

The Transformation of Widow Inheritance Rites: A Study of the Nomiya Luo Church's Doctrine and Practice in Siaya County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The persistence of harmful widow inheritance rites in contemporary Luo society remains a major concern despite advances in education, legal reform, and Christian evangelization. Among some Luo communities in Siaya County, widows may be coerced into sexual cleansing, denied rights to matrimonial property, or compelled to marry a male relative of the deceased husband in a practice commonly known as *tero chola* (widow inheritance). The Nomiya Luo Church, an indigenous African Independent Church, has made significant theological and social interventions to reform this practice, yet elements of it persist, especially in rural areas. This study investigates the transformation of widow inheritance under the doctrine and influence of the Nomiya Luo Church in Siaya County. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 47 purposively selected participants, including widows, church elders, pastors, and healthcare workers drawn from five sub-counties in Siaya County. Thematic analysis was applied to oral testimonies alongside documentary review of church records and relevant literature. Findings indicate that while Nomiya doctrine has modified or eliminated some harmful elements, cultural resistance and syncretism remain widespread. The paper proposes the Faith-Mediated Norm Transformation (FMNT) framework to explain this pattern. While the study is geographically bounded to Siaya County, its findings have transferable implications for faith-based reform of harmful cultural practices in comparable African Independent Church contexts across the region. The paper concludes by recommending a sustained theological, legal, and public health approach toward eradicating practices that undermine widows' dignity and wellbeing.

Keywords: widow inheritance, Nomiya Luo Church, Siaya County, cultural transformation, African Independent Churches

INTRODUCTION

Widow inheritance, known among the Luo as *tero chola*, has historically been a deeply embedded social institution. It ensured a widow's social security, preserved lineage continuity, and maintained family control over property (Ocholla-Ayayo, 1976). Over time, however, the rite came to include practices that are degrading and, in the context of HIV/AIDS, life-threatening (Okeyo & Allen, 1994).

Despite Kenya's constitutional guarantees of gender equality (Constitution of Kenya, 2010) and decades of Christian teaching, elements of the practice persist in parts of Siaya County. The Nomiya Luo Church, founded in 1907 as a reformist African Independent Church, has taken a distinctive doctrinal position on widow inheritance (Ogot, 2009), encouraging biblical marriage principles and promoting spiritual rather than sexual inheritance. Tensions nonetheless remain between doctrinal ideals and community expectations. As one church elder in Gem put it, the church and its members are caught between a culture insisting a widow cannot stand alone and a faith proclaiming she is already complete in Christ (E-Gem-01).

This study examines the extent to which the Nomiya Luo Church has transformed widow inheritance in Siaya County, tracing the historical roots of the practice, its transformation under Christian influence, and the points at which cultural persistence continues to challenge reform.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design consistent with the interpretivist tradition, which privileges the meanings that social actors attach to their lived experiences over the measurement of externally observable behaviours (Creswell, 2013). A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate here because the transformation of widow inheritance involves nuanced negotiation between religious conviction, customary authority, economic vulnerability, and personal agency, dimensions that resist quantification but lend themselves to in-depth, contextual exploration (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Study Area and Rationale

The study was conducted in Siaya County, located in the Nyanza region of western Kenya. Siaya County was selected because it is predominantly inhabited by the Luo community, where widow inheritance (*tero chola*) remains a documented social practice (Ambasa-Shisanya, 2007), and because the Nomiya Luo Church, which originated in the county in 1907, has its strongest membership concentration there (Ogot, 2009). Data were drawn from five sub-counties: Gem, Ugenya, Ugunja, Bondo, and Yimbo, selected to capture variation across both peri-urban and rural settings, since prior literature suggests that the pace and depth of reform varies with proximity to urban centres and the density of kin surveillance (Shipton, 2007).

