as a sign of final respect. The stick and knife on the other hand are weapons for the widow to ward off the spirit of the husband who might make attempts to take her with him to the next world. The widow is expected to carry these items with her wherever she goes including natures call. After the burial, the calabash is taken from her and kept in a pot, sealed and kept away awaiting the final funeral rites when it will be brought out and again given to her to hold.

5. The practice of sitting on a sheep whilst it's slaughtered ("*kumo-suuoluko*"). Here, immediately before burial, the widow is called, together with her eldest son and daughter and the two will sit on the sheep and an elder will slaughter it. The skin of the sheep is used to

cover the private part of the dead man and buried. This shows that the deceased has a wife and children. It is not done for everybody except a deceased who has left behind a family. It is also the last respect that family can show to the father and husband. Using a part of the skin of the animal in the burial is because of the non availability of the clothes in time past. Among the Namoos however, a goat is strangled and part of the skin is used to cover only the private part of the dead for burial which term as (*"kumo-suuoluko"*). This is a gift to the husband to go with out of the properties he left behind. This is only done to those who have left children and wife behind.

6. The widow is called to the room where the body of the husband is kept and the undertakers will prepare warm water and give to the widow who would dip her hands into the warm water and apply on her husband's body three times (termed as *"kumbo-soo-wuu"*). They explained that this represented a farewell gesture to the husband and his last bath. This is the final ritual that the widow has to perform and her ability to carry out without any hesitation is a proof of her innocence. The Namoos widows on the other hand only touch or massage him from head to toe before burial. Just like the bathing, this is meant as farewell gesture and a proof of innocence.



**Picture 3:** A local mat (*"Muu-sung"*) used for burial and widowhood rites in the Talensi District.

**Source:** Field Study.



**Picture 4:** A widow and her children go through a rite of “kumo-suuoluko” in the Talensi District.

**Source:** Field Study.

In the case of the final funeral rites (“*Kuu –kpee Maling*”), respondents explained that much the same processes are followed as with the fresh funeral. Other rites are performed here that are not carried out during the fresh funeral. They identified the following processes;

1. Sitting on the local mat (“*Muu-sung*” - part of the mat used for the burial is cut and given the widow to sit on).
2. Puts on “voak” or “liiug” (a traditional piece of material that only covers the private parts of the widows).
3. Tying of rope around the neck of the widow. The rope around her neck is to identify her among the living as a widow and also to hide her identity from her husband if he tries to take her with him. In the case of the Nabdams and the Namoos of Talensi, they Tie a white fabric around the chest of the widow and worn the day the widow goes to the dam or river for bathing.
4. Widow and her children have to sit on a local mat (“*Muuh –Sung*) for her sister in- laws to change the ropes daily before she eats (“*Teeko*”). The sister in-laws of the widow would then prepare TZ to perform a ritual before the ropes are removed (called “*mii-yeegre*”). This is the final ritual done on the last day. It is after this that she can be inherited or choose someone. Until this is done, any act of romance is considered adultery.
5. Holding of the calabash (this becomes their feeding bowl and drinking cup). Eating and drinking from the calabash shows that she is pure. Also this is a form of isolation from the other women. During such periods, it is a taboo to eat and drink with the widow hence the isolation. An old widow (“*Pakore Duu*” and “*Pakore Ma*”) would then prepare a concoction

into the calabash and for the widow to eat or drink. Her ability to drink the concoction is to test her fidelity and also proof of her innocence. The concoction is made of leaves worn by a previous widow during her husband's funeral. The leaves are collected burnt and boiled and given to the widow to drink.

6. The sister in-laws of the widow would then feed bambara beans to the widow with their hands. It is the first and last thing that is given her before she can eat any other thing. Skipping this is a sign of impurity and she can be haunted down by her deceased husband.

7. Shaving the hair of the widow. A widow is sent outside naked in the glare of public to consult soothsayer. The elders will inform the widow to come to the rubbish dump site for a man to shave her hair in the glare of the public wearing only the "voak" Shaving includes the pubic hair. When the shaving is completed, she is expected to cry back into the house. This is done to render her unattractive to other men during the funeral period and also to conceal her identity from those who might be trying to take her with him. This is also done to show that the widow is mourning and in grieve. Shaving is also to delink and separate the deceased from the living.

8. The widow would then bath and eat in public on a refuse dump ("*Tampoare*") after which a black substance is applied on her body (for 7 days). They explained that this ritual is done to cast off evil spirits and make the widow free from her husband's spirit. Death of a husband among the Talensi' is a symbol of dirt and uncleanness, as such, the substances are applied to cleanse her from that dirt.

9. The widow is then sent to a river or dam nearby to be bathed by a man and a woman after which her hair is shaved. She is then made to carry the calabash filled with water and sheanut leaves whilst crying back to the house. This signifies the shedding off of all the bad luck of the death of a husband.

