

## **Christian Perception on Widows' Sexuality among *Abanyole* of Emuhaya, Western Kenya**

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**Abstract:** Widows the world over suffer marginalization and discrimination. Sexuality is one of the areas in which widows are discriminated. A global survey on the sexual situation of widows reveals that there is a general infringement on widows' sexuality in many traditions and cultures. This is because most cultures have a patriarchal view of sexuality. Hence, the powerlessness of many widows to exercise real choice in many subsequent relationships and vulnerability to male deception manifested in sexual harassment and related exploitations. Retrogressive and inhuman cultural practices that widows have to undergo and the general sexual situation depict gender power play. As a result many governmental organizations and non-governmental organizations and individuals have risen to the occasion to facilitate women's and widow's empowerment. The third MDG clearly articulated an ambitious quest which calls for a collective responsibility. Christianity was founded on the basis of Jesus' preaching that promised above all other things freedom for the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19). Consequently, this study, sought to examine the Christian Perception on Widows' sexuality among the *Abanyole* of Emuhaya, Western Kenya. The aim of the study was to determine the Christian perception on widows' sexuality among *Abanyole* of Emuhaya by examining Christian perception on widows' sexuality. Making sense of the data was aided through frameworks of Feminist Perspectives, Gender Sexuality over the Life Course, sexual script, liberation theology and social reconstruction to construe theology as an ongoing, emergent and indispensable epistemological axiom for authentic Christian praxis. A descriptive design and survey method were used in the collection, measurement and analysis of data from a population of 4,624 widows. Purposive sampling method was employed to draw a sample for the study. Interview schedules, Focused Group Discussion and literature reviews were used to collect data. The findings were descriptively presented as narrated themes. This study established that *Abanyole* Christians have a syncretic perception of widows' sexuality that draws heavily on the prevailing traditional culture which is characteristically male-centered stigmatizing females. The research recommends that the church among *Abanyole* engage the culture in light of its teaching to avert female subjugation that characterizes widow sexuality.

**Keywords:** Widow, Sexuality, Christian, Perception, Church, widowhood, Culture, Gender, Trajectory, Bible, women, sex.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

This work is part of a study entitled Christian Perception on Widows' Sexuality among the *Abanyole* of Emuhaya, Western Kenya, carried out among *Abanyole* of Emuhaya, Western Kenya between April 2016 and April 2017. Christian perception on widows' sexuality formed the crux of the study. The study sought to establish Christian perceptions on widow's sexuality among the *Abanyole* of Emuhaya, Western Kenya. Thus, this paper presents the findings on the opinions and perceptions of Christians, both laity and clergy among the *Abanyole*, on the widow sexuality phenomenon.

Widowhood is an ancient phenomenon. However, it is only in the recent past that social scientists, researchers and civil rights activists have begun to investigate their plight that is gender based. This has come to the fore through the effort of women in academia seeking to investigate and highlight the experiences of other women within their particular contexts. One of the areas of concern for the widows highlighted has been their sexuality. Owen concludes a chapter on 'Sex and Sexuality' in her book, *A World of Widows*, by observing that,

Sex is part of life; sexuality is part of the makeup of every man and woman. Many traditions, customs and attitudes to do with widows are linked to a patriarchal view of a woman's sexuality as being either the property of a man, or else to be ignored. From these attitudes has risen a whole culture of discrimination and suppression of women's creative potential throughout her life (1996, 80).

Owen's sentiments are in tandem with those raised in *An International Journal on Sexual and Reproductive Health*. In an effort to understand the experiences and challenges faced by widowed and divorced

women, a research carried out in Oromiya, Ethiopia showed that women experience high levels of community stigma in relation to their sexuality (Newton-Levinson, Winskell, Abdela, Marce, & Rob, 2014).

The plight of widows in general and particularly that which relates to their sexuality has often been overlooked in academic research and writing (Newton-Levinson, Winskell, Abdela, Marce, & Rob, 2014). Owen (1996) carried out a global survey on the situation of widows' sexuality. She generally noted many sexual injustices against widows in all cultures of the world. She established that the western and developed societies showed a little better situation of the widows' sexuality due to women's economic and political independence. But just like those in most of the societies in Asia, Caribbean and Africa, they still find themselves in humiliating and distressing situations.

Among the Asian communities, Owen (1996) discovered that traditional responses to widowhood are intended to draw a curtain over her sexuality and make her into a non-sexual being. This idea, as Nyaundi (2003, 126-127) recounts, is well illustrated by a practice where a widow may offer herself to be burned alongside her husband's corpse as the highest form of devotion. Other widows' among the Indians and Muslim communities out of intense fear of 'uncontrollable' sexual desires commit themselves to religious duties concealing their femininity not to attract or 'tempt' men.

In Latin America the fate of sexual desire for widows is long sealed. Their religious upbringing makes them asexual as they age. They are socialized to equate sexual expression with temptation and sin. Others refrain due to their frustrations from their previous union. Still others are afraid of the mockery from their children if they enter a new relationship. This leaves the widows without a choice about their bodies and their sexuality except to embrace 'celibacy'.

Owen observes that patriarchal societies hold that sexual activity for women was allowed only within marriage institution yet no one bothered about men's sexual expedition. She found many of such traditions worldwide. Widows living without men to cover them as head of household became easy targets for sexual innuendo and sexual assault. She explains that sexuality of widows has evolved into a taboo from "religious and cultural inhibitions which hold either that widows should have no sexual desires or needs whatsoever, or that the sexuality is so rapacious that it must be stringently controlled lest it ensnare susceptible men. Widows thus must be forcibly incarcerated in institutionalized celibacy or be taken over in remarriage or other sexual union by the dead husband's kin" (1996, 72).

Potash (1986) demonstrates the status of widows in African societies. She illustrates how widows in Africa have limited or no choices to make relating to their sexual life. This is due to the patriarchal view of widows' sexuality that places it squarely in the hands of their male who exploit it to their own ends.

Magesa (1997) ably demonstrates that in African societies sex is jealously guarded under male custody as it increases and propagates life force. Similarly, he shows that in African communities, bride price seals marriage that even death does not break. This ensures the status of women and guarantees her needs, including sexual needs in her husband's family.

Kirwen's (1979) study of leviratic marriage in African communities reveals how widows' sexuality is discriminately abused. The widows' sexuality is viewed from a patriarchal perspective subjecting them to 'uncontrolled' sexual appetites of men. Hence, as Shisanya (2006) demonstrates through her research on the widow sexual cleansing rite among the Luo, such cultural practices places widows to luminal status denying them control over their sexuality.

