

Rethinking Widowhood in Western Cameroon: Serving or Enslaving the Widow?

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ABSTRACT

Widowhood rites are a set of cultural practices prescribed to the surviving partner in a couple when one of them passes away. Historically, these rites were established to help the widower or widow cope with this painful transition, to honor them, and to facilitate their reintegration into society. However, in the contemporary context, these practices are increasingly criticized, particularly due to their perceived degrading and humiliating nature—especially for women, who are subjected to a longer and more restrictive ritual process. This gender disparity is partly attributed to the patriarchal structure of most African societies, to which the Babadjou community belongs. The recent increase in complaints against these rites raises a crucial question: Do widowhood rites still hold significant value in today's society? This research adopts a qualitative approach, using a methodology that includes document analysis, in-depth individual interviews with widows and widowers, heads of families, and community or religious leaders in the West Region of Cameroon, as well as participant observation of certain widowhood ritual scenes. The aim of this study was to understand the origins of these rites, examine how their practice has evolved over time, and assess their current relevance in the society in question. The findings reveal that widowhood rites still carry a strong cultural significance within the Babadjou community, where traditional and religious authorities hold them in high regard due to their ancestral legitimacy. Nevertheless, due to scientific and technological advances, several changes have been observed: some rites considered too difficult or nearly impossible today have been abandoned, and there is a general trend toward making the process less burdensome. Field data reveals a growing sense of distress, particularly among widows, who denounce certain abuses they deem degrading and inhumane—calling into question the rites' role in promoting family cohesion and managing grief. While change is underway, it remains insufficient in the face of the serious grievances raised. As such, a collaborative initiative involving political, traditional, and religious authorities on one hand, and family actors on the other, appears essential to establish a cultural transformation that strikes a balance between preserving ancestral heritage and respecting widows' individual rights.

Keywords: widow, widowhood rites, serve, enslave, culture, socio-cultural logics, West-Cameroon, Babadjou.

Résumé

Les rites de veuvage sont un ensemble de pratiques culturelles recommandées au survivant dans un couple lorsque l'un des deux décède. Historiquement, ceux-ci visaient à aider le veuf ou la veuve à traverser cette douloureuse étape, à l'ennoblir et à faciliter son/sa réinsertion au sein de la société. Cependant, dans le contexte actuel, ces rites font de plus en plus l'objet de plusieurs critiques, notamment en raison de leur caractère jugé dévalorisant et humiliant pour les femmes surtout, qui subissent une version rituelle plus longue et visiblement plus contraignante. Cette disparité de genre est due en partie à la structure patriarcale de la majeure partie des sociétés africaines auxquelles appartient la communauté Babadjou, site de nos investigations. De l'accroissement du taux de plaintes récemment formulées à l'encontre de ces rites, survient une question importante : la pratique des rites de veuvage vaut-elle toujours son pesant d'or dans la société contemporaine ? Pour répondre à cette interrogation, une étude qualitative descriptive à visée analytique a été

conduite. Outre la recherche documentaire, des entretiens individuels approfondis ont été menés auprès des veufs et veuves, des chefs de familles, des leaders communautaires et religieux dans la région de l'Ouest du Cameroun. Une observation directe de quelques scènes rituelles de veuvage a été effectuée. Comprendre la genèse de ces rites, examiner les dynamiques observées dans la pratique de ces rites au fil du temps et en évaluer la plus-value actuelle dans la société concernée était l'objectif de cette recherche. Les résultats révèlent que les rites de veuvage gardent encore une très forte valeur culturelle dans la communauté Babadjou, où d'ailleurs les autorités traditionnelles et religieuses leur vouent un très grand culte en raison de leur légitimité ancestrale. Néanmoins, en raison des progrès scientifiques et techniques, de nombreuses dynamiques ont été observées, à savoir un retrait de certaines épreuves jugées difficiles et presque irréalisables aujourd'hui et un allègement évolutif de celui-ci en général. Les données de terrain révèlent un mal-être croissant, précisément chez les jeunes veuves qui dénoncent des abus qu'elles trouvent indignes et inhumains. Le veuvage, en tant que phénomène à la fois culturel et social, implique des rituels solidement ancrés au cœur des traditions, mais aussi soumises aux dynamiques contemporaines des droits humains. Les transformations amorcées semblent cependant incomplètes au vu des différents challenges quotidiens émis par les veuves. Ceci dit, il semble judicieux d'examiner l'interaction entre les autorités politiques, religieuses, culturelles et les acteurs des familles afin de proposer une réforme conciliante de la préservation du patrimoine d'une part et du respect des droits individuels des veuves d'autre part.

Mots clés : veuve, rites de veuvage, servir, asservir, culture, logiques socioculturelles, Ouest-Cameroun, Babadjou.

INTRODUCTION

Far from being the cessation of life, the death of a spouse marks the birth of a very large and complex ritual. Within the traditional African societies of Western Cameroon, the loss of a partner with whom the widow maintained an official marital relationship is the beginning of a series of ancestral practices known locally as "mpfôk," literally translated into French as "widowhood rites." These rites, once perceived as a set of practices aimed at supporting the widow and preserving the pre-established sociocultural order, are now the subject of much debate. Caught between the hammer of cultural conservation and the anvil of cultural revisionism, widowhood rites, which are one of the most important rites in the Ngombale culture of the Babadjou people in Western Cameroon, are the subject of debate about their actual place in a society subject to internal and external dynamics.

