

Research Article

The Changing Dimensions of Widowhood in Africa: Evidence from the Kom Fondom of the Cameroon Grassfields

Ngam Confidence Chia

Senior Lecturer/ Researcher; Department of History, The University of Bamenda, North West Region of Cameroon
BP 39, Bambili, North West Cameroon

*Corresponding Author
Ngam Confidence Chia

Abstract: This article surveys the alternating dimensions of widowhood in Africa using palpable evidences from the Kom Fondom, which is a typical African traditional setting in the North-West Cameroon. The veritable questions which this study has attempted to provide answers or leads to right perceptions on gender trends and topography in Africa using Kom as a case study are: (a) What were the traditional tenets that accompanied and sustained widowhood in Africa prior to the introduction of the elements of change? (b) what were/are these elements of change that greatly affected widowhood practices and (c) what is the overall impact of these changes and transformation to human development? From the analysis of evidence gathered from primary and secondary sources, it employs both the thematic and chronological construction styles to assert that in spite of the persistence of patriarchy in most African societies, the strings of widowhood that formerly overburdened widows and widowers with elastic responsibilities are gradually losing their grip lately. It argues that this gradual collapse of the bastions of patriarchy especially on the female folk has created room for the emergence of an avalanche of opportunities for this hitherto, downtrodden lot. It submits that the general trend of female emancipation with its overriding emphasis on gender equality and/or parity, as per the positive mutation registered, are no longer a policy design with no practical application on the ground in Africa as it used to be. From this, it posits that gender parity, as opposed to equality, is no longer a practical matter of the North with South suffocating on the strings of patriarchy as it was in the pre-colonial era. It is therefore a contribution to change and development in Africa especially within the discourse of gender topography with overriding relevance to regional and global policy definition and implementation.

Keywords: Africa, Cameroon, Kom, Change, Women, Widowhood.

Introduction

The current trends of globalization stand to suggest that the world is one big village with shared rules, skills and responsibilities and this has repositioned debates and research on feminist scholarship within the continuum of gender topography. This repositioning and renewed interest gives states and polities in both the West and the Southern Hemisphere the exacting responsibilities to re-examine its resources, human and natural, and harness them to stand ready to compete favourably with people and goods of alien abstraction. These developments along, with the women's changing roles in almost all fields, all point to the fact that all the elements that perturb the welfare of man needs to be carefully monitored and checked so as to develop a sustainable policy definition and implementation strategy. One of such areas in gender discourse is the passions that have sustained or

undermined the welfare of the female folk in all dimensions. This paper identifies an important but often negligible area of gender trends in the gender equality scholarship that has been topical during the last few decades. It tries to provide a literary anatomy of the passions both enjoyed and suffered by African women as opposed to that of men in the scope of widowhood. It garners evidences from primary and secondary sources and from its critique, opines that the current changes and transformations that are part of the world dynamics have not left out traditional African Polities but that the lot of women in widowhood still passes for an epitome of sorrow. It submits first that; the ordeal incurred in Widowhood by African Women in the past was rooted in so many figments some of them being (a) the notion of the family and marriage strings (b), lack of self-worth through genuine emancipation programmes like education, and training as well as (c), the firm grip of

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patriarchy that did all to measure the worth of a woman through that of her husband/father/uncle or simply her marital status. With such mentalities shifted aside, we posit therefore that, the lot of widows in Africa has witnessed tremendous positive mutations owing to overall global dynamics especially the emerging opportunities for them in education, job market and other forms of emancipation programmes but that with regards to the Kom Fondom, which is not possibly the lone case in the African locale, a lot more is still desired for this to be completely eradicated. It grows into maturity within a feeling that the African female lot is in threshold of veritable change thereby rendering the grip of patriarchy on traditional property tenure very weak.

Literally and Social Justification for the Case study Employed

The Kom Fondom which is one of the main centralised polities of the Cameroon Western Grassfields stands as a classic case to showcase the graphics of the changing and differential configurations of Widowhood passions between men and Women in Africa.¹ With an approximate population of 200000 inhabitants, this Fondom has a growing population with the population of single and widowers increasing geometrically.² A number of reasons stand to make the fondom a fitting case for the understanding of, not only the dwindling fortunes of patriarchy but also, the contours of widowers sojourn on the path of widowhood. A few among the many justifying reasons are (a) The fact that the Fondom is one of the very few Fondoms in the Grassfields where the grip of patriarchy and its toll on the female lot is unwillingly losing its grip (b) The fact that the culture and traditions of this fondom arrogates succession to the female line (matrilineal succession) where women strangely have no right to any kind of succession and (c) the fact that, unlike Nso, Mankon, Bafut and Bali, women ordeal especially with regards to widowhood have mutated to strange dimensions lately. It validates a point vigorously defended by Kathleen New

man:1979, Stella Fabu:2008, Nkwi 1976, De Vries 1994 and many other feminist scholars that female emancipation is no longer an illusion limited to legal framing and resolutions of conferences but that it has penetrated deep into the traditional psyche and registered ravaging impacts.³ This paper puts to question the dependency theory concerning gender dichotomy, which seeks to buttress the fact that women are and should in all circumstances be placed in positions of second fiddles. It asserts that the changing world order that has imposed a lot of responsibilities to humans of all races, accompanied with education Christianity and the emergence of a money economy for women, have worked hard to liberate most African widows from their pre-colonial prejudicial confinements and obligations thereby, placing them (women) on a new lane of responsibilities and rights. As sorted out, this is kind of liberation for the women folk in the African traditional societies looks tiny, going by the evidence at hand, but speaks volumes as a worthy part of departure for many other societies/polities that have been yoked by patriarchal strings where widows were once held to be victims of circumstances and as such, treated with benign neglect and disdain.⁴ This makes the prefacing of the entire discuss on female potency and the scholarship behind it necessary.

Prefacing the Issues on Gender and Widowhood Scholarship

The technological advancement in almost all fields of science and the global emphasis placed on gender mainstreaming has animated current debates sweeping away some of the obnoxious contentions that were occasioned by gender dichotomy. This has opened ample space, not only for women to gain space, but has aggregately pushed research frontiers to the confines of any practice or culturally orientated values and norms that impede the blossoming of women in the world of opportunities. This is certainly why in introducing her monumental piece titled *The sisterhood of man*⁵ Kathleen Newman, through the subtheme *Woman's place, Woman's Prospect* cleared so many ambiguities in the dimension of gender scholarship especially in the domain of female emancipation trends. A vivid picture of the dramatic twist to the whole essence of women in time and circumstances that has taken even chauvinist apostle aback is transcribed when she opines that:

The role of women is changing all over the World. The highly visible women's liberation of the industrialized West finds its muted parallels even in remote rural [African] villages. ...there

¹A true picture of Kom, Its Culture, Traditions and History can be found in Confidence Chia Ngam's PhD Thesis titled *Kom Leadership in its Sub Regional Setting Ca 1865-2005: A study in Power Diplomacy with a Grassfield Traditional State*, Yaounde, 2013. Similar details are traced by Joseph Nsomin *A Comprehensive History of the Kom Society and The Modern Kom Society: Culture, Customs and Traditions* (Yaounde, Nyaa Publishers, 2016).

