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## **THE ORIGIN, EVOLUTION AND CHANGING PERSPECTIVES OF WIDOWHOOD IN THE BAMENDA GRASSFIELDS OF CAMEROON SINCE THE PRECOLONIAL PERIOD**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examined the practice of widowhood in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon since the pre-colonial period. Every society struggling to deal with women who lost their husbands ended up with some norms for widows during widowhood. This was done through the developing of rules which were very often reactions to past and common experiences. The rules often sought to deal with the people's fears, loves, hopes and aspirations. However, widowhood eventually lost its original reasons and increasingly became a problem in most if not all African societies. The objective of this work has been to trace the original reasons for the practice of widowhood rites and how they evolved and experienced change in some selected communities of the Bamenda Grassfields. It is also to explain the culture of widowhood in the Bamenda Grassfields so that such an understanding could guide researchers in the search for solutions to the widowhood practices. Following a historical research guided by a questionnaire, both primary and secondary sources were consulted. Oral interviews were conducted with resourceful individuals and a selected group of widows in the study locale. The analysis of the data collected*

*led to the conclusion that the practice of widowhood in this area evolved with different historical moments and circumstances and has come to toe the line with feminism and contemporary laws.*

### **Keywords**

Widowhood, Rites, Culture, Bamenda Grass fields, Evolution, Change.

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## **1. Introduction**

In the culture of the traditional Bamenda Grassfields births, marriages and death ceremonies were important moments when people celebrated or mourned the departure of their loved ones. Death came along with a lot of sorrow and pain because it took a long time to forget about the loss of a loved one. It entailed the performance of burial and mourning rites. It became worse when a spouse died leaving behind a widow or a widower. In African traditional societies, widows and widowers were supposed to undergo cultural rights during widowhood. Unfortunately, widowhood eventually became worse for widows. It posed moral issues which came along with physical, psychological and social complications. This paper will concentrate on the experience of widowhood which was a practice in which the widow was made to undergo rites which were supposed to prepare her for a new phase of life without her husband.

Although widowhood constitutes an intrinsic part of the history of women and culture of the Bamenda people, its history has been highly neglected. Research in the area of widowhood has been focused mostly on the conditions of widows and their struggle for gender balance. This paper will buttress the view that widowhood was originally instituted in the traditional Bamenda Grassfields for the good of widows. It will reiterate the demeaning and abusive nature of widowhood on womanhood. It will begin by explaining the original practice of widowhood and how it has evolved since the pre-colonial period. It will cast a searchlight on the original reasons for widowhood practices. Those reasons may facilitate the understanding of the change in perspectives and serve as the basis for criticism and solutions to the problem. It is on the basis of this spectrum that the central argument of this paper suggests that widowhood practices in the Bamenda Grassfields have undergone significant changes. This result is drawn from our analysis of our selected cases in this locale.

The collection of data for this study required the use of both primary and secondary sources. The historical method of investigation has been applied to trace, narrate, describe and analyse the importance of widowhood institutions in the Bamenda Grassfields. Primary sources

included archival materials as well as interviews while secondary sources included published and unpublished materials.

## **2. Historical and Cultural Context**

During the pre-colonial period in the Bamenda Grassfields, the people's behavior was shaped by their traditions and customs. The Bamenda Grassfields currently known as the North West Region was noticed by various explorers especially the Germans. They described this part of Cameroon as the Grassfields or Grasslands based on its rich savannah vegetation. The administrative names of this region and its different political districts have undergone several changes since the colonial period. It was called Bamenda Division in 1916, Bamenda province from 1949, the North-West Province from 1972 (Monteh, 2004) and the North-West Region from 2008. This area under our study has two seasons<sup>1</sup>; the rainy and the dry seasons. The Bamenda Grassfields have low temperatures. This becomes problematic to widows given that they were forced to stay half naked during the period when they undergo widowhood rites.

