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Asugyafoɔ (Unmarried) and *Akunafoɔ* (Widows) in 1 Corinthians 7:8-9, 39-40: An Akan Christian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

In 1 Corinthians 7, the apostle Paul addresses various concerns regarding relationships within the Corinthian church. He discusses the appropriate behavior and attitudes Christian spouses should have toward each other, provides guidance to the unmarried and widows, and advises against divorce. Additionally, he encourages those who have experienced divorce to seek reconciliation whenever possible. Paul also offers cautionary advice to Christian virgins about the potential challenges of marriage, providing comprehensive insight into the complexities of relationships within the Christian community. This research explored the implications of Paul's teachings for unmarried individuals and widows, considering their spiritual, emotional, and social dimensions. By examining these verses from an Akan Christian perspective, the paper illuminated how cultural contexts influence biblical interpretation and the lived experiences of believers, providing a comprehensive understanding of the divine purpose for all believers, whether unmarried, married, or widowed. To achieve this, the researcher drew from various sources, including biblical texts and Akan literature. The study employed methodological tools such as theological analysis and mother-tongue biblical hermeneutics in its discussion. The study revealed that Paul's endorsement of singleness is rooted in its potential for undistracted devotion to God. Thus, the study concludes that Paul's recommendation is not a criticism of marriage but rather an acknowledgment of the benefits of celibacy for those who can maintain it.

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INTRODUCTION

The themes of marriage, singleness, and widowhood have been longstanding subjects of discussion within Christian communities. In 1 Corinthians 7:8-9, 39-40, the Apostle Paul offers guidance on these states of being, highlighting the unique spiritual and relational realities associated with being *asugyafuoɔ* (unmarried) and *akunafoɔ* (widowed). Through these verses, Paul provides insights that connect cultural and theological understandings, emphasizing the importance of personal choice and divine calling in relationships. This study takes on a distinct dimension when viewed through the lens of Akan Christianity. With its rich traditions and values, the Akan culture intersects with biblical teachings to shape the experiences and perceptions of *asugyafuoɔ* and *akunafoɔ* in contemporary Akan

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society. This study, therefore, explores the implications of Paul's teachings for unmarried individuals and widows, considering their spiritual, emotional, and social dimensions. By examining these verses from an Akan Christian perspective, the study aims to illuminate how cultural contexts influence biblical interpretation and the lived experiences of believers, providing a comprehensive understanding of the divine purpose for all believers, whether unmarried, married, or widowed.

THE GRAECO-ROMAN CONTEXT

The Graeco-Roman world, where Corinth was situated, had complex norms regarding marriage. Marriage was considered an essential part of society as it served as a means of continuity and preservation of the family lineage. Graeco-Roman marriage was a legally binding contract between a man and a woman and was typically a transaction or an arrangement by their families. Eva Cantarella affirms, "Roman marriage was not a matter of personal choice, but a family matter, involving the economic interests and the social expectations and ambitions of the two families arranging the marriage."[1] Based on this arranged nature of Graeco-Roman marriage, most people did not marry for love nor even for sexual attraction or companionship. However, a measure of affection could develop in time. Paul Veyne says, "Love in marriage was a stroke of a good fortune; it was not the basis of the institution."[2] In other words, love, though an important element in marriage, was not the main reason for the institution of marriage at the time. Instead, there were other factors or reasons for the creation and continuation of marriage beyond just love. According to Allison Glazebrook and Kelly Olson, the Romans married because it was their social duty to produce Roman citizens or legitimate heirs to carry on the family name and property. Equally, Greeks married to "transmit social identity and status, to maintain social networks (which were often based on kin), and to provide heirs through the production of children."[3] The Greeks also married to produce legitimate offspring to carry on the family name and fulfill citizen obligations, such as caring for the elderly and continuing the proper rites to ensure the well-being of the soul in the afterlife. In the patriarchal structure of Graeco-Roman society, the family name was derived from the father's family. The Greeks believed that "marriage followed by childbirth, not menarche, marked the essential rite of passage from *Parthenos* to *gunē* (that is, from girlhood to womanhood)."[4] Thus, marriage in the Graeco-Roman world was governed by strict laws and customs, with specific rules regarding property rights, inheritance, and social status. Glazebrook and Olson, following other scholarly writings, state,