²The Population figures for the Kom Fondom the Kom Fondom have been in for a rough debate lately. As for the 1986 census results this Fondom was purported to be having a population of about 150000 inhabitants with an annual growth rate of 2 per cent. Surprisingly, the 2006 figures indicated that the Kom Fondom was about 10000 people less making the both the 1986 and the 2006 figures doubtful. However, going by statistics provided by Plan International Organization, HELVETAS and SIL all Non-Governmental organizations with devout experience in the Fondom, the Population of the entire Kom Fondom as of 2014 should be 200000 inhabitants with Women respecting the national percentage of 52 percent. This statistics moves in line with the projections provided by Confidence Chia Ngam in *The Baptist in Kom 1924-1990*. MA dissertation, the University of Yaounde I, 2003.p.16

³The above named authors are just a limited few.

⁴M. A.Sossou, "Widowhood Practices in West Africa; The Silent Victims in *International journal of Social Welfare*, Vol11, 2002), pp201-9.

⁵Newman Kathleen (1979) *The Sister Hood of Man: The Impact of the Women's Changing Roles on the Social and economic Life around the world*.

are shifts and cracks in the bedrock of tradition, tiny compared to its mass; but like changes in the levels of wall waters before an earthquake they may be portent seismic shifts. Some of these shifts in women's roles have registered on a global scale, sending repercussion far beyond their areas of local impact. The major fault line runs through all the important areas of human activity including education, employment, health, legal structures, politics, communication and family. As the fissures widen and spread, there are inevitable casualties. Some people find themselves in danger of falling through the cracks in structures previously thought solid as the security of tradition gives way before the promise of change is realized.⁶

Newman is just one among the many contemporaries that have opened wide gates of issues on research buttressing female potencies and the harm its neglect has done to global dynamics and sustainable development. In fact, the scholarship sustaining gender issues has gained a geometric increase in the last decades leaving chauvinist architects greatly assailed not only at the numerical increase but also at the startling revelations, all suggesting that women do perform concrete than latent roles for the survival of all human societies. An unexhaustive list of those who have been able to tore the whirlpool of prejudice and discrimination to place the contribution of the female folk to human survival will include Morgan Robin,⁷ Leo Kanowitz,⁸ Goode William⁹ and Stamp¹⁰ and Sossou.¹¹

Indeed, within the present global dispensation, the question is no longer, whether women are important but rather whether the mainstreaming process has been bought hook line and sinker by those involved in gender mainstreaming policies. Gender mainstreaming is more telling in our days viewing the tonnage of legislations and policy formation that have vehemently sustained

gender emancipation scholarship. This is strangely very true of the African continent where patriarchy was almost graduated as righteous and sacred.¹² The above-named scholars' assertions gained sustainability and global replications after the Beijing Conference of 1995, which injected renewed steam on the entire arena of female emancipation and gender equality programmes. Many issues pertaining to the end of discrimination against the female folk were the fallout of the crucial conference on women. More than ever before the statesmen at Beijing formally and unequivocally agreed to uphold the equal rights and inherent human dignity of women and men and other purposes and principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments, in particular the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women and the Declaration on the Right to Development.¹³

It was also intended to ensure the full implementation of the rights of women and of the girl child as an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of all human rights and fundamental freedoms. With these new trends which have all been further reinforced by the forces of change and transformation that have affected almost every sphere of the human lane most especially the African traditional polities, the grip of patriarchy that have kept more than half of the human race (women) under bounds are gradually losing their grip. It is in this context that the changing dimensions of Widowhood are better apprehended.

The Crux of African Widowhood Dynamics

Indeed, widowhood is an aspect of the female emancipation programme that still requires enormous efforts not only in terms of policy formation but also on their practical application throughout the African continent. As indicated earlier, Widowhood, in the general trend of female potency, has witnessed telling shifts even in rural environments where the bastions of patriarchy and its grip on gender balance are still comparatively strong. This notwithstanding, the changes that have come with this are in every aspect,

⁶ Ibid.p.3.

⁷ Robin Morgan " Sisterhood is powerful " in Robins MorgansEds*Sisterful is Powerful : Anthropology of writing from the Womens Liberation Movement*(New york, Random House),1970

⁸Kanowitz Leo, *Women and the Law: The Unfinished Revolution*,(Albuquerque, New Mexico, The University of New Mexico Press,1969)

⁹ Goode William, *World Revolution and family Pattern* (New York; Free Press 1965), H Elizabeth White ' Women's Status, Education and Employment: Variations among Muslim Nations(University of Brekelly June,1975). This has been religiously cited by Newman K. A lot of recent literature in this direction also comes from M. Coheen " Men own the fields and women own the Crops in *Journal of Social Science* (University of Wisconsin Press,1996),Gittinger P.et and al ' Household Food Security and the Role of Women" in *World Bank Discussion papers ,The World Bank* , Washington D.C,1990) and J .K. Galbraith, *Theorie de La Puavrete de Masse*(Paris: Gallimard,1984)

¹⁰ Stamp, P. *Technology, Gender and Power in Africa*, (Technical Study NP.1989)

¹¹Sossou M.A. "Widowhood Practices in West Africa: The Silent Victims" in *(International Journal of Social WelfareVol.11, 2002)201-9.*

¹² For a very long time in the African pre-colonial past, patriarchy was seen as the most divinely ordained form of gender symbioses. It sought to glorify the righteousness of the male being and any other thing tightly connected to that. See Confidence Ngam paper presented on at the Belo Women's Forum during the Belo area Development Association annual meeting titled the 'Dwindling Fortunes of Chauvinist Apostles on March 7th 2010. An outgrowth of this paper was later developed and Published under the Title "Female emancipation Count: A survey of Missionary Influence on the lots of Women in Kom 2013 by the same author in *KaliaoVol.5*

¹³This was the fourth Conference on Women which marked the 50th anniversary of the U N. The citation quoted here is found in article 8 and 9 of their declaration which is just a tiny sorted part of the tons of issue that were resolved to sort humanity in general and women in particular out of the harm of gender disparity.

intricately connected to the assembly of mutations engineered both by mutations in gender balance and by other issues requiring full participation of women.¹⁴ With all of this working together for and towards the complete collapse of patriarchy, widowhood which can roughly be defined as a state of temporal or permanent¹⁵ singlehood by men or women conditioned by the loss of a spouse through death has also witnessed dramatic shifts and turns. Though it is true to say that traditional tenets in most African Societies imposes more of responsibilities than rights to widows and widowers, the passions of one or both are seen to have shared diametrically different lots in surviving the challenges that do come with it. Interestingly, even the currency of the egalitarian scholarship which has been sustained by Christian teachings have all not helped to make the passions and practice of widowhood to share the same blends and shadings between the male and female folks. It is still very common even in our days to find women suffocating under the yoke of intense widowhood practice. Such a worrisome situation in Africa prior to the penetration of the legion of change factors was accentuated by the practice of Polygamy and belief systems, which accorded extensive rights to men than women in Widowhood.¹⁶ The success or failure of this can be given a detailed comprehension if the entire fabric of African perception of the meaning and essence of Widowhood is taken into account along with the path this practice has covered prior to the percolation of change.

African Perceptions to Women and Widowhood Trajectory Prior to Change

The word change is quite a complex and an exalting issue in human development or in the broad lane of social sciences. It conveys several meaning but replicate itself in the form of a shift or switch from; the new to the old, the old to the new, the seemingly well-known and mastered to the less known and from the likely to the less likely. However, with regards to the issue under discussion, it aggregately means the assembly of mutations that have encumbered the development of humanity over the stretch of time.¹⁷

¹⁴G. C. Samuel, Emergent Issues on Widowhood Practices in Ibo Culture: Between the Video Screen and the Reality'' in *Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities(UJAH)*2011. p.85.