Historically, the Bamenda Grassfields is a conglomerate of varying ethnic groups of varying dimensions. It is composed of three main groups which claim diverse origins, namely the Tikar, the Widekum and the Chamba. Before the advent of colonialism the Bamenda people knew an almighty God whom they worshipped. It defined the real identity of the people of the Bamenda Grassfields. Traditional religion therefore contributed in designing their world view and as such guided their actions (Burckardt, 1992).

Before dealing with the situation of women *vis-à-vis* widowhood in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon, it is necessary to discuss briefly the position of women in the Bamenda Grassfields. As Concerns the status of the woman here, it is proper to speak of the complementary roles which African societies expected of gender in order to serve the greater purpose of enhancing society's effectiveness. However, women were always playing these roles from the background and within the authority of men. In the area of religious services, women were never left behind or relegated to a subordinate position. They also fulfilled their obligations as intermediaries between their people and the spirit world (Mbuy, 1992).

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<sup>1</sup>R.A.B., File No NW/Saled. 2008/54/BK, North West Women's Empowerment Forum, 2008.

The traditional status of a Cameroonian woman was primarily that of a wife and mother. This meant that she was largely defined by her relationship to other people. Her worth was based on marriage and children and not on her personal capacities. Upon marriage, the ownership over women was transferred from their fathers to their husbands once the bride price was paid. The culture did not allow wives to inherit any property including land neither from their fathers nor from their husbands. In the African context, women got married into a man's family and not only to their husbands who meant that wives owed respect to all the members of their husband's family. Since the majority of the communities were patrilineal the wives had to leave their families to stay in their husbands' homes. (Odudoye, 1986). In such patriarchal societies boys were much more important and treasured than girls. This was because boys were needed to continue the lineage (Nguh, 1992). Barrenness was believed to be contagious and one of the greatest curses or misfortunes on women. Before a woman became a widow she had to be married through the payment of her bride price by her would be husband. This was the situation in which widowhood amongst other cultural practices prevailed (Miles, 2003).

### **3. Widowhood during the Pre-colonial Period**

The origin of widowhood can be traced as far back as the settlement of the different groups that made up the Bamenda Grassfields. The widowhood institution was managed and controlled by women, especially female relatives and older widows of a husband's family. Widowhood has generally been referred to as a barbaric practice. A true knowledge of the characteristics of widowhood in pre-colonial times would question the claim of barbarism from its origins. Widowhood was originally a reaction to social problems. It is important to note that widowhood rituals, though seen today as an infringement on women's rights were backed up and upheld by cultural legitimacy and customary laws.<sup>2</sup> It was a search for psychological cures to the problem of grieving and the survival of the women who lost their husbands. With the passage of time, widowhood became abusive and overbearing as men and women misused the rite of widowhood. Many traditions had the tendency to misuse the mores that were originally meant to be good for society (Burckardt, 1992). Therefore the reasons for widowhood cannot be judge from the standpoint of the present day with all its social, economic and political complexities.

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<sup>2</sup>Customary laws were unwritten *laws* that governed traditional societies and differed from one community to the other. They evolve retaining what is good and rejecting what is no longer useful.

In the Bamenda Grassfields, when a man died, culture demanded that the widow undertook certain mourning rituals before, during and after the burial of her spouse. Traditional religion permeated the practice of widowhood amongst the Tikars, Chambas and the Widekum people. Widowhood rites were seen as religious and cleansing rites performed to meet the metaphysical needs of the traditional Bamenda people. Widows believed that rituals performed during and after the deaths of their husbands were simply religious rules that had to be respected (Zahan, 1970). It was only after these rites that a widow could mingle freely with other people otherwise she would grow mad.