> As mentioned, legal marriage was a matter of intent (*affectio maritalis*). But not everyone in Roman society could contract a legal marriage. Capacity to marry legally was inhibited by age and consent, but also by status: under the laws of Augustus (Treggiari 1991, 60-80; Gardner 1986, 31-44), senators and senatorial women were banned from marrying freedmen or freedwomen, actresses or actors, prostitutes, pimps, or gladiators (Dig. 23.2.44, 25.7.1, 25.7.2; Evans-Grubbs 2002, 143-50). Slaves could not marry (but see Hersch 2010, 29-33); nor could soldiers, until the time of Emperor Severus (193-211 CE; Evans-Grubbs 2002, 158-9; but see Allison 2011). Officials in Roman provinces could not marry provincial women. Often of course such groups formed monogamous, long-lasting relationships, complete with cohabitation and children; still, this was not a legal marriage in the eyes of Roman law. Capacity to marry was also affected by kinship: the pair could not be related within a certain degree (prohibited degrees included adoption, except by imperial dispensation; Evans-Grubbs 2002, 136-43). Thus first cousins could

[1] Eva Cantarella, "Marriage and Sexuality in Republican Rome: A Roman Conjugal Love Story", in Martha Nussbaum C. and Juha Sihvola (eds.), *The Sleep of Reason: Erotic Experience and Sexual Ethics in Ancient Greece and Rome,* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 269-282 (274).

[2] Paul Veyne, *A History of Private Life: From Pagan Rome to Byzantium*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 40.

[3] Allison Glazebrook and Kelly Olson, "Greek and Roman Marriage", in Thomas Hubbard K. (ed.). *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities,* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2014), 69-82 (70-76).

[4] Glazebrook and Olson, "Greek and Roman Marriage", in Hubbard (ed.), *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities,* 70.

> marry; brother and sister could not. Marriage between uncle and niece was legal after the Emperor Claudius. Finally, to marry legally, one needed to be possessed of the *ius conubii* ("right of marriage": Treggiari 1991, 43-9; Hersch 2010, 20-2; Gardner 1986, 31-8), the privilege of Roman citizens and of some Roman allies. Not having *ius conubii* means that (1) one could not legally marry in Roman law; and (2) if one did cohabit and produce children, Roman law recognized neither the union nor the children as legitimate (that was the cases of Anthony and Cleopatra in 34 BCE, for instance).[5]

Glazebrook and Olson's quote digs into the difficulties surrounding legal marriage in Roman society, emphasizing specific prerequisites and restrictions. From the quote, it is clear that in Roman culture, legal marriage was defined by mutual intent, known as "*affectio maritalis*." However, intending to marry was just the first step. Several factors could impact one's ability to enter a legal marriage: (1) Minimum age requirements and the need for consent were essential. (2) Specific laws, especially those enacted by Augustus, imposed restrictions based on social status. For example, Senators and senatorial women were prohibited from marrying certain individuals. Soldiers were also not allowed to marry until the reign of Emperor Severus. (3) Despite these restrictions, many people formed enduring, monogamous relationships involving cohabitation and children. However, these relationships were not legally recognized as marriages. (4) Close relatives "within a certain degree" of relation could not marry, except with an imperial dispensation. For example, first cousins could legally marry, but siblings could not. After Emperor Claudius's reign, marriage between an uncle and a niece became permissible. (5). Legal marriage required possession of the *ius conubii*, a specific right granted to Roman citizens and some allies. Not having this right meant "one could not legally marry" under Roman law, and any unions formed without it were not recognized. This also extended to children born of such unions, who would be considered illegitimate.

Glazebrook and Olson demonstrate how strict legal and social frameworks controlled marriage in Roman society, with various restrictions based on age, consent, social status, kinship, and citizenship rights. These regulations seemed to preserve Rome's social order, cultural integrity, and legal heritage. It is also important to note that marriage in ancient Rome was closely linked to religious beliefs and practices, requiring religious registration or validation. Therefore, it can be concluded that marriage was a complex and multifaceted institution that played a fundamental role in the social, economic, and religious life of Roman society. Graeco-Roman citizens could marry more than once in a lifetime because divorce was common at the time. Glazebrook and Olson summarize the Roman law on divorce as follows,

> Our written sources have more to say about adultery than about any other sexual transgression because of upper-class horror about introducing a spurious child into the agnatic line… In the republic, adultery had been handled with the family: by a woman's husband or father of the family, or by a family council. But Augustus passed the *Lex Iulia de adulteriis coercendis* (*Lex Iulia* on restraining adulterers") in 18 BCE, as part of his program of moral reform. The laws on adultery did not apply symmetrically to both sexes. *Adulteria* was defined as "sex with a married woman"; the status of the man was irrelevant. A husband could therefore prosecute his wife for adultery, but he could not do the same, as in the eyes of the law he had not committed any offense against their marriage. A wronged wife could, however, still obtain a divorce. As for the lover, public opinion in all periods held that extra-legal punishments were perfectly legitimate: the man could be beaten up by the husband, anally raped in various ways, urinated on by kitchen slaves, perhaps even castrated, in addition to being brought into court. If he was of low social status and the pair were caught in the woman's matrimonial home, the husband could kill him (but he could not kill his wife, or else he would be liable for

[5] Glazebrook and Olson, "Greek and Roman Marriage", in Hubbard (ed.), *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities,* 77-78.

