



## A Christological Reflection on Ritual Bathing and the Wearing of Black Cloth in *Kunlanehyile* (Widowhood Rite) among the Nzema People of Ghana

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### Abstract

Traditional rites are an integral part of many societies because they express the beliefs and values of people groups. One such rite is a funeral celebration through which people's religious traditions are expressed. For the Nzema people of western Ghana, the widowhood rite is used to fulfil key socio-religious requirements, thereby facilitating the reintegration of widows into society. There are various existing scholars on the Nzema people who lack a theological examination of the Nzema widowhood rite. This paper fills this research gap by assessing widowhood as practised by the Nzema people from a Christological perspective. Specifically, two key widowhood traditions, namely, wearing black cloth and the rite of separation and integration, were examined in light of the biblical practice of wearing sackcloths to ascertain how Akan Christians could make meaning of widowhood. The paper argued that the widowhood rites of the Nzema people could be given a Christian expression to purge them of any potential 'fetish' practices that are associated with them. This perspective, in a way, would strengthen the Christian faith in the Nzema community in a more realistic and relevant way.

**Keywords:** Cleansing, Foazinli, Kunlanehyile (Widowhood Rite), Nzema, Ritual bathing.

### 1. Introduction

Customary rites form an integral part of many human societies in Africa. These practices reveal the beliefs and values of a particular group of people or community that have been formulated over a long period (Boaheng, 2018). Examples of such practices are marriage, birth rites, funeral rites, puberty rites, and widowhood rites. Traditional customs vary from one location to another in terms of their character and length. For instance, the celebration of funerals differs from society to society (Boaheng, 2018). Even among different communities of the same tribe, there may be remarkable differences when the details of the rites are considered.

Before the advent of Christianity in Africa, these rites were purely traditional and were passed down through the teachings of African Traditional Religion (Hastings, 1967). The introduction of missionary Christianity into Africa brought a confrontation between the Christian faith and African culture and traditions (Boaheng, 2018). The missionaries saw the African culture as incompatible with Christianity (Hastings, 1967). In the process, some of the

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traditional rites were branded as evil or fetishistic rituals. Mission churches prohibited their converts from participating in traditional practices, including funeral celebrations, festivals, drumming and dancing, and singing traditional songs, among others (Ansre, 2016; Boaheng, 2018). The widowhood rite is one such practice that is more often associated with evil. Without an adequate understanding of cultural practices, one stands the chance of condemning them without just cause. The need for a theological assessment of indigenous practices, particularly those related to funerals, is therefore an urgent theological concern.

This paper offers a critical examination of the widowhood practice (*Kunlanehyile*) among the Nzema people of western Ghana. In this rite, a widow (Nzema: *kunla*) goes through two phases of the ritual, which are the first week after burial and the last eleven months, three weeks before she finally cleanses herself in a river called Tanoe to complete the process (Participant 2, 48 years, Widowed for 6 years). The rite has been examined from various perspectives, but with little serious engagement from a theological viewpoint. This paper fills the research gap by assessing widowhood as practised by the Nzema from a Christological perspective, with an emphasis on the black cloth the widow wears during rituals and the final cleansing rituals. The paper contributes to the contextualisation of Christianity in the Ghanaian/African society.

## 2. Conceptual framework

### **Religious Worldview of the Nzema People**

More than 100,000 “Nzema” (or Nzima) are Akan people who reside in the coastal region between the Ankobra River in Ghana’s Western Region and the Assinie in the Ivory Coast (Nrenzah, 2008). In Côte d’Ivoire, many Nzema also reside beyond the territorial tribal line (Yakub, 2020), particularly in Balsam, near the Ghanaian border, where they form a sizable minority. In Ghana, the Nzema area comprises three administrative districts: Nzema East (or Evalue Gwira) Municipal, Ellembele District, and Nzema West (or Jomoro) Municipal.

Religion permeates everything the Nzema does. The Nzema hold that *Edenkema Nyamenle* (eternal God) is the Supreme Being who created the universe (Nrenzah, 2008). *Edenkema Nyamenle* supplies rain, fertility, sunshine, and all other elements necessary for existence (Nrenzah, 2008). There is also the belief in lower divinities or gods – including sky gods and the earth goddess (*Azele Yaba*) – who are subordinate to God (Nrenzah, 2008). These deities, which reside in rocks, trees, rivers, mountains, and abandoned buildings, are collectively referred to as *awozonle* (singular: *bozonle*). In times of disaster, people may sacrifice to the gods to appease them. Against this backdrop, Nzema’s traditional religious tradition is centred on sacrifices performed by the traditional priest, who mediates between the supernatural and the natural realms.