Emuhaya District's Development Plan 2008-2012 identified HIV/AIDS, retrogressive cultural practices, and gender inequality as detrimental to the district's development. The plan cites wife inheritance and neglect of the girl child as examples of such practices. It goes ahead to elucidate that 21.5% of the households in Emuhaya District are headed by widows and widowers of which widows are the majority. Mutongi reporting of the neighboring Maragoli's notes that, "Families headed by widows constitute a large proportion of families in Africa: nearly 30 percent of adult women in Africa today are widows. And for fairly clear reasons, Maragoli has suffered some of the higher rates of widowhood in Kenya" (2007, 4). The Abanyole face similar factors that aggravate widowhood among the Maragolis. This is even complicated by the revelations that in-laws are becoming less willing to inherit the widows of their relatives because of the economic burden of supporting the widow and her family, as well as the risk of acquiring HIV from the widow. (Ambasa-Shisanya, 2007; Agot, 2005) This may explain Emuhaya's higher HIV/AIDS prevalence compared to the national one.

It is worth noting that *Abanyole* Christians are a mixed grill of traditional, Christian and Western beliefs, attitudes and practices. However, as Mbiti (1969, 1) alludes, the religious aspect wields the most influence on the thinking and living of *Abanyole* people as is the case with most of the peoples of Africa and the world. Bunyore is extremely religious and for that matter Christian, going by the number of churches and people who flock therein every Sunday. Even those who do not attend any church worship service identify with one by virtue of the immediate family's membership. Therefore no one among the *Abanyole* is without church membership and no one thinks of them self as an atheist.

As a result it is impolite to inquire on whether one is a Christian or not in Bunyore. The question is normally, which denomination one subscribes to. This is true even with the Islamic faith making inroads into Bunyore. Its adherents are statistically insignificant while there are no acclaimed African traditionalists among the *Abanyole*. Suffice it to say that Bunyore and its people, the *Abanyole* are Christian in their way of life.

That notwithstanding, it is a notable fact that the degree of commitment to one's profession is important. It has ably been demonstrated that Christianity in Africa is one mile long and one inch deep (Kapolyo 2007). Those who have made such conclusion say that Christian profession and spirituality demonstrated by the majority of Africans does not translate into their daily living. In times of trouble, it is not uncommon to find well-meaning Christians seeking solutions from very 'unchristian' sources. And more often than not, solutions are sought from traditional culture which prescribes solutions that are 'contrary' to Christian profession.

The claim also relate to the knowledge and understanding of Christian faith by the majority of Africans. There is a general observation that Christian faith has not been fully apprehended by the majority of Africans. Little effort has been made to enable African Christian to interact with the Christian Scripture to draw lessons and teachings that are true to the scripture and relevant to their contexts. The gap is such that Africans remain alien to the practice of a faith they have professed for over a century. They do not feel authentically Christian hence revert back to traditional African way of life which seems to resonate with their quests. This the Most Reverend Dr. Byrum A. Makokha, the arch-bishop of COGEA (K) vividly illustrated while preaching on the closing service of the National Convention of the Women of COGEA (K) 2016 at Kima. He cited a case where even pastors reverted to traditional ways of dealing with cases such as burying those who commit suicide.

In addition, the various shades of Christianity stir up the already mucky waters. Missionary, African Initiated and Neo-Pentecostal Christianities differ in their teaching and practice on key issues. Apart from the Roman Catholic Church that has official belief on specific matters communicated from the Holy See, the rest do not seem to have established positions. Or their position is rarely effectively communicated to the entire following. This leaves room for 'unorthodox' positions in belief and practice of the Christian faith. Or worse still, opens up a *lacuna* for strange practices. This study was undertaken conscious of such situation among the *Abanyole* Christians.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Descriptive data was acquired using a qualitative methodology from the respondents who comprised of purposefully sampled *Abanyole* widows, church leaders and other opinion leaders living in Emuhaya and from libraries. Interview schedule, Focused Group Discussion and literature review instruments were employed in data collection. The resultant primary and secondary data generated were perceived through Feminist Perspectives, Gender Sexuality over the Life Course, sexual script, liberation theology and social reconstruction theoretical and conceptual frameworks and themes drawn thereof for discussion as they emerged. The following themes stood out deserving a deeper consideration: Sex and the Bible, Women and the Bible, Widowhood in the Bible, the Contemporary *Abanyole* Christian perspectives on widowhood, Widows in the church today, and Sexuality of Widows: A quest for identity.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Christian Perception on Widows' Sexuality**

Christian community is both a spiritual and a physical gathering of the saints. This dual nature of the church has been emphasized in Bible. As a spiritual gathering it is mainly concerned with salvation in eschatological sense while its physical nature addresses itself to the here and now redemptive work of God as espoused in Luke 4:18. The concern of this study focuses on the later. Alela (2007) and Obwoye (2011) have not only demonstrated that social concern is part of the mission of the church but also that the church is strategically positioned to fulfill this noble mandate. They both report of dilapidating socio-economic situation of women in Emuhaya. Their studies recommend that the church should do more in establishing its adherents in this region economically. Their studies are very enriching though not explicit on the situation, especially sexuality, of widows who flock these churches.

Kassily (2004) implores the church to take cues from the gender and status power revolutionary Jesus' earthly ministry to re-orient its own. She opines that Jesus' revolutionized attitudes on women should characterize the church and by extension, the society within which the church operates. She argues that Christian women need to reexamine the scriptures and participate in continuing synthesis of their past situation and present opportunities as opposed to welcoming dogmas and biblical interpretations imposed on them by some churches and theologians. They should instead yield to the ongoing contextual illumination of scripture.

In the same way, a professor of Practical Theology at the University of Pretoria, Yolanda Dreyer underscores the ongoing duty of the Christian church in creating a conducive and humane living environment by embracing continual theologizing. He reiterates that,

In order for human beings to create a "humane" society, critical theologians find it important to remain suspicious of a dehumanizing status quo. In order to open up the possibility of authentic humanity for all people it is necessary to be aware that constructs and social patterns are human creations, not God-given structures. Therefore they have the potential to do harm or be evil. A dehumanizing system will affect those with less and those with more power: "When the systems operative in a culture are demeaning and dehumanizing, a vicious circle is set in motion in which women and men are prevented from developing the full humanity to which they are called. At the same time fractured humanity is incapable of creating a society that is truly human." Postmodern philosophy and theology create awareness of the harm that is done when human constructs are purported to be God-given and unchanging (Dreyer, 2008, 522).

Conversely, Maseno (2014) through her extensive study on widows' experiences and the accruing Christology outline their experience as uncovering, lack of assistance, loneliness and loss of significant relationship. She seems not to have encountered sexuality as an issue or chose to treat it as a non-issue, widows chose not to talk about it or it is tabooed.

The Bible carries several episodes that relate to widows and their sexuality. Two from the Old Testament stand out: Tamar (Genesis 38) and Ruth (in the Book of Ruth in the Bible). These stories reflect both a demand for justice in already established inequitable system and a ridicule of false self righteousness in a male subjugated society. Both cases celebrate the widows for their initiative that gives them a name in their hitherto unjust culture. These women were willing to go against the grain by initiating a process for their justice. In a nutshell, the Old Testament culture demonstrates the need and a culturally sound provision for widows meeting the sexual needs.