> homicide). The husband must then divorce his wife without delay, or he could be subject to a charge for *lencinium*, pimping…The penalties for convicted adulterers were severe…a stiff monetary fine, *relegatio* (temporary exile), and various legal disabilities. Women convicted of adultery in the strict sense (that is, caught in the act) could not remarry freeborn citizens, and thus they could not receive outside legacies.[6]

The quote shows the historical, legal, and social context surrounding adultery in ancient Rome, particularly focusing on the asymmetric treatment of men and women in cases of adultery. It highlights the severe consequences faced by women who were convicted of adultery, as well as the lack of legal recourse for men whom their wives betrayed. It also discusses the societal norms and expectations surrounding punishment for adulterers, including extra-legal forms of retribution allowed by public opinion. In both Greek and Roman societies, wives who were divorced due to infidelity were prohibited from remarrying. When marriages ended, children would typically remain with their fathers. Families typically comprised legitimate children from the same mother, with the possibility of illegitimate children within some households. Husbands had the authority to demand sexual satisfaction from their slaves, and any children born to slaves belonged to the slave master unless he chose to expel them. Men were not limited to their wives for sexual activities and could engage with prostitutes, citizen callboys, or effeminate individuals. However, women were expected to remain faithful to their husbands, and any extramarital sexual activity was considered a transgression. In Greek society, the penalty for a wife's adultery was divorce, loss of status and privileges as a Greek citizen, and potential sale into prostitution. Yet, a husband's unfaithfulness was not considered adultery unless it involved another man's wife. Based on the discussion above, it is evident that Graeco-Roman culture highly valued marriage and celibacy as essential social institutions for reproduction and family stability and as a way to focus on the Christian faith. This cultural milieu may have influenced Paul's discussion in 1 Corinthians 7. Therefore, Paul's guidance in the selected passages can be viewed as both practical and countercultural, considering the strong societal expectations and pressures surrounding marriage.

"THE UNMARRIED AND THE WIDOWS" IN 1 CORINTHIANS 7:8-9, 39-40

The Text

[8] Now I say to the unmarried and the widows, it is good for them if they remain even as I. [9] But if they have no self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to be inflamed. [39] A wife is bound as long as her husband may live; however, if the husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wills, only in the Lord.[40] But blessed is she, if she should remain according to my counsel; I think I too have the Spirit of God.[7]

Discussion

Having discussed the relationship between married couples and the essential role of sexual relations within marriage in the first seven verses, Paul now turns his attention specifically to the group he categorizes as οῖς ἀγάμοίς καὶ ταῖς χήραις, which translates as "the unmarried and the widows." In this context, Paul expresses a personal inclination for individuals in this group to remain single like he is, as noted in verse 8. This raises an interesting point of discussion, particularly regarding Paul's choice of the Greek term ἀγάμοίς, often translated as "unmarried." Paul's use of ἀγάμοίς introduces complexities when considering its meaning in Paul's subsequent discussion in verse 25, where he employs the term παρθένων[8] to refer to unmarried persons. The question is, to whom does the word ἀγάμοίς ("unmarried") specifically refer? Scholars such as Gordon D. Fee, Victor Paul Furnish, and Kenneth E. Bailey offer valuable insight. Despite a specific term for widower in classical Greek *chēros,*

[6] Glazebrook and Olson, "Greek and Roman Marriage", in Hubbard (ed.), *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities,* 79.

[7] This is my own translation from *Novum Testamentum Graece,* Nestle-Aland 27th Edition (BNT, BibleWorks 1993).

[8] Παρθένων is the genitive plural of παρθένοι hence, could be translated as "of virgins". But in this instance, it will be normally translated as virgins.

it was rarely, if ever, used during the New Testament period when *koine* Greek was in use. Instead, the term ἀγάμοίς seems to have been used more often as a substitute for *chēros,*[9] suggesting that it broadly refers to all categories of the "unmarried," which includes individuals who have never been married as well as those who are divorced.[10] The important question for consideration then is, if ἀγάμοίς refers to all unmarried individuals, why does Paul pair it with χήραις (widows)? It is worth noting that, in verse 11, Paul uses the same word ἀγάμοίς in a context that refers to those who are separated from their spouses, indicating a nuanced distinction. Furthermore, in verse 34, he contrasts this term with those who have never married. This suggests that Paul's regular use of ἀγάμοίς may not denote the general "unmarried" category but rather signifies the "demarried" group: those who have previously been married but are not currently.[11] Marion L. Soards thinks that Paul is referring to men and women who have experienced the loss of their spouses, that is, widowers and widows at this point.[12] Bailey aligns with this interpretation, asserting that "the natural way to read the text is to see these two words as a pair and understand that Paul is writing about 'widowers and widows.'"[13] Fee also contributes to this discourse, noting that Paul emphasizes the mutuality of husbands and wives throughout this passage, referencing them twelve times. This recurring theme of mutuality underscores the notion that viewing widowers in this context aligns with the broader discussion Paul is engaged in. [14] Consequently, the interpretation that ἀγάμοίς refers specifically to "widowers" seems to provide a coherent understanding of the text and facilitates a clearer interpretation of the subsequent verses (10-16 and 25-38). In these passages, Paul elaborates on the issues about married individuals, those who are divorced, and those who have never entered the institution of marriage. This focus on the nuances of marital statuses reinforces the validity of understanding the term ἀγάμοίς as inclusive of widowers within the larger framework of Paul's teachings.

