

Bound by Tradition: The Significance of Chumburung Widowhood Rites

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100900144>

Received: 14 September 2026; Accepted: 19 September 2026; Published: 03 October 2026

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the sociocultural and religious dimensions of widowhood rites among the Nchumuru people of Ghana. In many traditional African societies, the death of a spouse triggers a complex transition period for the surviving partner, particularly widows, marked by deeply institutionalized rituals. Through a qualitative approach utilizing interviews, focus group discussions, and ethnographic observations, this study investigates the specific ritual procedures, symbolic actions, and linguistic expressions embedded in Chumburung widowhood practices. The findings reveal that these rites serve a dual purpose: pathologically, they facilitate psychological closure and community solidarity during grief; structurally, however, they often reinforce gender asymmetries and impose physical, financial, and emotional burdens on women. The study highlights how traditional symbols, such as specific clothing, shaving rites, and confinement, signify the severing of the marital bond and the purification of the widow from the perceived defilement of death. Ultimately, this paper argues for a balanced approach to cultural preservation, advocating for the modification of harmful practices to align with contemporary human rights standards while safeguarding the communal and therapeutic values inherent in Chumburung heritage. External critics, Western feminists, and human rights NGOs often interpret the rituals purely as patriarchal tools designed to subjugate, humiliate, and control women. However, the traditional practitioners view the rites as vital mechanisms for spiritual purification, severing ties with the dead husband's spirit to protect the widow from haunting, and ensuring community well-being. The research has accurately navigated these competing narratives.

INTRODUCTION

Widowhood rites represent some of the most deeply entrenched cultural practices in sub-Saharan Africa, serving as a critical mechanism for navigating grief, restructuring social order, and preserving ancestral traditions. Among the Chumburung people of Ghana, these rites are not merely individual mourning practices; they are foundational communal rituals that dictate the transition of a woman from a wife to a widow. Historically, these rituals were designed to cleanse the widow of perceived spiritual pollution, cut her spiritual ties to the deceased husband, and protect the remaining family members from ancestral wrath. While modern human rights frameworks frequently criticize these practices for their physical and psychological toll on women, within the Chumburung socio-cultural framework, they hold immense spiritual and ontological significance. The rites reinforce gender roles, regulate inheritance, and preserve the cosmic balance between the living and the dead. To understand these rites requires looking past a Western-centric human rights lens to evaluate how the Chumburung community itself constructs meaning, duty, and identity through these traditional demands.

Statement of the Problem

Despite global and national efforts to eliminate harmful traditional practices in Ghana, Chumburung widowhood rites continue to be fiercely preserved and practiced. The core problem lies in the sharp contradiction between the external perception of these rites as archaic human rights violations and the internal Chumburung perception of them as vital cultural safeguards. While existing literature extensively documents the physical, emotional, and economic hardships imposed on Ghanaian widows during mourning, there is a distinct lack of research focusing specifically on the Chumburung ethnic group. Furthermore, current scholarship often oversimplifies these rituals by focusing solely on their punitive aspects, thereby ignoring the

complex web of spiritual protection, community solidarity, and identity reformation that keeps women "bound by tradition."

Without an empirical, culturally grounded investigation into why these rites persist, interventions by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and legal frameworks will continue to fail. This study addresses this gap by investigating the underlying socio-cultural and spiritual significance of Chumburung widowhood rites from the perspectives of the widows, traditional authorities, and the community at large.

Research Questions

To address this problem, the study will answer the following questions:

What are the specific stages and ritualistic elements comprising the Chumburung widowhood rites?

How do Chumburung widows and traditional authorities interpret the spiritual and social significance of these rites?

What factors contribute to the ongoing persistence of these rituals despite modern legal and human rights campaigns?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Analysing the paper *"Bound by Tradition: Significance of Chumburung Widowhood Rites"* requires structuring a clear framework of the surrounding literature review and the research gap it addresses. In Ghanaian anthropological and sociological studies, widowhood rites are highly localized, meaning general conclusions cannot simply be mapped onto specific ethnic groups like the Chumburung people of East-Central Ghana. Existing scholarly literature on Ghanaian widowhood rituals generally falls into three main conceptual paradigms: The Human Rights and Gender Violence Paradigm: Major Studies here focuses on the physical and psychological harm inflicted on widows. This includes practices like forced confinement, head shaving, and property dispossession. Scholars under this umbrella often label these customs as archaic and call for legal interventions or outright abolition. The Cultural Functionalist Paradigm alternative argues that these rites are not purely designed to oppress. Instead, they function as a necessary "rite of passage" to spiritually separate the living from the dead, ward off malevolent spirits, and provide a structured path for grief therapy and social reintegration. The Modernization and Religious Shift Paradigm, often explores how the advent of Christianity, formal education, and statutory laws (such as PNDC Law 111 in Ghana) are gradually modifying or clashing with traditional customs.

Conceptual Frameworks: Rites of Passage and Cultural Significance. This theme explores why traditional societies perform widowhood rites. The literature reviewed established that these rituals are not arbitrary; they are structural necessities designed to sever spiritual ties with the deceased, navigate grief, and protect the community from spiritual contamination. Aborampah (1999), writing in his *Women's Roles in the Mourning Rituals of the Akan of Ghana*, outlines how traditional Ghanaian mourning customs function as essential, albeit physically demanding, rites of passage linking the living, ancestral, and spirit worlds. Tilahun (2015) in her work titled *Widows, Widowhood and Widowhood Rituals*, explores how societies establish specific cultural expectations regarding a surviving female spouse's behaviour to safely transition her from a shared marital status to an independent or reintegrated status. Virtual Kollage (2016) writing on the topic: *Widowhood Rites in Ghana* documents how various Ghanaian ethnic practices act as a defense against spiritual haunting while officially concluding a marriage contract in the eyes of the ancestors.

