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The Silent Cry of Tamar and the Cultural Justice (Gen 38:1-30): A Post-Colonial Discussion

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Abstract

The article delves into the narrative of Tamar, Genesis 38:1-30 through a post-colonial reading that examines implications for the ancient cultural justice and the lived experiences of widows in contemporary African contexts. It critically discusses the practice of levirate marriage within Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern societies, its evolution in the early Church and medieval period.

Postcolonial discussion is used to draw parallels between Tamar's historical experiences and the current struggles widows, highlighting the importance of cultural reclamation and social justice. The discussion also draws similarities within in African contexts, in light of colonial disruptions, modernization, and theological tensions and the need to decolonize oppressive mechanisms that deny widows dignity and justice. The experiences of Banyamulenge widows in war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo, create a dilemma between Christian doctrines, modernization and cultural norms. Thousands of these widows find themselves at the margins of society. They are neither protected by the cultural justice nor by the care of the church in a non-existent government support.

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1. Introduction

As believers in the Word, we've become selective in how we engage Scripture, embracing its comforting parts while avoiding those that confront or disturb. Genesis 38 is one of those passages rarely heard from our pulpits. I've seen how stories of Ruth and other widows are often allegorized, sometimes even manipulated to flatter congregations. But Tamar's story? That one is kept at a distance. Yet, she appears boldly in the genealogy of Jesus, part of a list that includes women with stained reputations at least by patriarchal standards. Why is Tamar's name preserved in the opening chapter of the New Testament (Matt 1:1-17)?

Theologians have wrestled with this text. [Hauptman \(2018\)](#) calls it "one of the most gripping stories in the entire Bible." [Mathewson \(1989, pp.373-392\)](#) notes that Genesis 38 has "generated more frustration than enthusiasm" among interpreters. [Brueggemann \(1982\)](#) calls it "isolated and enigmatic," and Walter R. Bowie, cited by Brueggemann, refers to it as an "alien element" that only disrupts the flow of Genesis. Very few preachers would choose Tamar's story for a sermon, a Bible study, or an evangelistic campaign. Yet this passage holds power, not just as a disturbing narrative, but as a mirror to our own cultural, religious, and social failures to do justice.

Ironically, Tamar is foundational to the biblical story. She is the grandmother of King David (Gen. 38:29; 46:12; Num. 26; Ruth 4; 1 Chr. 2:1-15), and she stands with dignity in the genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:1-17).. Her story is marked by widowhood, injustice, and exclusion, but also by bold resistance and cultural justice reclamation. She does not merely survive; she redefines both her story and her history.

This paper focuses on levirate marriage; a practice deeply embedded in both the biblical and human cultural fabric. It explores how Tamar's story intersects with the lived realities of widows in African contexts today, and how postcolonial critique can illuminate both the text and our present world. How does Tamar's voice speak to the silent cries of widows in our own communities? What justice does she demand of us?

Methodologically, postcolonial theory has been used in recent biblical interpretation as a tool that examines the effects of colonialism on cultures and societies. It focuses on power dynamics, identity, and representation (see [Bhabha 1994:171](#); [Dube 1996](#); [Sugirtharajah 1999:3-5](#); [2001](#); [Segovia 2000](#); [Young 2001:1-11](#); [57-69](#)). It is a discourse of decolonization. "A postcolonial critique allows people emerging from socio-political and economic domination to achieve their own sovereignty". It allows them to negotiate "space for the marginalized to speak and to belong" ([Rukundwa 2005:927-928](#)). A postcolonial discussion of Tamar's story, Genesis 38, highlights the systematic oppression of the marginalized within patriarchal power structures. Tamar asserts her rights against the exploitation of Judah's household and secures her status as a mother. This reading emphasizes themes of resistance against institutional powers by victims who challenge and overcome systemic injustice through nonviolent means.

The story of Tamar exposes how some power structures exploit and neglect the weak, even under cultural and divine laws. A postcolonial analysis of Genesis 38 and African widows' discrimination highlights shared themes: patriarchal subjugation, silencing women, and struggles for rights and dignity in violent, impoverished contexts. Tamar and African widows both face systems that deny their agency, treat them as dependent or suspect, and cause exploitation, injustice, and economic hardship. "Tamar and the African Widows" is a thematic approach to studies and texts on Tamar's story and ancient widowhood, relating them to modern African widows. Key research uses qualitative methods, such as participative conversations, to gather community views on kinship and patriarchy's effects on widows' rights.

The objective of a post-colonial discussion on Genesis 38 is to analyze the patriarchal structures that marginalize Tamar. It challenges dominant interpretations of the text, understands Tamar's agency in seeking cultural justice, and demonstrates how this ancient narrative speaks to contemporary issues of gender inequality. To continue with the discussion, two terms need to be defined:

Widow: A woman whose husband has died and who has not married again. According to Artificial Intelligence, the Greek word for widow is *χήρα*, meaning bereft, deficient, or lacking. It emphasizes a state of being deprived of a husband for a woman. Metaphorically, it is extended to describe a city without its inhabitants or wealth.