From the above premise, therefore, Paul's advice in verse 9 is about the widowers and the widows. While verses 8 and 9 do not explicitly comment on the moral character or ethical behavior of these individuals, there is a reasonable implication that they may have been struggling with issues related to sexual immorality. This may have included engaging with prostitutes, as referenced in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20. Given these potential moral dilemmas, Paul proposes that marrying may be a viable solution to address and mitigate such sinful behavior. His use of the words, ἐγκρατεύονται ("they have self-control") and πυροῦσθαι ("to be inflamed"), are striking. In the Graeco-Roman cultural context, where self-control was esteemed as a significant virtue, it is crucial to note that Paul incorporates this term in a theological framework. He lists self-control among the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:23, which indicates a deeper spiritual dimension to the concept. Paul implies that true self-control is not merely a secular virtue but rather an empowerment that comes through the Holy Spirit. Thus, Paul's use of it in this context appears to suggest that the presence of the Holy Spirit empowers individuals to exercise the necessary self-control required to maintain chastity in a celibate state. For him, if one does not have the Spirit-given ability to live celibately, it is more prudent for that individual to enter into marriage rather than to succumb to the overwhelming urges implied by the term πυροῦσθαι ("to be inflamed" or "set on fire"). The interpretation of πυροῦσθαι has seen varied scholarly analysis, with some proposing that it might connote "burning in hell." However, this interpretation has been rejected by other scholars. Instead, the meaning of the term is implied by the context. Paul Ellingworth and Howard A. Hatton explain that the term may be expressed as "to have

[9] Gordon D. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Revised Edition. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 20214), 318-319; Victor Paul Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul: Selected Issues,* 3rd Edition, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 81; Kenneth E. Bailey *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians,* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2011), 204.

[10] David K. Lowery, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary,* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983), 518.

[11] Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 319.

[12] Marion L. Soards, *1 Corinthians,* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 143.

[13] Bailey *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians,* 204.

[14] Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 319.

sexual passion burning in you" or "to have hearts that burn with sexual passion."[15] According to Edward J. Ellis, the phrase reflects Greek novels like *Daphnis and Chloe* (by Longus), which the Corinthians were familiar with. The novel goes like this: "'There's a lot of snow, Chloe, and I'm afraid I shall melt before the snow does.' 'Cheer up, Daphnis, the sun is quite hot.' 'If only, Chloe, it were as hot as fire [πυρ] that burns in my heart.' (3.10.4)"[16] In this novel, the 'fire' is probably used metaphorically for 'love-sick.' Daphnis expresses his strong passion or desire for Chloe. He indicates that even the sun's heat is not as strong as his burning love for Chloe. This shows the depth of his feelings and the overpowering nature of his love for her. Thus, Ellis understands Paul's phrase as, 'If you are love-sick, get married.'[17] Hence, it is better to get married than to be set on fire or burn with passion for sex. This agrees with Paul's teachings in Romans 7:11-14 and 1 Timothy 5:14.

