

Chapter III–25: *Widows*

Today we are going to talk about how a woman's husband dies and leaves her, and how she finds a husband again. I told you that in Dagbon here, the ways to take a wife are different, and this is one of them. A woman's luck can be killing men, and such a woman, if her husband dies and leaves her, to get another husband will be difficult for her, because her luck does not kill only one man. Such a woman, too, if she came and met other women in her husband's house, and her husband dies, those cowives who were already there, there are some Dagbamba who watch and search for them. And so widows are different types, and the talk about widows is inside our Dagbamba customs. And there is also some talk on the part of the chiefs, because the widow of a chief and what they do to her is a big talk in Dagbon here, and it's a bad talk, or an ugly talk.

We Dagbamba fear widows, and it is difficult to take a widow. You can tell your friend, "Let me search for this widow for you," and he will tell you that you have not talked well to him. You can even quarrel with a person because of that. Even you, John, if a woman marries a first husband and he dies, and she goes to marry a second man and he also dies, even if you are becoming a mad person, you will not marry this woman. You have heard, and you have seen it, too. Even if they take the woman and give her to you, you will not agree. If you want to get her, what thoughts will be inside you? You yourself, you will refuse. You will be thinking that if you get her, you will also die as the other husbands died. That is how it is.

As I have said that there are some women who kill men, it is that such a woman's luck is like that, not that she kills them with medicine. Here is an example. A man has two wives, and he goes to marry another woman and add to them. When he brings this woman to his house, it doesn't keep long and he dies. As he is dead, the two widows who were already there were standing that they were already wives to the man, and everybody knows it. Men will come out and find all three of them. And you will see that the two who were already there will be with their husbands, and they will be sitting down quietly and with sweetness. And the third one, if it is that her luck kills people, you will see that it won't keep long and her husband will die. If he dies, is it not two? And inside Dagbon, if it is coming to add to become three, you will not see the man who will come to find her for the third time. She has become someone with bad luck. She won't get a husband, unless a man who doesn't know, or a man who has got medicine. And if not these two, then a maalam who is a big maalam can take such a woman. That is the way of life of a widow.

And what I want to tell you is this: somebody's good luck is somebody's bad luck, and somebody's bad luck is somebody's good luck. I say that because somebody can refuse something, and somebody will want it. This is the way of the whole world, not Dagbon alone. Somebody will see something and refuse it, and you will even give it to him free and he will not want it, but somebody will count money and go and buy that thing. Don't you ever see that? This is how it is. And so some people will search for a widow. If a man dies and leaves his wives, the widows will all go to their houses. And when a widow reaches her house, by all means men will come out and be finding her. Someone will go after women and he will not get; when a widow falls, he will go and chase her. Someone will be a useless person, and women don't like him; when a widow falls, he can go and look for her. And there will be someone who had many wives and they died and left him; he can go after a widow. And if not that, they will give a widow to somebody for free, and the fellow will run away and leave the widow.

And so going after a widow is a big talk in Dagbon here, and it is a big thing to us. In Dagbon here, when a man dies and leaves a wife, her housepeople will come and put the widow's dress on her. It is a white cloth and a white scarf. They will bathe her, and she will dress in the white cloth and white head-tie. If the widows are three or four, this is what they do to all of them. And they will take them and go to their family houses. When a widow falls, there can be ten men going after her. A widow does not stand that you alone will give her some money and she will tell you alone to find her to marry you. You don't sit with her before you give her money; you cannot sit with a widow. You only hear that a widow has fallen, and you go to find her. If you see her and you think you can go after her, you befriend her; but if you think you cannot, then you leave her. And all of those who are looking for her will come out to find her.

If you want to take a widow, you will go to your friend and you will stay in his house. And you will get the money you want to give to use to befriend her, and you will give it to your householder where you are staying. He will go and give it to the householder where the widow is, either her father or the family head, and say, "These people from this town are coming to find your daughter. And this fellow is the son of this fellow in this town." And the householder will collect the money and say, "Has he got a soothsaying stone?" And the ones you sent will say, "He hasn't got it." And the householder will say, "Go home and tell him to get his soothsaying stone and bring it."