Humans are at the bottom of the power hierarchy; they have the least power and are susceptible to both good and negative effects from any of the aforementioned creatures (Nrenzah, 2008). Since supernatural powers reward good deeds and punish evildoers, humans must ensure that they do not offend the spirits. The Nzemas also practice matrilineal inheritance. However, they consider lineage as people related by *mbowule* (bones), the part of the body that is structurally robust and long-lasting (Nrenzah, 2008). The Nzema also consider death to be a passage onto an area known as the ancestral world. After passing away, a person’s spirit travels to the world of the ancestors and becomes an ancestor (plural: *Nananom*). It is thought that to be welcomed into the ancestral realm, a person’s corpse must be transported to the graveyard with a large group of people. The foregone worldview of the Nzema people informs their daily activities (Nrenzah, 2008).

### **The concept of widowhood**

A widow is a woman who has lost her husband and has not yet remarried. Widowhood rites are the rituals and customs that women observe after the death of their husbands. A woman who has not been married by the performance of traditional rites (including payment of bride price) or by ordinance is not considered a wife and so does not go through widowhood rites. Concubines are not considered widows as a result, even though they lived together with their deceased “husbands.” Typically, widowhood rites start as soon as the husband passes away (Adeyem, 2016). Even while some tribes’ widowhood rites involve unethical acts, widowhood has some positive repercussions for women. Tasie claims that African widowhood customs are not an example of so-called male chauvinism and were not developed with the intention of demeaning, oppressing, or de-womanising African women. The majority of the time, widowhood ceremonies are conducted for the widow’s overall well-being. Apart from facilitating the grieving process, widowhood may also

prepare the widow to begin life strongly after the process is over (Atindanbila et al., 2014). The goal is to sever the departed spouse's link with the living spouse and ward off evil spirits (Atindanbila et al., 2014). Being a widow is a way to honour your late husband. The foregoing discourse serves as the conceptual framework for the rest of the paper.

### 3. Methods and materials

#### *Design*

This paper employed a qualitative case study design, with interviews conducted from August to November 2022 (Sarfo et al., 2021). This study followed the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) checklist to ensure the quality of the research (Tong, 2007).

#### *Sampling and sample size*

In this study, we employed purposive sampling techniques to select five widows aged between 27 and 78 years (Sarfo et al., 2021). The inclusion criteria were widows who had lost their husbands and had personal experiences during the passage of the rite. It also included a teacher who interpreted the Nzema language to the authors. The exclusion criteria were women who still lived with their husbands. The researchers decided to use this sampling technique to select Widows and Teachers who provided the relevant information needed to the researchers.

#### *Participants*

The participants in this study included different categories of widows in the Mpataba Community in the Jomoro Municipality of Ghana. See Table 1 for details.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the participants

Participant	Age (Years)	Years of being a widow	occupation	Religion	Number of Children
1	27	none	Teaching	Christian	none
2	48	6	Farming	Christian	3
3	78	17	Farming	Christian	4
4	63	10	Farming	Christian	5
5	63	10	Farming	Christian	7

#### *Instruments*

The primary instrument for this study was a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researchers to explore participants' lived experiences of widowhood rites among the Nzema people. The guide was designed to elicit detailed, descriptive, and culturally grounded responses. It contained open-ended questions that encouraged participants to narrate their experiences freely and in their own words.

Sample questions included:

- How was the widowhood rite performed after you lost your husband?
- What were your experiences during the performance of the widowhood rites?
- Can you describe some of the rituals performed during the widowhood rite in the Nzema dialect?
- What are some of the challenges associated with Nzema's widowhood rite?

To ensure language accuracy and cultural authenticity, we engaged a native Nzema speaker who is also a language expert, as well as a teacher from the Community Junior High School, to transcribe and translate the Nzema expressions used by participants during the interviews. This collaboration helped preserve the originality and contextual meaning of participants' accounts.

#### *Data collection procedure*

Following ethics approval, data were collected through in-depth, face-to-face interviews with participants who met the inclusion criteria. Before each interview, informed consent was obtained, and participants were assured of confidentiality and their right to withdraw at any stage without any repercussions. The interview locations were carefully selected based on the principle of privacy and comfort, ensuring that participants could express themselves freely without fear or interruption.

The first author conducted all five interviews using a semi-structured interview guide. Each session was audio-recorded with the participants' permission, allowing for accurate transcription and analysis. The duration of the interviews ranged from 30 to 110 minutes, depending on the

depth of responses. Immediately after each interview, recordings were transcribed verbatim by the researchers to maintain the fidelity of participants' narratives. These transcriptions formed the primary data for subsequent analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

Data obtained from the interview guide were edited, recorded, and translated before undergoing in-depth analysis using Microsoft Excel and Microsoft Word applications. Information obtained here was from Widows who provided detailed accounts of how the rite is performed, as well as its effects on their lives. We identified the key themes, categorised them, and determined the phrases consistently associated with the research topic after reading and re-reading the text several times.