Levirate marriage: According to [Britannica\(n.d.\)](#) In the dictionary, levirate is a custom where a widow should marry her dead husband's brother. The term comes from the Latin *levir*, meaning "husband's brother." The brother may be a biological sibling of the deceased or a person who is socially classified as such. The levirate often co-occurs with the sororate (from the Latin word *soror*), a practice in which a widower should or must marry his dead wife's sister.

2.The Narrative Story and Cultural Obligation

2.1 Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern Understandings of the Levirate Marriage

The story of Tamar in Genesis 38 is not isolated. It stands alongside a broader biblical and cultural tradition of levirate marriage, found in texts such as Deuteronomy 25:5–10 and Ruth 4:22. Deuteronomy establishes the legal framework: if a married man dies without a son, his brother is obligated to marry the widow. From the provision of Deuteronomy 25, the law is not binding and imposed upon the brother-in-law who declined the responsibility. The law also provided proceedings by which one can renounce his duty. But, [Davies \(1981, p. 61\)](#) argues that it is doubtful if the levir had the right to decline his duty anyhow; and in the context of Genesis 38 would suggest that, “at least in early times, the levirate was regarded as an unavoidable obligation.”

Their firstborn son would carry the name of the deceased, preserving the family line and inheritance. This wasn't only about producing a child; it was about restoring dignity, securing inheritance, and providing holistic care for the widow.

The vulnerability of widows was ever-present in Old Testament societies. Just as it is today for many women and their daughters are subject to exploitation and abuse by the powerful. Thus, God is their hope for protection and justice. Scripture gives voice to their pain and calls for their protection:

- “He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow” (Deut. 10:18);
- “The Lord... upholds the widow and the fatherless” (Ps. 146:9)
- “Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation” (Ps. 68:5).
- “The Lord will destroy the house of the proud, but he will establish the border of the widows” (Prov 15:25).
- “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (Jam 1:27).

Even outside Israel, ancient cultures recognized the widow's need for protection. In Mesopotamia, gods were believed to care for widows. A Sumerian hymn (c. 2100 B.C.) describes the goddess Nanshe as the “guardian of the widow.” Marduk, Babylon's god, “provides justice to the orphaned girl, the widow, the anguished and the sleepless” ([Moore, 2019, p.12](#)). This reminds me of the Banyamulenge culture in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where the spirits of ancestors were believed to punish communities that failed to treat widows and orphans justly ([Rukundwa, 2006, p.4](#)).

Levirate marriage, then, was one way to ensure **social protection** for the widow. It was not unique to Israel, but widely practiced across the Ancient Near East ([Burrows, 1940, p.23](#)). In patriarchal systems, it offered a form of continuity: the deceased husband could “live on” through a child born to his widow by a brother or closest male relative. The widow gained status, protection, and economic security, and land and inheritance remained within the family. The custom was not only a duty, but also a right — one the widow could demand. If the brother-in-law refused, he brought shame not only to himself but to the family's name: “This is what is done to the man who will not build up his brother's family line... That man's line shall be known in Israel as The Family of the Unsandaled” (Deut. 25:9–10). [Burrows \(1940, p. 26\)](#) asserts that “levirate marriage was one of the practices adopted by the Israelites after the occupation of Palestine, or at least that a similar Israelite custom was modified and codified under Canaanite influence.”

In Canaanite culture, the widow was even considered part of the deceased husband's property ([Burrows, 1940, pp. 23–33](#)). Among the Hittites (modern Turkey), if no brothers were alive, the father-in-law was next in line to provide a child. If he, too, was unable, the next closest male relative took responsibility ([Serangeli, 2020](#)). In the Middle Assyrian Laws, the widow could remarry her father-in-law if no brothers remained. If all male options were exhausted and she remained childless, she became a “free” widow, free to go where she pleased ([Tranžík, 2021](#)). In some cases, widows could inherit property ([Rashkow, 2022, pp. 143–159](#)). In ancient Egypt, a widow retained one-third of the couple's property, and the king, as a divine representative, was tasked with ensuring justice for widows. “Care of the widow fell under the provenance of the gods, and the ruler was the physical representative of a god on earth” ([Moore, 2019, p.13](#)). In Islam (Olaofe, 2024), prophetic Hadith recorded in Sahih al-Bukhari book 73, number 36, Prophet (once said: “The one who looks after and works for a widow and for a poor person is like a warrior fighting for Allah's cause” (al-Bukhari, Hadith 36. Vol. 8: 73). In the Banyamulenge culture in DRC, the spirits of ancestors punished communities that failed to treat widows and orphans justly ([Rukundwa, 2006, p.4](#)).

In contrast, Israelite law did not allow widows to inherit directly, except through their children ([Davies, 1981, pp. 257–268](#)). The woman of Tekoa (2 Sam. 14) pleaded with King David to spare her son, knowing that without him her husband's name would vanish. Elijah raised the only son of the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17), restoring not only a life but a lineage. And in Ruth's story, Naomi laments, “Return home, my daughters...Am I going to have any more sons,

who could become your husbands...? I am too old to have another husband... It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has turned against me" (Ruth 1:11-13)! That is how critical it was for a family without an heir.