There are also the Socio-Economic Realities and Gender Disparities. Widowhood rites across Ghanaian ethnic landscapes often reveal sharp structural inequalities. Scholars analyse how practices like property dispossession, social isolation, and forced levirate marriage intersect with women's economic vulnerability. Sossou (2002) writing on the topic, *Widowhood Practices in West Africa: The Silent Victims*, espoused a pivotal text mapping the socioeconomic hardships, loss of inheritance, and psychological distress imposed on women by patriarchal enforcement of customary funeral rites. Dery (2016) in his work titled: *Widowhood Rites Among the Talensi of the Upper East Region*, provides stark quantitative and qualitative proof of the material

impacts of rites, noting that a high percentage of widows face land confiscation, loss of livelihood support, and severe drop-offs in community standing. Korang-Okrah, R., and Haight, W. (2015) writing on *Ghanaian (Akan) Women's Experiences of Widowhood and Property Rights Violations*, illustrates how deep-seated customary rules frequently supersede progressive national laws, resulting in long-term economic marginalization for both widows and their children.

On the Human Rights Frameworks versus Cultural Dynamism, the perspective analyses the tension between preserving cultural identity and eliminating practices deemed oppressive or harmful under modern international and national human rights protocols. On the other, hand Manala (2015) in his *African Traditional Widowhood Rites and Their Benefits and or Detrimental Effects on Widows*, critiques the severe physical requirements of shaving, confinement, ritual cleansings from a human dignity lens, comparing them against the foundational African ethics of *Ubuntu*. Segbefia et al, (2020) submit in their work; *Examining the Effectives of Widowhood Rites*, highlights the complex reality that older women are often the primary enforcers and custodians of these practices, and argues that sustainable modification of culture must be led by collaborating with these traditional authorities rather than relying solely on a top down statutory bans.

Essilfie (2020) in his work, *A cultural and theological study of widowhood rites and their implication for the Ghanaian context* presented the psychological duality of the modern Ghanaian widow, noting that many find themselves trapped between fulfilling traditional taboos to satisfy extended family and seeking institutional church protections. Among the Nchumuru there appear to be a clash and synthesis with Christianity, because the Nchumuru people navigate a dual identity of traditional custom and contemporary Christian practices, so looking at the theological synthesis is vital. In all the above literature examined, none speaks about Chumburung widowhood rites or made reference to it, hence the importance of the paper titled "*Bound by Tradition: The Significance of Chumburung Widowhood Rites*" which establishes its academic necessity by addressing specific blind spots in the existing body of work.

The vast majority of well-known Ghanaian widowhood literature concentrates heavily on major southern ethnic groups like the Akans, or specific northern groups like the Talensi, Nabdam, and Dagaaba. There is an acute lack of empirical documentation regarding the distinct cultural nuances of the Chumburung community. There is also the oversimplification gap because most of the existing literature frequently categorises all traditional rites as universally negative or universally positive. This paper targets the nuance gap by investigating the dual nature of these rites, balancing their deep symbolic, communal, and spiritual significance against the personal autonomy of the widow. There is also the 'agency gap' because many baseline studies treat widows purely as passive victims of patriarchal structures. This paper seeks to capture the lived experiences and individual agency of Nchumuru widows, examining how they navigate, adapt to, or quietly resist these expectations from within the system.

Comparative Literature Overview

Core Research Focus	Key Scholars / Sources	Primary Landscape Finding
Spiritual & Psychological Transition	Aborampah (1999), Tilahun (2015)	Serves to break the metaphysical marriage bond and protect the widow from ancestral wrath.
Socio-Economic Violations	Korang-Okrah & Haight (2015), Sossou (2002)	Leads to asset grabbing, loss of agricultural land, and structural impoverishment.
Cultural Evolution & Advocacy	Segbefia (2022), Manala (2015)	Argues that change must leverage local female elders and a re-adaptation of <i>Ubuntu</i> values.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

When conducting research on cultural and sensitive topics like "*Bound by Tradition: The Significance of Chumburung Widowhood Rites*," a qualitative research methodology is standard practice. Because this topic deals with lived experiences, deeply rooted in traditions, and the cultural beliefs of the Nchumuru people of Ghana, a flexible approach is necessary to capture depth and context. The researcher deployed a qualitative

framework, which explored the meanings, values, and experiences attached to the widowhood rites. This design focused specifically on the lived experiences of widows and how community members interpret the significance of these traditional rites. The primary population included Chumburung widows, who have personally undergone these rites, alongside traditional authorities (chiefs/queen mothers), family heads, and ritual enforcers who hold custody of the tradition; altogether, research was conducted in not less than 25 Nchumuru communities within the Northern and Oti Regions of Ghana. Participants were intentionally chosen based on their direct experience or authoritative knowledge of Chumburung customs, rather than selected at random. Widows were often identified through references from community elders or other widows, ensuring a safe and trust built chain of contact.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted on a one and one basis, conversational interviews allowed widows to share their personal narratives, emotional journeys, and the socio-economic impacts of the rites in a private setting. Key informants interviews were also conducted with opinion leaders, clan heads, and traditional priests to document the historical and spiritual justifications behind the rites. Focus group discussions were conducted with small group discussions with older community women and men to understand community consensus, expectations, and shifting attitudes toward the tradition. The procedure used was formally seeking permission from the local Nchumuru chiefs and elders before engaging with community members, which aligns with cultural protocol and builds trust.

Being Nchumuru myself, I conducted interviews in the local language (Chumburung) to ensure participants expressed their emotions and experiences accurately, with responses later translated into English. Data was analysed from the audio recordings, transcribed, translated, and coded. The data was then categorised into core themes, such as the *spiritual purpose of the rites*, the *psychological impact on women*, and the *role of tradition versus modern/religious shifts*. I ensured I received consent, obtaining verbal and where necessary, written permissions from all participants, ensuring they understood the study's purpose. Using pseudonyms to protect the identities of vulnerable widows facing social or familial scrutiny. Managing interviews sensitively to prevent re-traumatizing widows during the recollection of painful mourning rituals.