The soothsaying stone is a ten-pesewa piece. If those finding the widow are about eight or ten, they will all get their ten pesewas — the soothsaying stones — and give them to the family head where the widow is staying. As he is collecting these ten pesewa pieces, he will put them in rags and make some marks so that he

knows everybody's money. And he will go to a soothsayer and remove them one by one, and the soothsayer will also be doing work. When the family head is putting down the ten pesewa pieces, he will put one down and say, "If my daughter is going to sit with this person from this town, and his body will be cool, you the soothsayer should catch this ten pesewas. And if there will be birth between the two of them, you should catch it. And if my daughter is somebody who cannot sit with this man, then you should leave it." And he will have a walking stick, and he will hold it with the soothsayer; the two of them will be holding the walking stick and going round, and the money will be lying down. And he will still be saying, "If this woman will sit with this man and there will be birth between them, and she will have a cool body, then catch this money." And "If there is no sitting between them, if there is no marriage between them, if there is no birth, then leave it." This is what he is going to do to all the stones when he is going round.

And it can stand that the soothsayer will catch two people. And the father of the widow will take the two stones and put them down again, and he will tell the soothsayer, "I am disagreeing with you. You have said two people, but two people cannot be for this thing. It's not something you can cut; it's a whole human being. And so I am disagreeing with you: I want you to separate them for me, and I will know the true one." And they will take the walking stick and go round, and the soothsayer will knock one of the stones. And the father will say, "I am disagreeing with you," and he will collect the two stones and put them behind his back and change their position and put them down. And the soothsayer will knock the stone again; the father will say, "I disagree with you," and the soothsayer will say, "I am speaking the truth." And by then the man will leave and go home. He won't tell the one whose stone the soothsayer caught. When he comes, he will tell his daughter, "When I went and looked, I saw that your husband will be this person from this town and this house. That is where you will sit, and there will good health and you will get what you want and you will get children."

And by that time, everybody who was finding the widow has given money to the householder at the friend's house where he is staying, and all this money has been given to the father of the widow. But he has not eaten even a pesewa of it. Everybody's money, he has tied it and put it somewhere. Unless the day comes when those who will take the widow come to take her, it is only their money he is going to eat. If the husband himself is not able to come, it is his friend's housepeople or his own housepeople who will come to take her. And as they have to come into the open, sometimes they come to take her in the night, and in the olden days, they had some medicine which they used to take her so they could go

and no one would see them. Because as I have told you that a widow is a dangerous thing, no one would chase a widow unless he himself was well-boiled, that is, he also had many medicines within him. Sometimes, too, the husband can call her to come to the house where he is staying, and then he and his housepeople will take her to their town.

When this woman is coming, someone who was also looking for her can use medicine to collect her. Sometimes someone will sit and use the *vua* to call the widow. I think I have already told you about the *vua*: *vua* is a medicine they use to call people; it's the horn of a small antelope, and they put medicine inside it, and they blow it, "*Pr-r-r-r*." There are many types, and some are like a snail's shell. When they blow it and it enters the woman's ear, the woman will not be able to sit. She will go there without wishing it. And it is not her husband but somebody else who was going after her, and she will get there and they will collect her and go. And others take the medicine and put it in smoking pipes, and when the woman gets the scent of the smoke, her head will turn. And others use a medicine we call *payali*: someone can come into a room with *payali* and collect everything inside, and no one will see him; he can even talk and no one will hear him. Some people use that one to take the widow away. All this, they do it, and it is because of all this that they use many medicines when going after a widow.

Sometimes it is the one who was looking for her but didn't get her who will be the one who collects her like that, and sometimes it is his housepeople. Sometimes when they collect this woman, they will take her to another town, and those who are actually for the woman will come out and meet them on the way. When they try to collect the woman back, there will be a big fight, and maybe there will even be deaths. And if they know that there will be a bad fight because of the woman, then they will run and tell the widow's housepeople, "These people have come to collect our wife away." Then the widow's housepeople will get up and go and meet them on the way and collect their daughter, and they will tell them that the widow's father has said that today there is no day, and he will meet them tomorrow. And at that time, you will see that there will not be any quarrel, and they will take the woman quietly. And they will take her and give her to the right man.

They do that because they know there will be trouble. Sometimes the widow's housepeople will hide her and call all those who are looking for her and tell them that someone has come to take her. And the widow's father will shout, "Which person has come to take my child? I will search for him." And there will be shouting, and red eyes. As the widow's father is talking like that, he knows what is in his heart, because his child is hidden in a room in the house. Getting to tomorrow, everybody will disperse. Then the widow's housepeople will hide and

send the woman in the night to her husband's house, and even if the husband's house is in another town, they will send her in the night.