Research Design and Participant Selection

A total of 47 participants were recruited through purposive sampling, a strategy appropriate for qualitative inquiry where the goal is to select information-rich cases rather than achieve statistical representativeness (Patton, 2002). Participants were identified across four categories: widows who had experienced widow inheritance rites or pressure to undergo them ($n = 26$); church elders and ordained pastors of the Nomiya Luo Church ($n = 11$); village elders serving as custodians of Luo customary practice ($n = 7$); and healthcare workers at Ugunja Sub-County Hospital and community health units ($n = 3$). Widows constituted the largest category since they are the primary subjects of the practice under study. Recruitment was facilitated through the Nomiya Luo Church's administrative structures, community health worker networks, and local village elder councils, with snowball referrals used to identify additional participants who had declined or resisted inheritance. Inclusion criteria for widows required that participants had been widowed within Siaya County, held membership or prior affiliation with the Nomiya Luo Church, and were willing to discuss their experiences voluntarily. All participants provided informed verbal consent in accordance with the ethical guidelines of Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology, and were informed of their right to withdraw at any point.

Data Collection

Data were collected through two primary instruments. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with all 47 participants using guides developed in both English and Dholuo, the latter to facilitate full and natural expression from participants more comfortable in their mother tongue. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted in locations chosen by participants, including church premises, homesteads, and community health centres, to minimise the risk of surveillance or coercion by family members. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Three focus group discussions (FGDs) were also held: one with six widows in Gem, one with five church elders and pastors in Ugunja, and one with a mixed group of four village elders and three community health workers in Bondo. FGDs lasted approximately 90 minutes each and were designed to surface collective norms, contested meanings, and points of inter-group tension. Documentary sources, including church minutes, doctrinal pamphlets, and published records relating to the Nomiya Luo Church's position on widow inheritance, were reviewed to corroborate and contextualise oral testimony. This triangulation of interview, FGD, and documentary data strengthens the credibility of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Analysis

All transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with data; generation of initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing

themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report. Coding was conducted manually with a codebook developed inductively from the data while also drawing deductively on the FMNT framework's four substitution mechanisms as sensitizing concepts (Patton, 2002). This dual inductive-deductive approach allowed the analysis to remain grounded in participants' own terms while positioning findings within the broader theoretical framework. Inter-coder reliability was enhanced through independent coding of a 20% sub-sample of transcripts by a second researcher, followed by discussion and resolution of discrepancies. Verbatim quotations selected for inclusion in this article were chosen to represent the range of perspectives within each participant category and to illustrate key thematic patterns.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology. Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter, several protective measures were adopted. Interviews were conducted privately and confidentially, and no identifying information linking participants to their quotations appears in this article; instead, coded references indicate only respondent type and sub-county. Participants who expressed current distress or indicated that participation could place them at social or physical risk were excluded. Dholuo-language interviews were translated into English by a bilingual research assistant and back-translated by a second assistant to verify accuracy.

Traditional Widow Inheritance Practices in Luo Society

Historically, widow inheritance among the Luo addressed three interlocking concerns: social security, lineage preservation, and property control. In a society where women had limited independent rights to land, *tero chola* functioned as a mechanism protecting widows and their children from destitution (Shipton, 2007). An inheriting male relative, whether brother, cousin, or more distant clan member, was expected to assume responsibility for the widow's welfare, ensuring food security and protection against social vulnerability. An elderly respondent in Ugenya described a widow without inheritance as a house with no door, vulnerable to anyone who might walk in or to being blown away by the wind; inheritance, in this view, restored that door (E-Ugenya-02).

Lineage preservation carried equal weight. In patrilineal Luo society, children born through levirate unions were considered offspring of the deceased husband rather than of the inheritor, ensuring that his lineage did not end with his death. Mbiti (1969) observes that African kinship systems placed great importance on the perpetuation of a man's name and presence through descendants. A church elder in Yala explained that a Luo man did not truly die if he left a widow, since children could still be born through her who carried his name, which is why the clan insisted she be inherited (E-Yala-03).

Property control formed the third pillar. Land, cattle, and homesteads were central to Luo identity, and clans feared that a widow's remarriage outside the lineage would transfer these resources to outsiders. An elder from Bondo observed bluntly that a widow who walked away with land would be giving the family's wealth to strangers, and that inheritance kept that wealth where it belonged (E-Bondo-04). Shipton (2007) notes that such arrangements reinforced women's economic dependency while protecting male control over property and lineage.