In some exceptional cases in Israel, women were allowed to inherit and preserve their family properties. Naomi was permitted to sell the property of her deceased husband (Ruth 4:3); Job's daughters inherited with his sons (Job 42:15); the daughters of Zelophehad (Numbers 27:1-11) claimed the right of inheritance after their father's death. Daughters of Lot (Genesis 19:31-32) preserved their family name through their father. From the beginning of human society, both tradition and religion have sought ways for communities to survive, especially through family continuity. In the post-exilic period, God gave priests marriage regulations: "They must not marry widows or divorced women; they may marry only virgins of Israelite descent or widows of priests" (Eze et al., 2024, 44:22). Over time, levirate laws evolved with generations. They were sometimes mandatory, sometimes merely favored, and in other instances discouraged or unregulated (Rashkow, 2022). Although rooted in biblical law, the custom would later adapt, especially under Greco-Roman influence and the rise of Christianity, which we will explore in the next section.

2.2 Levirate Marriage in the Early Church Formation

As cultural and theological paradigms shifted through the centuries, the practice of levirate marriage—once embedded in Jewish tradition—underwent a significant transformation. By the 4th century CE, both Roman law and early Church councils began to reject the practice outright. According to Monnickendam (2019, pp.141–142), Church authorities deemed levirate unions "illegitimate," and any children born from such marriages were considered unlawful. The condemnation extended beyond doctrine into ecclesial discipline: anyone who practiced levirate marriage faced excommunication.

Restrictions were also imposed on the ecclesial relationship between widows and the Church, particularly widows of bishops, priests, or deacons. As Ferreiro (2022) notes, these widows were barred from receiving the sacraments and isolated from the religious community—"no clergy or religious women could eat with her, nor could the widow ever receive communion," except at the moment of death. If a widow resisted returning to religious life after her husband's death, bishops could enforce monastic seclusion as punishment.

These developments were deeply influenced by Roman moral laws, which emphasized sexual abstinence, asceticism, and the ideal of a single lifelong marriage. This was in contrast to Jewish levirate laws, which had been rooted in the command to "be fruitful and multiply." Church Fathers increasingly viewed such a procreative mandate as outdated and incompatible with Christian ideals of celibacy and spiritual inheritance (Liccardo & Wabnitz, 2024, p.197; Monnickendam, 2019, pp.141–142). Remarriage itself became suspect in early Christian literature. Moore (2019, p.109) quotes a letter from Jerome (Epistle 54.15.4), where he warns against remarriage for widows, citing the challenges of blended families and step-parenting. Jerome's concern was echoed in broader Greco-Roman ideals. The widely respected Roman virtue of the *univira*—a woman who only married once—was borrowed by Church Fathers from the 4th century BCE through the 4th century CE (Moore, 2019, pp.110–111).

According to Winter (1988, pp.85-86), under the Roman Empire, a widow was expected to remarry within a year or two years after her husband's death. "Augustus in the lex Papia Poppaea of AD 9 actually legislated for this after a husband's death if she were still of child-bearing age, i.e., under fifty." This was reinforced by the *Lex Julia*. According to Dixon (1988), cited by Winter (2003, p.125), says that "the lex Julia penalized unmarried women as well as those who were divorced or widowed between the ages of twenty and fifty years who failed to marry or remarry." The penalties against those who did not remarry and those who remained childless were finally abolished by Constantine's reign (Moore, 2019, pp.110-111). Remarriage of the widow was a legal position for Roman citizens in the first century, but it was not apparently observed by all, and this was also a strong conviction that the Greek woman would remarry. There can be little doubt that young widows, even if they had children, were expected to remarry for security and shelter (Winter, 1988, pp.85-86).

Despite these cultural tensions, the New Testament continues to engage with the question of widowhood. The genealogy (Matthew 1:1–17, Luke 3:23–38) reflects the importance of preserving lineage, even through adoptive ties like Joseph's. Similarly, the story of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11–17) shows Jesus restoring not just a son to life, but a widow's dignity and economic future within her community. These narratives underscore the continued importance of family, inheritance, and protection for women left vulnerable after a spouse's death.

The Herod–Herodias marriage (Matt. 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29) also presents a case in which marriage between a man and his brother's wife is condemned, not because of levirate law, but because it violated Jewish moral and legal norms

based on Leviticus (20:18-21). Herodias divorced Philip, Herod Antipas' brother, and married him while Philip was still alive, and they had children (<https://earlychurchhistory.org/politics/herod-herodias-affair/>). Even in Jesus' debate with the Sadducees (Matt. 22:24-28), the levirate scenario was used not to affirm the practice, but to address the question of resurrection. Nonetheless, the fact that such a scenario was familiar suggests that levirate marriage remained part of Jewish cultural consciousness (Olando, 2024, p.3).

In Paul's epistles, especially 1 Timothy 5:14-16, there is practical advice for widows within the Church. Paul distinguishes between younger and older widows, encouraging the former to remarry. His concern reflects not simply religious ideals but realistic views of economic vulnerability, communal order, and sexual desire. He is also against false teaching, engaging in gossip, and idleness among widows. "Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion" (1 Cor 7:8-9). The use of the term "unmarried" can mean to anyone who is not married, either a widower, a widow, or a divorced person (Burk, 2018). But since widowhood was associated with destitution, men whose spouses had died avoided the term. Rather were referred to the generic "unmarried." After all, very few men, if any, would remain single after their wives passed away. It is also to be understood that being unmarried is different from virgin!