The New Testament, especially Pauline Epistles, seem to give uncritical praise of widows remaining celibate in its handling of widows and their bodies. There is a seeming discrimination on widows who remarry or engage in other form of quasi-marriage when it came to the inclusion on the roll for material care of widows (1 Timothy 5: 9-10). Younger widows are portrayed as sensuous in pursuit for self gratification hence, unfit for Church work and care. Paul advises Timothy to have these ones remarry as a way to tame them (1 Timothy 5: 11-15). The way through which these widows are to remarry is not prescribed.

However, the story of Ann, the prophetess, hails a young widow for her life of celibacy. She lived with her husband for only seven years. Celibacy is herein demonstrated as an epitome of religious discipline. The story is climaxed by insinuating that celibacy was the basis for her seeing baby Jesus (Luke 3:36- 38). The story demonstrates that sensuality is not about age. Even young widows are able to commit to church work. But the manner in which they perceive and meet their sexual needs is of concern to us.

Nyengele (2004) writes about Africa feminist theology. She describes it as a liberation theology whose preoccupation is a freer society where men and women live and related with one another without oppression. It explores and exposes issues of gender discrimination in African culture that oppress and demean male and female humanity. Furthermore, African feminist theology seeks the liberation of both men and women as for the entire creation in order to effectively participate in progression of the creation. She notes that the recurring themes in African Feminist Theology as:

1. Male domination of family relations
2. Cultural expectations of marriage and motherhood
3. Gender factors affecting women's mental health
4. Unequal distribution of work in the household
5. Discrimination in education and economics
6. Violence against women and the issues of women's silence; and,
7. Neglect of women's individuality.

Nyengele (2004) thus establishes, as a matter of fact, that families and societies subject women to suffering. She explains that societal and family values and practices subjugate and downgrade women to the margins. It is interesting to see how these issues play out among the *Abanylole* Christians, especially relating to widows.

## **FINDINGS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Sex in the Bible and in Christian Thought**

This study established that sex was a very important part of *Abanylole* life that carried a lot of meaning and significance. This belief led to the intense training and caution undertaken in its administration and management. This research work pursued this train of thought to find out what the Bible teaches about sex and the degree to which it was acknowledged by the respondents. The probing was also to examine the impact of such teachings and acknowledgement to widows' sexual life.

Generally, it was observed that majority of respondents had limited knowledge of the Bible teachings on widows' sexual life. This was evident as they misquoted texts, displayed lack of knowledge at all, ignored context, failed to differentiate between didactic (prescriptive) and descriptive passages and read their general

(tribal) knowledge into the Bible. Others felt that the Bible is not a place to seek for such information. Both the clergy and laity seemed to grope in darkness over the biblical position on widows' sexuality. In general, *Abanyole* Christians hold on a patriarchal perception that generally subjugates women.

The Bible which is the authority of Christian faith is foundational in development and dissemination of its teachings. It contains two covenants: the Old and the New Testaments. The first starting out with a universal fit and narrowing down to a specific people group, while the second has a local setting but with universal point of view. It is important to 'see' how the respondents perceive the phenomenon under study from a biblical perspective.

### ***Sex in Old Testament***

The Old Testament concept of sex is imbedded in the Jewish way of life. It is portrayed as the deepest and most intense of human fellowship that is preserved for a marital context and more often as a means to procreation. The Jewish people revered this expression of intense human fellowship as sacred. Igboin cites Adamo to aver that euphemistic linguistic characterization of sex, sex organs and related sex activities in the Old Testament explains the importance and sacredness of the function of sex in ancient Israel. He observes its sacredness and mysteriousness in its functions as a means of procreation, perpetuation and oath-taking (Genesis 24: 2-3, 9 cf. 47:29). Hence, indicative that "sex organs are authentically symbolic, mysterious, sacred, powerful and fearsome" (Igboin 2011, 351)

Unlike the *Abanyole* who espouses exogamous marriage the Bible seem to encourage endogamy. The tribe of the people of God is encouraged to marry close relatives, especially cousins. While those who marry from the neighboring communities become liable of sin or their wives perceived as foreigners and duly discriminated against (Genesis 24; 27:46ff; Numbers 12:1; Ezra 9 &10). Hence, impure sexual relationship would also constitute marrying a foreigner as illustrated in the passages of the book of Ezra which is sinful and attracts God's wrath.

The standard of sexual purity in the Bible is so high (Exodus 20:17b). It is not just the sexual act but even the imagination and a lustful gaze at an individual constitutes sexual impropriety. Job (31:1-12) relates of his life of chastity. He notes of his covenant to be true to God by checking on his morality. That he resists a temptation to lustfully glance at a woman or to be enticed of a woman or to lurk in search of his neighbor's wife.

Adultery is a "sexual intercourse ... of a man, married or unmarried, with the wife of another" (Douglas 1987, 19). It is one of the sexual pervasion that the Old Testament sternly warns against. The book of Exodus lists it in the Decalogue as one of the sins that Israelites must desist from in order to maintain their covenant relationship with God (20:14). In Leviticus 20:10-16, a death penalty is pronounced against the culprits of adultery, incest, homosexuality, and bestiality, in order to cleanse sin from among the people of God. Other related sins like incest and defilement were to be punished through banishment and barrenness (Leviticus 20:17- 21). Proverbs 5 warns against adultery. The Old Testament strongly advises against this sin that seems to be so powerful in bringing down kingdoms. The advice notes that sexual pervasion is so enticing yet is a sure path to destruction. It draws and wastes ones strength and resources. It then reduces one into slur of desolation and regret of having despised discipline. Finally, the reader is exhorted to choose discipline by drawing sexual satisfaction from within a marital bond which is blessed.

The book of Song of Solomon balances the Old Testament view on marriage, sex and sexual activity. The book centers on the "joys and distresses of the love relationship between a man and a woman". Among many other interpretations and views held about this master-piece is the fact that it "presents the purity and wonder of true love." It, thus, teaches "the holiness and beauty of the marriage-love relationship that God ordained" (Douglas 1987, 956-957). Hence, the integral place of the divinely designed intense emotional release that results in mutual satisfaction that is meant to sooth and renew the parties involved.

The Old Testament prescribes marriage as the befitting context for sex (cf. Genesis 2:18, 25). It is demonstrated to be the most revealing of relationships that requires an assuring security wall. Such a wall, in this context, can only be provided for by marriage which ensures both parties, especially the woman, of protection from abuse.

Such is demonstrated in the legal provisions and reprimands relating to sex, marriage and family in the Old Testament. The Old Testament provides regulations upholding virginity, according punishment to sex pets who rape young virgins (Deuteronomy 22:13-30) or misuse them (Exodus 22:16-17), governing divorce and remarriage (Deuteronomy 24:1-4), the right of the first born (Deuteronomy 21:15-17), against unlawful sexual relations [sex with a married woman, a close relatives, either through blood or by marriage, and related women] (Leviticus 20:10-21; Exodus 20:14, 17b), same sex relations, and sex with animals. Such acts are portrayed to defile the land and attract God's wrath against its inhabitants. Hence, the culprits must be punished; otherwise the entire people face the wrath of God (Leviticus 18).