¹⁵The usage of temporal or permanent condition here should not be nuanced. This is because the tendency of a man or woman to remarry after the loss of a spouse depends on the humour of that individual as well as the societal mores and customs that underlie the whole length and breadth of Widowhood tenets.

¹⁶S.Wilcox et all , ''The Effects of Widowhood on physical and mental Health, Health behaviours and Health Outcomes ''*The Womens' Health Initiatives,Health Psychology*,CVol.22,No.5,2003).pp.523.

¹⁷A full grasp of the accompanying elements of change are lavishly presented by D., Alberto Cimadamore and P.,FunginsaiGwansura '' Development and Sustainability science: Trans disciplinary Knowledge for Positive Social Change'' in Cimadore ,Mittelmark,Lie and Ottemoller (eds), *Development and Sustainability: The challenge of Social Change*,(London:Zed Books Publishers,2016),p.2. Similar Ideas are also vividly expressed by Elaine Unterhatler,TaniaBotler and Shiela Aikman '' Essentialism

Though change is hardly discernable and often associated with a multifaceted than a single dimensional band of issues, the kind and scope of change used here is the kind which was brought about through imperialism and any other forms of alien connection that percolated into the mainstream of African thought pattern and values in the 19th and 20 century. The African perception of the role and essence of the female folk when pitted with change displays a wealth of contradiction and humour. The contradiction and humour stems from the fact that, most African societies seemed to anchor the societal relevance of women on very skeletal premises. The change touched every fabric of the African traditional wellbeing gradually erasing some from total existing moderating others and grossly failing to uproot some. An aspect where this change displayed gross disparity is the issue of female emancipation and their lot especially the practice of widowhood and its evolution in the general string of time. Ankiambom Laywer¹⁸ offers an interesting analogy about widowhood. Among the fine details provided about the origins of widowhood,she goes further to opine that Africans adopted the rites of widowhood mainly for the Widows interest and that the ordeal later became the trademark of this practice was due in part by human prejudice and also by the fact that some women blatantly abused the respect that that practice had to ascertain themselves within the rungs of power. However like a human practice exposed to variations in interpretations and perception it differed in time and space from one family to the other as well as from one society to the other.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that in typical African societies Women were usually considered to be so important and indispensable for the societal wellbeing but this importance was unfortunately graduated or sanctioned only on their roles to the male folk rather than on their personal or collective count. Functionally, a woman in the traditional African context was a symbol of a man's authority, a measure of a man's' wealth, authorship and bravery and as well as a chessboard through and within which the continuation of a family lineage could be assured.¹⁹These tilted apprehension and relevance of women was however not an affair of the African continent alone. It was a custom widely practiced and even worshiped by most

Quality and Empowerment Concepts of Gender of Schooling in the HIV and Aids Pandemic'' in Elaine Unterhatler,Tania Botler and Shiela Aikman (eds), *Gender Equality, HIV and AIDS: A challenge for the Education Sector*(Wales: Oxfarm G.B. and action Aid,2008)pp.11-13.

¹⁸ Linda Ankiambom Lawyer ''The Origin,Evolution and Changing Perspectives of Widowhood in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon since the Pre-colonial Period'', in *People: International Journal of Social Sciences: Special Issue Volume. 3*.May 2017)pp.836-52.

¹⁹ The description has been captured in Kom song that was formed during the Prep-colonial period. The song was sung during female session with intentions to glorify the usefulness of the female folk to mankind. This ancient and prejudicial glorification of Women was confirmed to us in every detail by Cheneke Martins an Ibo farmer at Yoke Muyuka on June 15th 2012.

leaders in the West even as far late as the 18th and 19th centuries. In fact, discrimination against the female folk seemed to be as old as the existence of man. It is an old practice that has been part and parcel of World societies in both sides of the hemisphere. Female disdain, disregard and scorn as equals in function and esteem even in Africa was patterned according to a traditional system that placed them for a pretty long while in conditions of servitudes and surrogates.²⁰ With marriage seen as the ultimate end of every Woman, her role to the societal wellbeing was in each situation in Africa prior to any foreign influence logically tied to that apron string of societal regard and not on account of her singular personality whatsoever. Women were seen according to this thinking not to have or owned any identity of their own. They were seen before marriage in the image of her father after marriage in that of the husband. The African perception of women as surrogates seemed to have been inspired by legal traditions and developments in Europe along with Biblical teachings both sustained the role women as a much-depended folk. This was visible in the British Common Law legal system which upon colonization became the mentoring code of legality to all British territories. This code insidiously defined the woman under what was called the Doctrine of Coverture. By this doctrine, a man served like an umbrella to woman in the dimension of protection and choices.

Once in marriage the African perception projected that a woman's identity and the property she had before marriage plus even her name to have been swallowed up/usurped by that of her husband. With complete submergence of the woman's identity plus what she worked for before the marriage contract, she could be likened and treated as any other thing in the husband harem. As if this indignation was not enough in the African social and even political realm, the woman's personality and opinion was generally believed to have been completely erased by the fact that, the husband was given extensive right to sell, rent and even give out all sorts of family property especially real property like land even if it formerly belonged to his wife. This was aggravated by the fact that; the husband simply on account of the fact that he was of the male folk was not obligated by law or tradition even just to report or consult the wife on a matter as grave as disposing family property. It was on such firm patriarchal beliefs that the idea of all sorts of widowhood practices were firmly rooted.

This same thing was applied to the decision of the education of the children as well as the location/locality to set up the matrimonial home. As said, this was technically reinforced by the teachings of the Bible or the interpretation of it by the clergy that

²⁰ManalaMatsobane " African Traditional Widows Rites and their Benefits and /or Detrimental Effects on Widows in the context of African Christianity" in *Toeligiiese Studies/Theological Studies*.71,3,2015).p.3.

were overwhelmingly chauvinistic. These teachings fertilized the twisted thought about Women like in Gensis 2:23 when it opined that upon marriage a man and a woman shall cleave together and they shall become one flesh. Though it is likely that, this citation had a contextual reading buttressing love, oneness of heart and objective than of the physical person, the judicial interpretation of it and the efforts made thereafter to apply it, bear rich doses of patriarchal undertones that the Europeans and African used to downgrade the female folk. English Jurists like Blackstone and others who were for the most part, ardent apostles of patriarchy fought hard to make this Biblical citation to mean and be accepted to stand for the fact that the very being and legal existence of any woman get suspended during marriage or is at least incorporated into it.²¹The Roman Law like that of the French did not say anything different.

As for pristine African polities, local custom and traditional philosophy defined the regard due women. In every case African regard to women was just an outgrown anatomy of ancient practices in the West. A noticeable exception about this in Africa was that it was on these foundations that the idea of polygamy found its place. Honour, wealth and virility of African men was most of the time not construed from their dexterity in wars and hunting games but more on the number of women he could marry and the children that could come from such Unions. The size of a man's harem and the people therein especially women, entailed his workforce and his economic advantage. Strangely, little in the African sense was done to equate the fact that the number of people in each person's keeping technically enlarged the scope of his responsibilities. Without a just consideration of the responsibilities that came with polygamy and large families, the adult male folk who could afford the fortunes to build houses found pleasure in marrying women and treating them with any absconding neglect. Though the notion of bride prize seemed obnoxious to the Europeans upon colonization, it suffice to note hear that the marriage contract in the strictest African sense was barely a matter of exchange of hearts and willingness of intent on the part of the spouses than real payments in kind or in cash as the European understood.²² To this too should be added the fact that, the measure of a man's ability to lead and his power and influence was evaluated both in the traditional realm and by the Europeans through and within the public/private comportment of his wives and children

²¹ A detailed account and how legalism sustained discrimination against Woman can be seen on Leo Kanowitz,(1969) *Women and the Law, The Unfinished Revolution* (Albuquerque New Mexico, University of New Mexico Press) This has been cited by Kathleen Newman.