### **Trustworthiness and Rigour**

Trustworthiness is considered a more appropriate criterion for evaluating qualitative studies. To ensure the process is trustworthy, Guba and Lincoln's (1989) four models for qualitative research, such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, were adopted.

### **Reflexivity**

The authors ensured reflexivity throughout the study process by continuously reflecting on their own biases, assumptions, and positionalities as men, Christian theologians, and researchers (Sarfo, Attigah, 2025). We maintained reflective journals to document their thoughts, decisions, and potential influences on the interpretation of the data. This ongoing self-awareness helped enhance the credibility, transparency, and trustworthiness of the research findings.

### **Ethical consideration**

The protection of human subjects through the application of appropriate ethical principles is crucial in any research study. The protection of human subjects through the application of appropriate ethical principles is important in any research study. The protection of human subjects through the application of appropriate ethical principles is important in any research study.

The study received ethical approval from the University of the Free State. Protecting human subjects by applying appropriate ethical principles, such as informed consent, confidentiality, cultural sensitivity, and continuous consent from participants, which reminded them of their right to withdraw from the interview without penalty, was crucial in this study. Before data collection, the researchers sought the consent (voluntary) of the Widows and their understanding of what was being asked of them. These participants were adequately informed about the research, comprehended the information, and had the freedom of choice to decide whether to participate or decline. Participants' agreement to participate in this study was obtained only after a thorough explanation of the research process. The anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were preserved by not revealing their names and identities during the data collection, analysis, and reporting of the study findings.

## **4. Results**

Through in-depth interviews and data analysis, the process of Widowhood rites among the Nzema people was traced, including the discovery of the true meaning of the Widowhood rite, which is the *Kunlanehyile*, the two phases of the *Kunlanehyile* practice, and the biblical reflections on wearing Black cloth in *Kunlanehyile*. Overall, the culturally sensitive experiences of widows in the *Kunlanehyile* were divided into three main themes and six sub-themes, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Main themes and sub-themes of the study

Main themes	Sub-themes
Widowhood rite in Nzema, the <i>Kunlanehyile</i>	Widowhood rite in Nzema as the <i>Kunlanehyile</i>
The Phases of <i>Kunlanehyile</i>	The first phase of <i>Kunlanehyile</i> The second phase of <i>Kunlanehyile</i> Finding certain challenges of <i>Kunlanehyile</i>
Biblical reflections on wearing Black cloth in <i>Kunlanehyile</i>	Sackcloth and ashes in the biblical context Religious uncleanness and ritual cleansing in the



Main themes	Sub-themes
	Biblical context Christological Analysis of Widowhood among the Nzemas

### **Widowhood rite in Nzema as the *Kunlanehyile***

The Nzema people refer to their widowhood rite as *Kunlanehyile* (Participant 1, 27 years, Nzema Teacher JHS). *Kunlanehyile* involves seclusion, use of prescribed attire, limitations on sleeping or waking up, avoidance of certain food items, and others. All the interviewees indicated that the rite of widowhood begins a day after the burial of the deceased husband and lasts for a year.

#### **The Phases of *Kunlanehyile***

*Kunlanehyile* among the Nzemas has two phases. The first phase is a one-week, stringent ritual, followed by eleven months and three weeks. Before the process begins, another widow or a woman who has chosen not to remarry is chosen to lead the widow through the first week's rituals. The two phases of *Kunlanehyile* are as follows.

#### **First Phase of *Kunlanehyile***

In expressing her personal experience as a widow, Mrs Abekah told the authors that the first phase of *Kunlanehyile* starts like this: *"The widow is made to sit on a kitchen stool after being forced onto it three times. For the first week following the burial of her spouse, the widow will only sit on the kitchen stools. In the olden days, the widow would traditionally sit on a kitchen stool or sleep next to where her spouse was laid to rest"* (Participant 2, 48 years, Widowed for 6 years).

The widow's cook is the one appointed to oversee the procedure. She follows the custom of eating within a set hour. The supper is taken before 6:00 pm and is eaten in the room. In the olden days, widows who went through *Kunlanehyile* were banned from eating heavy foods during the first three days. Thus, *if the widow cannot totally abstain from food, she is not expected to eat to her satisfaction; neither is she expected to eat her favourite dish* (Participant 2, 48 years, Widowed for 6 years).