It will be about four days, and no one will hear of the woman again. She is not in her father's house any more. And you will hear people say, "She has married this fellow from this town." At that time, those who have gone after her will tell the householders at their staying houses the amount they have spent, and every householder will go to the widow's house and say, "My friend spent this amount." And I have told you that they have tied all the money in rags and put it somewhere, and the widow's people will remove that amount and give it to the householder, and he will go and give it to his friend. And everybody will come and collect his money, and it is the same money they used in looking for the woman. All the money they used to come and look for her, they will collect it all back. The only money they won't collect is the money they used for the soothsaying — ten pesewas — but every other money, they will collect it. If they fear shame, they will leave it; and if it remains and they leave it like that, then it is that they have left it. And some do that.

And the one who has taken this widow, he will also get a day to meet the woman. She will be in his house or in his friend's house, but he has not been sleeping with her. There are some things which are forbidden, and there is some medicine the man will get before he sleeps with the woman. If you are not well-boiled and you take a widow, the day you sleep with her, that is the day you will know if you are somebody who will die. And if you are somebody who won't die, it is that day you will know. This medicine is called *karga*, and it is very strong. The day you sleep with the widow, if you don't have it well, the dead husband of the widow will come and ask you, "That is my wife. I am not there, and you are going to have sex with her." And on that day, you the one who has befriended the widow, you will die unless you have this *karga*. That day, you will eat this *karga*, and the widow will also eat it.

When the widow is coming to you in the room, she will get a white cloth and a white scarf, and this is what she will wear. And you will get a new sleeping mat. She will come and lie down, and you will also lie down. You are not the two who close the door; somebody will close the door for you. If it is our local Dagbamba door like a thick woven mat, someone will come and take it and throw it against the entrance to your room. And no one will open his mouth in the room: you will not talk to one another. And it is dark: you will not light a lantern. You two will lie with your buttocks to one another: no one will turn his front and face the other. That is how you are going to lie until it is getting to daybreak. Getting to daybreak, you will search for her. If you don't hear any sounds, she has become your wife. And then, when it is daybreak, you will get white cola, and get

money and add, and you will let people take it to her house, and it shows that you have had sex with her. And her housepeople will know that you have got good luck, because you sent white cola. There is no talk. But even then, it is not finished. If this widow becomes pregnant in time, and when she is going to give birth, if she brings forth a boy, you will run away and leave the widow. The baby boy she has given birth to, that is the husband who has come back. If you don't leave her, you will die. And inside our Dagbon, this is how difficult it is to take a widow, and we fear them.

And what I have just told you about widows, there is some more talk on the part of the widows of a chief, and it is also a big thing in Dagbon. As for the widows of a chief, we beat them. It's only the widows of a chief; we don't beat every widow. The day the chief dies, the chief's housechildren will beat them out of the house. I have already told you something about how a chief's wife lives, and you know, when the chief is there, she has no time for the children from outside who are in the house. You know too, if you go to a chief's house and you want to count the chief's children in the house, they are not very many. I have already told you that the chiefs bring forth and take the children and give one another: this one is with the chief's uncle, this one is with the chief's senior brother. That is how it is with the chiefs. When you see a chief's house full of people, it is not the children the chief himself has given birth to who are in the house. A chief's brother's son is with him; his nephews are with him; his grandsons are with him. And the chief's wives don't have time for any of them.

And so when the chief dies, because of the bad things his wives used to do to the children in the house, those children will beat all the widows. On the day the chief dies, they will collect all the widows' things and bring them out, and they will beat them and tell them, "All your talks have finished today. Your chieftaincy is finished. All your bluffing, and how you were showing yourself, and how you have been talking and doing bad to all the people in this house, it is finished today." And so when the chief dies, the children in the house will beat the widows. Only if it is a woman who has given birth to many children in the chief's house, if the children are there, then her children will fight for her, and the others cannot beat her. Or if your housepeople are strong, they can come into the chief's house and catch you out. And so if you come to see a chief's wife who is not beaten, then it is because the time the chief was sick, some of the children gathered when they knew their father was sick, and those who were near came to him. And we don't hide a chief's death: a chief can die today and the townspeople will know it. And if the chief has wives who are from that town, or some of the children have come to wait on the chief, then they will protect their mothers, and the outside children cannot beat them. But those who don't have children, or their people have not been able to come in time, they beat them.