²² Confidence Chia Ngam (2015) *The Changing dimensions and implication of the Dowry in the African Lexicon. Its Implication on the value of Women*.P.6. (paper presented in the University of Bamenda on the occasion of the Women's Day celebration on the 19th of March.

and not only on him alone. With this, women had no authority or personality of their own in the society as they were at any one time either a wife or child of some little known or great man. It was in this context that some scholars were so overwhelmed to conclude dismissively that the role and essence of an African woman during the pre-colonial era was felt and graduated in the kitchen and to some large extent on their ability of procreation. These scholars fought hard to make marriage not only an ultimate destination to every African woman but the only sure industry where most of them could boast to have been hired to perform chores sacrosanct to their purpose of creation.

Again the salary of the female folk in this seemingly dignified job of child production and a variety of home chores hardly went beyond the societal good name and momentarily verbal gratitude that was most of the time not translated into policy formation or its application in time and space. A woman's essence in her geographical and social niche was aggregately seen in her ability to sustain the husband to provide a homestead where she could hide herself as well as the propensity of the husband to provide other items that ensured her welfare and that of her children. The potency of men over women in almost all aspects of human functionalities did not just emerge from a blind or wicked desire to subdue women. In the Bamenda Grassfield which is the hub of this paper, these Customs sustaining women underrating grew mostly from the fact that tradition and customs required that only responsible and able Men should get married. Though it was the dream of every parent to see the child or the Son in marriage, it was the son's ability, willingness and preparation to get married that mattered than the mere fact of belonging to the male folk. This ability was demonstrated through the son's ability to set up a home where he could house his wife and children and other traditionally relevant qualifications. By the possession of a home and farmland, the society was sure that both your wife and children were not going to become public nuisance. This thought was kept alive and allowed to define the marriage patterns among the Akan people in Gold Coast Ghana, as well as the People of the Buganda, Ethiopia, the Igbo, the Bantus and Tikars of Africa prior to colonization. Through this, a woman was expected both to see and venerate the husband as a great provider and protector. With the noticeable exception of farm, domestic chores and above all, procreation, African traditional women were not expected to perform any other chores that could contribute to the family's welfare. Unlike in the West or Northern Hemisphere where marriage conduct was guaranteed by certificates and other complicated codes and legalism that created room for divorce, African marriage system especially to women was essentially a one way traffic

where little possibilities of making amendment existed once the traditional rights were performed.²³

Going by the dictates of African traditional customs, marriage literally implied a contract of unspecified duration within which a woman was ordained once into it to owe a broad range of responsibilities to her husband and his relatives without corresponding expectations from her spouse. However, since it was the man who decided almost everything about the marriage and its survival in space and time, the duration of the marriages and the respect due it by the society depended on the man alone. Though the rate of divorce compared to the colonial and post-colonial eras was relatively slim, divorced women formed part of the three groups of single women that earned societal disdain in the African traditional psyche prior to change.²⁴ In this category the first were divorced women whose divorce cases were mostly erroneously blamed on them and their families. Among these women were those who, for biological or ethical reasons, were not able to bring forth children or who were unjustifiably accused of witchcraft and other spiritual claims.²⁵ The second group of this disdained lot were single women who for reasons independent of their own making, were not, as per the demands of custom, able to secure a husband of their own. A majority of these single women were those who in their earlier stages of life were either deceived by men with floating promises of marriages or whose families were stigmatized of a societal ill even if that was not contagious or hereditary.²⁶

Another issue associated with this was sexual pleasure which going by the fact that polygamy was the

²³Yaya Abiba (2015) "Marriage Customs among the Fulbe of the Mandara, Far North Cameroon" (B A Long Essay, Department of History, the University of Maroua.

²⁴ Practical and customary beliefs made divorced women a problem in precolonial African Societies. According to the NafoinTheresiaMebeneha, whom we interviewed at her residence at Sho-Kom on the 24th of July 2016, Divorced women posed a problem first to the society in that they automatically lost the respect that was given them in marriage, second to their parents and sister in that they came back to regained space that was no longer available with regards to compound resources and third to their children because or depended. She however stressed that the fear of public ridicule as a result of divorce and the fact that few if any women ever remarry kept women

²⁵Though it is known fact that procreation requires concerted act of both spouses in marriage, marriage African traditional mores and customs provided little or no allowance for childless Woman to continue staying in marriage. The traditional mentality held that all men were fertile and virile to bring forth thereby pushing through and impression that the absence of a child in any marriage encounter is solely the responsibility of the female folk. With such prejudicial contention most women saw their women workable only after they must have secured a child in marriage. To every extent the bonds of African traditional marriage contract were fastened and made to last most of the time after the first born. With the idea of childlessness hanging like the sword of Damocles over the welfare of women and some societal imposed stigmas few women went unmarried throughout their lives and therefore did come to enjoy and endure the joys and challenges that came and went with marriage.

²⁶

order of the time, came very sparingly but still satisfactory to most women since adultery and fornication were held as disdained societal ills. Once in marriage a woman became part and parcel of the family property entitled to a range of responsibilities not only to her husband but also to the close relatives of the husband especially her mother and sister in-laws where she performed her marriage internship.²⁷ With all of this surrounding and shaping the female lot in most pre-colonial African societies, marriage was elevated to the pinnacle of distinguished treasures and widowhood technically classed at the height of minions where only witches and wizards duel for almost all African women.²⁸ The extent to which widowhood constituted a real subject of scorn in ancient African societies with starling gender prejudice is seen when rights and responsibilities of the male and female folk is compared.

The Gender Paradox and Widowhood Passions Compared

The changes in the societal regard to women did not occur at the same time and so the passions of men, women or both in widowhood shared significant differences. In the West where most of the obscured contentions that sustained patriarchy have been cleared through an efficient legislative code with effective application on the field, widowhood depended for the most part on the whims and caprices of the individual. This situation is radically different with what was obtained in Africa until the arrival of alien rules and social patterns. The difference laid broadly on the idea, meaning and scope of what the whole notion of widowhood sought to explain or literary justified. This was more graphically and specifically entailing, on customary demands which failed to build the same systems of thoughts and expectations between men and women in widowhood. The gender paradox with regard to African widowhood passions emerges from the fact

²⁷ Marriage internship as used here was until recently a compelling exercised. It was usually here that the bride spent his early months or years in Marriage. In Kom which is our case study the young bride who were usually above 18years of age was expected to spend some good time with her mother or aunt in-law during which she will be fully introduced and integrated into the family circles. She was expected during that time to spend very close moments with the husband relatives and to do all in her power to please them to given that she was married to a family and not only to an individual. It was generally believed that it was during this time it was believed her trainer will drill her on all the techniques of housekeeping and a long range of domestic chores which also included satisfying her husband in bed. Unlike other cultures like those of the Bantus, Hausa and the Tutsi, the Kom custom attached very little room to sex education. It was very normal for a mother to discuss issues of menstruation and the implications surrounding it with the daughter but issues of sex were kept for the most part sacred. It was only during marriage that a young bride was permitted to discuss some minor details about this with her trainer for the marriage industry.