Taken together, these three functions show that widow inheritance was not a peripheral ritual but a central institution, embedded in the moral, economic, and spiritual fabric of Luo community life. Its persistence into the Christian era reflects the fact that it addressed enduring anxieties about widowhood. Yet, as the reforms discussed below demonstrate, what once seemed protective could, under new conditions of modern law, gender equality, and public health crisis, become coercive and harmful.

Doctrinal Reform: The Nomiya Luo Church's Response

When the Nomiya Luo Church emerged in the early twentieth century, it faced the task of negotiating between entrenched Luo custom and the ethical demands of Christianity. Unlike missionary churches, which tended to condemn African practices wholesale, Nomiya's leaders sought a middle path: preserving cultural elements

that sustained identity and belonging while reforming those that conflicted with biblical morality. Widow inheritance became one of the most visible arenas of this negotiation.

The church acknowledged that *tero chola* had once served legitimate purposes, but recognized that these purposes had, over time, slid into coercion, humiliation, and serious health risk, particularly during the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s (Ambasa-Shisanya, 2007; Okeyo & Allen, 1994). A Nomiya elder in Gem reflected that earlier generations believed inheritance protected the widow, but that in practice many women were forced into it, some dying from the diseases it brought, and that this could no longer be called protection but oppression (E-Gem-05). The church's response was not to abolish the principle of widow care but to transform its expression into something compatible with both scripture and human dignity.

Ritual Substitution: From Sexual Cleansing to Prayer

A central pillar of reform is the prohibition of sexual cleansing. Drawing on 1 Thessalonians 4:3-4, church leaders teach that holiness cannot be achieved through ritualized sex, redefining the act traditionally performed to remove "death impurity" (*chodo kodhi*) as incompatible with Christian teaching. Prayer, fasting, and the laying on of hands have replaced sexual rites. A pastor in Ugunja summarized this position by insisting that purity is restored at the altar rather than in the bedroom, since God cleanses through the Spirit rather than the flesh (P-Ugunja-06). This teaching directly challenges one of the most entrenched aspects of traditional widow inheritance, defending women's bodily autonomy while reducing their exposure to sexually transmitted infection.

Status Substitution: From Sexual Union to Spiritual Inheritance

Rather than endorsing physical union as the means of inheritance, the church promotes spiritual inheritance, in which a widow is received into the care of her deceased husband's family through symbolic acts: collective prayer, blessings from church elders, and formal acknowledgment during worship. A widow in Yala described being told that she remained part of her husband's family, but not through a man's bed, and that the church's prayer for her was enough (W-Yala-07). A second widow, also from Yala, recounted being called before the congregation and blessed, told that she was still part of the family though no man would force her, and concluded that this blessing was her inheritance (W-Yala-10). These accounts illustrate how the symbol of inheritance, continuity, and belonging is preserved even as its performance shifts to a non-coercive form (Okeyo, 1980).

Redefining Remarriage

The church also departs from tradition in its regulation of remarriage, insisting that any new union, whether within the clan or outside it, be conducted through a formal church wedding entered into freely. An elder in Ugenya expressed this position sharply: a widow is not land to be divided among brothers but a child of God, and if she remarries it must be her choice, blessed at the altar rather than forced by clan demand (E-Ugenya-08). This reframes the widow as a moral agent rather than a commodity transferred between male kin.

Authority Substitution: From Elders to Pastors

The monopoly that clan elders historically held over widow inheritance has also been challenged by the rise of pastoral legitimacy. Traditionally, elders enforced purity obligations as a clan duty (Ochieng', 1974); the spread of African Independent Churches has shifted this locus of authority (Gathogo, 2011). An elder in Gem observed that while it was once the elders who commanded inheritance, it is now the pastor who prays, and his word carries more weight than that of the elders (E-Gem-11). This shift recasts purity as a matter of divine assurance rather than family obligation (Hastings, 1994), signaling the erosion of patriarchal monopolies in favor of faith-based mediation.