According to the Old Testament, sex is a means. It is the means by which God brought forth new creation (Genesis 4: 1, 2, 17, 25). It was not only a means for procreation among human race but for the other creatures. Each member of the creation was commanded to be fruitful and to multiply as a means to populate the

earth (Genesis 1:22). Hence, the sexual act is sacred because apart from its intense emotional release and satisfaction, it leads to fruition which perpetuates the work of creation.

Suffice it to say, therefore, that sex and sexual activity is a subject that is treated with awe in the Old Testament. This is because of its sacred nature as ordained of God for human intense emotional release, pleasure and procreation. As a tool in human hand, its outcome depends on the beholder's relationship with God and attitudes towards life. When properly appropriated it yields abundant life, while in perverted state it results in destruction.

#### ***Sex in New Testament***

Having surveyed the Old Testament concept of sex we now turn to the New Testament. In this covenant, sex is portrayed as a mutual fellowship between a man and women in a sacred institution of marriage. Any alteration to this portrait is deemed a sexual disorder [read sin] which includes: fornication, adultery, incest, homosexuality, rape, bestiality, masturbation and pornography (lustful portrayal, gaze at and imagination).

The New Testament lists sexual perversion as pointers to individual's and societal godlessness (Galatians 5:19; 1 Corinthians. 5:1f.). A godly life is one characterized by chastity and righteousness which entails the purity and sanctity of one body, mind and soul (1 Thessalonians 2:23; 1 Corinthians 6: 12-20).

Defiant sexual behaviors are also a sign of God's wrath upon his people (Romans 1: 18-32). Paul insists that since godliness is evident yet people have chosen godlessness, God's wrath is set against the people, as demonstrated by their moral corruption.

Sexual immorality is punishable by God. This is because committing an immoral act is self-destructive (1 Corinthians 6: 18). It is a basis upon which many may not inherit the Kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9). Similarly, those excluded from entrance into the city of God include the sexually immoral (Revelations 22:15).

Therefore, the Bible clearly presents principles of sex. It shows that sex is precious within its perimeters, marriage (Hebrews 13: 4). It is powerful and passionate (1 Corinthians 7: 2-5). It is private (Genesis 2: 25). It is pure. It is physical. It is procreative. It is a gift which must be honored and jealously guarded.

#### ***Sex in Christian Thought***

Macharia gives a classical summary of the contemporary Christian understanding of sex as follows:

Sex continues to be an integral part of a good marriage. It is much more than just a tool for procreation. It however remains the power of procreation, the drive that perpetuates the race, the source of humanity's most intense pleasure, and the single source of the most pervasive anxiety. It can, in its abused form, hurl the individual into sloughs of despondency and when allied with Eros, it can lift humanity into orbits of ecstasy. It colours everything else – dull grey if it is poor, or passionate pink if it is rich (2010, 55).

In his conclusion, Douglas observes that in New Testament teaching, Jesus and the apostles tells us that, "all sexual impurity is sin against God, against self and against others" (1987, 19). As such, sex is ordained of God and is holy to be received with thanks giving within a marital relationship.

#### ***Women in the Bible and in Christian thought***

The Bible presents a mixed grill of perception of a woman. First from the creation story, the two accounts given give us divergent views of a woman. The first account (Genesis 1) gives a sense of equality that God created man, male and female to both rule the creation. On the other hand, the second account (Genesis 2) portrays man to be superior having been created before the woman and from man, seemingly as an afterthought coming in to help meet him in his loneliness. The two strands have been exploited as references by the various schools of thought relating to the engendered position of a woman in the society. Often, the Bible, which "draws upon Middle Eastern and patriarchal contexts interpreted through a patriarchal lens that assumes that European white, heterosexual, physically healthy male as normative" has served as a tool (Dyrness 2008, 805).

#### ***Women in Old Testament***

The accounts of creation (Genesis 1 & 2) portray a woman as part of the human race superior to the rest of the created order. She is a helpmate to, co-creator with and co-ruler of creation with man. Though the Old Testament does not celebrate many women as important, a few are listed as having played important roles in bringing to fruition of the divine plan for their generation. These include: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah and Esther. The Old Testament also highlights some women who led to the down fall of kingdoms due to their cunning and perfidious advice and acts.

In primordial Israel, women were treated as properties belonging to men (Genesis 12: 10- 20; 19: 1-11). They accrued their identity as daughters, wives or mothers of particular men. As daughters they followed their fathers, as wives their husbands and as mothers their sons. This overshadowed the women's identity a great deal. In fact, pious Jewish men would pray and thank God every morning, that He created them men and not women.

The Laws of Israel concerning ceremonially unclean and purification were skewed toward women (Leviticus 12 & 15). Menstruation, pregnancy and child bearing made a woman ceremonially unclean. This

required seclusion for at least seven days and a purification ceremony that required an offering. The period taken before purification and the offertory made were engendered. For male children, the mother was unclean for seven days after which she had to wait for thirty-three days for purification. The period was double for women who gave birth to girls. Thus they remained unclean for 14 days and would be cleansed after sixty-six days. Upon purification the woman was to bring a one-year old lamb for a burnt offering and a dove for sin offering.

Women were subjected to unfair treatment in order to test for unfaithfulness (Numbers 5: 11- 31). In the event a husband suspected his wife of impropriety, he would bring her to the priest who would administer an oath. Such an oath was discriminative because it only served the male while subjecting women to demeaning treatment. The injury was aggravated by the fact that priesthood was an all men affair. Hence, to a larger extent, women suffered in the hands of men without recourse. Men began to divorce their wives under the guise of unfaithfulness as they married other fair ones. This led to intense sobbing in the temple by the affected women that God had to speak out against this act (Malachi 2: 13- 16).

#### ***Women in New Testament***

In the New Testament, Jesus gives a revised version of the identity of women. He demonstrates how women ought to be understood and treated in the society (Luke's Gospel). Devoted women were appreciated and involved in Jesus' life and work of ministry (Luke 1, 2: 36- 38; 7: 36- 40; 8: 3; 12: 12; Acts 1: 14). The new social order by Jesus was less patriarchal than that of the wider society (Acts 10: 34- 48).

In the Apostolic ministry, women played an important role in the furtherance of the Gospel. They were the first converts in Europe (Acts 16: 13- 15). They formed part of the congregation at Rome (Romans 16). Apostles exalt the believing women while arguing against subordination for Christian women (1 Corinthians 11: 2- 16; 1 Peter 3:1- 6).

#### ***Women in Christian Thought***

Contemporary Christian thought on women has developed over the years. Dyrness (2008) summarizes the historical development of Christian thought as follows: Jesus created a new social order that was less patriarchal. This was embraced by the apostolic Church, but this was short lived since the early church readopted the patriarchal social gender relationship of the first Century AD.