²⁸ Bobe Fancis Chia Ngam finds the African ancestral Worship which is the nucleus of African traditional religion to be responsible for this regard often given to Widows. According to him, all deaths especially that of young men is linked to some misfortune which was most of the time orchestrated by wives. He personality doubted the validity of this belief because of the often disregard accorded to Widows.

that most African societies do attach the death of most husbands on their wives.²⁹ True enough, the responsibilities and complications that come with Polygamy helped to wear down most African Men which eventually led to their death but this was never seen as any cause of death. Concretely, African men unlike those of the West were yoked by daunting responsibilities.

The Over sizing of Men's Worth and the Engineering of Widows Plight

Interestingly, local functional realities stand to contradict this sweeping generalization made about the potency of the Pre-colonial African woman. Rather, there is much of wealth yet to be unearthed about the genuine contributions of the ancient African women to the functioning of their societies and the telling effect this had on the practice of Widowhood. Most ancient African societies sustained themselves through some form of agriculture or farming. The large sizes of the families brought about situations where men could not sustained the entire family economy and its welfare alone. Women and children provided the required labour force in the farms and therefore salvaged their family harem with food and other items through trade in the batter system. Even at this, the role of a woman with the notable exceptions of some queen mothers that were deeply engaged on issues of traditional administration was still held by most societies to that of near sub humans. In this considerations in both matrilineal and patrilineal systems women were tactfully removed from any arrangement that had to do with property ownership especially land estates or other that entailed large capital title ship.

In these conservative confinements the labour proceeds of a woman in farm assigned to her by the husband or father naturally belonged first and foremost to the man who had the ultimate right to sell some or all of it. With everything connected to property ownership carefully kept away from the reach of the female folk most women had just their naked personality and good behaviour to factor as capital when going into marriage. With summarily nothing to use as bargain in marriage and with the man boasting of having raised a ransom to contract the marriage and to have erected structures for the homestead, the bargain of most African women in the marriage deals was by every standard very weak. This was the first thing that made the idea of widowhood a very sad ordeal to women. This was aggregately the lot that was befalling widowers in Africa but that of the Cameroon Grassfields where Kom is an integral part was gravely notorious.

The Notoriety of Widowhood in the Cameroon Grassfields Prior to Change

²⁹ This conception of most wives capable of killing their husbands that erroneously runs through the lexicon of most African societies stands contrary to traditional norms where it is known that the societal worth of a woman is measured on her husband.

The Cameroon Grassfields display a wealth of unique geographical and historical realities which makes its conception and regard to women in general and widowhood in particular unique as well. Prior to colonization which fired in an assembly of change to the traditional conception of life, this region was firmly a strong bastion where patriarchy operated at its best. With this, the regard due women ran in accordance with other African social and Political esteem but also exaggerated it take into consideration the fact that, women were almost generally treated in the same rank and file as property.

Once into marriage, most Grassfield Customs provided that the worth of a woman was measured, graduated and positioned in the family hierarchy by the husband who was traditionally held to own not only the physical property that constituted the marriage patrimony but also all the rights that came and went with it. This set a delicate precedence for women without a corresponding ordeal for men in widowhood. These delicate balances were all accentuated by the fact that traditional societies seemed to have left no codified customary structures and institutions that carter for the rights and responsibilities of men and women in widowhood. The absence of such codes kept the fate of those in widowhood to wander in absurdities most of them emerging from the humour of the successor or council of the in-laws. In spite of this, African traditions and values still kept some witty relevance for women in their marriage fiefdoms. This regard was the ownership of children. Motherhood boasted the position of women in their marital home and the absence of it relegated married women to the heights of mere minions.

Intrinsically, children brought forth in marriage unions possessed a worth which far exceeded that of the women in the marriage homes. Upon the death of the man, the treatment mated to the widow depended not only on the number of the children issuing from that marriage but equally on the content of their conduct generally deduced from their respect for societal values and others. In the realm, the marriage bands of a woman got firmer or strengthened when a new child is born. This contention makes the situation of married childless women very volatile in widowhood. These unfortunate set of women were those who bore the most humiliating and frustrating treatment upon the loss of their husbands. Childless Widows, no matter the source of their childlessness, were all treated with absconding hatred, scorn or wickedness in societies like Kom, Nso, Bafut, Bali and Bum to name but just a few. Substantially, Grassfield marriage customs built and provided conceptions that enabled them to view marriage almost entirely as a bed of roses thereby making the loss of a husband an entire period of nightmare. Logically, if a woman's worth was as per the accepted societal standard pegged on that of her husband, the death of that husband at any point of the marriage cycle implied the loss of that esteemed

identity altogether. This incidentally became the fate of Grassfield Women once they lost their husbands. Matters for the women's ordeal in Widowhood in the Grassfield were further complicated by the fact that, the death of every husband was, most of the time, seen to be directly or otherwise intricately connected to his wife or wives. Besides the many material and emotional opportunities that women stood to lose in Widowhood was also associated the problem of lack of respect and the stigma or having killed or contributed to it even remotely. With this, young and elderly widows, especially those that had cantankerous relations with their deceased husbands, went through a long list of accusation which, besides stigmatising them for crimes not for the most part committed, also brought on them untold suffering.

These societal biases on women pushed and placed them on a doubled ranged of phobia and scorn. The first was the one which came with the complete disappearance or submergence of her person and rights once into marriage and the second being the loss of both following the death of her Husband. Matters could have been a little better for Grassfield Widows like the case of Kom, Nso or Bali if tradition had it that the death of a husband literary meant the end of the marriage contract for both the male and female folk. In practice, the death of a spouse relegated the strings of the marriage contract to men to sometimes an issue of the past while the fate of women was traditionally decided in line with the property that formed the wealth of that marriage. Like will be seen later, Men were free to remarry as frequent and as fast as they deemed fit but it was almost seen as a taboo for a widower to see that as an option, let alone, attempt it. In the Cameroon Grassfield fondoms, this case was graphically accentuated in the Kom and the Weh Fondoms where it was normal for a brother of a deceased man to inherit all the brothers' property along with the widows that formed part of that patrimony. Where such situations prevailed, Widows were under such a deal obligated to accept as husbands the brothers of the deceased husband or any other person as decided by the family hierarchy without need for her consent. The harm emerging from this is not only the fact that the fate of tradition was left to condition the women filial outfit and internal fulfilment but also that, most of them were sometimes forced to abandon their marriage homes plus the farms they cultivated to relocate in any area of the family choices. To this should be added the fact that, the children of the deceased, were most of time, either poorly treated or abandoned to fend for their survival in the wider blues and this again only went a long way to aggravate their mothers' ordeal.

The perception of everything that had to do with human survival in almost every African society had a lot to do with environmental realities, cultural values and more importantly, the influence of African traditional religion that attached a very high premium

on ancestral worship. In this respect, widowhood practices differed significantly from society to the other but bore a semblance of unity in the fact that, widows from almost all societies were treated for the most part with absconding disdain. This disdained treatment almost went unnoticed until the encroachment of Christianity and Islam with their resultant colonisation that differed in scale between societies that were patrilineal or matrilineal.³⁰ Aside from the passionate and physical treasures that women stood to lose as widows should also be highlighted the societal demands that came with such misfortunes. These demands had a world of difference between the male and the female folks as well as between the cultures of the Northern and southern hemispheres. Since polygamy was the norm in Africa, widowers never really felt the stigma of widowhood as due women. A noticeable exception in this chain of female frustration in widowhood was the royal women who really did go through the long and complicated process of widowed women. With polygamy standing tall, the death of single man usually left a group of Women widowed while the death of a wife could mean the loss of one of the many wives not to say fortunate liberation from one huge responsibility for her husband.