Widowhood rites during this period were carried out to preserve the widow's dignity and protect her spiritually and physically. Hence, most of these rites were done to please the widow; give her a sense of physical and psychological security in the absence of her husband. Widowhood rites were simply seen as passage rites from the marital status to the widowhood status.<sup>3</sup>

When a man died his wife immediately became a widow. She stripped herself naked and wailed. Her sister-in-laws brought a piece of sack cloth to replace the widow's waist piece. She was rubbed with wood ash. In some cases the widow was simply dressed with banana leaves tied around her waist. The widow was expected throughout the mourning period, to cry and wail early in the morning. She recounted to the hearing of the entire village how much her husband useful to her. In some areas like Kom, Bafut and Metta, this was repeated in the evening. This way, she could appease her husband's spirit which was believed to still be around his home. This was a sign that she loved her husband. It was also believed that the frequent wailing of the widow was the best way to demonstrate that the widow had not caused her husband's death. The perception was that a wailing widow also underwent a psychological process of grieving and intense healing. The widow sometimes accompanied by their children rubbed wood ash on their faces and heads to express deep sorrow (Tati, 2011).

Widows took oaths or swore that they were not guilty of their husbands' death. Whenever a man died his wife was presumed to be the first suspect not because women were fundamentally killers but because a wife was the closest person to her husband. In the case of polygamous marriages, the widows of a dead husband were supposed to swear on the husband's corpse to

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<sup>3</sup> W. E. Hunt, Bali assessment Report, Cameroons Province, file no. 4929, N. A. B., 1925.

prove their innocence in the death. In polygamous marriages wives generally felt obliged to compete in order to win their husband's love and attention. This created an atmosphere of jealousy and hatred which sometimes culminated in the murder of the man by one or more of his wives (Tchinda, 2005).

A widow had to sit by her husband's corpse until it was buried. When the corpse was laid in the grave, the widow usually made her last declaration, stating that she was innocent of her husband's death. In some tribes, the widows (and women in general) were not allowed to be at the graveside to witness the burial of their husbands. In some tribes like Baforchu and Batibo a widow had to visit her husband's grave every night for nine days. This, according to traditional belief was meant to send off the spirit of the deceased to the spirit world. By the ninth day, the man's spirit was presumed to have left the earth for the spirit world.

During the funeral of a husband among the Tikars and the Widikums, widows were confined in a room and closely watched over by older widows who were relatives of the deceased. This was different in some Chamba tribes like Bali Nyongha where the widows in confinement were watched over by their husbands' female kins. The widow either sat or slept on the bare floor, banana leaves or on a raffia or bamboo mat and was prohibited from bathing (Lawyer, 2005). It was believed that failure to bathe; the woman would look dirty, unkempt and unattractive to the spirit of her late husband. The unattractiveness of the widow was perceived as the best way to discourage her late husband's spirit from coming back to defile the grieving widow spiritually or sexually. Widows were served food in broken clay dishes, calabashes or on leaves. In precolonial Bamenda, every husband ate from well-made clay dishes or raffia woven dishes. It was believed that the late man's spirit would not share food with the widow since he could not eat from broken dishes or leaves.

The cleansing or bathing rituals followed the funeral ceremonies. After those ceremonies, the widow was taken to a stream in the night or very early in the morning and given a ritual bath. The hair on her head, armpits and genital areas was shaved. This action was presumed to cleanse the widow spiritually of all the misfortune and impurity brought upon her by her husband's death. All the items including the dress and utensils she used during this first stage of mourning were gathered and burnt or destroyed. It was believed that this completely disentangled the widow from her late husband's spirit and avoids ill luck on her and children (Watio, 1994). Although this action closed the official mourning period of eight or nine days, the widow

continued to stay indoors and mourn her husband for at least three months. This was the preparatory phase for her inheritance by her husband's kin.

During the inheritance ceremony, the kins of the deceased husband who were interested in inheriting the widow brought sleeping mats for the widow and left them in the courtyard. The widow was given the opportunity to choose the man she wanted to inherit her by sitting on the mat of the man she loved. Very often, she chose the mat from her late husband's brother. The rush of the husband's kinsmen to inherit a widow was largely determined by her ability to produce and reproduce (Stockle, 1994). In many of those cases the widow chose the brother who was close to their couple while the late husband was still alive.

