

## Conceptions and Treatment of Widows in Billiri Society of Gombe State

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### **Abstract**

*Billiri Society is the home of the Tangale people of Gombe State. The Tangale are the original settlers of the society. The society like every society of the world had suffered the devastation from death that widowed many homes. The origin of widowhood in human society could have begun from time immemorial; possibly with the creation of the first couple in the Garden of Eden as stated in the Holy Bible. Since then widows have been found everywhere in the world. In each society widows existed and their conceptions and treatment are based on the cultural and religious perception of individual societies. Billiri Society is not an exception in the conceptions and treatment of widows. The conceptions and treatment of widows in Billiri Society is to be perceived against the background of the pre-Christian era, in accordance with the culture and religion of the Tangale people. The work examined the conceptions and treatment of widows in Billiri Society of Gombe State. The researcher focused on the causes of death and rituals, property inheritance, levirate marriage and certain widowhood challenges. The researcher adopted the descriptive approach which compared and analyzed the information received from respondents concerning the conceptions and treatment of widows in Billiri Society. The study revealed that the dead toll of men in the society is higher than that of the women, thereby presenting a high population of widows. It also revealed that most of the widows suffered from socio-economic insecurity as a result of difficulty in remarriage and lack of welfare provision from the government. This situation of widows calls for empowerment from various sectors.*

**Key words:** Billiri, Tangale, Death, Widowhood, Inheritance, population,

### **Introduction**

The Tangale people are the original settlers of the area known as Billiri Society. The society has a population 269,611 people as projected by the National Population Commission of Nigeria, 2015. The *Tangale* people form a large ethnic group in Gombe State. They occupy three out of the eleven local government areas of the State including Billiri, Kaltungo and Shongom. Billiri is the headquarters of the western Tangale, which is the study area; Kaltungo is the headquarters of the Eastern Tangale and Shongom is the headquarters of the

Southern Tangale. The Tangale people of Billiri Society claim to have migrated from *Yemen* in the Middle-East through *Ngazargamu* and *Kanem- Bornu Empire* to their present settlement. The Tangale of Billiri Society settled in clans generated from family lineages which later developed into the present seven districts of Billiri Society (*Banganje, Bare, Billiri, Kalmai, Tanglang, Tal* and *Todi*). They settled in separate locations which bore the names of the families that became the names of the clans and the districts. The Tangale had a highly developed culture of protecting women and widows among them. Women were seen as subordinates of men and widows as women who needed protection. Widows in that society were very few because they engaged in levirate marriage with relations or remarriage with non-relations. Only widows with bad characters like disobedience, witchcraft or sorcery remained long in widowhood since people feared to marry them.

### **Causes of Death in the Pre-Christian Billiri Society**

Factors such as accidents, tribal wars, infections and unseen forces caused the death of individuals who were mostly men. The Tangale believed in the existence of evil spirits or demons which could not be seen by people (referred to as *soro*). These usually killed people, especially women with children who were warned not to go to certain areas at odd times for fear of spirits snatching their children. They also believed that there is a certain power in the sorcerer or the witch (referred to as *ogo*), which mystically went to the person it wanted to kill and stole his soul (Hall 63, 71, 76).

### **Widow and Rituals:**

The traditional conceptions of a woman as a widow began on the day her husband died. This was followed with certain rituals that were strictly to be observed by the widow. She continued in widowhood from the day the husband was buried until when levirate marriage took place or she remarried. Widowhood marks a new beginning in a woman's life (George 155); for the observation of rituals is a new experience to a woman who loses a spouse. Keister is like George would also conceive widowhood as a marital status a woman gains once her spouse dies (433). Rituals performed and observed at the death of a husband as valued in African culture formed part of the cultural values in pre-Christians Billiri society. There were two main types of rituals; the burial and widow rituals. The burial rituals included the slaughter of certain animal using its skin symbolically as cloth for his dress in the afterlife; bow and quiver as weapons of the man; and these were placed beside the corps in the grave. Before the grave was covered, an elderly member of the family bade good bye to the deceased man.

Tadi explains that in his parting words, the elderly member of the bereaved family bade good bye to the corpse as it was being lowered into the grave. He took a calabash with scoop earth (*hil-Pure*) and poured it into the grave, followed with the words: "Go well and not to come back and torment the living" (30).

The rituals observed by the widow included the use of brown/red stone powder known as 'Kulj', an Inter-woven rope, a wooden spoon known as 'Sara', used separate eating utensil and loosened or shaved her hair. The rituals performed by the widow first, it served as a way of hiding the identity of the widow from the ghost of the deceased husband who may still like to be close to his wife. Second, it also made the widow to be identified by sympathizers who came for condolence at a glance. The loosening or shaving of the hair was a sign of sorrow over the loss of her husband. All these rituals were carried out as last respect

accorded the departed husband and relative. There was the belief that the deceased man's ghost hanged around to see how well his family, especially the wife honoured him in performing all the rituals meant for the deceased husband.