In fact, widowhood for African men hardly exceeded the three days of the general mourning period where he was generally expected not to trim his hair or any pubic area as well as performed any public function that warranted people's attention. For women, widowhood was more of a new sad profession where they were treated with all rancour of guilty person. Widowhood among African women prior to the advent of change could last as long as the relatives of the deceased along with the societal humour tightly embedded in the cultural demands were prepared to keep them in that bondage. It is difficult to say with certainty how African Widows were dressed or dressed themselves in the early and later part of the pre-colonial period where the culture of clothing was not yet in fashion in Africa but sufficient evidence abound to attest that when once the wearing of clothes became a norm, widows were customarily bound to dress in a unique way most of the time they went on very dirty attire during widowhood³¹. Although the society expected the man to stay home and to put on sad clothing for a while, the performance of this rite depended only on the humour of the individual

³⁰All African traditional systems belong to one or both of the above mentioned concepts. Patrilineal societies are those societies that trace their ancestral origin to a male founder and as such accord an extensive allowance to the influence and power of male related issues while matrilineal societies are the contrary. As indicated most African societies operate in one or both of this.

³¹ A vivid picture of this evidenced has been documented by Confidence Chia in "Female Emancipation Count: A survey of Missionary influence on Women in the Kom Fondom" (paper published by Kaliao volume VI, 2013. This information was confirmed in great details by Theresia Mebenagha (present Queen Mother of the Kom Fondom) age 76. Interview at her residence at Sho Kom on 23rd of February 2017

especially the regards he had for deceased while she was still alive and the children there from. Upon the loss of husband, the widowed women did not only loose the prestige, protection, provision, love and care that were part of the marriage packets but were subjected to a number of elastic rituals that differed across cultures. In the Fondoms of the Grassfield plateau of the Cameroon Western highlands, Women, no matter their health conditions or social conditions, went through this entire ordeal. To this should be added the fact that the perception of widows in particular and widowhood in general was also hinged on the traditional customs that praised the practice of Polygamy and the ever-abiding contention that women were, at all times, created as property of the male folk. African widowhood passions, no matter the ordeal, were however, exposed to the syndrome of internal and external agents/factors of change.

The Change in Play and its Impact on African Pristine Widowhood Passions

The idea of change to or in African societies must not always been seen to have been alien. Change as used in this paper refers aggregately to the endogenous and exogenous factors that enabled African societies to divorce from their conservative ways of approaching their social, economic and political problems. However, this change was not engineered just for its sake. It was an assembly of factors working together to impose drastic reconsiderations of some repugnant customs that were deeply established in the African traditional psyche. Most of this change especially to the Grassfield Fondoms like Nso, Kom, Bafut, Bali, and Bum, came in the form of education, Christianity and other forms of legislation that regulated, not only marriage patterns, but also a broad range of issues intricately connected to property and its ownership. Two key elements are to be given full responsibility for the assembly of mutations that have encumbered African Widowhood practices. These are Christianity and colonialism.

Colonialism and Christianity and their Toll on Widowhood Passions

In order to cultivate habits and a worldview in the African folk that could keep them within the frame and understanding of the whole purpose of the colonial enterprise, the colonial government worked with the Christian missions to launch a long range of educational and training programmes to the natives within their spheres of influence. This greatly helped both in the understanding, incubating and extension of new ways of self-worth and approaches to the traditional African folk along with their profound conception of marriage, family and the women or children therein. Indeed, the colonial government did not just institute formal education but also created avenues of awareness to the native folk which informed and shaped their regard to humanity as a whole. In substance, the curriculum of the colonizer was designed to train natives in various

forms of administrative functions especially those that fell beneath the standards of their comfort but this could not be done without identifying and trying to erase some of the practices which in their sense stood on the part of justice or progress. The colonizers' mission as far as Female potency and other issues of transformation were concerned, worked hand in glove with the Christian missions who were mainly the architects of everything that had to do with school and changing marriage patterns. Christianity as buttressed by the different denominations in Africa differed among the different colonizers at some points but had almost the same approach to patriarchy, notably: the treatment of women. These two groups of change agents had slightly diverging conceptions in the practice of polygamy and again in the way customary laws seemed to class women, goods or property within the same realm. In spite of such diverging views, both were prepared to erase, or at best, moderate some of the obnoxious African practices that did not concur with their values or their administrative machinery.

Colonial administration and Widowhood Topography

The colonial period that lasted roughly from 1884-1967 for Cameroon was therefore a period where Europeans in Africa were grappling with the issue of providing a worldview to the Africans that reflected their values, mores and customs. This alone gave them that allowances to consider the emancipation of the woman as a worthy undertaking. In this respect many attempts were made through the avalanche of fissures created by education, moralization and training to prepare the African for a new dawn where women were to be hired into all circles including even that of decision-making and property-ownership. These developments created a new sense of awareness both to the women and the male folk and enabled them to begin questioning some of the repugnant rites, rights and responsibilities that came with Widowhood in Africa prior to the percolation of these forces of change. In all, these forces fought hard to ignite a new way of passion and to raise overwhelmingly questions as to the functional relevance of widowhood due African women and the ordeal that came with it. The colonial administration found most of the widowhood practices like keeping the Widow dirty for long periods, restraining them from any self-sustaining activity as well as transferring them to any other family member as awkward. With this, societal demands on women were forced to shift its emphasis in consonance to this alien demands.

Another colonial development that significantly touched the fabric of African widowhood practice were the plantations and the communication network that came with it. The colonial enterprise in Cameroon invested in some palm, rubber, banana and cocoa plantations. Though these plantations were overwhelmingly found in the coastal and Southern

regions of the country, the workforce that constituted the nerve wire of their existence majored from the Grassfield. The effect of this on gender equation which had a telling effect on widowhood was that the plantation workers got exposed to new cultures that upheld more relaxed postures on widowhood practices. To this should also be added the fact that some of them learned to receive command from the plantation administration which together with intertribal and cultural marriages some sort of weakened the blind submission to traditional tenets that belaboured the women with exceeding responsibilities. The obligations imposed on the colonizers to extend their administration far inland by the Berlin 1884-5, burdened them with the responsibilities of improving the road and railways. The resultant consequent was the development of towns which also resulted to a high degree of rural-urban migration. The development of towns also provided opportunities where singles or widows could fend for survival in petit businesses or other domestic chores. With such opportunities accruing from both ends, even uneducated women started snubbing some widowhood rights and practices since it was increasingly becoming clear that they could be other forms of survival for a woman other than that of marriage together with the enticing opportunities offered by Christianity.

Christianity and its shaping of Widowhood Passions

In the Cameroons, Christianity and the changing economic situation encouraged Women to engage in self-sustaining activities that yielded in them a great amount of self-worth. Education as upheld both by Christianity enterprise in the Grassfields of Cameroon gave women the chance to school, placed them in the threshold of gaining access to do apprenticeships in trades of different kinds and professions as well as, the mind-set to understand that family responsibilities were not a pure reserve for the male folk. This alone began to indicate to that African community that possibilities were emerging where and within which, a woman's capital in marriage technical could be raised beyond that of child bearing and kitchen expertise and placed within the realm where they could play the role of veritable partners in the marriage arrangements. This gave most of the African female folk witty respect once in marriage. Christian teachings and knowledge gained from education plus the legal codes that offered considerable space for female potency formed the basis for the rapid decay of widows and widower's plight in most African societies and this grew with ravaging tonic under and through Christianity and its tenets.