When the chief's housechildren beat the widows out like that, they take them and put them into the houses around the chief's house. As they are in houses in the area, they will sit there until the chief's funeral is performed. If it is six months or a year before the chief's funeral, they will be there like that. Before they can go to their houses and before they can meet with a man, there is an herb which they will give them to bathe with. Every widow of the chief will bathe with the herb-water before she goes on her own way. The widow of every person they call "chief," they bathe her. And the bathing of the chief's widows is wonderful to see.

When the chief's funeral is performed, the day they are going to show the thing, that will be a Thursday. It is in the morning of that day they bathe the chief's widows. There is someone who comes from Yendi to bathe them; he is called the *Mba Naa*. He is a big elder at Yendi, and he doesn't come to all chiefs' funerals; but if he himself doesn't come, he will send people. The *Mba Naa* goes to Nanton and goes to Savelugu; he can go to Kumbungu and go to Tolon. The same way that Grandfather Namo-Naa will go to funerals, that is how *Mba Naa* will go. If it is a funeral that the *Yaa-Naa's* elders will attend, but the chief is not one of the big, big chiefs — say Diari, Tibung, Wariboggo, Nyankpala, Voggo — then *Mba Naa* himself doesn't go, and he will send his children.

In the morning of the day they are going to show the thing, they will sit all the widows outside behind the chief's house, and they will dig holes and bring out the herbs as well. And they will dig some holes again and put chairs behind the holes they have dug. And all the widows will sit down and stretch their legs towards the holes. As the widows are sitting, everyone will be wearing a short cloth. If they are twenty or forty women, they will all join one another like that, sitting on the chairs by the holes. As I have told you that the bathing of the chief's widows is wonderful, on that day there will be many people around the house. This *Mba Naa* is there along with his youngmen. And all the widows, their housepeople will come to add to them; someone whose house is very heavy, they can come with about six people; others will have two people or four people. If the widows are twenty or forty, then you know that there will be many people there. And others are there, too, because there will be townspeople who come to look at them. And those who have come from other towns to see the performing of the funeral, they also come to see how they will bathe the widows, because as the bathing of the chief's widows is wonderful, some people have never seen it, and they will come around to see.

As *Mba Naa* has come to bathe the widows, he himself cannot take a sponge and bathe all of them. When he comes, he stands in front of a woman, and her housepeople will fetch water for him. He will take some water and put it on the

woman's head, four times, and turn to the next one. The widow's housepeople will take our local Dagbamba soap and they will start bathing her with a sponge. This sponge is different from the one we normally use. There is a tree we call *tanyibga*, and they cut its roots and pound them until it all becomes a sponge, a white one. They use this sponge for bathing the widows. And this is what they will do to all the widows. When they finish bathing them, they will dress all of them in the widow's dress — the white cloth and white scarf. They use our Dagbamba cloth, the one woven by our local weavers. And they will take our local threads and weave them and wear them on their necks; and maalams do work for some of them, and they will use the local threads to weave around the medicine, and they take it and hang it on their necks like that. If you are someone who has thoughts, when you see the widows like that, fear will catch you, because of the way they dress. You cannot compare the dress of a widow to anything, and that is why there is fear inside it.

When Mba Naa has gone round all the widows, he comes to stand by the front door to the hall of the chief's house, and he will be holding the *barazim*, our Dagbamba whip. The time they finish dressing the widows, they will be taking them one by one. Where the chief's grave was dug inside a room of the house, they have pushed down the wall at that side of the house; we call the side wall *gambee gooni*, and that is where everybody passes to see the chief's grave. And they will take spears and put them down near the broken part of the wall. And drummers are there, too. As each widow comes from behind the house, if this woman was not sleeping with any other man apart from the chief, you will see that she will come and collect a spear and enter through the part of the wall that has been pushed down, and she will come to the grave room and stand. If the woman takes the spear at once and goes through the broken part of the wall, men will take her and put her on their shoulders, and she will hold the spear up. And that time, the drummers will start beating *Banjumaṇa*, and they will carry her and be dancing. She has showed that she was not going outside when she was living with the chief, and so she was good. And the other women coming, you will see that some of them won't want to enter through the broken part of the wall, and they will run and try to enter the hall. Such a woman is showing that when she was in the chief's house, she was going out to sleep with other men. And so she has no way to pass through the broken part of the wall, because if she tries to pass there, she will die. We have that in Dagbon here. If she does adultery, and she comes to take the spear, if she stands on the grave and does not have something to protect her, she will die. It won't be up to one week and she will die. But there is medicine, and maalams have that help, and our typical Dagbamba also have that help. And so if a woman has done adultery, and she wants to go through the broken part of the wall, there is medicine for that. This is how it is.