Scope and Structure of Contents

A research paper layout focusing on the significance of Chumburung widowhood rites in Ghana required a structured, academic framework that balances cultural preservation with modern human rights and religious (Christian) perspectives. The Nchumuru¹ people, primarily located in the Guan ethnic cluster of the Northern, Oti and Bono East regions of Ghana, utilise these rites to manage grief, transition statuses, and navigate spiritual separation. The research is centred on the Nchumuru of the Northern (Kpandai District) and Oti (Krachi East and Krachi Nchumuru Districts) Regions of Ghana. This brings to focus the area from Jachani and Chonko streams near Salaga in the North West to and beyond Dambae on the Oti River in the East and South East. The Krachi form a wedge between the Northern Chumburung and Tokoroano, the southernmost town of the Chumburung Brukum, N.J.K. (1979). The core areas to be covered in the study include the Chumburung socio cultural and religious situation, Chumburung widowhood rites, traditional purpose of widowhood rites and summary, recommendations and conclusion. Under the socio-cultural and religious situation of the Nchumuru people, the researcher gives a brief overview of the origins of the people, their natural environment, political and social organisation, the concept of God, marriage, death and burial among the Nchumuru.

On the issue of Chumburung widowhood rites, the focus is on funeral and associated rites, the subjects of the rites, and how the widow finally comes out of confinement to be reintegrated into the community. I am also looking at the traditional purpose of widowhood rites (as a means of spiritual, moral and emotional protection and the health element related to the performance of the rites).

Problems and Challenges

Researching into the significance of Chumburung widowhood rites practised by the Nchumuru people of

¹ The name Chumburung in this paper is used, interchangeably with the name, Nchumuru. Chumburung represents the language and Nchumuru, the people.

Ghana, presents severe methodological, cultural, ethical, and safety challenges. Because these rituals touch on deeply sensitive areas like grief, gender roles, spiritual taboos, and ancestral beliefs, I encountered several systemic barriers and these included the following: Time and financial constraints did not permit me to visit as many Nchumuru communities or personalities as desired, cultural secrecy and sacrosanctity. Many rituals are sacred and restricted to inner-circle family elders or specific ritual performers. Traditional authorities and family heads tightly guarded details from people not considered as insiders. Community members often refuse to speak openly due to deep-seated fears of angering ancestral spirits or suffering divine punishment for revealing sacred customs.

Nchumuru Sociocultural and Religious Context

For a research paper titled *"Bound by Tradition: Significance of Chumburung Widowhood Rites,"* establishing a strong sociocultural and religious context is crucial. The Chumburung or Nchumuru people are part of the Guan ethnic group located primarily around the shores of Lake Volta and the Kpandai District in Ghana. Their traditions sit at a fascinating and sometimes tense intersection of indigenous cosmology and modern Christianity. The contextual framework for this topic is outlined below, organised by headings suitable for a research paper.

Social Structure and Lineage Continuity

Chumburung society is structured heavily around extended family systems and clans. Marriage is not just a union between two individuals, but also a pact between two extensive lineage networks. A woman's social security, identity, and integration are heavily bound to her husband's family. When a husband dies, this structural bond is ruptured. Widowhood rites serve as an institutionalised mechanism to manage this social disruption, dictating how the widow transitions from a "wife" to a standalone or reintegrated member of the community.

Cosmology and Ancestral (*Akyeɲaŋpo*) Veneration

The Chumburung hold a profound belief in the afterlife and the continuation of life after death. Deceased ancestors, known as *akyeɲaŋpo*, are considered active guardians of the clan's morality and prosperity. Rituals such as shaving the head, wearing symbolic clothing or specific purification baths are fundamentally rooted in the belief that the dead husband's spirit (*akyeɲaŋpo*) remains attached to the surviving wife. If this bond is not ritually severed, it is believed the spirit will haunt her, cause bad luck, or prevent her from moving forward. Death introduces "ritual danger" or defilement into the household. The rites are mandatory because failing to pacify the ancestors or cleanse the widow is viewed as a threat to the spiritual safety of the entire clan or community.

Cultural Expectations and Gender Asymmetry

Like many ethnic groups in Ghana, Chumburung widowhood rituals place a heavier burden on women than on men (widowers). The community and the late husband's family closely observe the widow's behavior during the mourning period, such as intense weeping, wearing dark attire or periods of confinement. While traditionally viewed as a system of grief therapy to help the widow process loss, the stringent nature of these rituals also functions as a form of social control. Compliance with the rites is often a prerequisite for a widow to maintain her reputation, avoid accusations of spiritual wrongdoing (such as witchcraft), and protect her access to property.

Religious Syncretism and Pluralism

According to Baker (2006), over half of the Chumburung population identifies as Christian (including Catholic, Protestants, Pentecostal, and Adventist denominations), while many still adhere closely to Indigenous ethnic religions. This creates a unique religious context for this paper. Many modern Chumburung widows find themselves performing a dual set of obligations, participating in Christian memorial prayers while simultaneously completing traditional ancestral cleansing rites to satisfy village elders and in-laws. This negotiation highlights the literal meaning of being *"Bound by Tradition."*

Christianity experienced exponential growth following the translation, publication and dedication of the Chumburung New Testament in 1989 and the eventual translation and, publication of the entire Bible in the Chumburung language (Asewie, B. 2013). The presence of Christian denominations grew from seven (7) in 1986 to over twenty-one (21). Prominent church groups include Roman Catholic, the Evangelical Church of Ghana, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, the Church of Pentecost, and Seventh-day Adventists, to mention but a few. The convergence of traditional socio-political structures and modern Christian doctrines generates unique local dynamics. Because traditional customs are deeply embedded in civil processes (like land acquisition or chief palace disputes), many Christian Chumburung navigate a dual reality, participating in church leadership while respecting or subtly engaging with ancestral rites.