Paul is aware that the church resources were stretched far too thinly to meet adequately the needs of the widow who was without a family (Davies, 1981, p.87). As Baloyi (2015) explains, Paul's guidance aligns with Torah traditions, offering criteria for church support based on age, character, and need. Paul even seems to follow Roman legislative categories, considering age 60 as the qualifying threshold for a widow to be enrolled in the church's care program (Moore, 2019, pp.110-111). In 1 Corinthians 7:39, Paul writes, *"A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord."*

This affirms both the widow's freedom to remarry and the importance of spiritual compatibility. Similarly, James 1:27 defines "pure religion" as care for orphans and widows in their distress—a holistic vision of justice that includes food, shelter, spiritual care, and communal responsibilities. The Acts 6 narrative shows that the Early Church History (2014) took this seriously, appointing deacons to ensure fair distribution of food to widows, especially those from marginalized groups.

Beyond the Jewish and Roman worlds, the levirate marriage persisted in parts of Eastern Europe. In the Baltic region, which converted to Christianity in the 12th century, the practice remained common. Tranžik (2021, p.9) cites Brundage (1973), who explains that Pope Innocent III allowed levirate-style marriages in Livonia under two conditions: the union must have occurred before baptism, and the deceased brother must have died childless. In a war-torn society, this exception was pragmatic, ensuring the survival of bloodlines and incentivizing conversion.

A related practice known as widow conservation emerged in Protestant Europe during the Reformation. In regions like Scandinavia, particularly Denmark-Norway, the widow (or daughter) of a deceased parish vicar would often marry his successor to maintain her economic support. The Church Charter of 1537 introduced the idea of a *naadensaar* ("year of grace"), during which the widow could remain in the vicarage and receive parish income. However, after that period, she was expected to support herself, often becoming a midwife or entrepreneur. By the 17th century, many parishes customarily elected a new vicar on the condition that he marry the widow of his predecessor. Though never formally required by law, this became a de facto system of widow support in rural Protestant communities (Wikipedia, "Widow conservation – Denmark-Norway").

2.3 Levirate Marriage in the Current African Context

Levirate marriage is one of the common practiced traditions across the continent and is largely regulated by customary laws under the concept that "death does not end a marriage" (Owen, 2001:8). But gradually over the years of colonial influence, Christianity and modernization of cultures, levirate marriage is less practiced or presently banned in many cultures. There are several commonalities across African traditions to why the levirate marriage was a positive practice particularly in patriarchal lineage: (i) Preservation of the name of deceased brother in the family and the society; (ii) Social security and preserved honor of the widow; (iii) Protection of family inheritance; (iv) Multiplication of the family members, the bigger family you have the richer you are; (v) Marriage was a family business in good or in worse situations; (vi) Social support and meeting sexual satisfaction and reduction of prostitution attempts.

According to the customs of the Alle people in Ethiopia (Bombe and Gutu, 2018), a married woman becomes fully integrated into her husband's family, and the head of the household holds social obligations toward all its members. In

the event of the husband's death, the widow is cared for to ensure the inheritance of property and the continuation of the deceased brother's lineage. Women often support this tradition as a way to maintain social acceptance. Within this custom, a younger brother is expected to care for and engage in sexual relations with his elder brother's wife if the elder brother is absent for an extended period, such as during military service or imprisonment, until his return. The widow is generally not permitted to remarry outside the family, to prevent property from transferring to another lineage.

The African levirate marriage is practiced just as in Jewish culture. Children born from this union belong to the deceased brother (Mbiti, 1969). In Banyamulenge culture in the DRC, the saying *habyara impfizi*—"it is the family that gives birth, not the individual"—reflects a communal understanding of identity and lineage. This tradition ensures continuity of life: the 'I' continues in the 'We', even after the death of a married brother (Mbiti, 1969; Ogolla, 2014, p. 290). Through this practice, the family identity remains alive, and children born within the arrangement carry the name of the deceased father, even if they are not biologically his. However, if the widow leaves the family and has children with a "stranger," those children may be seen as illegitimate by the clan. In some cultures, when a husband dies, the family elders designate a brother-in-law to care for the widow. In others, the widow is free to choose a relative of her late husband, with confirmation by the family elders. Widowhood rituals can be particularly harsh in some cultures. In Igbo communities of Nigeria, for example, widows are expected to undergo a series of restrictive rites. They are often secluded and regarded as ritually impure, prohibited from interacting with others until purification is completed (Eze et al., 2024, p.163).

3. The Narrative Story of Tamar

3.1 Tamar and Identity Crisis

Throughout history, God has never spoken in a vacuum, but within specific situations and cultural contexts. The stories of Boaz and Ruth (Ruth 1–4), Jacob's marriage to Rachel and Leah (Gen 29), and Abraham's union with Hagar (Gen 16:1–15) are examples where God worked through existing cultural frameworks. In patriarchal cultures, women often lack identity. Even after carrying a child for nine months in her womb, a woman is not seen as the giver of identity. She does not belong—she exists at the margins of society, called in or out at the will of others. This sharply contrasts with matriarchal cultures, where women hold central relational and communal roles.