In this period, the widow bathes with cold water early in the morning before cockcrows and bathes again in the evening before 6:00 pm. In the olden days, a widow would bathe at dawn at the junction of a cemetery because *she was seen as an unclean (evinle) person, and she was perceived to be accursed (Munzule. It is believed that she is not supposed to bathe in the community where people live to affect them with her uncleanness* (Participant 3, 78 years, Widowed for 17 years). It is anticipated that the widow will go to bed before 6:00 pm. The woman retires to bed before her deceased husband's spirit follows her, so the story goes. The authors were told that, *in the olden days, the widow used to be forced to sleep on a raw mat (Nzema: Foazinli) or any other piece of clothing that was spread out on the floor* (Participant 3, 78 years, Widowed for 17 years). The widow's designated guardian travels with her at all times, regardless of how discreet the itinerary should be. The widow is shielded from the ghost of her late spouse by doing this. A ritual seawater bath at the break of dawn marks the conclusion of *Kunlanehyile*'s initial stage. The widow then washes her own body with clean water. After having a bath, the widow throws away everything she has used on herself over the week, including clothing, jewellery, a mattress, towels, and a sponge. *These objects are believed to be spiritually impure due to their touch with her* (Participant 4, 63 years, Widowed for 10 years).

A mixture (known as ezuvindle) is created from a leaf and kaolin (ewole) on the same day and given to the widow to sprinkle at any crossing or crossroads using an ezumile leaf in a ritual known as yeyilale (fortunate moment). "When I sell, let it be profitable, and when I do anything, let it be well with me," the widow says, sprinkling the concoction. The widow performs this ritual to ward off bad spirits, proclaim her release, and pray for good fortune in her impending "new" life. In each of these, *the widow is joined by her guardian and another individual who may be a member of the widow's family* (Participant 2, 48 years, Widowed for 6 years).

After the sprinkling, the widow is allowed to carry on with her usual activities till the end of the year. But she is supposed to wear only black clothes and red beads around her neck, waist, and wrists till the end of the year. A deceased person's wife will continue to observe mourning as a customary practice of grieving (Elwell, Beitzel, 1988). A bead that she loses from her waist, neck, or wrist while going about her daily activities is never replaced. It is repugnant for such a widow to pluck the beads and reuse them on herself, even though the results are unknown. In this frame of

mind, one of the Widows explains that the widow continues to experience widowhood all year (Participant 4, 63 years, Widowed for 10 years).

### ***Second Phase of Kunlanehyile***

The second phase of the widowhood rite takes place on Thursday (Nzema: *Kule*) when the widow travels to Elena and takes a final purification ritual bath in the Tanoe in the Jomoro District. The widow makes her late husband's finest dish and places it on the table at home before she departs for Elena. This is typically served as fufu, which is made without plantains. She throws away the firewood used to cook the meal as she heads back from the Tanoe River. At Elena, a widow, is led to the riverbank for her ritual cleansing, typically done late at night after a payment is made. *The hair on the head of the widow is also shaved as part of the procedure* (Participant 5, 63 years, obaapanin, Mpataba). Shaving has a cultural underpinning among the Akans. In Akan culture, during the traditional wedding ceremony, a man is required to pay the "head price" (Bono: *tire adel* or *tire nsa*). This ritual of shaving implies that the departed husband has no claim over the widow's hair when it begins to grow again because (the hair) he bought for her on the day of their marriage is no longer there (Boaheng, Asibu-Dadie, 2020). The ritual shaving is also intended to destroy their marriage connection and to rid them of anything the deceased husband touched throughout their marriage. The widow, after cleansing herself with River Tanoe, leaves everything she used on herself (such as the black clothes, rings, towel, sponge, or headgear) for the person in charge of the cleansing process at the river. After the cleansing, kaolin is smeared all over the widow's body with white clothes, earrings, and white sandals to symbolise her total freedom and victory.

It was also found that the widowhood rite in Nzema differs from the one practised by the Axim people, who are also Nzemas. With their process, the widow in question wears black clothes for three months. During the three months, a person chosen for her (the widow) prepares her food. At the end of the three months, the widow bathes in seawater at the seashore and throws away everything she has used on herself during the three months to complete the whole process. No matter the form it takes, one is certain that the Nzemas perform widowhood rites in one form or another without exception.

### ***Challenges Associated with Kunlanehyile***

Among the challenges associated with the practice of *Kunlanehyile* are social exclusion and solitude. The Nzema have a communal worldview of life. The community is prioritised over the individual. A person's existence is intimately connected to that of other people. It is, therefore, not desirable to live alone under normal circumstances, but more so when bereaved. Sadly, widows who require support from those closest to them following the loss of their husbands might not always get it because those who should be doing so distance themselves from these widows. After the burial of one's husband, the wife is taken through a period of solitary confinement for one week. This means the widow has no absolute right to visit neighbours or attend any social gatherings. With these restrictions, these women do not experience the African Communal sense of life, which fosters interdependence, interconnectedness, sharing of resources, and the solidarity that Paul encourages believers to practice in Romans 12:15-16 (NIV, International Bible Society, 2011).