This is illustrated in the opinion of Reverend Dr. David Oginde, the bishop of Christ is the Answer Ministries (CITAM). He caused a stir on his audience while addressing a prayer breakfast meeting comprising of leaders from Kisumu and Vihiga Counties on 28<sup>th</sup> July 2016 congregating at Wigot Gardens. Addressing the women in the congregation he cited Delilah who brought down Samson (Judges 16) to say, "This feminist thing will take you nowhere. Your strength is in weakness – being a woman, not fighting. This kind of weapon disarms and dislodges men rendering them powerless in your hands .... If I were a woman, I would be very successful." He argued for the proverbial virtuous woman of Proverbs 30: 10- 31 that is referred to as the wife of noble character. Such a notion assumes and downplays the already existing gender disparity in men's favor.

Among missionary mainstream churches the researcher observed such disparity enacted in the church. Women are expected to marry through church wedding while it is fine for the men to elope. Thus a woman member of a church who elopes and stays in her marriage for sometimes is expected to go back to his church and parents to seek for 'forgiveness' to be 'reinstated' in the fellowship. Luka (O.I.) observes that such an occasion was very solemn for the ladies who were brought up under the care of a church. A man on the other hand is not perceived to be guilty of such a sin. She claimed that men are headstrong. She noted that men's way of seeking 'forgiveness' is to pay bride price and to register their marriage in church.

#### ***Widowhood in the Bible and in Christian thought***

The Bible gives us a picture of widowhood from both the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament picture comes from the ancient Hebrew culture which gives special privilege to men. The New Testament picture though blended with the Greco-Roman civilization still presents a patriarchal system centered on and serving men, though, with some gender consciousness from Jesus and Paul. Peoples' Christian thought has always been derived from prevailing cultures to the degree that they encounter Christ through the Scripture within their specific contexts.

#### ***Widowhood in Old Testament***

The Old Testament gives us a glance into the life of the Hebrew people for a long span of time. There is a general characterization of women and widows that is evident in the cultures of the nations, people and families represented. A casual reading of the Old Testament suggests a general marginalization of women and especially widows.

The Old Testament insists that widows are endowed with God's favor (Psalm 68: 5; 146: 9; Proverbs 15: 25). It is widely demonstrated in the Old Testament scripture that God is the husband for the widows and His ear is inclined to their prayer. Thus widowhood is perceived to be a status of special privilege from God. Widows were encouraged to commit themselves to loving and serving God who in turn would respond by meeting their needs.

The Old Testament also shows that God contends for and defends the cause of widows. It clearly demonstrates that any injustice meted against a widow is directed to God who in turn defends them. Widows are considered to be weak people that cannot defend themselves and so find defense in God (Hosea 14: 3).

Widows in biblical times are shown to have presented an opportunity for others to demonstrate godliness. The book of Ruth relates a story of widows and how they were treated. Rich people like Boaz harvested their fields with the poor, especially widows, in mind (Deuteronomy 24: 19- 21). They even went ahead to ensure their posterity in the event they had no heir (Deuteronomy 25: 5- 10). In some incidences we also meet widows pressed down with debts to pay threatening their very auction (2 Kings 4: 1- 7). Thus every God fearing person took special cognizance of widows and aiding them in every way possible. For in so doing they knew they were lending to God, thus averting calamity (Exodus 22: 22- 23; Deuteronomy 14: 28- 29; Isaiah 1: 17; Jeremiah 7: 6).

The Bible in the Old Testament depicts widows as a snare for the proud. The haughty ones would trample down the down trodden widows at their own peril (cf. Deuteronomy 25: 5- 10; Ruth 4: 2- 12). The Old Testament encourages people to be alert and defend the cause of the widows, especially for those who seem to have no capacity to do so (Isaiah 1: 7; Jeremiah. 22: 3). Thus discrimination, intimidation, or taking advantage of widows in whatever way is alien to what is presented in the Old Testament.

Widows in biblical times also wore a distinctive garb (Genesis 38: 14). This was to announce their status. It attracted sympathy and prejudice in equal measure. But the essence was to put any one dealing with a widow on alert. This is because God expected justice and mercy especially for such one to be championed by all.

### ***Widowhood in New Testament***

The New Testament perception of widows is a continuation of the Old Testament one except for the Levirate marriage practice where a brother of the deceased was under obligation to marry a widow without a son for the preservation of his name. Widows and practices related to widowhood were a common knowledge (Matthew 22: 23- 32; Cf. Theological Advisory Group 1994, 164).

The church looked after the poor and widows in apostolic times (Acts 6: 1f; James 1: 27). There was an established body of policy and specific directives on the church's widow care ministry (1 Timothy 5: 3ff.). To be enlisted for the church's care a widow, one needed to have attained a minimum age of at least 60 years. They needed to have married only once and should have had a reputation for good works (5: 9- 10). Young widows were expected to remarry and bear children (I Corinthians 7: 8; I Timothy 5: 9- 16).

There is a noticeable element relating to female in the New Testament. Widows belong to a larger category of that is women. Women, apart from incidental mention given in the scripture, receive very little attention. One widow according to Luke's record was pursuing godliness as she waited on God in prayer (Luke 2: 36- 38). Another gave sacrificially (Luke 21: 2). Thus it could be said that even in the biblical times (including New Testament) majority women (especially widows) lagged behind their male counterparts, with a few exceptional cases.

### ***Widows in Christian Thought***

Christian thought here refers to the Christian philosophic reflection about widowhood developed over time. As earlier alluded to, widowhood has been around with man ever since. And as such it is prior than Christianity. Christianity, can be described as a way of life as demonstrated in the person of Jesus Christ and contextually lived out by all called out ones over the years.

According to Douglas, widow ministry in the church reached its zenith in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century. During this time there was an order of widows in the church. Its members looked after the widows of the congregation. This order, unfortunately, was abolished by the synod of Laodicea in A.D. 364 (1987, 1064).

### ***Abanyole Christian Perspective on Widows***

A consideration of the *Abanyole* Christian perception on widows must take cognizance of the prevailing socio-cultural realities. To explore this subject it is prudent to divide it into two: perspective through the years (colonial and independence) and contemporary perspective (post-independence era). Both the primary and secondary data collected reflect a general gender power relation in favor of men. There is a great difference in perception, attitude, provisions and prohibitions toward widows and widower regardless of the era.

### ***Perspective through the years***

The history of the church among the *Abanyole* is connected to that of colonialism. As recounted earlier, Christianity started among the *Abanyole* in 1905 at Maseno and Kima by the Church Mission Society and South African Compound Missions respectively. It spread like wild fire. At this time those who responded to the call and converted to Christianity joined the other believers in isolated communities referred as '*amatala*' (homesteads).

As Asiachi (O.I.) explains, these communities developed distinctive patterns of life informed by their new found faith. The communities had codes of regulations that governed their entire social life including the care for widows which had already been engraved in the *Abanyole* philosophy. In essence, the Christian communities baptized *Abanyole* way of caring for widows ridding them of practices that they deemed cultural, archaic and backward.