Protection Substitution: From Kin Dependence to Church Welfare

Finally, the church has reconfigured widow protection away from dependence on in-laws and toward welfare programs, legal literacy, and pastoral counseling. Recognizing that poverty often drives widows back into

coercive arrangements, the church has introduced food assistance, small emergency grants, and partnerships with legal aid organizations to educate widows on land and property rights under the Constitution of Kenya (2010). These interventions respond directly to the gendered economic dependence that Silberschmidt (1999) identifies as a recurring driver of women's vulnerability in rural Kenyan communities. Economic empowerment initiatives, including savings and credit groups, business skills training, and cooperative farming, aim to reduce financial dependence on in-laws. A widow in Bondo described joining a widow fellowship instead of depending on her brothers-in-law, contributing to savings, supporting other widows, and learning about land law, concluding that she was no longer afraid (W-Bondo-12). Pastoral care complements these structural interventions: one widow recalled being told by her pastor that her body was the temple of God and not the property of her in-laws, words that gave her courage to resist pressure (W-Bondo-09).

Theoretical Framework: Faith-Mediated Norm Transformation

The persistence and transformation of widow inheritance in Siaya County is best understood through what this study terms the Faith-Mediated Norm Transformation (FMNT) framework, which situates cultural change at the intersection of customary authority, Christian morality, and state law. FMNT draws on social norms theory (Mackie, 1996; Bicchieri, 2006), legal pluralism (Merry, 1988), and inculturation theology (Shorter, 1977) to explain why widow inheritance is not simply disappearing but is being actively renegotiated.

Widow Inheritance as a Socially Anchored Institution

Following Ocholla-Ayayo (1976), Luo widow inheritance was never a marginal ritual but a socially embedded institution serving social security, lineage preservation, and property control. Shipton (2007) describes African kinship systems as relying on mechanisms of "entrustment" that secure dependents and resources within patrilineages. Compliance was historically maintained through elder authority, the threat of stigma or witchcraft accusation, and widows' economic dependence. This explains why many widows today describe themselves as living, in the words of one Bondo widow, between two laws: the law of God and the law of the elders (W-Bondo-19).

Religion as a Catalyst of Normative Substitution

The Nomiya Luo Church intervenes in this space not by rejecting culture wholesale but by substituting new meanings and practices for old ones, providing credible replacements for what *tero chola* once accomplished. The four substitutions identified in Section 4, ritual, status, authority, and protection, together preserve the underlying social intentions of widow inheritance (care, continuity, and inclusion) while discarding its exploitative and harmful elements. As one widow summarized, the meaning of being cared for has not disappeared, but it is now accomplished with dignity rather than shame (W-Yala-10).

The framework identifies four mechanisms through which this transformation travels. Normative reframing occurs when sermons and testimonies redefine what is "pure" and "honourable," shifting collective expectations (Mbiti, 1969). Legitimation arises when pastors conduct public blessings, granting widows a socially recognized place without requiring sexual ritual. Resource substitution matters because economic empowerment and legal awareness reduce the leverage that in-laws and elders hold over widows (Achieng, 2015). Public health convergence reinforces reform as HIV prevention campaigns align with biblical calls to holiness, creating overlapping moral and medical imperatives (Okeyo & Allen, 1994).

Symbolic Interactionism and Social Transformation Theory

At the micro level, symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) illuminates how widows, pastors, and kin reinterpret the meanings of inheritance through everyday interaction. Ritual substitution shows symbols of purification being redefined: what once required physical union is now accomplished through spiritual acts, while the underlying meaning of cleansing as reintegration remains intact (Mbiti, 1969). Status substitution operates similarly, with spiritual blessing replacing sexual union as the marker of belonging.

At the macro level, social transformation theory (Castells, 2000) explains how these reinterpreted practices become embedded in new institutional logics, religion, law, and welfare, rather than remaining purely

symbolic. Authority substitution illustrates this dynamic directly: institutional power migrates from kinship structures to religious institutions, recoding purity from a clan duty into a divine assurance (Hastings, 1994; Gathogo, 2011). Protection substitution reflects a parallel structural shift, as church fellowships, legal literacy programs, and state-backed rights assume roles once held by in-laws (Kameri-Mbote, 2000).