In verses 39-40, Paul deals with the dissolution of marriage and remarriage as it pertains to Christian widows. He stresses in verse 39a the sanctity of the marriage bond, highlighting that it should ideally last until death. This notion is paralleled with the teachings found in Deuteronomy 24:3, which outlines the conditions surrounding marriage and divorce in the Hebrew Scriptures. Paul emphasizes that a widow is permitted to remarry only after the death of her husband, which reflects the traditional understanding of marriage being a lifelong commitment. He continues in 39b to say that a widow may remarry who she wishes but with a significant caveat: "only in the Lord". This phrase suggests a preference for a marital union with a fellow believer, reinforcing the idea that any future marriage should be spiritually aligned. This guidance resonates with the Jewish legal teachings found in m. Git. 9:3, which provides a framework allowing widows to remarry, thereby affirming an element of personal freedom in their choices.[18] In addition to these instructions, Paul explores the potential advantages of remaining single. In verse 40, he expresses the opinion that a widow may find greater contentment and fulfillment in singlehood, suggesting a nuanced view of personal agency. This perspective is notable in the context of Graeco-Roman societal norms, where unmarried women, particularly widows, were often marginalized and had limited options for social and economic independence. Paul's guidance can be seen as both relevant and possibly revolutionary, as it emphasizes a widow's autonomy and spiritual commitment rather than adhering to the prevailing societal pressures to remarry or rely on male relatives for support. He urges believers to avoid unnecessary complications that might hamper their attention to God's will for their lives. Paul ends strongly on this by asserting "But I think I too have the Spirit of God", a bold assertion that carries significant weight. It is worth noting that the exact meaning of this statement remains somewhat ambiguous and open to interpretation. Some interpretations suggest that Paul may have been addressing certain ascetics or individuals within the Corinthian church who considered themselves exceptionally spiritual and may have been given conflicting advice. Alternatively, Paul may be asserting that he also possesses the Spirit of God, just like the other apostles, in giving his advice and instructions to the Corinthians. While the exact intention behind Paul's assertion cannot be definitively resolved, it is evident that this statement reinforces the legitimacy and authority of his counsel within the Corinthian context, establishing him as a credible voice on matters of faith and practice. Paul's teachings not only reflect theological principles but also respond to the practical realities faced by widows in a complex social framework, bringing forth a message of hope, agency, and spiritual empowerment.

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[15] Paul Ellingworth and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians,* 2nd Edition. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 150.

[16] Edward J. Ellis, *Paul and Ancient Views of Sexual Desire: Paul's Sexual Ethics in 1 Thessalonians 4, Corinthians 7 and Romans 1*, (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 155.

[17] Edward J. Ellis, "Controlled Burn: The Romantic Note in 1 Corinthians 7", *Perspectives in Religious Studies,* 29 (2002), 89-98 (97).

[18] Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, "1 Corinthians", in G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (eds.). *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament,* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2007), 695-752 (716).

ASUGYAFOƆ (UN-MARRIED) AND *AKUNAFOƆ* (WIDOWS): AN AKAN[19] CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

The 2018 Asante Twi-English version translate 1 Corinthians 7:8-9 thus, "*Na meka mekyerɛ asugyafoɔ ne akunafoɔ sɛ, ɛyɛ ma wɔn sɛ wɔtena hɔ sɛ me; na sɛ wɔntumi nhyɛ wɔn ho so a, wɔnware; na ɛyɛ sɛ wɔbɛwareɛ sene sɛ wɔbɛnya akɔnnɔ bɔne*." It has been previously discussed that the term ἀγάμοίς, which is translated by the Akan word *asugyafoɔ,* means "unmarried persons." That is, all categories of the "unmarried" including those who have never been married and divorcees. Similarly, the Akan word *asugyafoɔ* represents the same meaning as ἀγάμοίς. For instance, J. G. Christaller defines *osigyafo* or *asugyafoɔ* as,

> an unmarried person, i.e. a man or woman who has either not been married at all, or a man who has sent away his wife, or a woman who has forsaken her husband, in general, one who is not in the state of regular marriage. As such a state with the natives is hardly ever one of abstinence, the word rather includes than excludes irregular intercourse with the other sex.[20]

With these meanings given by Christaller, ἀγάμοίς and *asugyafoɔ* are not different from each other. That the *asugyafoɔ* can be both unmarried and married persons whose marriages are irregular[21] cannot be disputed. This point is significant, especially as it reveals the intricate and nuanced understanding of various relationship dynamics within the context of Akan culture. The Apostle Paul issues a cautionary admonition specifically directed at the *asugyafoɔ.* His warnings parallel those he directs towards fornicators, adulterers, effeminates, and homosexuals, as noted in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. Paul underscores the necessity of abstaining from immoral sexual practices, clearly stating that those who partake in such behaviors will not inherit *Nyankopɔn ahennie* (the kingdom of God). This is a profound moral and spiritual exhortation for the community, urging members to uphold ethical standards and maintain integrity in their relationships and sexual conduct. Thus, an Akan reading this passage will understand Paul as encouraging him or her to reflect on their behaviors and choices and promote a culture of respect and responsibility in matters of intimacy and commitment. His exhortation acts as a clarion call for Akan Christians to strive toward a higher standard of living that aligns with their Christian beliefs and values.

