

Love after death

Cover story

Tuesday, 09 April 2013 21:15

Written by Shifa Mwesigye

[1 Comments](#)



Deputy speaker Jacob Oulanya Married Lady Winnie Amoo Okot after losing his first wife Dorothy

It's not easy starting afresh after one's spouse dies

When Natasha Babirye's husband died, her world stopped. She had not seen it coming. One minute he was simply resting, the next she was rushing him to Mulago hospital where he was pronounced dead. At only 28 years old, Babirye was widowed with two boys.

"It was terrible, I hated myself and everyone round me. I knew the world is for me and the kids. I was thinking; can I really ever get a man like him again? He was caring and loving, he had it all," Babirye narrates her ordeal.

Babirye had met Charles Orombi at her hostel when she was studying for her diploma at Makerere Business Institute and he was completing his Masters degree at Makerere University.

"He was a charming person, very loving and friendly. He said I was hardworking and he loved that about me," Babirye recalls.

The two fell in love and after dating for six months. Babirye introduced Orombi to her parents and they started living together and had two children.

"He stopped me from working because he wanted me to look after the children. We were to be wedded that very year when he died," Babirye says.

He was the district planner for Nebbi. In June 2010, he returned home for a week which he spent with his wife and children. But he was feeling unwell yet medical checkups revealed he was fine. On the evening of July 2, Babirye found an unconscious Orombi in bed and rushed him to Mulago hospital. It is here that Orombi was pronounced dead.

"I think he was poisoned and the thing was eating him for a week. I still had hope that he was alive. I put him in the car and asked my neighbour to drive because I couldn't drive. My older son asked me 'Mummy what is wrong with dad, is he dying?' He just stopped breathing," Babirye recalls Orombi's passing away.

"Some relatives thought it was me who killed him but others said he was bewitched. They are the ones who said that he was poisoned," Babirye recalls.

As if losing her love was not enough, her in-laws turned on her and took the family estate – a commercial building and a bungalow in Nebbi.

"They said, 'if you come here, you will die like him'. I had to leave because I was fearing for my life. So, I built my home in Matugga. I started my own business as a mobile money agent. They rented the flat but they cannot bring a penny for me or the children," Babirye says.

Her family has asked her to remarry but that is not an option she is considering. Babirye says her husband is irreplaceable because he was everything she wants in a man.

"I am just working for my children. I don't think I will get married because I don't want to have other children. I don't think I can trust anyone like I did him. My relatives say that I need someone to take care of me but I can take care of myself. He was a caring person and he was a rich man. It is not easy to get someone who is rich, caring and loving and I am thinking I cannot ever get such a man again. I lost those things of love and I don't

know if I can love again,” Babirye says.

Like this mother of two, many women and men find themselves between a rock and hard place when a spouse dies. When 42-year-old Dina's (not real name) husband suddenly died leaving her with three daughters, she thought she could never love again and for years she wallowed in self-pity, wrapped in her deceased husband's love. But then she met Jim (not real name), also widowed with children, and eventually, their friendship blossomed into love and marriage.

“I had never thought it possible that a love deeper than that in my first marriage existed, but God proved me wrong through Jim,” Dina, who encourages young widows to mourn but not shut out love altogether, said. “Jim is more passionate, richer, more generous and I love him more than I thought possible to love another human being.”

They both put up the respective homes they had built with their deceased spouses for rent, to set up a new haven in one of Kampala's more affluent suburbs. Thousands of single men and women, single mothers or fathers agonise over finding their significant other. In Uganda, it is even harder for a widow or widower.

The Bible teaches in Matthew 19:5 that when a man and woman get married, God unites them as one flesh. The only thing that can break the marriage bond, in God's eyes, is death. If a person's spouse dies, it is only then that a person can remarry.

Reverend Davis Kiconco, the All Saints Church Missions Coordinator for Kampala diocese and a marriage counsellor, says marriage is an agreement between a man and a woman to live together as husband and wife with the pronouncement “Till death do us part”.