Elders noted, with nostalgia, the way the church took central place in the life of widows especially their sexuality. A widow depending on her commitment to the church would be required to make a choice of either remaining celibate or remarrying. In the event of remarriage the church would let the widow choose a suitor or consent to marry the one the church leaders proposed. The marriage would eventually be solemnized in church. This kind of arrangement mainly targeted to get rid of polygamy as the widows were required to either be remarried by widowers or willing and single young men in church. The location of the newly wedded depended on whether the widow had children or not. But overall, the arrangement remained in touch with the *Abanyole* culture. Examples of such unions that were solemnized by the church (COGEA [K]) includes Nehemiah and Rebecca Amaune; Zadock and Dorcus Omuchele; Caleb Ang'oma and Angila (Elders FGD; Asiachi O.I.).

The church had its vigilante who kept its faithful in check. Those who went contrary to the norm were subjected to disciplinary action including excommunication. Elders FGD cited an example of a certain widow from Esibila who was excommunicated for having been discovered to have been 'cleansed' of *oweingo* (non-Christian). She eventually deserted her matrimonial home never to return because of the shame.

Widows who choose life of celibacy and gave themselves to the life of the church were accorded double honor. They were involved in church work as a way of engaging them in community service and in turn received honoraria from the church. The church generally showed concern for the widows and orphans. The orphans were sponsored to school, as widows were engaged in gainful activities by the church.

It is notable that this era led to crystallization and cementing of gender disparity. Education and key responsibilities in church and schools were a reserve for men. The women were taught to be good obedient and submissive wives with skills on carrying out simple domestic chores. Women who excelled had to pay a higher price. Gender disparity both at home and marketplace have remained a thorny issue (cf. Nwachukwu-Agbada 2011).

#### ***Contemporary Abanyole Perspective***

A Contemporary *Abanyole* perspective on widowhood refers to the attitudes that have characterized the post independent society in Bunyore. This society has held mixed views of a widow depending on individuals in question. But in general the attitudes are characterized by gender power play in favor of men at all levels of the society.

However, the contemporary *Abanyole* society has not been spared of the forces of social change. Omuka (O.I.) and Opapa (I.O.) observed that widowhood practices and attitudes have greatly changed due to Western education; government supported social nets (orphan and vulnerable children and elderly fund), HIV/AIDS, poverty (due to money economy), gender parity activism and alcoholism, drug and substance abuse. These factors affect the practice of widowhood putting the society at risk.

This means that wife inheritance and related practices are persistent among the *Abanyole*, only that they have been changed to suit the socio-economic realities of the day. These changes as perceived through the eyes of Opapa, a traditional healer and elderly widow, are detrimental to the society.

This is how Kwendo explained the contemporary attitude toward and state of widows in the church today in the following manner:

We have so many widows in our churches that we try ministering to through our Compassionate Ministry. Widows are whole persons with a wide range of needs. We majorly train them on how to be self-sufficient. We only deal with the needy. Biblically a widow is a source of blessing, a ministry opportunity; in need of our care. They become the talk of the village mainly being accused of men stealing, self-pity, lack basic needs, perceived as snares etc. Widows are accused of men stealing because they are perceived to be on the loose.

Some leave church, others decline responsibilities because of the challenges they encounter. It is better for widows to remain celibate but if they can't stand it, they rather remarry. They have been freed by death. Our church does not give direction on how to remarry nor is it involved in the process; it is an individual's choice. Our pastors offer counseling services to the remarrying widows that seek such service.

There are many cases in our church where widows are mistreated and threatened with disinheritance for turning down in-laws' proposals for remarriage/inheritance. Others leave their matrimonial homes and raise their children in towns while others defy and stay.

In general widows suffer more hatred from in-laws who keep an eye on and reign in on their sexuality. Some widows, for lack of livelihood or defiant behavior, turn their sexuality into a trade causing havoc in the community.

Some widows opt to remain in their matrimonial homes, meet their own needs and keep secret relationships to meet their sexual needs. This is never public especially where there are grown up children and the widow is involved in church work. It is only a few bold ones that come out in the public as opting for remarriage. Widows are normally advised to consecrate their lives to Christ.

Widows are also secluded for fear of contaminating or imputing impurities on the rest of the family and clan. Death is perceived as a bad omen and a widow is seen to bear impurities/the ghost of widowhood/deceased who seeks vengeance.

These sentiments raise a few issues of concern worth noting. First, who are the needy widows as conceived by this church through the mind of its leader? And what is the sum total of a widow's needs? Who are the self-sufficient widows? Do we ever realize that a widow is a sexual being with specific sexual needs? And if so, how does the church expect such needs to be met? To this question the pastor's response displayed ambivalence that opens a *lacuna* for a double standard lifestyle as is evident in the excerpt. Secondly, what are the implications of the advice to widows to assume a life of celibacy? Having considered the concept of sexuality and noted that even celibacy does not entirely make one asexual, this idea provides a rich fodder for discussion. Taken on face value, it is the easier way of telling people to find solutions for their needs elsewhere. And as such, it encourages double standard. However, with a sound theological education and training that espouses freedom for the widows to explore meaning and alternatives of meeting their sexual needs, such an advice is effective. Finally, what is the implication of a belief in the late husband's ghost hovering over the widow or avenging on subsequent suitor on the marriage vow, "Until death do us part"? As earlier, noted the church in Africa is yet to develop contextually sound theology to inform its practice. Thus the "Until death do us part" vow seems not to have taken root on the African Christian marriage practice. The spirit of the deceased husband lives on and to whose homage is to maintain the first matrimonial home and perpetuate his name.

#### **Widows in church today: Widows' Perspective**

Widows have found a safe haven in church. The church provides a place they can at least express themselves, as encapsulated in the opening remarks of one widow, Likokhe, while preaching at a Widows' Special Service at the NHOM on the 18<sup>th</sup> December, 2016. She noted that women had no audacity to speak before men and were counted among the properties men had. Christianity [church] has freed women from those shackles and now they are free to love and serve Christ in His church. She noted that they can speak and teach and be heard because of Christ's events.

The contemporary church has fully incorporated widows into the mainstream ministry. There is a ministry for and by the widows. Ministry for the widows entails what the church is doing to enrich widows that are in its congregation. On the other hand, ministry by the widows includes all that is allowed and accomplished in the church by the widows.

#### **Ministry for the Widows**

There is a general feeling from among the respondents that widows are an integral ministry frontier for the church today as it has been throughout the Christian history. Widow ministry reached its zenith in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. This ministry came to an abrupt end and the contemporary church has strived to serve its widows with variant degree of effectiveness. But on general, the ministry has not performed well. However, as Osiako (O.I.) observes, the ministry of the church to widows is far reaching, to a degree, in meeting both their physical and spiritual needs.

The respondents (Widows & Elders FGDs) that participated in this study noted that some denominations show concern by providing widows with material goods, but this is very limited. They remembered nostalgically of the Dorcus Ministries that sewed clothing for widows and orphans. They also vividly remembered how church elders and deacons waited on widows and orphan through the church's grain basket and offerings. They pointed out that deacons, in the study area, are mainly pastors' servants waiting upon the pastorate. Marriage officers (FGD) noted that the church is currently under financial pressure that it is barely able to pay its own bills. This resonated with Esibila widows' (FGD) observation that the church's receipts have gone down and that it cannot attend to such demands as looking after orphans and widows which characterizes a true religion (cf. James 1: 27). However, Komba (O.I.) of Catholic Church, widowed in 1957 and a beneficiary of church's kindness to widows squarely places her finger at the changed emphasis of Christian witness from being and doing to saying (preaching) and the current generation of pastorate that is egocentric.