The Akan word used for the Greek χήραις in 1 Corinthians 7:8 by the various Akan Bible translations is *akunafoɔ.* However, the way the Twi translators have translated χήραις is a bit problematic. The Greek word χήραις agrees with the Akan word *akunafoɔ* in terms of its plural form, but while the Greek is strictly feminine plural, the Akan word is generic. In other words, the Greek can strictly be translated as "widows," but *akunafoɔ* can be used for both men and women, thus expanding the meaning beyond the original Greek implication. The origin of *akunafoɔ* can be traced to the Akan word *kuna* (widowhood), meaning "the state of a widower or widow."[22] Meanwhile, the infinitive *Kunayɛ* means "The state of being a widower or widow; the performance of the duties of a

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[19] The term "Akan" includes the Twi and other related dialects spoken by people in the Brong-Ahafo, Asante, Western, Central, and Eastern regions of Ghana. The Akan people live in the southern part of Ghana, mainly in the forest and coastal areas. Culturally, the Akan are a large ethnic group with many dialects and are divided into subgroups such as Asante, Mfantse, Akuapem, Bono, Adanse, Twifo, Asene, Akyem, Akwamu, Kwawu, Awowin, Nzima, Dankyira, Sefwi, Ahanta, and Wassa.

[20] J. G. Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language Called Tshi (Twi),* (Basel: The Basel Evangelical Missionary Society, 1933), p. 456.

[21] An irregular marriage technically speaking, is the type of marriage that does not satisfy the laid down requirements for marriages within a particular society. For both the Akan and Paul, the guidelines for proper marriage are clear. In Jewish or Graeco-Roman society, for a marriage to be proper, it needs to meet some prescriptions or principles. For instance, it should be heterosexual, and the partners eligible for marriage must have citizenship status, among others. For the Akan, a proper marriage is one contracted having observing all the traditional norms regarding marriage. Also, the marriage must be heterosexual, exogamous, and the woman must not be someone else's wife, and so on. Again, a marriage confronted with problems that have rendered the partners separated from each other is an example of an irregular marriage. Thus, an irregular marriage can be defective or disruptive and lack the necessary ingredients for a successful and happy marriage.

[22] Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language Called Tshi (Twi),* 271.

widow."[23] This underscores the responsibilities that individuals in this condition may bear within the community, further enriching the cultural context surrounding concepts of marriage, loss, and societal roles in Akan life. To the traditional Akan, the widowhood rites, as explained by Gaylord Aidoo-Dadzie,

> are seen…as a means of spiritual, moral and emotional protection for the surviving spouse. Proponents of widowhood rites regard them as a means of warding off bad influences from evil spirits. As with many African peoples, the Fante (*Akan*) believe that the ancestors are the custodians of family law and have the right to punish offenders and reward the law-abiding. The belief is that if the rite is not observed, ancestral spirits will be offended and will cause varied unforeseen problems to interfere with the normal life of the surviving spouse as a punitive measure.[24]

As has already been indicated, *akunafoɔ* can be used for the man or woman, depending on the person performing the rite. If it is a man, he is called *kuna-barima,* and a woman *kuna-baa*. However, this distinction is normally kept mute because women are normally made to undergo the widowhood rite. Peter K. Sarpong agrees with this when he says, "According to the logic of our people, widowers do not have this right simply because it is a man who marries a woman and not the other way round. So, it is the woman who should not be unfaithful to her husband, both when he is alive and when he dies."[25] He continues to argue that "without that rite, she lives in perpetual fear of the spirit of her husband. She dares not marry even when she has the natural urge. It is to be emphasized that all this is in the minds of our people. It is good logic for them and, unfortunately, the women too have come to accept it."[26] Similarly, Helena R. Asamoah–Hassan has explained that,

> Although widowhood rites, culturally are meant for males and females, it is usually females who are made to go through it strictly. This is explained away as being so because females have 'light or weak spirits'. The rites are actually performed as a way of purifying the widow and also to drive away the spirit of the dead man, from coming close to harm her or even having sex with the woman. It is also to show how much the woman loved the man.[27]

It appears these rites are an imposition on the woman because she is always forced to go through it. As Sarpong observes, "…when a man dies, his wives are expected to go through certain rituals. Some of such widowhood rites, as they are called, appear to be senseless, entirely meaningless, and cruel. The fact that they affect women rather than men gives a chance to those who are against them to cite them as an example of the domination of women by men."[28] However, Asamoah-Hassan argues that "Most of the widows went through these rites willingly because the elders had said that any woman who refused would face the wrath of the dead man."[29] Kwaku Amoako Attah-Fosu argues that the

> widowhood rites ceremony last for forty (40) days but a widow who loves her dead husband dearly can choose to stay for one (1) year (Afenhyiada) before taking another man as a husband. After the forty (40) days, the widow would be called by the members of the dead husband's family and either give to her

[23] Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language Called Tshi (Twi),* 271.

[24] The emphasis on Akan is my own. See Gaylord Aidoo-Dadzie, "The Widowhood Rites of the Fante", *Journal of African Christian Thought,* Vol. 4, No. 1 (2001), 33-38 (36).