The socio-historical background of Genesis 38 is entangled with issues of male offspring, levirate marriage, prostitution, and seduction. In patriarchal culture, a child born to a childless family had to be male, tasked with carrying the name of the deceased father. The entire practice centered on male legacy, separating children by sex and ignoring the role of women in preserving lineage. Tamar, a widow still in mourning and without a child, waits for her brother-in-law to fulfill his obligation. But Onan refuses. His act of withholding life dishonors her and defies both culture and divine covenant. His refusal is an act of selfishness and injustice: "Then Judah said to Onan, 'Sleep with your brother's wife and fulfill your duty to her as a brother-in-law to raise up offspring for your brother.' But whenever he slept with his brother's wife, he spilled his semen on the ground to keep from providing offspring for his brother" (Gen 38:8-9). His act is condemned before both God and people. Tamar is again a victim, and her right to carry offspring for Er is denied. Imperial power and patriarchal selfishness distort cultural norms, deciding when to give life and when to take it, especially from the helpless and voiceless, like the widow Tamar.

Judah, gripped by fear of losing his remaining son, chased Tamar from his home. But he expects her to remain his unworthy widow, in mourning clothes! She is not free and remains confined in the rules of Judah in unending grief. "Judah then said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, 'Live as a widow in your father's household until my son Shelah grows up. 'For he thought, 'He may die too, just like his brothers.'" So, Tamar went to live in her father's household" (Gen 38:11). Once again, Tamar is victimized and confined by a culture that refuses to honor her role in preserving family lineage.

But Tamar refuses to be silenced forever; "she took off her widow's clothes, covered herself with a veil to disguise herself" (Gen 38:14). She turns her pain into opportunity; she is beautiful. She bargains her security with a man whose sexual desires are uncontrolled after mourning his wife. She gains her cause through pain and in critical circumstances. Her tears and grief turned into joy, songs of praise with moon, stars, and angels streaming into her place. She is pregnant! This should make Judah rejoice. Instead, he is enraged by her actions, seeing them as a source of shame to his family. Tamar deserves the death penalty, "Judah said, 'Bring her out and have her burned to death'" (Gen 38:24)! She is victimized because of her brave and genius plan.

In many African cultures, as in patriarchal societies across the world, childlessness is often blamed on the woman, whether barren, divorced, or widowed. The Bible is full of women who suffered under this weight: Sarah (Gen 16), Hannah (1 Sam 1:1–5), Naomi and her daughters-in-law (Ruth 1–2), and Tamar (Gen 38). This stigma is also applied to single mothers such as Mary (Mat 1:18–24). These stories show how the culture often silences women whose identity is tied to childbearing (Niditch, 1998, p.33).

Judah's selfish and brutal attitude demands Tamar's public execution to cover his shame. But Tamar stands her ground, refusing to let anyone challenge or abuse her rights again, even with her life hanging in the balance, she demands justice. She boldly confronts her status, breaks cultural proceedings, and presents decisive evidence that puts Judah to shame: *"I am pregnant by the man who owns these," she said. "See if you recognize whose seal and cord and staff these are"* (Gen 38:25). With her twins stirring in her womb, Tamar transforms shame into honor, and her dehumanized body into that of a dignified mother-to-be, restored to her rightful place in the community.

Tamar refuses to be misrepresented as a harlot. She refuses to be called a widow or childless when she is, in fact, productive and powerful. She finds her identity. She does not deceive but seduces, successfully prompting a man to fulfill the role of a husband. Tamar gains confidence and realizes just how beautifully, wonderfully, powerfully, and fearfully she is made (Psalm 139:14). She sets the bar of negotiation high—not for a goat, but for the seal, the cord, and the staff: the symbols of tribal authority. By possessing these tribal markers, Tamar takes control of the tribe itself and emasculates Judah at the moment he seeks to condemn her (Thabede, 2017, p.64; Gunn and Fewell, 1993, p.126).

Tamar chooses to liberate herself from the status of a widow, of being childless, of being a foreign and forgotten woman in unending pain. She challenges the actions of both Onan and Judah, who failed to fulfill their divine and cultural responsibilities. Her cry echoes with power like this: *I am not a harlot, I am not a sinner, I am claiming what is mine! I am not just a woman—I am claiming my justice, a divine and cultural right to be a mother, a bearer of life, a carrier of my family's future.*

3.2 Decolonizing Patriarchal Mechanisms

A postcolonial approach is essential to the story of Tamar because it exposes oppression, exploitation, misrepresentation, and dispossession. In Dube's (2000, p.170) argument, Tamar is a victim of "patriarchal and imperial ideology". Judah and his family violate their patriarchal obligations toward a woman who struggles to assert her identity in a foreign household where she no longer belongs. Tamar's argument before the community court, politely but powerfully, demands the identification of the owner of the seal—Judah himself—forcing him to confront his own guilt. In a humble yet victorious manner, Tamar teaches Judah to behave justly: to care for widows like her, not to exploit their vulnerability, and not to confine them to mourning clothes indefinitely. Judah recognizes his failure and declares, *"She is more righteous than I"* (Gen 38:25).