The rite of *Kunlanehyile* also has a negative economic impact on widows. Most traditional Ghanaian cultures rely on the husbands for their everyday needs. Women who are engaged in a form of commercial activity supplement what their husbands provide. In the period of widowhood, the widow is not allowed to undertake any economic activity. They are banned from handling money to buy anything. The widow finds it challenging to have a means of support once the widowhood process is finished, since she is forbidden from engaging in commercial endeavours.

Kunlanehyile's associated isolation results in psychological problems. This claim is supported by Shumbamhini, who claims that isolations increase the impact of a loved one's passing while widows are still grieving (Shumbamhini, 2020). There are several illnesses among them as a result of the widows' profound psychological toll. *"It hurt me in my thinking, and my blood pressure was also shown to be excessive because of my husband's passing, and the fact that I was by myself in this place was on my mind a lot."* (Participant 4, 63 years, Widowed for 10 years)

There is also a social stigma associated with *Kunlanehyile*. Ghanaian widows frequently face accusations from society that they killed their spouses. *'Widow who passes through Kunlanehyile suffer from social stigma because it is sometimes believed that the widow is the cause of the death of her husband.'* (Participant 4, 63 years, Widowed for 10 years). This frequently occurs, especially

when family members are unsure about the husband's cause of death, which makes it easier for people to accuse the widow and spread negative sentiments about her. Widows become the talk of the community during such times.

It is also a belief among certain Nzema people that a widow who has not completed the whole ritual process is spiritually unclean to be associated with. There is the mindset of the uncleanness of the widows, which prevents other people from associating themselves with them. The majority of communities in Nzema still discourage socialising with widows. Some people sternly warn their children and family members not to associate themselves with the widow, all because she is not clean. As a result, the widow endures societal ridicule and eventually isolates herself.

### **Biblical reflections on wearing Black cloth in Kunlanehyile**

#### ***Sackcloth and ashes in the Biblical context***

During the *Kunlanehyile* process, the widow in the *Kunlanehyile* wears black clothes throughout the year as an outward sign of mourning and grief for her beloved husband. This custom has ties to the biblical sackcloth and ashes, which were used as an outward symbol of mourning, repentance, humility, or submission. For example, after Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery and then told their father Jacob that his beloved son had been murdered by a wild animal, Jacob wept over the loss of his son Joseph. Jacob then tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. 'No,' he said, 'I will continue to mourn until I join my son in the grave. So, his father wept for him' (Genesis 37:34-35, [NIV. International Bible Society, 2011](#)).

In 2 Samuel 3:31-32 ([NIV. International Bible Society, 2011](#)), David laments the loss of Abner and commands Joab and the rest of his companions to rip off their clothing, wear sackcloth, and weep before Abner. In this act, King David lifted his voice and wept at the grave of Abner, and all the people wept. According to Spence-Jones (2004), while in mourning all those at Hebron had proof that David was innocent, the people generally would know only that, when Abner was treacherously murdered by Joab, who was in charge of David's army and was also the nephew of David at the gate of Hebron, he was accompanying the king's wife back to him and organising for his election to rule over all Israel.

In the book of Esther, it is said that when Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and he cried out with a loud and bitter cry. He went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one was allowed to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth (Esther 4:1-2 [NIV. International Bible Society, 2011](#)). Esther 4:3([NIV. International Bible Society, 2011](#)) adds that when the king ordered that all Jews be murdered, Jews mourned in sackcloth and ashes, and fasted and wept. The sound of their weeping echoes Mordecai's loud and bitter cry, and listeners to Mordecai would hear both the cry of one wronged and an appeal for help. Queen Esther does not respond to his actions ([Spence-Jones, Ed. 2004](#)).

A sackcloth is a symbol of repentance and humility before God for our sins, as well as sadness. The penitent was found wearing sackcloth in the book of Jonah and the Ninevites. Jonah's warnings were taken seriously by the Ninevites, who recognised that their wrongdoing had so severely offended God that everyone, from the king to the poor, put on sackcloth and ashes (Jonah 3:5-8, [NIV. International Bible Society, 2011](#)). The inhabitants of Nineveh believed that if they offered God a visible demonstration of their humbling and repentant hearts, God would have pity on them and hold off on punishing them. Similar to Daniel, he went to the Lord God and besought Him for forgiveness for his people's crimes while fasting and wearing sackcloth and ashes (Daniel 9:3, [NIV, International Bible Society, 2011](#)). It is also stated in the book of 1 Kings that "when Ahab heard that the Lord would bring disaster on him and eradicate his descendants because of his sins, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his flesh and fasted and lay in sackcloth and went about dejectedly" (1 Kings 21:27, [NIV. International Bible Society, 2011](#)). The Lord recognised that Ahab had humbled himself via this outward show, and because of this, He decided not to unleash the calamity within his lifetime.