Read together, these two theoretical lenses offer a dual-level account. At the micro level, individuals reinterpret symbols of inheritance to preserve meaning while avoiding harm; at the macro level, new institutions stabilize and reproduce these redefinitions across generations. This interplay explains why widow inheritance has not disappeared but has evolved into a form that attempts to balance tradition, faith, and human dignity.

Pathways and Variation in Outcomes

Despite these substitutions, outcomes vary considerably across communities. Legal pluralism means elder authority can still override church teaching in some contexts (Merry, 1988). Poverty and insecure land rights continue to push widows toward symbolic or partial compliance. Syncretism emerges where families attempt to satisfy both church and clan expectations simultaneously, producing dual practice. Context also matters: reforms gain greater traction in peri-urban areas with weaker kin surveillance, while remaining more contested in tightly knit rural villages.

The FMNT framework predicts three broad pathways. Where church embedding is strong, economic independence is achievable, and elder pressure is manageable, widows tend to achieve full reform, abandoning sexual cleansing and reclaiming dignity. Where pressures are mixed, a syncretic compromise tends to emerge, combining public prayer with discreet cleansing. Under conditions of intense poverty and elder dominance, some widows revert to coercive inheritance altogether. These pathways resemble what Bicchieri (2006) calls “conditional preferences,” in which behavior is shaped jointly by individual conviction and community expectation.

Persistent Cultural Challenges

Although the Nomiya Luo Church has made deliberate and notable reforms, these changes continue to encounter entrenched resistance along four main lines: elder authority, economic dependence, syncretism, and stigma.

Elder Authority

Village elders remain among the strongest defenders of *tero chola*. In Luo cosmology, elders are custodians of tradition and arbiters of communal morality, and their word often carries more immediate authority than church teaching. An elder in Yimbo described inheritance as something received from the fathers rather than invented by the present generation, comparing a widow without inheritance to a tree without roots, and insisting that however much the church preaches, the roots of culture cannot easily be pulled out (E-Yimbo-13). Such testimony reflects what Ocholla-Ayayo (1976) describes as the moral weight of tradition, under which deviation is read as betrayal of ancestral obligation rather than personal choice.

Economic Dependence

While theology offers widows dignity, poverty often pushes them back toward custom. Land remains the principal resource in Luo society, and in-laws frequently control its allocation. A widow in Yimbo recounted knowing what the church taught, but having no land title or money when her husband died; her brother-in-law made continued access to the land conditional on her being inherited, and although she accepted inheritance through prayer rather than sexual ritual, the community still whispered that it was not a real inheritance (W-Yimbo-14). This illustrates Shipton’s (2007) “politics of entrustment,” in which women’s access to land remains mediated by male relatives even when sexual exploitation itself is avoided, leaving doctrinal reform fragile without parallel poverty alleviation.

Syncretism

A further challenge is the blending of church teaching with traditional practice. Some families observe a public church blessing while privately insisting on sexual cleansing. A widow in Gem described this double life: a church prayer celebrated publicly, followed that same night by in-laws bringing a man to perform cleansing, with the family explaining that the prayer was for the pastor but the cleansing was for them; she agreed out of fear of being cast out (W-Gem-15). Mbiti (1969) frames this as consistent with the holistic character of African religious experience, in which individuals often straddle Christian and traditional obligation rather than abandoning either fully.

Stigma

Perhaps the most painful challenge is the stigma directed at widows who resist inheritance, whose refusal is frequently read as defiance rather than faithfulness. A widow in Gem recounted that when she refused inheritance, she was accused of having caused her husband's death and was offered bitter herbs to prove her innocence; she refused, telling her accusers that if they doubted her, they should take her to the church, where God would defend her (W-Gem-16). Such accusations echo older patterns in which women who defied custom were labeled witches or troublemakers, a stigma that excludes them from communal support systems and places the church's promise of dignity in direct tension with community demands for conformity.

Even church leaders acknowledge the limits of reform. A pastor in Gem described teaching that inheritance must be non-sexual and defending widows accordingly, but conceded that family pressure at home often proves too strong, leading some widows to return quietly to older practices; he characterized change as a journey rather than a command (P-Gem-17). Health workers add a further dimension of urgency. A nurse at Ugunja Sub-County Hospital reported observing fewer new infections among widows from churches, including Nomiya, that teach against ritual sex, while noting that risk persists in households that secretly continue older practices (N-Ugunja-18).