Tamar emerges as a hero, one who overcomes selfish masculinity and the exploitative patriarchal systems that oppress widows. She reclaims her right to become the mother of nations and restores the family line, not through Er, but through Judah. Tamar becomes a defender of cultural justice, teaching Judah and his household timeless values: justice, dignity, and the humanity of the voiceless. Tamar's story calls us to confront and dismantle any belief systems or practices that deny widows and all vulnerable people the right to live in dignity, to access justice. Theologians are invited to engage in dialogue with Scripture, to decolonize it from oppressive cultural and patriarchal filters, and to protect cultural values that are too often misused or misrepresented by their supposed guardians.

What if Tamar had given birth to twin girls (Thabede, 2017, p.76)? Would she still have been considered secure? Why do widows and their daughters have less value than widowers and their sons? And yet, as a flicker of light in the darkness, Tamar's once-weak voice gains strength and space enough for resistance, enough for liberation (Van der Walt, 2015, p.69).

Men must acknowledge their failures—not only as a step toward healing of widow-victims, but for themselves as well. Recognizing limitations is not a sign of weakness or cowardice, but of human responsibility within society. Judah's humility saves them both from public disgrace and grants Tamar full rights to carry forward her family's legacy through the birth of the twins. In the end, it is not the name of Er nor Onan that is preserved, but the name of Judah (Gen 46:12). Tamar is no longer called a foreigner, a woman, a widow, or childless. In the process of healing her wounds and overcoming the trauma inflicted by her context, she emerges as a mother, a bearer of promise and blessing to the nations. There is a profound notion of reconciliation between Tamar and Judah and the use of pain as an opportunity. Tamar is rehabilitated at home, and Judah admits his fault and plays his patriarchal/ cultural role. Judah is now a

changed man to carry out his responsibility as a good man in the family. That is justice that she fights for the complementarity in the household with no revenge. Both are united to usher in the long-term plan of salvation of humanity. Through her son Perez, the family lineage continues: he becomes the ancestor of King David (1 Chr 2:1–15), and ultimately of Jesus, the Messiah—born not in a vacuum, but within a cultural story that Tamar helped to shape (Matt 1:1–27).

4. Challenges in the African Contemporary Society

Although levirate marriage was historically widespread, it has become far less common in modern societies. Cultural norms and legal frameworks have shifted to prioritize individualism, autonomy, gender equality, and human rights. In this context, several challenges emerge and complicate or discourage the practice of levirate marriage:

(i) Socio-economic, Physical, and Psychological Vulnerability

Widowhood often results in severe disruptions to a woman's socio-economic, physical, and psychological well-being. Widows may be denied the means or given only limited opportunities to live independent and productive lives. In some cases, relationships with in-laws become hostile or violent, as families fail to manage the grief and crisis caused by the loss of a loved one. This further marginalizes the widow and exposes her to abuse and neglect.

(ii) Shift Toward Individualism and Health Concerns

Contemporary society is increasingly individualistic, with both men and women often unwilling to share resources or responsibilities beyond their nuclear families. This shift has widened the gap between legal wives and widows. Additionally, concerns about HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections have made families more cautious about entering into relationships involving multiple sexual partners.

(iii) Theological Tensions in the African Church

In many African contexts, Christian teaching remains ambivalent or even hostile toward levirate marriage. The Church often discourages or outright bans the practice, instead encouraging widows to either remarry or remain single for the rest of their lives. Young widows—especially those with no children—are frequently advised to return to their fathers' homes and start a new life, while their children and property are left behind. Unfortunately, while the Church discourages traditional practices, it has not yet provided viable, culturally sensitive alternatives. Biblical interpretations and doctrinal approaches to culture remain unsatisfactory and disconnected from the lived realities of widows.

(iv) Colonial Disruption of African Cultural Practices

Since the colonial era, African cultural practices have been devalued, demonized, or outright denied by both colonial powers and Western Christian missionaries. Their influences shaped African independent states' organizations and new religious beliefs. These include traditional marriage customs like levirate marriage. For example, the Roman Catholic Church and the Belgian paternalistic colonial system in the Congo *"generated a specific lens through which Congolese women were targeted by colonial policies"* (Lauro, 2020). These ideologies disrupted indigenous ways of life and left lasting cultural wounds.

(v) Modern Education, Feminist Movements, and NGO Campaigns

Modern education systems, the rise of women's movements, and the advocacy of NGOs have challenged the practice of levirate marriage. These voices often emphasize women's rights and autonomy, but they rarely offer practical alternatives for how widows should survive and thrive. The question remains: what meaningful support systems are in place for widows who are rejected by both their in-laws and traditional customs, and are unable to be assisted by the church, particularly those in rural settings?

(vi) Conflict, Displacement, and Global Migration

Ongoing conflict, displacement, and migration have scattered families across regions and continents, making practices like levirate marriage nearly impossible. Widows are often left alone to care for their children under extremely harsh conditions, with little or no support from family, church, or community structures. Widows need practical alternatives, not theories.