Mutation of Widowhood Passions in the Grassfields under the Christian Tenet

Concretely, the influence of the fantasies and some sort of treasures displayed by women who attended school together with those who for various reasons were shuttling between the coastal regions where plantation social culture was enormous especially

in places like Mamfe, Kumba Bamenda, Bali and Kom. This began to make this class of women to stand for a class of people apart and for various reasons considered themselves to be firmly tied to the apron strings of hierarchy that stood far above traditional responsibilities. In all they attempted to seek for various means to disregard tradition especially issues of gender biases that was envougue. These are the conditions through and under which customary tenets began lifting the position of women and that of widows to some heights of dignified persons.³² All of this gave women extensive elegance and or prestige.

More than anything else, Christianity created a society for women apart. The missionaries through their messages of love placed marriage responsibilities and the property at parity for both sexes though they still literally attempted to press on the idea that the husband remained the head of every family as prescribed by the scriptures. Though it was difficult in such society for a woman to completely cast down every traditional belief that ran contrary to customs and belief, the church had exciting programmes that lured the attention of many. Those women who succeeded to tear down the whirlpool of traditional prejudice by abandoning these practices also abandoned their marriage fiefs and found liberty under the church where the ordeal of widowhood was almost nil.³³ Unlike the African customary perception of marriage which held that marriage was an issue of two broad families and even societies with possibilities of continuation to any family line for a woman, Christianity joined the colonial administration to push through the idea that marriage responsibilities for both spouses remained valid until as they often put it ‘‘ till death do them part. This conception was sustained by the fact that they held marriage to be above everything else, a union of two responsible persons. In this thinking, Christianity fought hard to make the native folk to accept and keep alive the fact that, the marriage contract between the concerned spouses became null and void following the death of one. With such new trends working together to produce serious fault lines on the bed rock of patriarchy, Christian women imposed a new way of widowhood practices on their fellow convert and this virtually graduated them

³²In an interview with NawainNjanggeh Ca.85 years in KichuhKom on June 13 ,2017, she did not only confirmed but also added revealing details about these symbols/agents that gradually uplifted the female status in Kom. It should be noted that this women is a shining example of those women who even without any level of education or Christianity that gave women grandiose prestige decided to be challenging male segregation and domination to his face. She never got married but lived her life with absconding impunity in the way she conducted her social business.

³³We had lots of fine details for Kom, NKambe and Nso in our focused group discussion with Paul Nchoji, Nkwi, AnthonyNdi, and Joseph Nkwi aged averagely 78 years all lecturers of the Catholic University of Bamenda. The first two are renowned professor from Kom and Nkambe with extensive publication on Female potency in the Grassfields in Anthropology and History while the third is a former member of parliament and a graduate from Oxford. All of them are devout Christians of the Catholic Church. Interview on September 30th 2016.

from the entire ordeal engineered by traditional widowhood systems.

With many opportunities within the bosom of change factors availing themselves for women especially those linked to the money economy that gave them power, the esteem that women had for marriage during the pre-colonial era dwindled enormously. With this came the frequency of divorce and the idea of single parenthood since women were gradually coming to understand that there were other forms, avenues and opportunities of happiness other than within the marriage fiefs. As said, the church or Christianity in the grassfields above all else, provided very enticing and entertaining programmes where women passions were glued. The church through its handicraft projects and domestic science instructions gave women the opportunities to indulge in a multitude of self-sustaining income generating programmes that immensely ignited in them renewed forms of worth. All of this worked together and were grossly factored into their perception both of marriage and widowhood. To this should also be added the fact that, African women like those of the Kom kingdom came to learn and to regard singlehood especially that which was engineered by faith and servitude in God as distinguished calling.³⁴ With regards to divorce and polygamy which formed the basis of widowhood ordeal in Africa prior to change, Christianity and the colonial legal standing shared diametrically different views. Legal codes saw divorce to be very normal as far as the established legal proceedings were respected. This was an issue which were rightly held to be satanic and as such condemned by Christianity in all its forms. However, both Christianity had differences in approach to traditional norms but their juxtaposed positions recorded tremendous strides on female emancipation and widowhood in particular.

Christianity and Colonial Administrative Policies Juxtaposed

As for polygamy, the colonizers saw that to be very normal especially that of royal notables who were bestowed with the duty of tax collection and pacification. Christianity on its part condemned polygamy. It therefore means that both the colonial project and the agents of Christianity anchored views about women and marriage that were contradictory to established traditional customs. As indicated earlier, Polygamy formed the crux of patriarchy that sustained the traditional economy of pre-colonial African societies and any attempt to dam its existence was going to meet with stiff resistance from the natives who had overwhelmingly found that to be sacrosanct and rooted on unchallenged reasoning. In the Cameroons

³⁴Emmanuel Chia Ngam ‘‘ The Kom Women in Retrospect. A recapitulation of the Kom Women in Catholicism’’ Unpublished paper delivered during the Bello Women’s Women Day Celebration 2006. p.7.

the colonial agents did not detest or even asked for the abolition of polygamy at any point in time during the colonial era but the forms of awareness that were created buttressing the potency of women along with the feeling that women were free to ask for divorce along with their attempts to stop some obnoxious rites that undermined widows' happiness kept them at odds with the traditional authorities and their following. This, in itself, contributed to reducing the widow's plight in tune with the general female emancipation agenda. As said, the Christian missions had their fair share of troubles during the colonial era with the traditional authorities and the African native most of them emerging from the treatment of women or their welfare in the traditional economy. Top among this problem was that their refusal to recognize traditionally contracted marriages and the open castigation of polygamy. This produced a double faced problem- that women sought to abandon their polygamous home to seek refuge under the auspices of the church-that the liberation messages offered and the opportunities created by the Christian groups made the women a little unstable in their marriage homes and more so,-that Christianity was so ready to tolerate Widows to freely remarry if they found the wish to do so. The fact too that Christians were trying to make the native folk to understand that family property was jointly owned and that the right to dispose of it was equally shared between husbands and wives did not argue well in the African traditional psyche and this continued to stir further discrepancies between the tradition and church.

All of these developments were reinforced by the emergence of the Market economy wherewith, women got involved in a multitude of trading activities that provided them with money to handle some of their basic needs.³⁵ The accruing possibilities of needs fulfilment initiated a new sense of self-worth and began to remove women from a world where the men were soul and material providers and placed them on a new paradigm where wealth and comfort reigned supreme. This only went a long way to tilt or reduce their dependence on the male folk. With regards to Widowhood, widows, as a result of some new avenues of survival, began to abandon some of their assignments more so because the modern Law and the Church stood in their favour.

It is therefore evident from the foregoing that colonization opened the flood gates for any idea that had to do with female potency to flower and blossom. However, African patriarchy was so firmly established so much that either Christianity or the colonial government could not scale it off from practice with one broad sweep or at a time as short as the colonial period. As far as widowhood and female emancipation

was concerned, the agents of change can be rightly described to have barely scratched the surface. It was during the post -colonial era that significant steps were taken along with the assembly of change factors to scrap most obscure practices that were connected to the female welfare away.