Wife inheritance or levirate marriages were done with the intention of preserving the dignity of the widow. The widow needed to remarry to regain her respect in the society as a wife. In some tribes within the Tikar group, she was supposed to be remarried (in the absence of a son) to the late husband's brother. The widow belonged legally to her husband's family and found it normal staying with her husband's people. It was also supposed to provide the widow and her children paternal protection. Widows could not inherit land which generally belonged to the man's family. They could only gain access to land if they bore sons during their marriage to their deceased husbands.<sup>4</sup>

#### **4. Evolution of Widowhood during the Colonial Period**

Each culture evolves and has a tendency to retain what is useful to the society and can gradually let go what is no longer useful. The Bamenda Grassfields lived under the German and British colonial rule between 1884 and 1961 (Nyamndi, 2007). Christianity was introduced in the Bamenda Grassfields in 1903 with the arrival of the Basel missionaries. The Catholics followed in 1912 and the Baptists arrived in 1924 (Lawyer, 2011).

Widowhood during the colonial period was influenced by some internal and external events or practices. These included colonial rule, Christianity, Islam, the First and Second World Wars, the monetary economy and formal education. This evolution and change were generally referred to as modernization. However, when a woman lost her husband during this period, she was treated in such a way that cast suspicion on her for the death of her husband.

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<sup>4</sup> Land ownership during this period was left in the hands of family heads who got land through the Chiefs or *fons* See Hunt, Assessment Report.

On the one hand, Christianity preached firmly against wife inheritance and levirate marriages. In addition to the rejection of such marriages, the Catholic and the Baptist churches preached against polygamy. Christian converts were forbidden to indulge in the sinful acts of levirate and polygamous marriages. According to Christianity, marriage ended at the death of one of the spouses and the widow (or widower) was free to get married to another man (or woman). Christianity gradually affected the marriage institution and eventually affected widowhood. Christians could be married to only one wife and in the case of a husband's death; the wife had to mourn according to Christian doctrine. In 1926 in Kom, for example, widows sought refuge in Catholic mission compounds where they were prepared by missionaries for remarriage to men of their choices. This was done with the support of the colonial administration (Tohmuntain, 2002).

On the other hand, the Islamic religion tolerated polygamy allowing for up to four wives. Islamic laws were against widow inheritance and levirate. As a result, Muslim female converts avoided widowhood inheritance and levirate. Nevertheless, according to the Holy Koran, when a man died, the widow was expected to go through the widowhood period of one hundred and thirty (130) days. At the end of the widowhood purification, there was a big celebration because *Allah* has promised madness to any widow who will violate the law. This process was reinforced by the fear of Allah (Nkuyu, 2005). Moslem widows were free after this initial mourning period to get married to any other man of their choice. Moslem widows had a right to the inheritance of half of their husband's property. Half of such property went to the children of the late husband. Such widows were no longer treated like part of their husband's property as was the case before Islam came to the Bamenda Grassfields (Tati, 2011)

In addition, colonialism ushered in new colonial administrative laws (some aspects of the Cameroon Law of England) which acknowledged that death terminated marriage. The laws also gave women the right to inherit their husband's property and remain in their husband's homes without remarrying any of the husbands' relatives. This was contrary to the customary laws which only gave widows the right to farm on their husbands' landed property if they remained under the control of their late husbands' family.<sup>5</sup>

The introduction of formal educational affected the people of the Bamenda Grassfields

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<sup>5</sup> N. A. Y, APA 10559/J Missions : Enseignement, Collaboration avec l' Administration [Missions: Teaching and Collaboration with the Administration], 1930-1937, pp. 6-7.

directly and indirectly. They saw widow inheritance and levirate as incestuous, uncomfortable and outdated. Western educated wives who eventually picked up jobs with the colonial government could no longer put in all the time needed for widowhood rites when they became widows. Traditions gradually changed, allowing for widowhood rites to be conducted summarily so that widows could get back to their jobs early. Social norms were adjusting themselves to new realities.