“When you look at the Christian marriage and the way God wants it, marriage stands as long as the two partners are alive. Once one partner dies, the partnership is no longer binding. So when my spouse dies, I am released from the legal person. I am single again,” Rev Kiconco says.

Ssenga Hamida says that in Buganda culture when a woman loses a husband, before she announces his death, she wears a sanitary pad or terry cloth. This is believed to keep away the ghost of her husband so that he does not disturb her when she chooses to remarry. Then she can go outside and alert people that her husband has died.

If a man loses his wife, he takes a thread from the terry cloth and ties it around his arm in the same respect to keep her ghost from interfering with his life when she is gone.

When the husband is put into the grave, the woman also digs a hole and buries the terry cloth and laments the words “I have buried you with your wife, don't return to me. I am free of you”. These words are believed to keep away her husband's ghost forever.

After the burial, the widow or widower is prayed for and cleansed with herbs. The religious people just pray for the widowed. Ssenga says that the culture of widows staying unmarried is dying. More young boys want to marry widows because they inherited property and money from their husbands.

“Because they want to grab the property, young men are looking for lonely widows who have a lot of money to spend and no one to spend it with,” Ssenga Hamida says.

She says that a woman who stays in the husband's home after he has died cannot be allowed by her in-laws to remarry and bring another man in the home.

“Any woman who leaves the home will remarry; which family is going to allow their young daughter to remain a widow for life because the husband died? Is it a crime?” Ssenga Hamida asks.

“All the widows I have encouraged to leave their husbands' homes have found men and are now married,” Ssenga Hamida says.

But Rev Kiconco reminds us that when taking marriage vows, a man says, “I give you this ring as a sign of marriage, all that I am I give to you and all that I have I share with you within the love of God”.

The moment you proclaim, you have sold your individual rights. You don't own Shs 10,000 you have in your pocket. It cuts your property into two. So when a man dies, the woman is the next of kin. You take over the administration of your husband's estate.

Women are, however, scared of bringing a new husband into her home. When Mozambican former first lady Graca Machel lost her husband Samora Machel and remarried South Africa's Nelson Mandela, they bought a home they would stay in together. But they would go back to care for their original homes.

“So, bringing a new man to the home of a deceased person and in the compound of the father-in-law is definitely a disgrace. The two can get a new home but still keep in the old homes and raise their children. In a situation where children are older, I don't see a problem where the two can get into a new home, leave the older children in their homes. That is healthy for Africans, I know many people who have done it and no one is complaining,” Rev Kiconco says.

More cultures especially in northern Uganda encourage widow inheritance for the deceased's property to stay in the family but also for the widow to have someone to care for the children.

In Uganda, widowers will sooner remarry than widows. There are beliefs that if a woman loses her husband, she will carry the curse of death of her spouses with her into her next marriage.

But Kiconco says this belief is in the African tropics. Men used the culture to deny women their social and conjugal rights.

“Women have the liberty to remarry because marriage is not a cultural social function, it is God's way. After losing a husband, the woman still has sexual rights and needs which should be met. So when culture says she should not remarry, or that she comes with a curse, it is a blanket brand. It was levelled on women because [it meant her producing] children who are not of that clan and they would become shareholders of the property that the deceased left behind,” Kiconco says.

Ssenga Hamida says men are often encouraged to remarry immediately to avoid situations of incest. If he refuses to remarry, his daughters are taken away and he is forced to get a wife if for nothing else, for the domestic duties.

There is no cause for debate in Islam whether a man should remarry after losing a wife; after all Muslim men are encouraged to marry four women. If he loses one, he can always remarry to make four.

Kiconco says he counsels such people differently because they tend to continue where they stopped with the other person. They carry a notion in their minds that marriage is what the deceased spouse made it.

Most men run into problems with their second marriage because they keep comparing spouses. Yet remarrying means making a fresh start. Dina attests to that. Nothing in her second marriage can be compared to the first one.

“Where my deceased first husband believed in cost-sharing in the home, Jim is traditional about domestic roles and pays all the bills and children’s tuition, while I run the home smoothly, even with my day job,” she said.

Death happens, sadly, but when all is said and done, dare to give love another chance.

smwesigye@observer.ug