Origins

The Chumburung (also known as Nchumuru) are a prominent Guan ethnic group in Ghana. They primarily inhabit regions around the Volta Lake and Daka River, spanning across parts of the Northern, Oti, and Bono East regions. The Nchumuru belong to the Guan linguistic stock, which represents one of the oldest and most widely dispersed indigenous ethnic families in Ghana. They speak Chumburung (*Kyonboron*), a North Guang language belonging to the larger Niger-Congo family. Major dialects include North Chumburung, South Chumburung, and the divergent Yeji dialect. Their traditional kingdom encompasses land on both sides of the Daka River and the southwestern shores of Volta Lake. They are dominant across several administrative zones: Kpandai District (Northern Region), Krachi East and Krachi Nchumuru Districts (Oti Region) and Yeji and Pru, in the Pru East and West Districts of in the Bono East Region.

Anthropological and historical profiles indicate that the Chumburung were already securely settled in their current homeland before the year 1700. According to Nana Ndese (2005), the Nchumuru originally arrived or expanded into the territory as part of the massive invading army of Ndewura Jakpa. Artificial borders created by British and German colonial mapping split the cohesive ethnic territory, creating political lines that still segment the Nchumuru traditional area today. In the mid-1960s, the creation of the Volta Lake (via the Akosombo Dam project) dramatically disrupted the Nchumuru homeland. The rising waters flooded ancestral land and divided the population across five isolated pockets covering roughly according to Baker (1986:265), 2,200 square kilometers. There are two main theories of the origins of the Nchumuru people. One of the two theories of the origin of the Nchumuru was that narrated to me by Nana Bande, late Paramount Chief of Nchumuru Traditional Area. According to Nana Bande (2004), his predecessor earlier narrated this history to him thus the late Nana Boasu Kwadjo 11 that they the Nchumuru, were from the Fante area in the Central Region of Ghana and passed through the Brong Ahafo Region, to what is now Yapei. Here they met the Gonja who asked them to lead as war captains in their wars of invasion. Lumsden (1973) quotes Goody that Gonja tradition has it that in the mid Seventeenth century two sections of Chumburung people namely Banda and Chinkee went east with them in their wars of conquest. The other theory of the origins of the Chumburung, consistent with that of other Guan languages of which they belong according Mair (1983) is that they came from the area of Larteh in the Eastern Region, which is also a Guan language and moved across the Afram plains. Lumsden (1973:6) quotes Bassa traditions that when they arrived in the late 17th century, the Chumburung were already there having their capital first at Kumpu, west of Atebubu and when the Nchumuru demanded too much tribute from Bassa, the ensuing fight caused the Nchumuru to cross the Volta to their present location. Thus, there are two theories of the migratory origins of the Nchumuru, and it is even possible that both are true because before the arrival of the Fante to their current location the place was occupied by a section of the Guan whose descendants are present day Effutu (Winneba, Senya Beraku, etc).

The Nchumuru Concept of God

The Chumburung believe in the existence of a High God who is male, a creator known as *Wuribware*. As the name implies, he is connected with and related to the concept of goodness. *O bware* in Chumburung means all that is good and the cooling fertilizing blessing of rain, *bware*. *Wuribware* is recognized as the creator of the world and all that is in it. He sees all that occurs yet he is remote from humanity. The Chumburung express their knowledge of God through songs, short statements, proverbs etc. Their knowledge of God can be identified with the statement of Mbiti (1969:28); “African knowledge of God is expressed in proverbs, short statements, songs, prayers, names, myths, stories and religious ceremonies.” *Wuribware* is not directly

concerned with the toil and tribulation of everyday life. This duty, they say, he has delegated to the charge of

the “ikisi” (deities, divinities or lesser gods). To them, he is essentially spirit and there are no images or visible (physical) representation of him. He is omnipotent but strictly speaking he is functionally absent from the day-to-day activities of man. However, he plays an important role in the life and destiny of the individual. Nothing happens behind him. Each soul, the Chumburung say, is summoned into *Wuribware*’s presence before it is born into the world. There, one makes certain requests and promises as to ‘what one wishes to be’ in the forthcoming life. The Chumburung call this *kakra* (destiny). This explains why the Chumburung person thinks he or she cannot do anything to alter his or her destiny. Everything has been predetermined; they also say all souls return to *Wuribware*, after death. He is the final judge of all. *Wuribware* is believed to have a consort called *Nana Osweere*.

Marriage

Marriage among the Chumburung (Nchumuru) people of Ghana is structured as a communal contract deeply intertwined with patrilineal lineage, ancestral veneration, and agrarian socio-economics. Anthropological records heavily enriched by the 33-year ethnographic and linguistic fieldwork of researchers Keir and Gillian Hansford, show that marriage serves as a primary tool for kinship alliance and societal stability. Marriage among the Nchumuru is one of the rituals that bring the community together and increase group solidarity. It is regarded as a duty enjoined on everyone in the community or a religious obligation by means of which the community is renewed and re-energized.

For the Nchumuru, marriage is the focus of existence; hence, people who refuse to marry and procreate are frowned upon because they deny the ancestors the opportunity to be reborn. The Nchumuru say marriage is an obligation and they see it in the light of what Mbiti (1969:133) says, “.....marriage is a duty, a requirement from corporate society, and a rhythm of life in which everyone must participate. Otherwise, he who does not participate in it is a curse to the community, he is a rebel and law-breaker, and he is not only abnormal but under-human. Failure to get married under normal circumstances means that the person concerned has rejected society and society rejects him in return.”

There are different kinds of marriages known among the Nchumuru. An infant girl may be betrothed by a young man or by his parents on his behalf. There is also the pledging of daughters to a young man perhaps as a sign of gratitude for past favours (either by the youngman or a member of his family), or some virtues such as hard work or respect. This could take place at any place. The third type of marriage is where a young man sees the girl or woman he is interested in and informs his parents or relatives who start the negotiations. According to Nana Awaasa (2004), the Nchumuru abhor the situation where a woman proposes love to a man. This is unacceptable among the Nchumuru. Any woman who does this is branded a spoilt immoral and lustful person. It is forbidden to marry some people; a man is forbidden to marry his patrilateral cross cousin (father’s brother’s daughter). He cannot also marry his half sister, his wife’s sister or his paternal uncle’s daughter. However, he can marry his matrilineal cross cousin (mother’s brother’s daughter).