Widows also benefit a lot from church's Spiritual programs. These programs include the Sunday church worship services, seminars and workshops, counseling, prayer meetings, Bible Study meeting, discipleship classes, and cell church fellowships. In these programs the church strives to nurture its members spiritually. Widows, as part of the church membership, equally benefit from the teachings, counsel, exhortations and spiritual nourishment available through such programs (Marriage Officers' FGD).

Nevertheless, Osiako (O.I.) observed that Widow Ministry in the church in Bunyore, as with the rest of the church as lacking in a sense. She acknowledged the general principles with regard to sexual discipline that the church teaches its member that widows apply to their specific situation. She, however, noted that more could be done if the church embraced and included scientific findings in its teaching ministry to the widows. She pointed out that widows can benefit a lot if they can be brought together through forums, workshops and seminars where Christian professionals and widows with various experiences interact with them to demystify sex and educate them on appropriate and honorable ways of dealing with their sexuality. She decried the overuse and abuse of sex drive suppressants that many widows are accustomed to. She advised that any intense physical exercise that leads to exhaustion is able to take care of sexual drives while not compromising the libido for the young and aspiring widows.

The assessment of the church's widow ministry by one widow serving in one of the COGEA (K) congregations in the study area is herein captured,

The church has no specific and intentional program for widows. They are seen as nobodies – just statistics. Their needs transcend the material/financial and child rearing and property inheritance: they are whole persons.

Most marriage officers and pastors have a casual relationship with the couples they marry. Hence no follow up and sound counseling and teachings is given to couples who eventually become widows. Such is the experience I had with our marriage officer [registrar]. He assumed that since we were already living together we did not need premarital and marital counseling. I have never had a time with him ever since despite all that I have been through. More so, I am yet to hear of any church forum, seminar or workshop for widows where widowhood is explored meaningfully.

Widows, especially young ones, need counseling and teachings that will establish them throughout their life. They also need to be supported in their ministry endeavors. Unfortunately, they are left on their own subjected to all manner of accusations and suspicions (Odinga O.I.).

The sentiments by Osiako's and Odinga are also echoed by Kwendo (O.I.) who strongly recommended the introduction of sex education in the church. He observed that it is currently tabooed and requires guts. The church has shied away from nurturing its members on marital life which explains the unprepared state of young people for marriage, the rate of divorce of Christian marriages and other eventualities of marriage including widowhood. Celestine Musara's story of Fiona Okandia is a case in point. Okandia relates of her naïve Christian upbringing which nurtured her sex education's ignorance. This made her innocent and an easy prey and it took grace and intervention to pick up her pieces. She is now helping others (Daily Nation 3/10/16). Similarly, Kimeto (2016, 15) points out that church's "Refusal and denial to be dynamic and pragmatic in presenting its claims including its inability to tap into the huge pool of intellectuals in the congregation will continue to expose the Christian faith to being vulnerable...." Thus, on overall there is no particular denomination or church organization in the Study Area which prides itself in having a functional widow program.

### **Ministry by Widows**

Christian widows among the *Abanyole* are not just committed to the church as recipients of its ministry but also as partakers thereof. Widows as other women are a pillar in the church among *Abanyole* in every sense of the term. They give offerings, are involved in prayer and intercessory ministry, teach discipleship classes and do most preaching, are involved in visitation, and lead various ministries and departments of the church (Kima widows' and Marriage Officers' FGDs).

Esibila widows (FGD) categorically stated that widows do very well in most of the church offertory. Citing Luke 21:2 they noted that widows offer their best out of gratitude for what God does in their lives. Most widows whose children and grandchildren have excelled in life seize this opportunity to thank God for having remembered them. They do so by offering tithes and other offering to support the work of the church. These views were also held by most of the respondents interviewed. The elders and Marriage Officers (FGDs) also noted the exemplary performance of widows in church offerings.

Prayer and intercessory ministry in many churches in Bunyore is run and attended by women, the majority of whom are widows. Litunya (Kima widow FGD), the Director of Women Ministries, COGEA (K), confirmed this notion by the case of the monthly prayer meeting held at its Kima headquarters. She noted that widows readily come for prayer meetings and commit longer hours in prayer and intercession.

Another area of widow ministry is teaching and preaching. Widows readily volunteer in the church's teaching and preaching ministry. They teach in Church Sunday Schools, lead Bible Studies and discussions in cell church and preach in the Sunday and mid-week services, besides giving exhortation during special functions as duty calls. Asiachi, Etemesi and Ameso (O.I.) observed that widows are so committed to the work of the ministry and always make time for the same. This could be explained by the fact that they, in their widowhood, owe no one an explanation as to when they are going out and coming back. Osore (Esibila widows' FGD) also mentioned the joy and fulfillment that widows accrue from such ministry, as their driving force.

Visitation is another area of ministry in which widows thrive. This ministry requires individuals to set apart time to call on the members of church in their homes to pray and encourage them. It requires a lot of sacrifice and dedication. Kima and Esibila widows (FGDs) were of the opinion that widows volunteer a great deal in such ministry. They noted that most of the cell church leaders in the surrounding congregations are widows, so they take upon themselves the responsibility of visiting members or taking pastors around during pastoral visits.

Finally, widows in the church serve in various leadership capacities. The Director, Women Ministries, COGEA (K), Litunya observed with pride that widows form the bulk of the Church of God pastorate and general local church leadership. She also noted that widows perform exemplarily in their ministry assignments due to their commitment and dedication. These views were also supported by the MYW and Marriage Officers (FGDs). However, a spot check on top and middle level leadership of most of denominations reveals gender disparity in favor of men. An example is COGEA (K) of which women form a paltry eighth of the top eight positions i.e. the chairperson of Women Ministries. And of the thirteen Chairpersons and heads of institutions, only two slots are occupied by women. Finally, there are only ten women of its ninety-three directors, associate directors, overseers and associate overseers (COGEA [K] Daily Reminder 2016).

For the Kenya Israel Church and Jerusalem Christian Church widows' leadership is restricted to women ministry. Women in these denominations do not serve as clergy and in general leadership positions. Indieka and Kwendo observed that women's involvement in ministry in these denominations is restricted to leading songs and peer education among fellow women.

As for the NHOM and Revival churches, widows as other women find every opportunity for ministry. Osiako (O.I.) noted that widows, despite their manifold predicaments, form a formidable ministry resource. She observed that widows, as any other member of the congregation, are free to participate in any kind of ministry in her church. She explained that gender or marital status is a non-issue as far as the administration of sacrament is concerned. These sentiments were confirmed by widows I conversed with during my impromptu visit during a special church service in their honor. However, Osiako explained that widows in her Church still struggle shedding off the stigma related to widowhood. This she attributed to the cultural influence that dictates the socio-economic environment of widows. She observed that re-educating the entire society on gender and sexuality would go a long way to ensuring its posterity.