A sackcloth is sometimes not only seen as a sign of mourning, but also as a symbol of grief and self-humiliation when people hear words of fear and threat. In 2 Kings 18:13-37 and Isaiah 36:1-22 ([NIV, International Bible Society, 2011](#)), Sennacherib, King of Assyria, confronted all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them. And the king of Assyria sent the Rabshakeh from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem to pour out threats upon King Hezekiah. 2 Kings 19:1 ([NIV.](#)

[International Bible Society, 2011](#)) states that as soon as King Hezekiah heard it, he tore his clothes and covered himself with sackcloth and went into the house of the Lord. The king in mourning took two further steps. He went with a heavy heart to the temple to pour out his soul before God and also sent Shebna and the leading priests, all dressed in sackcloth, to meet with Isaiah so that he might hear God's word through his prophet. From the above, it could be concluded that the physical characteristics of wearing sackcloth made it a suitable attire for times of danger, grief, personal and national crisis, and times of distress.

### ***Religious uncleanness and ritual cleansing in the Biblical context***

Throughout history, people of all nations and faiths, including Hindus, Jews, Christians, and even Pagans, have used spiritual baths and ceremonial bathing. It is believed to remove negativity from oneself, celebrate a new season, or have other symbolic meanings. Washing was a physical act that fulfilled a religious purpose by preventing contamination by tangible objects. To return the widow to her normal self after her husband's death, the *Kunlanehyile* demands that she undergo ceremonial purification in the River Tanoe. This can be connected to the biblical framework of ceremonial purification.

Many reasons for uncleanness may be deduced from the Mosaic Law. First, the law provides different commandments regarding animals that are considered clean and those that are forbidden to eat (Leviticus 11:46-47, NIV, [International Bible Society, 2011](#)). Second, illnesses, particularly leprosy, caused a condition of uncleanness (Leviticus 13, 14; 2 Kings 5:1-14, NIV, [International Bible Society, 2011](#)).

Thirdly, body secretions were impure, and depending on how long they were in contact with someone, they could pollute them. Whether during sexual activity (Leviticus 15:16-18 NIV, [International Bible Society, 2011](#)) or unintentionally at night (Deuteronomy 23:10), the release of semen caused uncleanness till evening. According to Leviticus 15:19-24 (NIV, [International Bible Society, 2011](#)), menstruation also caused uncleanness. It was forbidden to engage in sexual activity during that period (Leviticus 15:19-24; 20:18 NIV, [International Bible Society, 2011](#)). Contact with the spittle of an unclean person produced uncleanness for a day (Leviticus 15:8 NIV, [International Bible Society, 2011](#)).

Additionally, uncleanness was brought on by dead bodies. Anyone who touched a dead body was considered unclean for a month and may only celebrate their own Passover after that period (Numbers 19:16, Numbers 9:6-11, NIV, [International Bible Society, 2011](#)). Due to his unique ceremonial duties, the high priest was not even permitted to bury his own parents (Leviticus 21:10-11, NIV, [International Bible Society, 2011](#)).

Lastly, idolatry was the greatest source of spiritual pollution. The entire nation of Israel was defiled because of idolatry, as were the Gentiles (Psalm 106:38; Isaiah 30:22; Ezra 36: 25 Jeremiah 43:12 NIV, [International Bible Society, 2011](#)). In light of this, interaction with Gentiles was believed to result in contamination. According to Zechariah 13:2, the contamination brought on by unclean spirits was closely tied to the defilement brought on by idolatry.

The Bible provides a means of dealing with religious uncleanness. For example, according to Leviticus' priestly laws, bathing is required to cleanse oneself of various contaminating agents, including skin diseases (Leviticus 14:8-9 NIV, [International Bible Society, 2011](#)), sexual activity (Leviticus 15:18 NIV, [International Bible Society, 2011](#)), specific bodily discharges (Leviticus 15:5-6), contact with a dead body (Numbers 19:11 NIV, [International Bible Society, 2011](#)), leprosy (Leviticus 13:3), and menstruation (Leviticus 15:19-30 NIV, [International Bible Society, 2011](#)).

A person could also be purified using ceremonial substances such as the ashes of a red heifer mixed with water (Numbers 19:1-10 NIV, [International Bible Society, 2011](#)), and (in cases of leprosy) cedarwood, scarlet cloth, hyssop, and blood (Leviticus 14:2-9 NIV, [International Bible Society, 2011](#)). Due to the altar's history as the site of sin sacrifice (Leviticus 16:18, 19; Ezra 43: 20 NIV, [International Bible Society, 2011](#)), only blood was acceptable when it came to purifying rituals. In the case of cleansing from sin, the sinner was to be made as white as snow (Psalm 51: 7 NIV, [International Bible Society, 2011](#)).