[25] Peter K. Sarpong, *Odd Customs: Stereotypes and Prejudices,* (Accra: Sub-Saharan Pub., 2012), 15.

[26] Sarpong, *Odd Customs: Stereotypes and Prejudices,* 16.

[27] Helena R. Asamoah–Hassan, "Widowhood Practices among the Akan of Ghana: Yesterday and Today". Accessed on 13th April, 2015, from ir.knust.edu.gh/handle/123456789/4189.

[28] Sarpong, *Odd Customs: Stereotypes and Prejudices,* 14.

[29] Asamoah–Hassan, "Widowhood Practices among the Akan of Ghana: Yesterday and Today".

> the one who inherits the dead husband in marriage or allow her to go and take a different man of her choice.[30]

Mercy Amba Oduoye reechoes the fact that the woman's freedom is tied to some separation rituals she must do to set herself free from her dead husband, and if she fails to do so, she incurs the displeasure of her late husband.[31] This understanding among the Akan people is not very different from what Paul says in 7:39, "*Ɔbaa kunu te aseɛ no, na mmara akyekyere ɔbaa no, na sɛ ne kunu no ka baabi a, na ɔde ne ho, na ɔwɔ kwan sɛ ɔwareɛ, na mmom Awurade mu nko ara*." Whereas Paul believes that the marriage is terminated with the death of the husband, for which reason the woman is free, the Akan believe that even in death, the marriage is still valid. This is why, as stated above, the rituals are needed to terminate any existing marriage relationship between the woman and the dead husband. The issue of sexual abstinence comes to the fore here. It is presumed that within the stipulated period of forty days for the widow to mourn her late husband, she must abstain from any form of sexual act. Aidoo-Dadzie confirms this when he says, "Women and men in widowhood are forbidden to have sex and this protects them from people who may want to take undue advantage of the sorrowful situation to make amorous approaches. They are thus protected morally."[32] As Paul suggests to the Corinthian Church, the Christian widow needs to abstain from sex until such a time when she is remarried. Both in the Corinthian and Akan contexts, sexual abstinence for the widow cannot be compromised. Going back to the perceived negative image of the widowhood rites, Sarpong says, "Outsiders may see it as inhuman, and by the logic of sentiments it is… For this reason… the solution to the problem of the existence of what surely, in the light of modernity, is to be stopped, is not by enacting laws ordering it to be discontinued."[33] He says, "Such a law will not have its desired effect. The practice will not stop; people would go underground to do it if need be, and, in any case, what would be the justification for stopping it? Would it not amount to religious intolerance by enforcing abolition of the rite?"[34] To him, "the answer to the problem posed by what is clearly an unwanted practice of widowhood rites is *to convince women that their dead husbands have no power of the type they attribute to them.*"[35] He appears to be appealing to the emotions of the widows. It is more of a psychological warfare over which the women must muster courage. He then turns his attention to how the Christian church must respond to this cultural practice: "But for the Christian, the answer is that the husband is dead and has either gone to his rest in heaven or, God forbid, gone to hell. From neither place can the husband be interested in the marital affairs of his widow."[36] Sarpong is here appealing to the faith or religious persuasion of the widow. As he says, there are many examples in the scriptures as to where the dead in the Lord go (cf. Matt. 22:30; 1 Thess. 4:13-14). Marleen de Witte also believes that the church is opposed to these cultural practices. Maleen de Witte says,

> Another practice outlawed by Christian churches was the maltreatment of widows in the rites a widow of a deceased man had to go through before she could take up normal life again (*Kunayɛ*)… Christian churches, emphasizing the marriage bond between husband and wife and respect for all people, strongly condemned the 'barbaric' treatment of widows by their husbands' *abusua* after their death. It is mainly under the influence of the churches that widowhood rites are no longer generally performed these days.[37]

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[30] Amoako K. Attah-Fosu, *Funeral Celebration by Akans,* (Kumasi: Center for National Culture, 2000), 12.

[31] Mercy Amba Oduoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa,* (UK:Regnum Africa,2002), 82.

[32] Aidoo-Dadzie, "The Widowhood Rites of the Fante", 33.

[33] Sarpong, *Odd Customs: Stereotypes and Prejudices,* 16.

[34] Sarpong, *Odd Customs: Stereotypes and Prejudices,* 16.

[35] Sarpong, *Odd Customs: Stereotypes and Prejudices,* 16.

[36] Sarpong, *Odd Customs: Stereotypes and Prejudices,* 16.

[37] Maleen de Witte, *Long Live the Dead! Changing funeral celebrations in Asante, Ghana,* (The Netherlands: Aksant Academic Publishers, 2001), 155.