The creation of plantations during the German colonial period (1884- 1918) in Cameroon influenced the institution of widowhood in the Bamenda Grassfields. During the German annexation of Cameroon, plantations were soon established in the tribal territories of the Mboko and Bakweri people near mount Cameroon. The migration of people from the Bamenda Grassfields to the coastal regions to work as labourers in cash crop plantations had a great effect on the institution of widowhood. With money earned from their work in the plantations, some of the prosperous persons acquired land, settled with their families in the coastal regions. There was no longer an absolute necessity for such men to inherit their brothers' property and/or wives. Widowhood rights underwent more scrutiny and more questioning (Matute, 1990). Indigenes that migrated to urban centres usually abandoned most of their cultural practices and become assimilated to city life where they were bound by the laws of the state. Wives who followed their husbands to the coastal region and cities and settled there did not spend a long time in their villages of origin when they lost their husbands. (Tekwe, 1997).

Nocturnal widowhood was adopted by the local population during the colonial period to avoid the constraints put in place by the colonial authorities and Christian missionaries. It was believed in the local traditional religion that the respect of widowhood rites was absolutely necessary. This was because widowhood protected not only the widow, but also the spirit of the dead and the whole community. In order to succeed in their fight against widowhood rites, missionaries decided to coordinate Christian funerals until burials were done. The indigenes also adjusted to this by letting widowhood rites start immediately following the departure of the missionaries who had attended the burial. This was again noticed by the missionaries who started burying their Christians in church cemeteries. With all these measures taken by the colonial authorities and Christian missionaries, widowhood practice was rendered difficult and consequently declined in the Grassfields area of Cameroon (Myazhion, 2001).

Cultural imperialism also placed Africans in general and the Bamenda people in particular in a state of dilemma which resulted in syncretism. They were never ready to abandon the widowhood practice even though they had accepted Christianity. Most Western educated elites still practiced widowhood to free themselves from the psychological trappings of their traditional beliefs. Some educated women remained completely attached to their culture and people. Such educated women were convinced that refusal to observe widowhood rites would have them psychologically ostracized or estrange them from their people. Although the missionaries and colonial administrators saw African customs and traditions as wild and barbaric, most Bamenda indigenes were still convinced that the abandonment of widowhood rites would be a form of treason against their ancestors (Watio, 1994).

## **5. Widowhood in the Post-Colonial Period**

Colonial rule came to an end when the British Southern Cameroons gained independence on 1 October 1961 through reunification with the francophone Republic of Cameroun. The end of colonial rule ushered in new ways of thinking about rights. Independence brought in the more pragmatic application of modern state laws in the whole of Cameroon. Widowhood rites became more and more perceived as repugnant to the human rights of women. It is mostly carried out in rural areas, especially where rural women are unable or are unwilling to assert their right. Apart from its gradual modification, the study on widowhood nowadays is more concerned with how to put an end to its practice. It is seen as outdated both at the national and international levels. Despite a few modifications in some cases, widowhood practices were further intensified during this period so that this aspect of culture did not disappear as a result of modernity. The intentions, which were mostly seen as evil, also determined the intensity of the widowhood rites meted on widows by their sisters in-law (Tekwe, 1997).

Between 1977 and 1984 remarkable and revolutionary cultural modifications were deliberately made by some traditional chiefs among the Chambas. The intention was to water down the brutal rigours of widowhood rites. The two chiefdoms of Bali Nyongha and Bali Kumbat, being part of the Chamba group of tribes, made modifications in their practices of widowhood rites. From 1979, *Fon* Galega II of Bali Nyonga spearheaded the reformation of the widowhood institution in his chiefdom. The people of Bali Nyongha and Bali Kumbat agreed

that widows already went through enormous physical, economic and financial hardship upon the loss of a husband. It was resolved that the widowhood rites should end on the 14<sup>th</sup> day counting from the day of the husband's death. In order to ensure conformity to these new rules, a fine of seven goats, palm wine and palm oil was foreseen by the rules (Galega II & Mundam 1979). In spite of these changes introduced by the chiefs, widows in those tribes were still frightened to go to the market before a period of six months had elapsed after their husbands had been buried. They were insulted and jeered at by other women and older widows.