Female Potency and Widowhood Passions in the Post -Colonial Era

The crumbling of colonization in Africa after the Second World War did not mean the end of those practices, agents and structures that were involved in the female emancipation business during the colonial era.³⁶ Rather it ensured the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, which together with the UN which was created in 1945 made frank resolutions against all forms of discrimination thereby reinforcing the job done during the colonial era by the colonial government and the Christian missions held by this paper as the cardinal elements of change. As the wind of change was blowing over Africa bringing about the birth of new nations across all the sectors of political and social life, it was generally accepted that the fundamental issues buttressing all forms of discrimination notably the rights of Women and other groups that were segregated against should be made a preamble of each and every constitution of the emerging new nations. To this should be added the problem of property ownership and marriage rights and responsibilities which by this time were still essentially a male affair.³⁷ The Nigerian, Kenya, Cameroon and Senegal constitutions and civil codes extensively carried these ideals in their preambles. As a matter of policy, most constitutions struggled to create allowances in their text that had to handle not only issues of female potency but went further to spell out the problem of property ownership and its disposition at any time.³⁸ With this, Widows were categorized under the broad social groupings whose identity was patently emasculated by male patriarchy.

In Cameroon matters of this kind of social order were regulated by a consortium of customary, common and civil law codes. Key matters in this realm that had telling effects on widowhood passions were gender and property ownership dichotomy, bride price, inheritance and any other thing that had to do with social relations. As for southern/English Cameroon such matters failed

³⁶ Lips,H. *Women ,Men and Power*(Mountain View, CA May Fields,1990).p.13. Also see G Mutangadura, *Women and Land Tenure Rights in Southern Africa; A human Right Based Approach*(London: Church House Westminster,2004).p.34.

³⁷ P.Kameri,Mbote,*The Land has its Owners: Gender Issues in Land Tenure under Customary Law in Kenya.* (IELRC: Switzerland,2005), p.45.

³⁸ Guyer J. I. *Family and farm in Southern Cameroon* (Boston:MA,African Study Center,Boston University ,1984)pp.15-16. Also read similar details about the influence of the new independence government on Female potency in Fonjong I, et all in *Land Tenure Practices and Womens Rights to Land: Implication to for Access to Natural Resource in Anglophone Cameroon*,(IDRC,Research Brief No 1.,2011.)

³⁵E.Boserup,E. *The Role of Women in Economic Development*(New York St Martin's Press)

within the ambits of section 27 of the southern Cameroon High court law, 1955 and section 18 of native Law ordinance of cap 142 of the 1948 Laws of Nigeria. The first and second article of section 27 dismisses several nuances when it states graphically that:

The high court shall observe and enforce the observance of every native law and custom which is not repugnant to natural justice, equity and good conscience or incompatible with any other law for the time being in any force and nothing in this law deprive any person of the benefit of any of any such laws and customs. ...such native laws and customs shall be deemed applicable in cases and matters where the parties thereto are natives and also in causes and matters between non-natives where it may appear to the court that substantial injustices would be done to either party by a strict adherence to the rules of English Law.³⁹

These ordinances literary sought to end the long and almost endless tug-of-war between customary and postcolonial legal traditions that were inspired both by the civil and the common law codes. This notwithstanding, the application of the Law on the ground variedly violated established principles and sense of good conscience and justice thereby, still making the whole issue of female emancipation a dream bargain for the most part.

However, the wide spread practice of leverage along with the customary obligations that virtually kept women under house arrest following the death of their husband motivated the erecting of ordinances both within the civil and the common law to address the situation. This was addressed by article 77 sub 1 of the Civil registration ordinance of 1881 which amongst other things made it unequivocally clear that the death of woman's' husbands automatically dissolves the marriage, ends the relationship and any other relationship that was directly or indirectly tied to it. Indeed, the following article 77 sub 2 went further to state that;

in the event of the death of husband his heir shall have no right over the widow or over her freedom or the share of property belonging to her. She may, provided that she observes the period of widowhood of 180 days from the day of the death of her husband freely remarry without anyone laying claim to whatever compensation or material benefit for dowry or otherwise

received either at the time of engagement during or after marriage.⁴⁰

To a very large extent such telling legal pronouncements had a multiple effect on widows if this kind of preaching found space to flower and blossom with the African psyche. The same could apply if the female natives did not only know about their existence but were also willing to apply them in time and circumstances. Among other things these articles sought to make sure that upon the death of any traditional African Husband, she was no longer going to be tied to the endless strings of been given out like any other property to her late husband relatives. It admittedly also meant that the mourning period which in the pre-colonial and colonial depended mostly on the humour of her in-laws was carefully defined and reduced to six months where the woman was given the latitude to remarry without need for any compensation like the refund of bride price as prescribed by native customs. It also literary gave women the right to remarry and to dispense of her husband property without need for the prior consent of any other person.

The unfortunate thing about these sound legal traditions that were intended to address the plight of Grassfield women is the fact that most of these found it absurd to address issues of their plight in the Law courts. With these conceptions a lot of practices that were repugnant to good conscience and others that continued to frustrate widows 'emancipation drive simply went unpunished or unattended to.

The post-colonial legal provision though at odds with some of the deeply entrenched traditional mores and custom got itself sustained by Christian teachings, education and other forms of awareness that strove to end some of the obnoxious practices that undermined the rights of Women. In the Cameroon Grassfields even as far late as 2014, so many human right groups were still in the firm battle for the battement of widowhood passions in Cameroon, Africa and the world at large.

Conclusion

African Widowhood passions and its topography in time and space constitute a crucially topical element of African traditional practices that is still wrought with very intriguing but quite interesting and revealing contradictions. The induced prejudices endured by women in this perilous condition are tightly contrasted by the symbolic sojourn by the male folk in it. As evidenced in our discussion across the broad spectrum of social and academic yards within the

³⁹The Details are carried on in the Decorum of the 1955 Southern Cameroon High Court Rules and standing Order which was intrinsically inspired by the Nigeria Common laws. See especially section 27 sub 1 and 2.

⁴⁰ See the 1981 civil registration ordinance article 77 sub 1 and 2. This has been religiously quoted by Vera N. Ngassa ' ' exploring Womens' Rights within the Cameroon Legal System: Where Do customary practices of Bride Price Fit In?' ' in Lotsmart N.Fonjong (ed) *Issues of Women's Land Rights in Cameroon* (Bamenda: Langaa Research and Publishing Common Initiative Group,2012).p.75.

present discourse of sustainable development the understanding and progress of widowhood thus far, provides clues to policy design as well as governmental power and resource redistribution. Widowhood local and international importance and replication sums up to argue that studies on or surrounding the travails of males and females in this accidental life contraption provides cross-cutting knowledge useful to all the faculties of knowledge most especially the social sciences and humanities. Agreeably, this paper has tapped from the treasures of research to provide some interesting refreshing and newer insight in the broad landscape of female emancipation topography using the Grassfields of Cameroon to elucidate its contentions. By so doing, it has fertilized the current scholarly efforts geared towards understanding general and specific trends in the welfare of women with the southern hemisphere. However, we make no claim of having fully exploited every other detail worth knowing and exposing within the bosom of widowhood. It has judged, examined and built up the facts and figures only from its own research standpoints hoping this will provide an anchorage and starting point for other scientists across the board.

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Interviews

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Bobefancis Chia Ngam

Joseph Nkwi aged 78 years, lecturer, Catholic University of Bamenda. Interviewed on 30th September 2016.

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Nawain Njanggeh, age Ca.85 years, interviewed at Kichuh Kom on June 13 ,2017

Paul Nchoji, Nkwi, aged 78 years, lecturer, Catholic University of Bamenda. Interviewed on 30th September 2016.

Theresia Mebenagha (present Queen Mother of the Kom Fondom) age 76. Interviewed at Sho Kom on 23rd February 2017