Those who don't pass through the wall, when they are entering the hall, the Mba Naa will be there with the whip. He and his people are there, and anyone who tries to enter the hall, they will whip her. They whip her until when you see her, you will think she is going to die. And no one minds, and her housepeople cannot talk. But there is a way for them to pay money and free themselves, because this Mba Naa also has his bribes, his cheap money. A house that has a widow, if they don't want this woman to be beaten, they will see the Mba Naa and bribe him. Before they bathe the widows, they will give him the bribe and show him the woman for whom they have given the bribe. And so the women who cannot pass through the wall but who try to pass through the hall, those who have not given the bribe, Mba Naa and his people will beat them. But as for the one who has given the bribe, she will pass and they won't beat her.

And all those widows who passed through the broken part of the wall, as for them, they have not slept with other men, only the chief. And we drummers praise them and say that they heard the mouth of their father. And even we drummers, when we are going to praise their children, we say, "*Gambeyirsi bihi*," that they are children whose mother passed through the broken part of the wall. And so if your mother passes through the broken part of the wall, we are going to praise you, "You are the son of a passer through the *gambee*." And you will see that such children will do good to their mothers. Some will slaughter sheep for them. If the woman's house has strength, her people will slaughter a cow because of the talk their daughter has done, because their daughter was sitting in the chief's house with one heart, and she did not take her vagina to sell to the townspeople. They will all do this to her when they get home. And this is why we like the broken-wall talks. But if your mother was in the chief's house and didn't pass through the broken part of the wall, if you eat some chieftaincy and drummers are praising you, they will not say that you are a son of a woman who has passed through the broken part of the wall. They cannot praise you like that.

And truly, the talk of widows is very hard on the part of the chief's house, because going through the *gambee* has got different types. If a chief dies and leaves the wives, some have given birth to children. If such women who has given birth to children don't go through the broken part of the wall, then we drummers won't praise their children that their mothers passed through the wall, and it will show that their mothers were going out to have sex when she was in their father's house. And there will be somebody who didn't do any adultery in the chief's house, and she was just a chief's wife. She was only meeting with the chief and bringing forth the chief's children. And those in front of her who were senior women to her, they could not pass through the *gambee* because they have done adultery, and they have no money to go and get a *maalam* to help them. And

you the one who didn't do adultery, if you pass through the gambee, those in front of you who could not pass through the gambee will kill you with medicine. They will say, "Why is it that we didn't go through the gambee, and you are going through?" If you have no money to get maalamas to help you on the part of your enemies, and your house hasn't got strength, they can kill you like that. But if your house has strength, and they are standing behind you with medicines, as for that, you can pass through. And this is how difficult the living is in the chief's house.

The time the widows have passed through the wall and people are carrying them, when they finish dancing, they will go back to the houses where they are staying. Early in the next morning, Friday, they will take small calabashes and go around to the houses. Someone will take the small chair on which they sat for the bathing, and will hold the chair and be in front. They will make a line and will go around the town greeting people. And people will greet them their yesterday's good luck, because they have passed through the broken part of the wall, and they will be giving them money in the small calabashes. When they finish greeting, some of them will not even stay up to the afternoon to see the prayers or up to the evening to see the sharing of the funeral property. Any widow whose house is in another town, they will take her and go home. And when the widows get home, men will come out and be searching for them.

And that is how it is with the widows of the chiefs and the commoners. And so the widow's talk is different, because she has become a fearful thing. And truly, I haven't taken a widow, and none of my daughters' husbands has died and left her. But how I have talked to you, that is how somebody who takes a widow will talk to you or how a widow's father will also talk to you. And so I have talked the truth, and there is nothing lost. And I think we have finished our today's talks.