5. Tamar and Contemporary Widows of War

According to the [United Nations \(n.d.\)](#), there are more than 258 million widows globally, and “widows have historically been left unseen, unsupported, and unmeasured in our societies” (UN, International Widows’ Day). Today, armed conflicts continue to leave tens of thousands of women newly widowed, while many others are left in limbo, their partners missing or disappeared. Sadly, their cries are unique but often silenced. Thirty years ago, countries affected by war in Eastern Europe and Africa, widows made up “more than half the population of all adult women. In several war-ravaged countries in the post-conflict years, more than 70 per cent of children depend on widowed mothers as their sole support” (Owen, 2001, p.12). But this has not changed, and the plight of widows, victims of war, continues to rise.

The experience of widows in the Banyamulenge community reflects this global reality. The Banyamulenge are a Tutsi ethnic group that lives in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. During the 1964-1969 war in the Democratic Republic of Congo ([Rukundwa, 2006, pp.122-126](#)), many Banyamulenge men were killed. In the aftermath of wars, widows rebuilt families through levirate marriages, despite opposition from church doctrines. Interestingly, many children born of those unions are now respected church and community leaders. As one pastor recently shared with me: “*I am from that marriage, ‘gucura,’ and if it were not for community solidarity, some families could have ceased to exist.*” Since 1996, Eastern DRC has endured prolonged armed conflict ([Nzongola-Ntalaja, 1998](#)), resulting in the deaths of many thousands of people. Recent conversations with Banyamulenge widows’ associations, the community currently has over 2000 widows, aged 17 to 50, many of whom are now scattered across the globe, seeking a safe haven.

This context of wars and conflicts creates cultural practices and legal complexities. In the Banyamulenge for instance culture, traditionally, widowhood is practiced in the following ways:

- Young, childless widows are expected to return to their natal homes, where their families repay a portion of the original bride wealth (*gukoranura*) to the deceased husband's family. The widow loses all rights to property and must start life from scratch, either waiting to remarry or remaining single. If she has children at her natal home, those children are considered part of her father's lineage, and they are called *inkuri*.
- Young widows with children who do not wish to be taken in by a brother-in-law are also returned to their family of origin. Their parents repay part of the bride wealth, and the widow is free to remarry—but she leaves behind her children and forfeits her property rights.
- A widow may choose to remain with her in-laws and not remarry. In this case, she retains rights to property and child custody. However, this arrangement often leads to conflict, especially when:
 - In-laws mismanage her property.
 - There is tension due to a lack of sexual relations.
 - Or when a child is born outside the family lineage, leading to rejection and identity crises for the child.

These scenarios show that widowhood is not only a personal or emotional crisis, but also a legal, spiritual, and communal dilemma. In a conversation with a group of Banyamulenge widows, their suggestions reflected both cultural sensitivity and church doctrinal insight:

1. Cultural practices should be renewed, allowing for consensual levirate arrangements, not forced ones, for those who wish to;
2. Widows should have the freedom to choose whether to remarry or not, while retaining rights to their children and property.
3. Church doctrines, customary laws, and state laws must be harmonized to protect the legal and spiritual rights of widows. After all, they are Christians too.

The Church must become a space of grace and healing, offering counseling, not excommunication, when a widow is found pregnant or in sexual intercourse, as it often happens.

6. Dialogue with the Bible

Widows often live at the margins of their societies, moving in and out of the influence of changing religious and cultural norms. They live in a world that asks them to adapt constantly but makes space for their voices. Their question is simple but profound: “*Where do we belong?*” In many places, like in Tamar's time, widows are expected to mourn indefinitely, wear grief like a uniform, and wait silently for justice that often never comes.

In this context, the loss of meaningful cultural practices, often erased by aggressive Christianization, has left many widows in a state of permanent dislocation. Tamar's grief in mourning clothes mirrors theirs. This dislocation is not simply a result of the culture itself, but rather how culture has been misrepresented, abused, or distorted by insiders and outsiders alike. Culture is not fixed; it is dynamic. It is not to be criminalized or erased, but be allowed to evolve, to walk with us through time and space. Without culture and history, we are a people without direction, identity, or future. Even when some widows manage to care for themselves economically, social support remains essential. *"I am because we are."* Raising children and managing a home alone is no easy task.

Odette, whose husband was killed in the war of 1996, recalled during a conversation in April 2025: *"One day, I helplessly needed a man around me—just to talk through the plan for building my house. I didn't need financial help, but I missed the family voice in my project."* On the other side of this reality, **Suzanne's** pain stands in contrast. In the early 1990s, she was brutally attacked by her brother-in-law, who left her with deep wounds on her neck, simply because she tried to sell one of her own cows. **Namahoro** goes on and says, *"Please, we are tired of this name of abapfakazi (widows). Maybe we can be called ababyeyi bibana (mothers who live by themselves)."* These stories are not exceptions; they are the norm in many places. When culture becomes a tool of domination and not of community, it ceases to be life-giving. Tamar did not reject culture. She rejected the abusers of culture. She stood up not against tradition, but against injustice disguised as tradition. She claimed both her divine and cultural rights.