The chiefs of some Tikar tribes like Kom and Oku also agreed with their elite to reduce the intensity of widowhood rites. In the case of Kom, the request was made by female elites in 1999. They also proposed that widows' health be watched over during the performance of widowhood rites. In the case of Oku, the male elite asked in 2005 that women and widows should not be allowed to go around half naked and bare feet during the death of their chief or husbands. All these demands were granted by the chiefs and their secret councils. They also thought that widowhood could be modified without taking away its cultural significance. After a number of campaign trips to the villages by elite groups, some women gradually saw reason in the chiefs' decisions (Ndichia, 2009).

Despite the efforts of these traditional rulers and elites, these moves were surprisingly rejected by most women in the villages. Such women argued that any modification of widowhood rites was disrespectful for womanhood. In some Ngemba tribes for instance, half naked women had to go round the yard dragging their buttocks on the ground immediately after the burial of their husbands. Mysticism was even introduced into widowhood rites as widows in some Tikar tribes had to dance in circles, round concoctions prepared by traditional priests to prove their innocence over their husband's deaths. This was also to test the women's fidelity to their husbands when they were alive. It was believed that unfaithful widows after dancing round the concoction either went mad or fell sick of undiagnosed illnesses. (Ndichia, 2009).

In the 1990s, Christianity and modernism further affected the practice of widowhood. Widows were exposed to modernity and they struggled to modify the rites. Widows avoided sleeping on bare floors or bamboo mats. Many educated women who could afford it slept on mattresses placed on the floor to avoid catching certain illnesses like pneumonia common in the Bamenda Grassfields. Widows were allowed to attend to their personal hygiene. In some cases, widows succeeded in stopping their sister-in-laws from shaving their hair. They provided

medical prescriptions from medical practitioners or simply bribed their sister-in-laws (Nsokika et al., 1996). Acculturation affected the dressing habits of women during their husbands' death. For instance, when a man died the widows no longer stripped themselves naked. The widows tied long loincloth around their waists and chests covering their bodies down to their feet. Sometimes they wore long gowns made from loincloth. These gowns were commonly called "*kabba ngondo*", a dress style copied from women of the coastal region of Cameroon (Dah, 1995).

In modern times, materialism (economic and financial reasons) determined the type of treatment given to widows by their late husbands' family. Widows were deprived of their right to inheritance especially when the deceased husbands left behind money and other property. Wife inheritance still persisted among highly traditional families. In most traditional Cameroonian societies nowadays, the extended (and not the nuclear) family owns the body of the dead person and exercises complete control over the corpse. Consequently, the widow is supposed to submit to the dictates of her husband's family even when they were the ones who decided on where to bury her husband. Frequently, after the burial of a husband, the widow was stripped of all assets, property (and even children on some occasions) by the late husband's family leaving the widow homeless and destitute (Tekwe, 1997). Very often, and for acquisitive reasons, men were not buried by their families on highly valued landed property or residences. Such landed property or residence were reserved to be eventually sold and the money spent by the late husband's family.

In an attempt to solve the problem, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was adopted in 1979 by the United Nations General Assembly. The aim was to spell out the rights of women. Despite the provisions of CEDAW especially in articles 13, 14 and 16, this obnoxious practice of widowhood still continued in Cameroon. There were also the Forward-Looking Strategy (FLS) and the Global Plan For Action (GPFSA) adopted in 1995, which called on all governments to eliminate the injustice and obstacles in relation to inheritance faced by the girl child (Department of Public Information, 1996). All these laws have been ratified by the Cameroon Government though the women still suffer in the hands of their relatives and communities. Women and girls in the Bamenda Grassfields like elsewhere in Cameroon are still denied the right to inheritance. Widowhood is still a rampant practice, especially in the rural areas (Tati, 2011).