Marriage begins with the outdooing of courtship called *kebare kilee kawu*, which involves the giving of gifts to the girl’s family, usually in the form of drink and money. After this, one begs for the bride. A paternal aunt of the man usually performs this. After this stage, the date for a wedding is fixed. The wedding ceremony is usually done on *kekpawa* the 5th day or on *kpanya*, the 6th day of the six-day week. The bride price that the man pays to the woman’s relatives may include the following: Two giant-sized calabashes, yams, preferably 100 tubers, fish about a head pan full and other items. Presently, because of modernization the calabashes are replaced with suitcases including the bride’s clothing. The bride’s mother gives her, cooking utensils, soap and other household items. The bride’s father’s next of kin gives her a stool called *kakpaaragya* to symbolize her family’s continued concern for her. The bride’s head of family bless the marriage the next day, libation is poured to the ancestors who are called upon to witness and bless the marriage with children and prosperity. When all the rites in connection with the wedding are over the groom seals the marriage transaction by presenting drinks (usually two pots of *pito*) to the bride’s family as a token of his gratitude. Marriage therefore makes man or woman a creative and reproductive being, linking him or her with both the departed and the generations to come.

Death and Burial

Death and burial rites among the Nchumuru (a Guan ethnic group living primarily around Lake Volta in Ghana) serve as crucial sociological and religious mechanisms to transition the deceased into the ancestral realm. Death is seen as the most disrupting phenomenon of all in society. It is seen as an intruder of things in a society and therefore disturbs the equilibrium of nature, hence terminate marriages. However, it is not seen as the end to the process of life, but a transition from this earthly life into another (higher) level of existence. Like many African peoples, the Chumburung attribute every death to one of several causes, ranging from witchcraft, the ancestors and to the deities. The Chumburung will usually ask, “Who killed him?” and not ‘what killed him?’

The issue of natural death is almost unthinkable among the people. This means that although death is acknowledged as having come into the world and remained there ever since, it is unnatural and preventable on the personal level because it is always caused by another agent. As intimated by Mbiti (1969:156), if an agent does not occasion death an individual would not die. Nchumuru traditional mortuary rites are strictly systematic, operating in two primary phases. Burial takes place after the body has been washed, dressed up and laid in state in the case of a normal death. Close relatives with a new sponge, towel, soap, and calabash do washing. In the event of a bad death like somebody who dies with a swollen or bloated stomach, the body is buried shortly after it has been washed on dressed up by the Priest of the *Gyabuni*² cult or his accredited representative. For normal death, burial could take place much later after the body has been laid in state.

Chumburung Widowhood Rites

Widowhood rites are rites performed for surviving spouses upon the death of their married partners. These rites are observed among many African people, especially so within our Ghanaian context. The Chumburung word for widowhood is *kikpenle* and widowhood rites is *kikpenle kekra*. A widow is called *kpenlekyee* and her male counterpart *kpenlenyare*. *Kikpenle kekra* translates literally as widowhood keeping and it is the rites a widowed person undergoes in order to drive away the spirit of the deceased spouse from haunting him or her. Although widowhood rites are meant for both widows and widowers, among the Nchumuru, widowhood in practice is associated with the woman in most cases.

Funeral and Widowhood Rites

The foundation of Nchumuru funeral theology is anchored in their ancestral cult, known as *akyenjanpo kaaba* (the ghosts' bowl). The clan head is the absolute custodian of this sacred bowl, which is physically kept in his courtyard. Death is not viewed as a permanent rupture but as a transition. For an individual to join the *akyenjanpo* (ancestors) successfully, specific rites must be completed perfectly. If a family fails to perform these rituals, it is believed the stranded spirit will bring severe misfortune, illness, or crop failure upon the living relatives. The first funeral (burial phase) occurs immediately after death, the body is prepared and washed by ritual partners and direct relatives. Historically, traditional graves were dug with a circular interior chamber, sealed using a large earthen pot, and covered with packed earth. However, now burials are done with the use of modern caskets. Mourning periods vary strictly by gender: three days for a deceased male and four days for a female and seven days for a deceased chief, hunter, or clan head. The second or final funeral rites will take place much later, often deferred to the post-harvest dry season. Gathering the extended family requires months of planning, resource hoarding, and coordination with migrant family members. During this final stage, libation is poured over the *akyenjanpo kaaba* to formally integrate the deceased's spirit into the collective ancestral line.

Among the Nchumuru, widowhood rites begin the moment it is confirmed that one has lost his or her spouse. The woman or man is expected to be involved in any way possible in the funeral arrangements of his or her late spouse. If the surviving spouse is a female she loses her right to stay in her late husband's house immediately the funeral is over. The only exception to this rule according to Nana Fofie (205) is when the woman decides not to remarry or get involved with another man or old enough not to remarry. After the

² The Gyabuni cult is a god of war and protection introduced into the Nchumuru religious setup, to ward off evil and haunting spirits that assail an individual

funeral however, any surviving children in the marriage gain permanent access to their late father's house and any other property he might have acquired when he lived. Nana Awaasa (2004) intimates that in the past, the widow was remarried to the next of kin to the deceased who naturally performs the funeral of the deceased. Remarriage for any one of the surviving spouse is permissible only after the funeral has been performed.

Subjects of Widowhood Rites

To qualify to undergo the rites, a woman should have been properly married to the deceased. If this requirement is not met, the surviving spouse will be deemed unqualified by the relatives of the deceased to observe the rites. It should be noted that among the Nchumuru a dying man may tell his family members not to let his wife undergo the rites or vice versa, depending on the kind of relationship that existed between them while he lived. A caring wife may not partake in the rites but one who did not treat her husband well in marriage while he lived would have to undergo the rites, as a form of punishment for her misconduct. Since the last words of the dying are of great value in the Nchumuru traditional setting, his word for his family members would be observed to the latter. It appears from the foregoing that in most cases, the traditional rites of widowhood are meant to punish the widow but traditional practitioners are quick to dismiss that position and insist that the rites are meant to keep the balance in the cosmic space between the living and the dead.

