

## A Cultural & Historical Tour of Ghana - Part 5 - Widows & Orphans

Dear Friends,

This is part 5 of the series that I began in April and May to provide some more knowledge about my hometown, my people, and our way of life in Ghana. This article continues with the purpose of our theme: to talk about the traditions and cultural practices of my people (the Akans of Ghana) -- this time to write about widows and orphans.

### Family Traditions: Widows

The term **widow** refers to a female member of the society who has lost her husband, as is the case, everywhere in the world. For some widows, depending on their faith background, there are several rites that are performed at the start of the period of widowhood; during, and at the end of the mourning period. The significance of the rites is that it properly and formally, and albeit, permanently, ends the relationship as a result of the passing of the spouse. In the typical rural life of our ethnic circumstances, the total seclusion of the widow from normal social life is to signify the intensity of her grief and period of mourning, so the community would give her space to mourn while providing every support to comfort her.

In Ghana, widowhood starts when it is declared that the spouse has died and she begins to be clad mainly in black clothes, as a symbol of mourning. The rites are performed for these reasons: 1) so the ghost of the departed spouse will not haunt the wife; 2) to strengthen her to survive in the days and years ahead; 3) to cause a permanent break from any ties to the dead spouse while they remained married. The rites are also intended to prepare her for the eventuality that she might re-marry, so she will not feel guilty in any way moving forward, but have peace of mind.

### A few of the rites performed for the widow would be:

- 1) Sit on fresh leaves or on the bare floor almost naked.
- 2) Eating and drinking at the same spot for days (but should an ant bite her, this 'proves' that she caused the death of her husband).
- 3) Confining the widow to a room, shaving her head, having her wear a rope around her neck and conducting a ritual bath.

The rites processes are handled by the family of the deceased male spouse, and particularly by the elderly females in his surviving family. Generally, the period of widowhood covers a period of one year, but in modern times, there have been concessions where the woman is a career woman and lives in the city, or where her personal life could be hindered by the complete observances of the ritual.

Males are not expected to be in black attire and are never made to perform any elaborate rituals either to commence widowhood or to end the period. Widowhood and the traditional rites are mainly observed by women.

*As an American, reading about these rites, you may feel surprised or sad.*

*\*\* Please understand that these rites are NOT performed or observed by women or families who are Christian and believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior!*

*\*These rites are still performed by women and families who do not know Jesus.*

*So, if you feel stunned by these practices, please keep these widows of Ghana in your prayers that they may come to know Jesus!*

### Family Traditions: Orphans

Orphans in our society are as vulnerable as widows. It worsens from place to place and depends on the status of the demised father. In rural Akan communities the community would rally around the family of the orphan(s) to ensure that they are taken care of. Our extended family system ensures that uncles and aunties take over the responsibility of adopting the children of the deceased sister or brother to care for the child left behind. Universally, an orphan is a child whose father has died. In the society when a woman dies, her children may not be regarded as orphans so long as their father is alive, but when the father dies, then the children become orphans. At that time, orphaned children become the obligation of uncles and aunties, and grandparents and other family members. Rarely a family would deny an orphan the opportunity to live with someone else, but it is not compulsory that an uncle or aunt, for that matter, take over the responsibility. It is rather impressed upon the members of the extended family to do all they can to take care of the orphan(s).

Blessings, Pastor Ben Wilson