10. The widow is made to sit on sheanut leaves. Sheanut is a symbol of wealth and smoothness. Sitting on it is therefore to comfort her and prevent spirits from haunting the widow.





**Picture 5:** A piece of local mat used for widow to sit for ritual. **Picture 6:** Widows wearing “Voaks” and ropes tied on their necks in the Talensi District.

**Source:** Field Study 2017.



**Picture 7:** Widows, “poayame” (sister – in – law ) and their children preparing to undergo the “Teeko” rites.

**Source:** Field Study, 2017.





**Picture: 8** Widows and their son sitting posture “Ku – Kgbee Summa” (bambara beans) used for “Teeok” of a Widow whilst “poayame” (sister – in – law) taking them through a ritual of “Teeko” among Taleng group in the Talensi District

**Source:** Field Study 2017.



**Picture 9:** A widow is going through a rite of shaving of hair on refuse dump in the Talensi District.

**Source:** Field Study, 2017.

#### 4.1.5 Widowhood Rites among the Nabdam District

Similar to the situation in Talensi district, widowhood rites are equally performed for widows in Nabdam district in both the “*Kumaa –re Maling*” (fresh funeral Rites) and “*Kuu –kpee Maling*” (Final Funeral Rites). Widowhood rites last for 10 days in the Nabdam district (3 and 7 for fresh and dry funerals respectively).

On the first day of the dry funeral (“*Kpea –kpagre*”), the elders in the community gather at the funeral house to make provision for the pito brewing and indentify the “*Poayameris*”.

On the second day (“*Baondura*”), the sisters of the deceased will prepare a local dish of bambara beans (“*summa*”) and beans for everybody gathered at the funeral ground to eat. The brewing of the pito takes place on the third day. This day also marks the start of the period of confinement and the putting on of the “*liigu*” (a little piece of wrapper worn to cover only the genitals of the widow). The widow is made to sit on the local mat in the company of the “*Pakore Ma*” holding a calabash (“*Pakore mwaan Zalik*”) in her hands with shea leaves inside it. From this day till the end of the funeral, the widow takes her bath at the refuse dump.

Next is the ritual of cleansing the widow (“*Pakore -Duuku*”). A widower is made to go to the bush for roots and tree backs of certain trees and plants ,with the support of the “*Pakore Ma*”, to prepare concoctions. The widow is taken to the refuse dump holding the calabash for a bath (“*Pakore Tampoare - suu*”). From there her food and drink will be taken from that calabash.

In the sixth day of the funeral (“*Pakore kulog- suu*”), the widow is taken to nearby stream and shaved by the “*Pakore Ma*” and “*Pakore Duuku*”. More concoctions are smeared on her head after the shaving. She then uses her calabash to carry water and pick fire wood and starting crying back to the house.

The last day, the widow will go to the man who went to her parents’ house to pay her bride price to collect foodstuff and if the man can afford to give her guinea fowl to come back to her husband’s house to prepare food to eat and remove all his clothes she was wearing during the rites to be set fire in the bush. They explained that during the “*Kumaa-re Maling*”, widows are taken through;

1. Indoor confinement (normally between 1-7days depending on the age)
2. Practice of sitting on the mat in the company of other widows (“*Pakore Ma*”)
3. Sitting on the skin of cow (“*Naoh - gbong*”)

4. Puts on “voak” or “liigu” (a traditional piece that only covers the private parts of the widow)
5. Holds a calabash (“*Pakore Nwaan Zalik*”).

On the day of the wake keeping during the final funeral rites, the calabash that was kept after the burial of one’s spouse is brought out from the pot. This calabash is cleaned and smeared with some black stuff, which is made from burnt shea nut leaves which widows have sat on in the past and this calabash is given to the widow to handle as she sits. The woman sits on leaves of the sheanut tree. A man does not usually handle the calabash as he sits. The calabash is prepared and given to him at the beginning of the funeral and he holds it for a short while and it is taken from him and kept aside. He, however, eats from it throughout the funeral. A man does not sit on the leaves but on the skin of a cow or the local mat but the leaves from the sheanut tree are also used for the rituals for him. Besides, while the woman sits in the room, he sits in the kraal and instead of handling the calabash, he handles the traditional hat, they also have beside them a piece of millet stalk. Among some communities, instead of a stalk, they have a knife. The meaning of the calabash is not very clear but besides being an external symbol of separation. It also signifies for the Nabdam people something far more than the external. It must have developed as a symbol of providing for one’s spouse. As mentioned earlier, the calabash in a traditional Nabdam community was a dish from which they ate and drank water and the local brew. For the woman, therefore, to hold a calabash during the funeral of her husband symbolizes her care for him during his lifetime when she prepared food for him. Besides, it is also connected with the mystical dirt. As the calabash is usually smeared with the concoction eating from it signifies the ‘dirt’ of the spouse, which they shared. It is through eating this that one is purified from the mystical dirt. The fact that the man handles a traditional hat instead of a calabash is also in itself very symbolic. Nabdam men do not cook and it is not their duty to look for dishes for household use. His duty is to provide food for the upkeep of the family and the woman’s duty is to provide the dishes for use. These roles are, therefore, completely enacted here in this ritual. The hat which he handles is, symbolic of a man, since it is in that hat, that a traditional Nabdam man puts his tobacco and colanuts for use. There are two different explanations for the use of the stalk/knife and it is difficult to know which explanation expresses exactly the mind of the people. The first explanation is that the stalk/knife is a weapon for the widow to ward off the spouse who may be making last minute frantic efforts to take his/her partner away into the ancestral world. The widow handles this as a weapon to keep the deceased spouse away so that he/she does not come near to attempt to