In Billiri Society of Gombe State of Nigeria, death rituals and mourning are inseparable. Before the inception of Christianity in Billiri society (1929), emotional mourning by the widow for the dead husband usually began as the corpse was carried to the grave; a period when the whole family and sympathizers wailed. During the mourning period the elderly women and friends of the widow played a great role in counseling and consoling the widow. They encouraged her to eat, settle down from her tears and also helped her to bath. The elderly women taught her what to do as demanded by a bereaved family. Mourning the death of a relation especially the husband and the youth emotionally, is a global practice that no society ignores; especially when the deceased had been supporting and caring to the family and the society or community

### **Levirate Marriage**

In the traditional Billiri society, levirate marriage was not so much restricted to the closest relative, but could be carried out with extended family members. The desire for more children in the clan and family was the main motive behind levirate marriage. The moment the funeral ceremony was over, the widow adopted levirate marriage, especially the young widow through whom children could be gotten. Unlike some African Societies where a widow has to undergo some cleansing test before adopting levirate marriage (Brian 212, 213), the pre-Christian Billiri Society did not suspect the widow of any infectious disease because the society was one in which every family had to be culturally discipline

Ankurma (2005) explains that the value of levirate marriage was in most cases the procreation of children. This was why the young widow was desired more than the older one; for children were the backbone of the society. Sons served as defenders of the society in times of war or civil crisis; they also served as cheap labour on farms. The more children a man had the more yields he got from his farm and the more he was respected. The Tangale people like other African societies were not ordinarily poor. They lived their life in plenty from various sources. (Ankurma 43, 58). Tadi in consensus with Ankurma confirmed that agriculture was the bed rock of traditional Tangale economy and that was why food was not a problem to the society and the widow (18).

### **The Conceptions and Treatment of Christian Widows**

Christian widows in Billiri Society practiced Christian norms. With the inception of Christianity in Billiri Society in 1929, the Tangale people embraced the Christian religion and practices. This was also the period when traditional practices were phased out from most people. Men were expected to love and care for their wives while women on the other hand were to be respectful to their husbands (Eph 6:33). Women played their gender roles to the benefit of the family as expected of Christian women. Women shared properties raised by the couple and utilized it for whatever purpose they may have had in mind. But like in every society, families had always been widowed by death which marks the beginning of Widowhood.

### **Causes of Death in Christian Billiri Society:**

Factors that predispose Christian women to widowhood in Billiri Society included terminal illness such as Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency

Syndrome(HIV/AIDS) gotten through indiscriminate sexual relationship; cancer and hepatitis which are commonly gotten from excessive intake of alcohol and smoking; substance taking like marijuana, whisky and tramadol and attack from insurgents like the cattle Fulani and Boko-Haram who destroy crops and kill farmers in Billiri Society of Gombe State. These widowed many homes leaving women and children in miserable conditions.

Ritual that could be associated with death and Christian widows in Billiri Society include the Christian tradition of burial where the Clergy took scoop earth poured into the grave after the corpse had been placed, with the concepts- “earth to earth, ash to ash, and dust to dust”; and the widow attire which in most cases is black in colour signifying sorrows. Christian widows sometimes remain indoors for three months after the burial, mourning the death of their husbands.

### **Inheritance of Property**

Christian widows in contemporary Billiri society are to some extent denied the inheritance of property left behind by their husbands, especially when the relations of the deceased husband are not all Christians. The unbelieving relations consider the widows as being covetous over their dead relative’s properties (Informant from Tanglang District). The researcher would rather conclude that the unbelieving members of the family tend to apply the pre Christian culture of denying widows property inheritance in the affairs of bereaved Christian families. This attitude of the unbelieving relatives usually rendered the widows and their children impoverished and devastated in life. They only survive by engaging in manual labour to earn their living.

Christian widows are sometimes required to accept levirate marriage with unbelieving or married relations of the deceased husbands in order to benefit from the property left behind. Widows who do not cooperated are ejected from their marital homes. Widows are sometimes denied participation in discussing the assets of their diseased husbands so as to grab the assets; forgetting that some of these assets were gotten through the joint efforts of the couple as demanded by Christian ethics.

In an interview with a widow in one of the districts, the researcher was made to know that she was deprived of her husband’s properties even though she was left with many children to manage. According to her, the husband left both material and landed properties but she had to hire land to weed for their survival. Another widow interviewed in the same district explained that when her husband died, all his properties disappeared. Yet, another widow lamented how she ejected from her husband’s house and denied assets because she did not give birth to a baby boy; hence she had to hire a house to live. The source of property grabbing from Christian widows in Billiri Society is syncretism employed by certain Christian in-laws in the succession of a deceased relation’s property; for customs have crept into Christianity thereby creating a room for property grabbing. Again, culture, poverty and greed from the part of the deceased husband’s relations could be considered as the causes of denying a Christian widow the inheritance of property.