Ethnographic Perspectives Across Siaya County

Field interviews conducted in Ugunja, Yala, and parts of Gem reveal a layered set of personal narratives that illuminate both the resilience of widows and the difficulty of reforming deeply rooted tradition.

Voices of Widows

Several widows interviewed described a complex interplay between cultural expectation and personal agency. One respondent from Ugunja recounted that her in-laws arrived within two weeks of her husband's death insisting she choose a man from the family, and that when she identified herself as a Nomiya Church member unwilling to undergo sexual cleansing, the pastor intervened to explain the church's position; though some relatives remained angry, they ultimately allowed her to remain uninherited. By contrast, a widow in Yimbo described how economic necessity overrode doctrinal conviction, since without a land title or money she accepted a brother-in-law's conditional offer of land access in exchange for inheritance, performed through prayer rather than sexual ritual, though village gossip continued to question its legitimacy (W-Yimbo-14).

Perspectives of Church Leaders

Pastors and elders within the church describe their role as protecting widows while remaining sensitive to Luo cultural heritage. A church elder in Yala emphasized that the church's task is to protect widows from danger rather than expose them to it, replacing older practices with blessing and prayer while acknowledging that some members continue to hold onto custom, since "change is a journey." Another pastor in Gem described a mediation role, bringing widows and in-laws together to explain that inheritance within the faith concerns care rather than sexual relation, while recognizing that some families accept this teaching and others continue their own practices outside the church's view.

Persistence of Cultural Pressure

Despite doctrinal reform, widows continue to face subtle and overt cultural pressure. One younger widow recalled being told that a woman without a man is like a house without a roof, and that despite her Nomiya membership, such words still wounded her sense of completeness. This sentiment underscores how stigma, more than any formal legal or doctrinal obstacle, continues to shape widows' decisions, since refusal to be inherited is sometimes read as rebellion against both the deceased's family and broader community norms.

Public Health and Social Benefits of Reform

Health workers in Ugunja confirm that the church's rejection of sexual cleansing has measurably reduced HIV exposure among widows who adhere to its teaching, even as risk continues in households that maintain older practices in secret (N-Ugunja-18). Socially, widows who avoid coercive inheritance often report greater personal autonomy and self-esteem, particularly where supported by the church's economic empowerment initiatives. Taken together, these testimonies suggest that the Nomiya Luo Church provides a religious framework that legitimizes widows' refusal of harmful inheritance rites, that acceptance of reform depends heavily on economic security and family relationship, that cultural stigma remains powerful even among practicing members, and that health and dignity benefits, while real where reforms are embraced, remain unevenly distributed across rural and peri-urban communities.

CONCLUSION

The transformation of widow inheritance within the Nomiya Luo Church of Siaya County reveals a dynamic negotiation between cultural resilience, Christian doctrine, and socio-economic reality. Historically, *tero chola* was central to Luo society, ensuring widows' social security, preserving lineage continuity, and safeguarding property within patrilineages (Ocholla-Ayayo, 1976; Shipton, 2007). Over time, and under the pressure of new social contexts, including HIV/AIDS, gender rights discourse, and constitutional reform, the practice became increasingly coercive and harmful to women's dignity and wellbeing (Okeyo & Allen, 1994).

The Nomiya Luo Church has responded not by rejecting culture wholesale but by mediating reform through doctrinal reinterpretation, pastoral authority, and socio-economic empowerment. The Faith-Mediated Norm Transformation framework developed in this study explains how the church has substituted harmful elements of *tero chola* with spiritual, communal, and legal alternatives: ritual substitution replacing sexual cleansing with prayer and blessing; status substitution reframing inheritance as symbolic recognition rather than sexual obligation; authority substitution transferring legitimacy from clan elders to pastors; and protection substitution shifting dependence from in-laws toward welfare programs, widow fellowships, and legal literacy.