Moreover, even those whose husbands worked in the civil service, the police, and the army share their awful journey to recover the pension of their deceased husbands. This difficult situation is not only experienced by the Banyamulenge widows, but it is a shared experience across a wide range of African contexts. **Namasoso** recalls how she was neglected by the army administration when she went to claim the pension of her husband, who passed away in early 2000 in Bukavu. The concern is with no answer for widows in Eastern DRC whose husbands die in the armed groups, whether allies of the government or rebel movements. *"Will our husbands ever be honored for their sacrifices? Will we and orphans be remembered and be taken care of?"* **Divine**, a widow of three children, ponders in deep anxiety.

These tensions are not abstract; they play out in real lives, through quiet acts of resistance and unexpected stories of solidarity. In one of my villages in Minembwe during the 1990s, a pastor's wife took the initiative to care for her brother-in-law's widow. Her husband initially refused to provide the care that her sister-in-law needed. But one day, his wife prepared a separate room for the widow in their house. When her husband came home, she told him to sleep in another room. To his shock, he found another woman in the room. *"Who is this?"* he asked. *"Shhhh,"* his wife replied, *"it is your sister-in-law. She needs a child. Do it."* Nine months later, a beautiful child was born. Then another. Later, she told her husband, *"If you want our family to remain happy, take care of both of us."* After the Rwandan genocide in 1994, the country survived with untold numbers of widows and orphans. According to a UN report (Owen, 2001:8-10), *"A wave of genocide created 500,000 widows in Rwanda. Sixty per cent of adult women were widowed by the wars in Angola and Mozambique."* In Butare, a widow once came to a male friend and asked, *"Would you be willing to father me a child? My husband was not as lucky as you."* These are not stories for mockery or judgment. They are stories of survival, of longing to belong, of rebuilding communities in the face of a broken world, shuttered hopes, and unimaginable loss.

This is why I believe we must open a real and honest dialogue between Scripture, culture, and state institutions to find common ground for rebuilding families and communities. Biblical texts need to be liberated from colonial interpretations and allowed to speak meaningfully in our local contexts. Deuteronomy 25, which gave Tamar the right to bear a child in her deceased husband's name, reminds us that many African cultures once contained deeply protective and life-affirming institutions. Tamar's story is not about rebellion; it is about restoration.

We must remember that during the anti-colonial struggles, African socio-political visions like Ubuntu, Ujamaa, Harambee laid the foundation for community justice and solidarity (Nkrumah, 1957; Kaunda, 1967; Nyerere, 1968; Kenyatta, 1968). These were not merely political slogans; they were deep African convictions about human dignity and collective responsibility. Their focus was to alleviate human suffering under colonization (Rukundwa and Van Aarde, 2005, p.939); dialogue was their method, and justice was the goal.

In 2004, during a conference between the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and the African Council of Churches in South Africa, I found myself in trouble for suggesting that we need to write our own African Gospels and Acts of African Apostles. Later, in my writings (Rukundwa, 2006, pp. 81–82), I insisted that Western hermeneutics cannot help us fully own the meaning of Scripture. We must give voice to tricontinental perspectives—from Africa, Asia, and Latin America—that speak to our realities. If the Bible is not a *"frozen artifact,"* as some claim, then it must be interpreted by those who live its stories in flesh and blood (Pui-lan, 1996, pp.212–213; Tamez, 1996, p.204). African theologians and church leaders must read the text not only for what it says, but for what it means in their context.

Today, levirate marriage has significantly declined in Sub-Saharan Africa. But its disappearance has left many without the social and economic support they once relied on, especially in rural villages. So, we must ask: how can we redeem and reimagine cultural practices to coexist with biblical teachings for the well-being of our communities? How can the church, alongside cultural leaders, state institutions, and civil society, become guardians of traditions that protect widows and promote justice?

The Church, like Tamar, must teach justice and must become a place of healing, a refuge for the voiceless, and a reconciler for both abusers and victims of cultural misuses. The Church's calling is not only to preach the gospel for heaven but to embody it as a radical force of grace and create a place that everyone would feel safe, regardless of social status, gender, tribe, or race. There is a song that says, "Everyone needs somebody to lean on!"

I conclude with the vision of Revelation 7:9: "After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb." Culture is our identity. It is our song, our memory, our justice. We are called to protect it, not only from outsiders who demonize it, but also from ourselves when we misuse it. A people without culture is a people without identity, dignity, and a future.

Conclusion

Tamar's story in Genesis 38 serves as a powerful testament to the resilience and agency of widows, challenging contemporary readers to confront cultural injustices and advocate for the marginalized. By reclaiming her narrative, we are reminded of the urgent need to address the silent cries of widows in our communities, ensuring that their voices are heard and their rights upheld. In the case of Banyamulenge widows of war, their suggestions need to be listened to. There must be an open dialogue between Scriptures, church doctrines, and their culture to find suitable and contextual alternatives. Faith and actions must go hand in hand: Cultural justice must be renewed and be guarded from those who misuse them to exploit widows. Widows are parents who live by themselves, *ababyeyi bibana*, and are to be allowed to retain rights to their children and property, whether remarried or not. Finally, the church and any other religious body a space of grace and healing for the weak and the marginalized of our societies. Widows must find rest and rebuild their broken lives in God's hands.

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