Preparation for Widowhood Rites

When the death of the husband is confirmed, relatives and close friends are informed. Among the Chumburung, other family heads other than close relatives are also informed about the death. At this stage an immediate decision is taken to appoint someone, usually the *kyeegy*, an elderly woman of good repute, well versed in the traditional rites and who has herself undergone the rites from the deceased husband's family. She plays the role as the companion of the widow and later on as one of the officiant of the required widowhood rites. According to Senavoe (2001:39) the companion functions as one who steer the widow through the emotional and psychological trauma arising from the loss of her spouse. She supervises her eating and sleeping, indicates what she should do at stated times and guides her social interactions. She would also prompt her in instances where something significant was being overlooked. One of the respondent I interviewed, Nana Fofie (2005) who has had a personal experience told me that sometimes the period of widowhood is oppressive and unpleasant as possible for the widow.

The Experience of Widows

A marriage immediately ends when death strikes and one's identity is suddenly altered from that of a wife or husband to that of a widow or widower. According to Nana Fofie (2005), herself a participant in the rites told of her experience. She said hers was a tragic situation. This is what she told me, "My husband told me one evening he was going to cast his net at the riverside to come. In the next couple of hours, someone from there came to announce that my husband had been drowned in the river and is dead, unbelievable! And that was it." Several others have experienced similar situations in various degrees of magnitude. The effect of the death of spouses on respondents ranged from despondency to loss of orientation and sometime so much fear and anxiety.

Some even have expressed fruitlessness of their continuous existence, since they depended heavily on their late spouses. Through out my interaction with them, what I gathered was that most of them had hoped that their ailing spouses, according to Senavoe (2001:39) would have been spared 'the king of terrors.' Such is the experience of widows.

Aspects of the Widowhood Rites

Among the Nchumuru widowhood can last for several months, up until the final funeral rites of the deceased is performed. The period and process of widowhood starts as soon as the death of ones spouse is known. During this period the widowed person is expected to observe rites related to wailing, bathing, food, clothing and economic activity before and after the burial of the deceased. These rites commence soon after the death of the spouse and some of these rites are expected to deal with the uncleanness associated with widowhood. After the burial, the widow is brought back into the room. She is made to sit on a sheepskin while holding a blunt

matchet in her right hand. According to Nana Awaasa (2004), the widow is lowered three times on the skin. Each time she is told, *Fo kuri a wu ne nkee, fo e lee fo kikpenle kaase*, (meaning your husband is dead and you are now to start your widowhood confinement).

Afterwards she is helped to sit on the skin in the room and this begins the confinement. The duration could take several days, not less than one week. The *akyeegy* conduct the widowhood rites. These are elderly women, of good standing with the people and well versed in the traditional rites and who have themselves undergone the rites. Any woman who has not been widowed is not allowed to enter the room. Some women are selected from the widow's family to attend to her during the period of confinement. These women sleep in the same room with her. Between the period of confinement, the widow changes into white cloth, removes her waist beads, which are replaced with a strip of old cloth.

Wailing

The widow is expected to wail at dawn each day during the period of confinement for seven days. The widow is led to the bathroom each time amidst wailing, thus expressing her remorse or sorrow for the departed spouse. She continues to weep until her days of confinement are over. According to one of the respondent, I interviewed (a widow herself), when one wails it positively helps the one to release some of the pain she bears in this moment of fear and hopelessness.

Ritual Bath

In Chumburung widowhood rites, the ritual bath is a well-known rite. Miss Afua Mary (2004) one of the respondent I interviewed, related to me that the widow is expected to receive a cold bath three times daily, the first of which is to be taken very early in the morning at dawn. The ritual bath is meant to nullify or ward off evil spirits which are believed to have caused the death of the husband of the widow and to purge her of any *iyisi* (uncleanness), the defilement as Senavoe (2001:1) intimated that the death of a spouse is believed to bring and which may follow her to her subsequent marriage or marriages. One older respondent told me that sometimes the bath offers the widow the opportunity to break the boredom of sitting at one place for a long time, and to take some nourishment in the seclusion of her room. Among the Chumburung, widowhood rites tend to be more strictly enforced on widows than on widowers, because they say the woman's *kra*, which is soul is weak and hence needs to be protected.

Dietary Restrictions

Among the many respondents, I interviewed what seem to be consistent is that, there are no strict dietary restrictions the widow must observe. What is clear however is that for the first day of confinement due to the extreme sorrow the widow goes through she might not even have the appetite for food. The relatives of the late husband's family are responsible for providing food for the widow and her attendants. Relatives of the widow who are some of her attendants usually do the cooking.

There are however a few restrictions or taboos, which the Chumburung call *akisito* (taboo things). Some of the taboos are, when the widow's food is being cooked, no drumming and noise making is permitted within that vicinity. Any such noise making renders the widow's food uneatable by her. Greetings are prohibited around the same time. The widow does not also respond to greetings from outside of her room, if she did, it would mean disrespect for her late husband. When food meant for the widow falls unto the ground or flies fall into it, the widow does not eat it. These are interpreted by the Chumburung to mean signs of bad omen. They will say that it is the spirit of the widow's late husband who is punishing her by preventing her from eating, probably because of mal-treating him while he lived. Water for the widow is drawn at night from a riverside or any source, which is available. The widow eats before darkness falls, because it is believed that the spirits are active at night. This is to protect her late husband from putting his hand into her dish. A fellowship meal with the deceased might result in some serious problem such as a disease to the widow.

Clothing

Among the Nchumuru any type or colour of cloth is acceptable for mourning. Nana Fofie (2005) told me that

the black or red cloth used now for mourning are recent introductions into the Chumburung culture. What almost all the respondents generally mentioned, is that the type of cloth worn by the widow to commence the rites is what she uses throughout the period of confinement. The widow does not change into any other cloths until the period of confinement is completed. Ash is usually sprinkled on the head of the widow to protect her from any sexual intimacy with her deceased spouse, because the Chumburung believe strongly that there is a possibility of a spirit having such intimacy with a living person or being.