take him/her away. The second explanation is that the stalk/knife represents the deceased spouse who has to lay with his/her wife or husband for the last time before he/she goes to the next world. Therefore, the widow/widower has to symbolically feed it any time she/he is eating.

6. Widow passes through the small hole in the round room (*“zong”*) where the husband will be dressed for burial. They explained if the widow whilst her husband was alive mistreated him or was unfaithful, she will be met with a calamity of either sickness or death. They added that this is also the last ritual to be performed for the widow and the last room that the deceased husband would lay before burial and the widow must enter to pay her last respect.

7. Cotton is used to close the ears of widow during wake keeping in the night for her not to here the mourning for her dead husband.

8. A Goat is strangled to death and part of the skin is used to cover only the private of the part of the dead for burial which is termed as (*“kumo-suuoluko”*). Among the Zolibas however, the skin of the deer (*Walig bong*) which is term as (*“kumo-suuoluko”*) is used to cover the private part of the deceased. This is readily available in the home and used during funerals. It is also the totem of the Nabdams and hence highly regarded.

9. Calabash is used to cover widow’s head and a hen is sacrifice on her. The calabash is smeared with flour and put on her. It is also the sign that they are about to bury her deceased husband. This practice is performed by the Nabdams.

10. The widow is been hidden at the back of the house so that she does not see the husband because it is considered bad luck for the widow to see them taking her deceased husband out to bury.



**Picture 12:** Widows sitting posture on local mat and holding calabashes in their hands in a funeral in Nabdam District.

**Source:** Field Study, 2017.



**Picture 13:** An interview with a widow leader in Nabdam district.

**Source:** Field Study, 2017.

In the case of the final funeral rites (“*Kuu –kpee Maling*”) the following processes are carried out;

1. Indoor Confinement
2. Sitting on the mat (“*muuh-sung*” - part of the mat used for the burial is cut and given the widow to sit on) and been guarded by old widow’s (“*Pakore Ma*”)
3. Sitting on the skin of a cow (“*Naoh - gbong*”)
4. Puts on “voak” or “liiug” (a traditional piece that only covers the private parts of the widows).
5. Tying of white rope around the chest and the waists of the widow.
6. Holding of the calabash (this becomes their feeding bowl and drinking cup)
7. An old widower and widow (“*Pakore Duuku*” and “*Pakore Ma*”) who have lost their spouses would prepare a concoction in a calabash and give it to the widow to eat or drink
8. The widow would then bath and eat in public on a refuse dump (“*Tampoare*”) after which a black substance is applied on her body (for 7 days). This is another unique and symbolic widowhood rite performed by the Nabdam widows. Taking of special baths in designated places such as the refuse dump or in a nearby river in the company of other widows and men and eating and drinking of concoctions prepared for them. This practice marks the end of confinement and widowhood rites. This widow confirmed that they went through cleansing process the purpose of which was to finally separate the widow from the spirit of the deceased husband. This process according to many widows is very humiliating as a widow is bathed in the full view of the public on a refuse dump. The widow is then reintegrated into the

community and the family with a different status as a widow. In addition, a special bath is carried out accompanied by some rituals which mark the end of the mourning period, and these include exchange of mourning clothes with new sets of bright clothing or materials, disposal of all items used, preparation of special meals for the widow and well-wishers, prayers are offered for protection of the widow, the children and other family members of the deceased.

9. The widow is then sent to a river or dam to be bathed naked by a man and a woman and her hair is shaved. She is then made to carry the calabash filled with water and sheanut leaves whilst crying back to the house. This is the bath of purification. Part of the widowhood ritual is shaving and bathing the widow. This ritual takes place outside at the family's compost heap on the last day of the funeral. In the early part of the evening the widow is brought out for the shaving and bathing. He/she is seated at the compost heap and is surrounded by a group of women and while her hair is being shaved. In the mean time the herbs together with some leaves from the sheanut tree are being roasted in a pot nearby. After the hair has been shaved, he/she then moves to that pot with the roasted herbs and purifies him/her with the smoke coming from the herbs. When that is done, the widow then moves to bath with warm water boiled in the herbs. This is done in the full view of everybody. Formerly they used to bath completely naked but these days they can at least bath with their under pants on. After this the widow/widower then eats some T.Z, which has been prepared for the purpose. This is the last time that he/she eats from the calabash.