In a bid to provide a tangible solution to this problem, the State of Cameroon had to intervene. Cameroon is a bijural nation, which means the customary and civil laws are both applicable. Article 1 (2) of the country's constitution says "The Republic of Cameroon ...shall recognize and protect traditional values that conform to democratic principles and human rights". Section 77 (2) of the Civil Status Registration Ordinance of 1981 states that: "In the event of the death of the husband, his heirs 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, freely remarry without anyone laying claim whatsoever to any compensation or material benefit for dowry or otherwise, received either at the time of engagement, during marriage or after marriage." The law stipulates punishment (10 years of imprisonment and a fine of 1 million FCFA) for anyone who indulges in the tradition of wife inheritance, described in law as "levirate marriage" (Republic of Cameroon, 1981).

Unfortunately due to lack of education and insufficient exposure to the law, women continued to suffer dehumanizing traditional practices. Efforts by the government and international organizations to dissuade the women from this ritual have so far yielded little fruit. The practice has left many of its victims with serious health complications like hypertension caused by psychological shock, backaches resulting from sleeping on the bare floor, and lung infections (Lawyer, 2005). The unsanitary practice of using a single razor to shave the widow, her co-wives and children has been an easy means of spreading the HIV/ AIDS virus.

## **6. Conclusion and Way Forward**

The central objective of this paper was to trace the origin, evolution and changing perspectives of the rites of widowhood in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon. Like the evolution of man from savagery through barbarism to civilization, the practice of widowhood rites in the Bamenda Grassfields has also undergone a remarkable evolution in tandem with the dynamics of African civilization. Evidently, the practice stemmed from savagery and grew through barbarism and started experiencing meaningful changes at the wake of exploration and colonialism. The data at our disposal has revealed that colonialism and colonial rule threatened the fabric of widowhood rites in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon. If only little was done, at least, there is historical evidence that the horror and barbarism that characterized the rites relaxed in intensity with the arrival of the colonialists.

It seems that the indigenous population needed a new pattern of belief that could challenge the traditional beliefs in which such rites were rooted. The coming of Christianity and Islam exposed the practice as gruesome, superstitious and sinful and it began to thaw and evolve in line with the dictates of modernism. The long period of mourning characterized by wailing of the widow, going half naked, getting rubbed in wood ash, sleeping on the floor, dispossession and suffering baseless accusations of killing have, to say the least, evolved to respect constitutional demands and feminist forces of the contemporary world. This means that the barbaric rites of widowhood in the Bamenda Grassfields have, since the colonial period, adjusted to colonial forces, Christianity and Islam, national and international laws and global feminist pressure. In other words, each time there was a change in perspective to the widowhood rites, there was a corresponding change in practice.

Issues concerning widowhood require that societies examine study and seek ways of respecting the human rights of widows. The rights of women are so fundamental that they remind us that every society has to strike a delicate balance between our traditions and modernity. It is important to draw the attention of experts to the complexities of apparently simple societies such as the Bamenda grassfields. In spite of the apparent simplicity, the Bamenda Grassfields and many less developed societies are extremely complex and difficult to understand. This is because an over simplification of the nature of social mores may lead to faulty conclusions and unfortunate proposed remedies.

The eradication or modification of widowhood practices can be achieved through education. The education of women and the girl child in every African society is therefore highly recommended and must be taken very seriously. Education in all its forms is in the short, medium and long term, the most powerful weapon for such a change in all its forms including the struggle to rid widowhood of its barbaric practices. It will therefore be important for future researchers to examine the extent to which women can contribute in the modification of the widowhood practice.

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