At the micro level, symbolic interactionism illuminates how widows, pastors, and communities reinterpret the meaning of inheritance, retaining symbols of belonging and purity while infusing them with new, faith-driven significance, so that continuity is preserved without perpetuating harm. At the macro level, social transformation theory highlights the structural changes underpinning this evolution, as the historical monopoly of elders is increasingly challenged by pastoral authority and state-backed legal frameworks, and as widows' protection is redefined through economic empowerment and legal education. Together, these shifts mark a broader transformation from patriarchal kinship control toward institutional frameworks rooted in law, rights, and religious authority.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study carries several limitations that future research should address. First, the qualitative design, while generating rich and contextually grounded data, limits statistical generalizability. The findings are best understood as analytically generalizable, in the sense that the mechanisms identified, particularly the FMNT framework's four substitution pathways, may transfer to comparable settings where faith-based institutions negotiate with harmful customary practices, but they do not permit claims about the prevalence of those practices across the full Luo population (Yin, 2018). Second, the study is geographically bounded to five sub-counties within Siaya County, and the dynamics of widow inheritance may differ in other Luo-inhabited

counties such as Kisumu, Homabay, Migori, or Kisii, where different African Independent Churches, varying land tenure arrangements, and different degrees of urbanization could produce distinct patterns of compliance and resistance. Third, social desirability bias is a potential concern, since participants recruited through church networks may have understated non-compliant practices to avoid appearing to contradict church teaching. The use of multiple interview sites outside church premises, the inclusion of village elders who were explicitly identified as defenders of tradition, and the FGD format, which encouraged participants to challenge each other's accounts, partially mitigates this risk, but it cannot be entirely eliminated.

These limitations suggest productive directions for future research. A mixed-methods design combining in-depth qualitative inquiry with a structured survey instrument administered across multiple Luo-inhabited counties would significantly strengthen the evidence base by generating both mechanistic understanding and prevalence estimates. Such a study could also test whether the FMNT framework's substitution pathways operate in comparable ways across other African Independent Churches such as the Legio Maria or the African Israel Church Nineveh, whose doctrinal positions on cultural practices differ in instructive ways from Nomiya. Longitudinal designs tracking the same cohort of widows over five to ten years would allow researchers to assess whether church-based reform produces durable behavioural change or whether syncretic compromise is a transitional phase that eventually resolves toward full reform or full reversion under sustained elder or economic pressure.

Nevertheless, this study demonstrates that cultural pressure, economic dependence, and syncretism persist, leaving many widows to navigate, in the words of one Bondo respondent, between the law of God and the law of the elders (W-Bondo-19). The FMNT framework, read alongside symbolic interactionism and social transformation theory, helps explain these complexities as the outcome of competing norms, conditional preferences, and uneven institutional enforcement (Bicchieri, 2006; Castells, 2000). The Nomiya Luo Church's reforms show that harmful cultural practices can be reinterpreted rather than simply abolished, evolving into forms that retain their protective intent while safeguarding dignity. For these reforms to become fully sustainable, however, they must extend beyond the church itself to encompass theological education, constitutional enforcement, economic empowerment, and sustained community dialogue.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study carry implications for theology, governance, public health, and community practice, suggesting that a multi-pronged approach is necessary to sustain reform and protect widows' dignity and wellbeing.

Within the church, doctrinal clarity should be institutionalized by codifying teaching on widow inheritance into official manuals and training curricula, ensuring consistency across parishes and giving pastors firmer ground when confronting resistant elders. Pastors and lay leaders require structured training in counseling, gender sensitivity, and public health, given their central role in mediating disputes and supporting widows directly. The church should also continue to develop symbolic rituals, such as public blessings, widow fellowships, and memorial services, that preserve cultural values of continuity and belonging while discarding exploitative practice.

Legal reform must complement theological reform. Enforcement of Article 45 (marriage) and Article 60 (land rights) of the Constitution of Kenya (2010) is essential to protecting widows from dispossession and coercion, and county governments and local administrators should be supported to enforce these provisions effectively. Legal literacy campaigns, conducted through partnerships between churches, NGOs, and legal aid organizations, can help widows resist customary coercion and claim inheritance independently. Institutionalized dialogue between elders, pastors, and legal actors would help bridge the divide between statutory law and customary norms in ways that are both culturally acceptable and legally sound.