10. The widow is made to sit on sheanut leaves. The explanation for the use of these leaves is simple and straightforward. The sheanut tree is important for this ritual because of its importance in the community. First of all it provides food with its fruits for the survival of the community. It also provides them with good wood for their roofs but more importantly and connected with the widowhood ritual is its ability to give oil to sooth the hearts of the people. The oil it gives is known as shea butter and this oil is used not only for consumption but also for all Nabdam rituals. It is key oil in the community. Even though, the Nabdam produce a lot of groundnuts, groundnut oil plays no part whatsoever in Nabdam rituals. It may be used for normal consumption but not for rituals. Since the funeral rituals are among the final events in the life people, the leaves of this tree are used to indicate its role in their ritual lives. Despite the fact that a man does not sit on the leaves, these leaves are given to him at the beginning of the ritual to affect the same significance.

12. Widow will send to the man who paid her bride price during her marriage to collect food stuff to prepare T.Z in her house and eat.



**Picture 14:** An interview widows in Nabdam District.

**Source:** Field Study, 2017.

At a group discussion, members narrated what widows go through during widowhood rites for both fresh and final funeral rites as:

From the data gathered on widowhood rites in both districts, it became clear that the main essence of the rites performed for a widow is to prove her fidelity to her husband and to ensure that she is innocent of his death. Almost all of the rites performed for the widows are to determine her fidelity and faithfulness to her husband whilst he was alive. Perhaps this has a direct relation to the rites performed for the woman at the point of marriage. It is deadly to have a married woman go outside her matrimonial bed. It is worth noting that the rites to determine the fidelity of a woman raises questions about the trust that husbands and men in general hold for women in both districts. In the case of a widower, there is no contention over such issues. There is actually no specific mourning period. In fact, widowers are permitted to be sexually active in the course of the funeral and can remarry within a short period of time after the final funeral rites of their wives unlike the widows. The reason mentioned is related to having a woman around to perform household activities. On the other hand, the practice of the burial rites and the final funeral rites that are conducted for widows are different from that for the widowers when their wives pass away.





**Picture 15:** Widows in a refuse dump using the calabash to bath and drink concoctions.

**Picture 16:** Widows performing rite of bathing in a river or dam.



**Picture 17:** A traditional mat made from elephant grass used for both sleeping and for wrapping dead bodies for burial.

**Source:** field study, 2017.

## CONCLUSION

1. Widowers are permitted to be sexually active in the course of the funeral and can remarry within a short period of time after the final funeral rites of their wives unlike the widows. The reason mentioned is related to having a woman around to perform household activities. On the other hand, the practice of the burial rites and the final funeral rites that are conducted for widows are different from that for the widowers when their wives pass away.
2. The study also observed that, it is not the woman who has abandoned the value systems, but rather the man who has refused to be a responsible caretaker of the widow and in so doing, used the practice to take the property of widow. It is therefore evident

in this study that the main reason why some men would want to be associated with the widow is not financial support to the women but to take away their property.

The study concludes that while the widowhood traditions may have some negative characteristics, the people of Talensi and Nabdam have changed them to defend women's dignity, variety, and religious tolerance.

That financially secure widows are more inclined to refuse widow inheritance since they know it will not benefit them. The widow is forced to accept an inheritor who denies her and her children the right to inherit the deceased's possessions.

There are several current incentives that support the continuation of widow inheritance; this is true for widows and men who stand to benefit financially or otherwise.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

1. non-governmental and community-based organisations working to abolish widowhood rites should work with traditional authorities to change traditions, especially those that violate women's rights.
2. Considering national and international institutions' contributions to widows' rights, the government should enforce provisions on the promotion and protection of women's rights in national and international agreements Ghana has signed.
3. Governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) must also be pressured to approve and execute global declarations and conventions on all forms of gender discrimination. The path to independence from these cultural behaviours is lengthy and difficult, but it is desired.
4. Widows in Ghana should join organisations or networks to advocate for their rights and influence international and national government policy. Widows should engage traditional leaders, report rights abuses to the relevant state institutions, and follow up to ensure justice is served.
5. The media should adequately highlight human rights issues, particularly detrimental or bad widowhood ceremonies. The government's LEAP programme should be expanded to include all non-working widows. This will improve their livelihood, protect them from exploitation, abuse, sexual assault, property denial, and give them a voice.

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