So, the Christian has very little to worry about as far as the widowhood rites are concerned. The challenge for the Christian widow is whether or not to remarry or remain single. As Paul advises, if she is unable to control her passion, for which reason she may live a life of immorality, then she needs to remarry.

The next issue one has to consider, though it may have come up in the course of the discussion, is the importance of widowhood rites. Attah-Fosu has outlined some salient points that should endorse the act or the rites. These are,

> (1) It is performed to honour the dead husband as the last respect. It shows that the dead man married during his life on earth. (2) Also it is done to drive away the spirit of the dead husband from the widow. (3) It further portrays the widow as a good wife, who has her husband in mind. (4) This in a way gives the widow a good and better husband when she marries again. That is, good and responsible men come forward to propose to her.[38]

Attah-Fosu's saying that the rites are done "to honour the dead husband as the last respect" is very instructive. In Akan society, extreme importance is attached to the dead. When a person dies, either for a good or bad reason, rituals are performed to see him or her off to *asamando* (spirit world of the dead). The body of the deceased is not discarded as if it were a useless thing. The Akan word for bury which is *sie* reveals that the body of the deceased is not thrown away but kept in a place where the body is preserved. This is because, according to Christaller, *sie* means "…to lay up, preserve, reposit… to keep, to take care of, attend to, support…"[39] Also, when he says that the widowhood rite "portrays the widow as a good wife, who has her husband in mind", it suggests that if the rites are neglected, it may be difficult to tell whether the widow is a good wife or not. What Attah-Fosu seems to suggest is that the rites are sometimes used as a measuring rod for a good wife within Akan society. Thus, Paul's submission that the widow should remarry cannot be removed entirely from the institution of Akan widowhood rites, since, for the Akan, a widow can only remarry after she has successfully gone through the required mourning period. From the above, it is clear that remarriage for the widow is paramount in the mind of the Akan people. Sarpong argues,

> True levirate, the custom of a man taking his dead brother's wife and begetting children with her for the dead person, is not found in Ghana. The levirate, mentioned in the Bible, and practised by such people as the Zulu, differs considerably from widow-inheritance, in that, in the former, the woman remains the wife of the dead person and her children by the new "husband" are the children of the deceased. In widow-inheritance, practised in Ghana, the brother of the dead man becomes the real husband of the widow and the children by that marriage belong to him.[40]

So, both Paul and the Akan people believe that the widow can still be married. This further means that the Akan Christian widow may not have to fear being single again after the demise of her husband.

CONCLUSION

The study has demonstrated that within the Graeco-Roman context, marriage was primarily regarded as a pragmatic arrangement. Its key functions included the bearing of legitimate children, the management of property, and the establishment of social and economic stability. In this cultural milieu, it was commonplace for relationships outside of the marriage institution to be accepted, provided they did not undermine the fundamental purpose of marriage. Divorce was relatively prevalent, mostly among the upper echelons of society, where men could more easily secure a divorce compared to women, who often faced greater challenges in this regard.

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[38] Attah-Fosu, *Funeral Celebration by Akans,* 12.

[39] Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language Called Tshi (Twi),* 455.

[40] Peter K. Sarpong, 1974. *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture,* Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 78-79.

Again, the paper has shown the significance of marriage and singleness. Paul's teachings highlight that the Corinthian believers existed in varied circumstances, including those who were unmarried or widowed. He offers counsel to the unmarried and widows, advising them to remain in their present condition unless they find it difficult to control their sexual urges. Paul's recognition of singleness as a potential gift from God stresses the idea that such a state allows individuals to devote themselves more fully to the service of the Lord, free from the complexities and obligations associated with marital life.

While Paul acknowledges the advantages of celibacy, he does not diminish the importance of marriage. He appreciates both states, affirming that those who cannot maintain celibacy should consider marriage as a legitimate and appropriate option. Paul encourages widows to consider the possibility of remaining single while granting them the freedom to remarry if they choose, emphasizing that any potential spouse should be a fellow believer.

Overall, Paul's message to the unmarried and widows emphasizes the importance of finding contentment in one's current circumstances, whether that person is single or widowed. This reflects his commitment to maintaining spiritual unity and integrity within the Christian community. A sense of eschatological urgency influenced Paul's counsel, as he firmly believed in the imminent return of Christ, as noted in 1 Corinthians 7:29. This belief shaped his advice to prioritize devotion to the Lord's work over familial affiliations, regardless of one's marital status. Thus, Paul's approach provides a nuanced framework that regards marriage and singleness as valuable and legitimate from a Christian ethical perspective. His teachings strike a delicate balance between celebrating the spiritual benefits of celibacy and offering practical guidance for those who opt for marriage, emphasizing that devotion to the Lord remains the overarching priority. In doing so, he fosters a sense of purpose for his audience, encouraging them to reflect on their roles within the broader Christian community while navigating their situations.

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