Given the documented links between widow inheritance and HIV transmission, reform efforts should be integrated into public health campaigns led jointly by the Ministry of Health and churches, promoting awareness of the risks associated with sexual cleansing alongside spiritual and communal alternatives. Such an approach would extend to widow inheritance the kind of faith-based health engagement that Parsitau (2009)

documents among Pentecostal churches working with youth on HIV/AIDS in Kenya. County governments should establish psychosocial support services, including counseling, safe spaces, and widow fellowships, to reduce stigma, alongside social protection schemes such as cash transfers that reduce widows' economic dependence on in-laws.

Long-term sustainability depends substantially on widows' economic independence. Microfinance programs, cooperative farming, and small-business training can support income generation, while county governments should prioritize issuing land titles to widows as part of broader land reform, reducing susceptibility to dispossession. Vocational training tailored to contemporary labor markets may offer younger widows alternative livelihoods that reduce the practical appeal of inheritance as a survival strategy.

Because elders remain influential in determining whether reform is accepted, community dialogue should actively engage them as allies, reframing their role as protectors of widows rather than enforcers of harmful custom. Public awareness campaigns through radio, church seminars, and local barazas can help reshape community perceptions of widows who reject inheritance, while educational programs aimed at youth can challenge harmful stereotypes and encourage intergenerational acceptance of reform.

Finally, continuous research is needed to track the long-term impact of these reforms. Academic institutions and church research units should conduct longitudinal studies evaluating outcomes in widows' health, dignity, and socio-economic security, supported by monitoring and evaluation frameworks developed jointly by faith-based and governmental organizations. Indicators such as reductions in coerced inheritance, increased property access, and greater participation by widows in decision-making would provide useful benchmarks for assessing reform effectiveness over time.

The transformation of widow inheritance in Siaya County illustrates that culture is not static but negotiable, and that faith-based institutions can serve as powerful agents of reform. By applying the FMNT framework alongside symbolic interactionism and social transformation theory, this study demonstrates how harmful practices can be reinterpreted into more compassionate alternatives. Yet the persistence of cultural resistance, poverty, and stigma indicates that reform must be reinforced at multiple levels, spiritual, legal, economic, and social, and that sustainable change depends on collaboration among churches, government agencies, NGOs, community elders, and widows themselves.

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Appendix: Coded Verbatim Testimonies

Table 1 presents the full set of coded oral testimonies cited throughout this paper. Codes follow the format [Respondent Type]-[Location]-[Sequence], where W = Widow, E = Elder, P = Pastor, and N = Nurse.

Code	Respondent Type	Location	Theme
E-Gem-01	Elder	Gem	Tension between culture and faith
E-Ugenya-02	Elder	Ugenya	Social security rationale
E-Yala-03	Church elder	Yala	Lineage preservation rationale
E-Bondo-04	Elder	Bondo	Property control rationale
E-Gem-05	Nomiya elder	Gem	Recognition of historical abuse
P-Ugunja-06	Pastor	Ugunja	Rejection of sexual cleansing
W-Yala-07	Widow	Yala	Spiritual inheritance (first testimony)
E-Ugenya-08	Elder	Ugenya	Redefinition of remarriage
W-Bondo-09	Widow	Bondo	Pastoral care and empowerment
W-Yala-10	Widow	Yala	Spiritual inheritance (second testimony)
E-Gem-11	Elder	Gem	Authority substitution
W-Bondo-12	Widow	Bondo	Protection substitution / widow fellowship
E-Yimbo-13	Elder	Yimbo	Elder authority and cultural resilience

W-Yimbo-14	Widow	Yimbo	Economic dependence
W-Gem-15	Widow	Gem	Syncretism
W-Gem-16	Widow	Gem	Stigma and accusation
P-Gem-17	Pastor	Gem	Pastoral frustration with limits of reform
N-Ugunja-18	Nurse	Ugunja Sub-County Hospital	Public health outcomes
W-Bondo-19	Widow	Bondo	Dual belonging / closing testimony