Constant experiences of widows’ denial of property in contemporary Billiri Society forced widows to seek for legal assistance in the Law Courts. The steps taken by widows in Billiri Society in order to inherit property attracted the reaction of the production of a document that would caution the courts in entertaining cases filed by widows concerning property inheritance (Usman 11, 12)

### **Factors Responsible for Growth in Widow Population**

The Christian church in Billiri Society has not given room for widows to engage in levirate marriage. Christian widows with grown up children could remain in the guardianship of their sons while the younger ones may remarry or decide to remain unmarried. Widowers and the youth who could have married the younger widows fail to do so for fear of being infected with the common epidemic HIV/AIDS, especially when the dead husband suffered from a protracted illness. Christian widows who have younger children to care for find it difficult to remarry. A widow who loved to remarry concluded that marrying a widower who already has children will create more problems for her; hence she decided to remain with her children (informant).

### **Discussion**

Christianity which brought new doctrines and culture is responsible for the poor treatment of widows in Billiri Society by way of discouraging the traditional culture which protected widows through levirate marriage and polygamy. The coming of Christianity with her practices though encouraged love and care for the needy; but it also developed insensitivity in the society through the culture of marrying one wife, which led to nuclear family settings. This new cultural transformation destabilized the initial Christian ethics of caring for the needy as taught by the missionaries in their teachings..

Weichold ascribed changes in society as cultural transformation which affects different areas of human endeavour (2-3). The truth is that over the years, Billiri Society adopted strange cultural practices in religion, farming, education and business. The socio-cultural organization of the people changed from community to town life with new form of family life where people settled in mixed societies based on their religious or business affiliations. With this development widow protection disappeared to some extent. People became more committed to their own nuclear families than caring for extended relations even though Christianity teaches love and care for others. This shows that the society adopted new form of life that has become difficult for widows who are growing in population every time.

Interaction with people from different cultures brought about the Human Immunodeficiency Virus and the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS). The epidemic though a global issue, it widowed more homes in Billiri Society than any other factor; leaving many widows sick and dreaded by men who would have loved to marry them. Brian explained that among the Luo of Kenya, for a widow to be engaged in levirate marriage she must undergo widow cleansing through sex with a non-relation of the deceased husband traditionally before she is accepted in levirate marriage (212,213). Widows in Christian Billiri Society face the challenge of procreating fatherless children through promiscuity as a solution to their predicaments of socio-economic insecurity; a practice which has brought shame and disgrace to many Christian homes and the church. The consequences of procreating fatherless children in the Society is the formation of delinquents who have nothing doing than to cause problems in the society; since they have no male parents that could cater for their education and subsequent developmental engagements that can groom them.

Widow Re-marriage is also another widowhood challenge in Christian Billiri Society. Levirate marriage was the practice of marrying a deceased relation's widow in pre-Christian Billiri Society, for the purpose of protecting her and the children or having more children for the family. This practice was strong in pre-Christian Billiri Society because it was the culture, but it is now extinct in the Christian society. The widow with grown up children

remains in the guardianship of her sons, while the younger ones may remarry or decide to remain unmarried. To engage in levirate marriage as an unmarried young man usually resulted into humiliation from fellow youths and since the society is a Christened society it is virtually very difficult for a widow to have levirate marriage within the family circle with relations of the deceased husband who are already married. With this development widow protection has disappeared to some extent.

Sequent to the factors militating against widow remarriage, the population of Christian widows in the past two decades has grown high. A census of Christian widows carried out by the researcher for the period of five years (2011-2015) has shown that there were 12,673 Christian widows of different age grades ranging from 25-60 years' Most of the widows depend on substance farming for survival. Few among them are retirees and petty trader. These widows have children to care for their feeding, shelter, health and education.

### Conclusion

The causes of death in the pre-Christian period were few compared to those of the Christian Billiri Society. Major causes of death in the Christian Billiri Society included poor health care, substance taking, HIV/AIDS, cattle Fulani attacks and civil crisis among farmers.

Widows in the traditional society mourned for seven days because they were protected by their society. Christian widows mourned for a long period because of the presumed situation of their socio-economic insecurity.

Widow population in Christian Billiri Society grew as a result of death toll caused by technological development in weapons, hard drugs; difficulties in remarriage, Christian teaching against polygamy levirate marriage.

### Recommendations

1. The high population of widows in Billiri Society presupposes widows need empowerment for sustainability
2. The Government of Gombe State, Billiri Local Government can directly or indirectly legislate provision for widows through loans for business in marketing, fertilizer for farming, free education for their wards, free health care for their families, establish entrepreneur centres for training of the widows on self-reliance or provide monthly allowance for them.
3. The Church too can engage in spiritual counseling, teaching on remarriage between widowers and the unmarried youths, especially the younger widows who had a short-lived marital life; making use of the health personnel who are their members in guiding them to undergo medical examinations before remarriage.
4. The Church teaching should serve as diversion therapy for the doctrine of monogamy.
5. The Church can organize ways of supporting and empowering the widows through the youths, in helping them in washing, cleaning, fetching water and weeding on their farms in addition to the usual provision of money or food materials.
6. Charity groups available in the society can also empower the widows variously.

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