Coming out of confinement - Final purification

Before the last day of confinement, ash is sprinkled on the skin on which the widow sits and some sprinkled on her head. All this time she does not wear a headscarf. The Priest of the *Gyabuni* cult or his accredited representative prepares some herbs, which are put in a big calabash with water provided by the family of the widow. Her family also provides a sponge and soap. Some elderly women from her family who have themselves been widowed are made to shave her and bath her with water containing the herbs by using the sponge and soap and these things are destroyed after use. One respondent told me that after this, the widow now puts on clean and neat funeral cloths, which the Chumburung call *kale waagya*, this is normally black. After eating the food prepared her late husband's sister, she is formally discharged from confinement and at this point, her widowhood confinement is completed.

Nana Okose (2004) told me that the final purification rite is for the widow to have an affair or carnal knowledge with an unknown man and this she said must take place in a dark room at night. The widow according to her must under no circumstance whatsoever know that man facially. The widow after going through all these is now admitted into normal life. I am not very sure if this aspect of the widowhood rite is still being upheld by Nchumuru traditional society.

Economic activity

The widow is expected to suspend every activity that she normally engages in following the period after her confinement until the final funeral of her deceased husband has been performed. These will involve also any economic activities. Before she even comes out of confinement after the necessary purification rites are performed, she is not expected to handle money or even receive any monetary gifts. Any such gifts are to be handled by her companion or those administering the rites. If this is not applied, the Chumburung say that any money that will come to her afterwards will simply pass through her hands. It will not do her any good. She may also never be successful in any endeavour she engages herself in, especially in the area of economics or finance. Some widows and widowers I interviewed told me that such prohibitions could not apply to present day situation. They say that if their marriages have produced children how could they afford to stay on for longer periods without doing some work to be able to fend for the children, especially if they are still very young. One woman respondent was emphatic by saying that if my late husband did not leave any property behind after his death and there are children for me to take care of how can I stay on unnecessarily long without engaging in any economic activity. One of the elderly respondents by name Okyee Br̄sē Akyu (2004) said; "It is common knowledge now that nobody takes care of somebody's child anymore. The responsibility is mine and I must act within time." The reason being that some funerals take longer periods to be performed.

Remarriage

A year after the death of one's spouse, one who has been widowed is at liberty to marry again if he or she desires to, provided the deceased spouse's funeral has been duly performed. Originally, among the Nchumuru the next of kin to the dead man marries the deceased's surviving spouse. The next of kin normally performs the funeral of his late brother, cousin or uncle. Many respondents related to me that the practice is no more common today even though there are traces of it. This used to be the practice among the Nchumuru because they regard marriage of a woman to her husband as marriage into the larger family of that man. It is therefore a common practice that after the death of one's husband, the family of the deceased take responsibility to maintain the woman and the children until she remarries. In Chumburung culture and tradition, any remarriage with a widow usually attracts the payment of the full bride price by any suitor into that relationship if such a person is not connected in anyway to the late husband. The suitor must for a matter of necessity go to the family of the widow to perform all the customary rites required for the marriage to be contracted.

Remarriage by widowers is very common among the Nchumuru as compared with their female counterparts, however older men may choose not to remarry. Most widows I interacted with related to me that they would not enter into any relationship any longer, because they are not sure of what may happen the next moment. For some it is the fear of losing their husbands again. One of them who lost two husbands in two previous marriages informed me that she has had enough problems and for her enough is enough. During my interaction with a section of Christians at Kumdi, the issue that became clear was that most married couples in the church feared the consequences that might befall them should they fail to observe the rites, in the event of being widowed.

Traditional purpose of Widowhood Rites

Among the Nchumuru, widowhood rites are seen, traditionally, as a means of protection for the surviving spouses. In this section, my attention would be drawn to the various aspects of the traditional means of protection for widowed persons as pertains in the rites of widowhood among the Nchumuru.

Spiritual Protection

Spiritually, proponents of widowhood rites regard the rites as a means of warding off bad influences from evil spirits. As with many African peoples, the Chumburung believe that ancestors are the custodians of family law and possess the right to inflict punishment on offenders and reward the law-abiding. It is therefore submitted that if the rites are not observed, the ancestors would be offended and would bring upon the widow numerous problems to intercept her normal life, as a punitive measure.

Nana Ndese 1 (2004) told me that the ancestral spirits could be offended by the non-observance of widowhood rites. He said they could punish with death, bad omens, disease, and decline of business or some spiritual attacks. The deceased spirit, according to the Chumburung will also haunt the living spouse when the rites are not adhered to strictly. The Chumburung, like several African communities believe in the continuous existence of the dead, so every thing is done to offer the best spiritual protection for the surviving spouse. The rites are therefore, observed to ensure that the widowed person is spiritually fortified.

Moral Protection

Widowhood is a very vulnerable state. Under the pretext of comforting the widow, people can take advantage of her. Hence, traditional society makes it a taboo to have sexual relationship with a widow who has not completed her widowhood rites. According to Nana Fofie, the rites serve as protection for the widow against unsuspecting men who might want to exploit the widow under the cover of comforting her.

The *akyee gyi* who serve as the companions of the widow are assigned the responsibility of offering her their moral support. These *akyee gyi* who have themselves gone through similar conditions are better able to comfort and console her who is currently facing the same experience they had gone through before. Widowhood rites are carried out among the Nchumuru, with the aim of offering the widow the needed moral support, during the observance the rites.

Emotional Protection

Nana Awaasa (2004) related to me that it is appropriate that widows are given the requisite emotional protection from sorrow, fear and loneliness. According to him the death of a life partner, the thought of some unkind treatment from in-laws, the looming responsibility of the care of children and of the home and other related issues, could have severe effects on the widow and this could worsen her emotional stress.

Chumburung traditional society appoints people to attend to the widow during her period of confinement and these are expected to provide her the needed emotional support. The apostle Paul admonishes the Church in Romans 12:15 to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn. In Chumburung widowhood rites, sometimes the widow's companions who are supposed to be giving her some form of emotional support could subject her to some form of oppression during the period. The Church could provide alternative companions who would attend to the widow during this period.