#### **Sexuality of a Widow: A Quest for Identity**

In sexology discourses, sexual identity refers to an individual's particular sexual orientation. They include heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual and transgender. Hence one is referred to as gay, lesbian or straight. However, this study considers sexuality and identity for the widow from a self-realization perspective where a widow explores her true identity as a woman. This is because the *Abanyole* have embraced heterosexual relationship.

Many people struggle with the question of identity. And so the pertinent question here is who is a widow? And to this question many answers are given and it is important to examine attitudes communicated in those answers and what exactly a widow is for the *Abanyole* Christians. First, a widow is a sexed being; she is a gendered being; she has needs; her needs accrue from her identity [can include the sexual]; and there is an acceptable way a widow should express herself sexually.

#### **Widow as Sexual Being**

Both field and library research pointed to the fact that a widow is a sexual being. The researcher had a benefit of training from a philosophical background that linguistically distinguished a widow and widower. However, the researcher established that the *Abanyole* have no term or word for widower. For the *Abanyole*, *omulekhwa* refers strictly to a widow. In their philosophy, it is only the woman that can be an *omulekhwa* since she is married ['brought'] by the husband to his home, family and clan and as such, an alien. And because there is no limit as to how many a man can marry ['bring'], it is inconceivable that a man can be an *omulekhwa* (Esibila widows; Elders FGDs). Thus a widow, among the *Abanyole*, is a sexual being. It is a woman or a female; of a particular gender.

#### **Widow as Gendered Being**

A widow as a sexed being is also gendered. Every people's culture assigns a specific social space and roles to their women. Thus widows fall in the category of women with specific social space they occupy and roles they ought and ought not to play. The *Abanyole* have a specific space for women in a gendered sense. There are roles that are played by women and those that are strictly a male affair.

When a woman/widow undertakes a role or occupies a space that is reserved for men among the *Abanyole* it is referred to as *omusilo*. That means that what has been done is an abomination and unacceptable. It attracts a curse to the individual, family, clan and even community which the elders say can only be blotted out or averted by way of a sacrifice to appease the ancestors. Such an *omusilo* include a woman representing a family in boundary demarcation and disputes, bequeathing inheritance, presiding over important rites such as marriage, burial, initiation, and religious festivities (Elders and Esibila widows' FGDs).

MYW (FGD) leaders observed that such notion from the traditions of the *Abanyole* have been held on by men who use them to suppress and oppress their wives. They also noted that the same is used to oppress and subject widows to demeaning rites and demands which leave them divested of dignity.

#### **Widows and her Needs**

Widows' needs only get magnified or diminish due to the social space they occupy first as women and second as widows. Omuka (O.I.) noted that widows have need for upkeep [food, shelter clothing etc], security, companionship, intimacy, father figure for her children, headship (family convener). He noted that the *Abanyole* culture has very effective mechanism and ways through which such widow's needs are guaranteed.

However, in a rejoinder the MYW leaders (FGD) felt that the contemporary *Abanyole* men are ill prepared to meet such needs. In fact Nambutete did not mince her words in her observation that most of the married women in Bunyore experience widowhood long before their husbands actually die. They pointed out that *Abanyole* men have literally relegated the home, church and now community responsibilities to women.

#### **Widow and her Sexual need**

Selfa, a widow, painted a picture of a typical contemporary widow among the *Abanyole* in this way: her husband is dead; she has no resources; she has children to feed; has a home to keep; has no friend; she is a sore to the community; and attracts pity. She goes ahead to explain that a widow is a helpless woman. Exploring their plight, she notes that most of them have no access to factors of production. Moreover, she also notes that above all the challenges and concerns; a widow is first of all, a woman who has needs – sexual needs. She experiences urges, that craving and that feeling of wanting to have a man satisfy her sexual needs. Thus, her cries and mourning is not only for a helpmate; but importantly because she has lost a friend, a companion and of course, a lover, a sexual partner.

Opapa's (O.I.) observations are in line with the above sentiments. Widows have needs including sexual needs that need to be met in one way or the other. She laughed out at the very idea that very young widows would opt for celibacy for the sake of their service in the church. In fact she felt that it is against the Biblical teaching for young widows not to remarry.

#### **Widow's Acceptable Sexual Expression**

The way of sexual expression among the *Abanyole* is within a marital relationship. The observation of burial and after burial rites is meant to usher in a new lease life. For a young widow with children it is expected that after completing the observation of the mourning period she finds someone within the late husband's family to care for her family and meet her sexual needs. Such an arrangement is undertaken in consultation with and blessing from the in-laws. Others opt to go back to their parents to start a new life altogether. The second option used to be the very last resort where families did not agree and the late husband's family failed to support the widow (Elders FGD).

Any sexual expression outside of marital relationship is deemed sinful and defiant and is discouraged. Widows who opt not to enter a marital arrangement of any kind are expected to remain celibate. It is not only sinful but very dangerous, according to the *Abanyole* Christians, for a widow to engage in illicit sexual affairs in the community. This is the main cause of most deaths among the *Abanyole*, as Opapa observes (O.I.).

## **CONCLUSION**

This article sought to examine the Christian perception on widows' sexuality among *Abanyole* of Emuhaya. The task was to describe the identity and social space the church accords widows, in a gendered sense and the general view on the expected sexual behaviour of a widow. This research established a continuity of the traditional *Abanyole* and Judo-Christian views crystallized through western civilization of the nineteenth century white missionaries with slight changes orchestrated by socio-economic pressure and HIV/AIDS.

First, the *Abanyole* Christian view on sexuality is paradoxical. It is celebrated as sacred while in the same vein, dare domination in favour of male flourishes. This is attested of by the number female followership verses female leaders and the positions they hold in their denominations. Women's top leadership seems possible only within ministries and churches founded by women. This gives limited room for the church to address women issues in its theology. Mary Akatsa's Jerusalem Church of Christ is a case of a female founded and led denomination among the *Abanyole* that is redefining womanhood and addressing widows' blight head-on. Second, the *Abanyole* Christian's have embraced 'voluntary' widow celibacy as a norm. The study found out that the *Abanyole* Christians expect that those widowed among them not to date, remarry or engage in sexual activity. A widow who violets this norm is either excluded from some opportunities such as leadership responsibility or is excommunicated depending with the magnitude of her act and denominational affiliation. This explains the eulogies given by Christian widows during their deceased husbands' burial ceremonies. They publicly announce to mourners that they are widowed but not available. Some go as far as declaring that Jesus Christ has become their husband. Whether they live up to their declaration is another matter altogether.

Finally, this research established that very little has been done among the *Abanyole* Christians in the area of developing an authentic *Abanyole* Christian theology pertaining to widowhood. Consequently, there is a

lacuna of knowledge on widowhood which subjects its victims to abuse by the very institution that exists for their peace. Therefore the church in Bunyore must see itself as so and evolve to stamp its authority by honestly allowing Christ to abide with and speak to its widowed women adherents in their specific contexts.

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