Purification by Sacrifice is another method of cleansing in the Old Testament. Both ceremonial and moral purity ultimately came through blood sacrifice. According to Leviticus 15:14-30 (NIV, [International Bible Society, 2011](#)), doves and pigeons were offered to purify all bodily fluids except sexual ones. Blood was used as a metaphor for a life given and the death that followed when it was sacrificed. It was thought that the uncleanness brought on by a disease or sin



was conveyed to the sufferer and so eliminated (Leviticus 14:7 [NIV. International Bible Society, 2011](#)). As a result, a sacrifice's death always had a substitutional component. Therefore, the basis for all purification, including that from sickness, was such a substitutionary atoning sacrifice ([Williams, 1960](#)).

In the New Testament, uncleanness is linked to sin. Jesus taught that true defilement came from the sinner's heart and not from outside contamination (Mark 7:14-23; Luke 11:41 [NIV. International Bible Society, 2011](#)). His critique of the ceremonial externalism practised by the Pharisees was a key component of his teaching. The Law was internalised by Jesus. It would be more accurate to say that he compelled individuals to pay attention to the demands made by the Law on their inner life. Just as the widow mourns her departed husband for days, so should one mourn over their sins and guilt before God. The guilt that sin brings must compel the sinner to come to God and seek the forgiveness of sins through the atoning blood of Christ. The word of God can wash and make the sinner clean from the defilement caused by sins (John 15:3, [NIV. International Bible Society, 2011](#)). In actuality, what the blood of bulls and goats only symbolised in the Old Testament sacrifice system, the atonement of Christ was the final remedy for sin and its moral effects (Hebrews 9:13-14 [NIV. International Bible Society, 2011](#)). In contrast to the yearly repeated offerings of the Levitical priests, Jesus made a single sacrifice.

### ***Christological Analysis of Widowhood among the Nzemas***

The main argument of this section is that Christ has already achieved cleansing and protection, which the Nzema widowhood rites seek to achieve for the widow. Therefore, the Christian widow should make Christ central in the period of widowhood and depend solely on him for the necessary protection and cleansing. To this end, Christ invites the widow to the cross of repentance, where people rend their hearts, not their garments, and resolve not to repeat their sinful ways. Christology, the study of Jesus Christ's life and teachings, is central to all Christian theological discourses because Christ is the foundation of the Christian church. In this section, the paper reflects on the ritual bathing and the wearing of black cloth in *Kunlanehyile* among the Nzema People of Ghana from a Christological perspective.

It must be said from the onset that widowhood rites, as performed by any people group, have some pluses and minuses. Therefore, one should not condemn the entire ritual simply because some aspects of it are unacceptable. The church needs to get involved and transform any aspect of the practice that can be proven as unbiblical. Practices such as making the widow sleep with the corpse in the same room, prohibiting the widow from bathing or eating for days, and falsely accusing the widow of having a hand in the deceased husband's death (associated with widowhood practices by some tribes) must be discouraged as they contradict the gospel. In the case of the Nzema rite, none of these unethical practices featured strongly. The practice was seen as something that gives the widow enough time to mourn the deceased husband, helps her to prepare for life without the deceased husband, cleanses her from her ceremonial uncleanness resulting from the death of her husband, and severs her marital union with her deceased husband, among others.

## **5. Discussion**

### ***True Cleansing***

The *Kunlanehyile* rite involves ritual cleansing from uncleanness, which is performed twice: once at the end of the first week and again at the end of the entire period of widowhood. These cleansing rituals can be considered as a shadow of the cleansing that Christ achieved for humanity on the cross through his atonement. They are comparable to the Old Testament cleansing rites, which were performed in anticipation. Bediako describes the efficacy, completeness, and finality of Jesus' sacrifice as follows: "The Lord Jesus achieved permanent salvation for those who ceased from their acts of purification and put their faith in him and his flawless Odwira (Cleansing), i.e., Christ himself, who has become our Odwira (the Twi phrase used here, *ode n'ankasa ne ho*, is more evocative than the English equivalent). Through Jesus Christ's death, the "Odwira to end all odwiras" has occurred ([Bediako, 2000](#)). Given this fact, the *kunla* must appreciate that it is Christ who offers true purification from sin. From the Christological perspective, sin is the main cause of spiritual uncleanness. The New Testament believer does not become spiritually defiled by what they eat, childbirth, or the touch of a corpse, but by sin (Mark 7:14-19; Colossians 2:16-17; 1 Timothy 4:1-4 [NIV. International Bible Society, 2011](#)). Therefore, it is necessary to acknowledge Christ's superior cleansing power when performing the ceremonial cleansing for the widowhood

process. Christ is the sanctifier, so the ritual should have no other object of worship. The purification rite is a reminder of daily cleansing by the blood of Jesus from sin.