Health Reasons

The professional health worker defines health as, 'freedom from medically defined disease and disability.' According to Senavoe (2001:43), becoming a widow is a very traumatic experience, which affects mental, emotional and psychological health. Some food prohibitions among the Chumburung for the widow during the period of confinement are strictly health related. The widow is prohibited from eating food that has fallen to the ground and food that flies have fallen into. Traditionally the Chumburung will not relate these food prohibitions to any health issue, but the truth about the health element is obvious.

Theological and human rights implications

Theological Implications

Widowhood rites among the Nchumuru people of Ghana often sit at a tense intersection between African Traditional Religion (ATR) and contemporary faiths like Christianity. In traditional belief, a husband's death disrupts the cosmic balance. The widow is often viewed as spiritually contaminated or tied to the deceased husband's spirit. The rites act as a theological mechanism for purification and severing this metaphysical bond. These rites are frequently enforced out of fear of angering the ancestors. Failing to perform them is seen as a sin against the spiritual community, potentially bringing curses upon the widow, her children, or the entire community. Christian theology emphasises that death breaks earthly marriages "until death do us part" and that Christ's blood provides ultimate purification. The insistence on traditional cleansing rituals creates a sharp theological conflict for Christian Chumburung women, forcing a choice between cultural identity and Christian orthodoxy.

Human Rights Implications

From a human rights perspective, many traditional widowhood practices, such as forced confinement, specific grooming rituals e.g., shaving the head, restriction of movement, or levirate marriage widow inheritance, directly infringe upon modern legal and ethical frameworks. Many practices are deeply gender asymmetrical; widowers rarely undergo the same rigorous, often degrading rituals as widows. This violates Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), officially adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 10, 1948, which prohibits degrading treatment. Widowhood rites are historically tied to the deprivation of property. Widows may lose access to their deceased husband's land and assets unless they comply with the rituals or accept a structural arrangement like being inherited by a brother-in-law. This violates economic rights safeguarded under regional frameworks like the Maputo Protocol, reached in July 2003 and formally known as the *Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa*, which subsequently entered into force on November 25, 2005 after receiving its required 15th ratification periods. Confinement and forced physical alterations breach the right to liberty and bodily integrity. In a modern legal context, Ghana's 1992 Constitution explicitly outlaws traditional practices that are injurious to the physical and psychological well-being of a person in the 1992 constitution in (Article 26(2)).

SUMMARY

The paper "*Bound by Tradition: Significance of Chumburung Widow Rites*" explored the cultural, spiritual, and social dimensions of widowhood rituals among the Chumburung ethnic group of Ghana. The paper examined the significance of Chumburung widowhood rites, demonstrating that these practices are not merely outdated customs but serve as a vital socio-religious framework for navigating loss, inheritance, and community continuity. The rites successfully transition the widow from the realm of the deceased husband back into the community of the living. The rituals protect the widow's status, clarify property rights, and redefine her role within the extended family structure. These cultural practices reinforce Nchumuru cosmic beliefs, ancestral reverence, and communal solidarity. While some contemporary critics view these traditions through the lens of modern human rights concerns, this study highlights their deep-rooted psychological and structural utility within Nchumuru society. Striking a balance between preserving cultural heritage and evolving to protect individual wellbeing remains the critical path forward for these indigenous rites.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Here are strategic recommendations that Traditional Authorities, Government Agencies, the Church, and Future Researchers could propose for a balance in cultural preservation with human rights and socio-economic support.

Traditional leaders should audit existing rituals to eliminate elements that induce physical discomfort, prolonged confinement, or psychological distress. The core spiritual objective, severing ties with the deceased can be maintained through symbolic, non-invasive alternative practices. Family heads and queen mothers should explain the purpose and expectations of each stage of the widowhood rites to the widow before they commence. This prevents confusion and reduces the psychological anxiety associated with strict traditional taboos. Chiefs and traditional councils must enforce local sanctions against family members who use the mourning period to dispossess widows of farmland, assets, or property, reinforcing customary support systems instead.

Local government bodies, such as District Assemblies and the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, should collaborate with traditional authorities to establish legal and social safety nets for vulnerable widows. Government supported agencies should offer legal aid to rural widows. Educational campaigns must be carried out to sensitize communities about existing national laws that criminalise dehumanising cultural practices.

Since many modern Chumburung widows navigate both traditional expectations and Christian doctrines, local churches should collaborate directly with traditional opinion leaders. Together, they can design structured Christian widowhood rites that respect the cultural context without violating Christian values. Churches should move beyond basic theological teaching and provide tangible welfare programmes, specialised counselling ministries, and micro-finance initiatives to help widows overcome the severe economic setbacks of the mourning period.

Future researchers should contrast Chumburung widowhood rites with neighbouring ethnic groups in northern and central Ghana to understand regional evolutions in customary law. Academic research should focus heavily on the unique psychosocial and economic impacts of these practices on younger widows, evaluating how modern employment demands clash with traditional confinement timelines.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Chumburung widowhood rites are not merely archaic customs; they are deeply embedded socio-cultural mechanisms that dictate the transition of a woman from a wife to a widow. As this paper has demonstrated, these rituals serve a dual purpose: they act as a spiritual conduit to sever the ties between the living and the deceased, while simultaneously reinforcing the patriarchal structures and communal cohesion of the Nchumuru people. While the rites offer a structured framework for grief and community reintegration, they also impose profound physical, psychological, and social restrictions that leave widows literally and figuratively "bound by tradition."

As contemporary forces like globalization, formal education, religious (church) institutions and human rights advocacy continue to permeate Ghanaian society; the Nchumuru community faces a critical crossroads. The future of these rites depend on a delicate balance: preserving cultural identity without compromising the dignity and fundamental rights of women. Ultimately, addressing the oppressive elements of these rituals requires internal community dialogue and evolutionary cultural shifts, ensuring that tradition serves to protect its people rather than entrap them.

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