### **Protection by Christ**

Satan has dominion over humankind because of sin. The death of Christ secured the believer against attacks from evil powers. Agyarko claims that Jesus' victory over the spiritual world, particularly over the forces of evil, provides the solution to the question of why there should be a strong guardian against such forces and powers (Agyarko, 2009). For many Africans, the cross is not only about sacrifice but also about victory won by a mighty Warrior, Christ.

Death and the host of evil powers became powerless when Jesus died (Hebrews 2:14, Colossians 2:15 NIV. International Bible Society, 2011). Kuma (2011) alludes to this fact when she refers to Jesus as the person who yelled at Death, and it fled from his face, the first-born Child who is aware of Death's cure, the barrier that prevents Death from entering and causes many hearts to leap for pleasure, and the person who yelled at Death and it fled from his face. For Jesus to shout at death and have death run from his presence means death has no power over Jesus; no wonder it could not hold Jesus captive. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews underlines the victory Jesus won on the cross against Satan and his hosts of forces when he says, Jesus incarnated so that through death, he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil and free all those in bondage to death's power. Given this fact, the Nzema *kunla*, who has given her life to Christ, must appropriate the protection that Christ's death offers believers. There is no need to fear ghosts, as the protection Christ offers is sufficient.

### **Penitence**

The ritual wearing of black cloth compares well with the wearing of sackcloth and sitting in ashes by the ancient Israelites. The sackcloth was meant to express sorrow and repentance (Jonah 3:8 NIV. International Bible Society, 2011). The Asante-Twi version of Jonah 3:8 translates the sackcloth as mourning cloth, which is the same as the cloth worn by the *kunla* during the widowhood rite. Therefore, the wearing of black cloth has both a penitential and mournful connotation. This, however, is an external dimension of repentance.

From a Christological perspective, genuine repentance is an internal rather than an external phenomenon. There is no relevance in putting on a sackcloth if this outward sign is not rooted in internal transformation. The paper, therefore, urges the *kunla* to use the period of seclusion to assess their lives and repent of all sins, asking for forgiveness from God. This way, they will be renewed both physically and spiritually to begin a new life when they are reintegrated into society.

## **6. Conclusion**

This paper describes the Nzema widowhood rite (*Kunlanehyile*) and the challenges associated with this practice. It was noted that during the *Kunlanehyile* process, the widow in the *Kunlanehyile* wears black clothes throughout the year as an outward sign of mourning and grief for her beloved husband. It is related to sackcloth and ashes in a biblical context, which was also an outward sign of mourning, repentance, abasement, or submission, with various examples from the Old Testament. The paper has also noted that the widow is seen as unclean, which the paper relates to uncleanness from the Mosaic Law, where several causes of uncleanness can be derived from its ritual cleansing in the biblical context. However, from a New Testament perspective, what renders a person unclean is sin, which necessitates repentance and genuine cleansing through the blood of Jesus. To conclude, the Nzema *kunla*, who has given her life to Christ, must appropriate the protection that Christ's death offers believers and not entertain fear of ghosts. She is not to be put to fear that, without cleansing in the River Tanoe, something dangerous could happen to her. She should believe that the protection that Christ offers is enough.

## **7. Limitations and Strengths**

The study was conducted in the Mpataba community, Jomoro Municipality, Western Region, Ghana. This might have limited the potential of generalising our findings to other widowhood rites in other cultural settings. However, the interpretation of the findings should be done with care.

However, this study explored the cultural sensitivity of widows among the Nzema people, giving us a unique understanding of and insight into *Kunlanehyile*. This study focused on widowhood rites among only the Nzema People within the Jomoro municipality. Participants' religious beliefs were not captured in this study. Future research should consider this information.

Finally, for this study, data analysis was not performed for the inclusion criteria of the participants' current experiences with the introduction of Christianity. The findings present the true meaning of Kunlanehyile, its various phases, and its effects on participants within this municipality. It might be meaningful to recruit participants from different cultural backgrounds to realise how different widowhood rites affect the cultural sensitivity of widows.

## 8. Declarations

### **Ethics approval and consent to participate**

Ethical approval: CSUC/EA/01/2023; Institutional approval: CSUC-REC2023/01/07

### **Consent for publication**

Not applicable.

### **Availability of data and materials**

Raw data is available upon request from the corresponding author.

### **Conflict of interest statement**

The authors do not have any personal or financial interest in this study.

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### **Authors' contributions**

This document is the work of Isaac Boaheng and Rev. Justice Korankye, representing an intellectual contribution to their academic work, which they have approved for publication.

Conceptualisation: LVM, SHM, methodology, data curation, data analysis: LVM, SHM, and DMN, writing – original draft preparation, writing: LVM, SHM, and DMN; writing – review and editing: LVM, SHM; writing – supervision: LVM, SHM and DMN; funding – LVM. All authors have read and agreed to the final version of the manuscript for publication.

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