In Cameroon, Mbonji Edjenguèlè (1978) conducted an in-depth study of the different types of widows found in the locality of Pongo. Furthermore, the author analyzes the widowhood ritual as practiced in this community. Among the Béti, authors such as Mebenga Tamba Luc (1990) and Pascale van de Wouwer-Leunda (1996) have conducted work on widowhood. They discuss the various rituals that take place during funerals in this community, while emphasizing the problems faced by widows. These problems are notably economic, insofar as widows are often held for ransom by the officiants of the widowhood rites. Similarly, there is the problem of managing the deceased husband's estate. It appears that rites related to widowhood lead to the material and financial impoverishment of widows. A symposium organized in March 1988 by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Women's Condition (MINASCOF) on the theme "Widowhood in Cameroon" had denounced the practice of certain funeral rites that make the condition of widows in Cameroon unpleasant (Luc Mebenga Tamba, 1982:13).

Furthermore, it is not good that those who practice it do not master its scope at all: hence the observed deviations. Emmanuel Batamag (2017:12) states: "If there is one traditional rite whose mere evocation provokes a dark mood; it is indeed that of widowhood. In Cameroon, depending on the tribe, it is a custom dreaded by men but even more so by women because of its practices deemed humiliating." Following him, Mariam Sorelle (2014: 07) noted that: "Widowhood [is] a prison for African women"; due to the fact that it is a stage lasting sometimes from three months to a year and during this time, the widow must constantly maintain a sad attitude. She also states that others (in-laws) even go so far as to demand that the woman drinks the bathwater of her husband's corpse to prove that she had nothing to do with his death, which for her is a prison, especially since the same ritual for men is more lenient; hence the idea of "one weight, two measures."

However, traditional leaders, echoed by Jean Roger Kuate (2015), support the idea that the widowhood rite is a therapeutic and indispensable ritual for the widow.

This article proposes to analyze the complex contours of this question in order to grasp the real function of widowhood rites for widows today. To this end, we found it appropriate to first proceed with the methodology, then the main results, followed by the analysis, and finally the discussion.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

Target Population

The qualitative data used come from various field surveys, including in-depth individual interviews and focused group discussions with 35 key informants, whose number was determined by saturation.

Field Data Collection

Data collection was carried out from March 2021 to June 2021, and then from January to February 2022. Through in-depth individual interviews, focused group discussions, and sharing life stories, it allowed for interviewing rite specialists, several elders who are guarantors of the tradition, widowers and widows. Discussions with widows were motivated by the natural desire to communicate, which led them to dialogue with us several times. Thus, they felt useful and described these rites that they had already practiced and had practiced at least twice in their lives. Furthermore, since data collection was based on an immersive approach, direct observation allowed for the collection of ethnographic data on the practices and behaviours of widows. Photography provided a visual basis for daily details, although some phases of the rite were inaccessible out of respect for modesty.

Analysis and Interpretation of Obtained Data

After transcription and compilation, a thematic analysis of the field data was conducted, and the widowhood ritual in the Babadjou area was interpreted. Functionalist and dynamist interpretive frameworks were used for the interpretation of the results.

Main Study Results

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Widows

The widows interviewed in this study numbered 21. During the fieldwork, the following variables were recorded:

- Age
- Education
- Economic Activity
- Residence
- Household Composition
- Social Network

Age

The ages of the 21 widows participating in the study range from 35 to 85 years. The majority of them are in the 45 to 55 age group. This age distribution indicates that most widows are at a stage in their lives where family responsibilities (household and child maintenance) and economic challenges (rent, schooling, food, health, etc.) can be significant.

Education Level

It is varied. Among the 21 widows interviewed, six widows received primary education, eight completed secondary level, and four pursued higher education. Three widows had no formal schooling. The level of education can significantly influence the widows' ability to provide for the material and financial needs of their families, preventing them from accessing job opportunities and, consequently, managing the various daily challenges they face during and after widowhood.

Economic Activity

The widows encountered in this study have diverse economic situations. Ten of them are active in the informal sector, mainly in basic activities like trade or selling perishable goods from plantations and local products. Five widows work the land, cultivating it and harvesting products to support their families. Four of them are unemployed and daily resort to family, friends, and community organizations to solicit material or financial help. Finally, two widows have formal employment within the public service in sectors like teaching and health, with more stable financial incomes than the others.

Residence

The majority of widows (16 out of 21) live in rural areas, more specifically in the neighbourhoods of Babadjou, namely Balepo, Kombou, Bamegnie, Topelou and Banwa, where financial resources and community aid often available through social services can be limited. Five widows reside in urban areas, notably Douala and Yaoundé, the economic and political capitals respectively, where access to services, opportunities, and infrastructure may be easier.

Household Composition

All households of the interviewed widows include dependent children. Twelve widows live with minor children, and among them, eight have at least four dependent children. Four widows live far from their children, and five share their residence with members of the extended family. The household composition considerably influences the needs in terms of resources and support.

Social Network

The social network of the widows varies significantly from one widow to another. Ten widows have strong support from their biological families and communities of origin, which allows them to face the challenges of widowhood more serenely. Seven widows have a more limited social network, making them more vulnerable to social and economic problems. Four widows have little or no social support, having been abandoned since their husbands' death, with only sporadic contact with friends and relatives.

These variables are important for understanding the challenges and needs of widows in their specific context in Cameroon. The analysis of these variables can help identify the different areas in which they might need support to improve their condition.

Contrast between the Sociocultural Conception of Widowhood and Real-Time Practice

The contrast between these two notions is very significant today. It ranges from idealized conceptions of widowhood with the function of ennobling the widow, to complex, sometimes arduous practical realities, characterized by physical abuses, physical sanctions, and sometimes financial penalties.

The Sociocultural Conception of Widowhood

The widowhood ritual called "mpfok" in the Bafung language was established since ancient times; the ancestors officiated these rites to accompany widowers and widows. The objectives of this rite, practiced by the surviving spouse, were as follows:

1. the neutralisation of death
2. the reintegration of the widow
3. the aesthetics of life.

Neutralization of Death

Marriage between two people is made official by the payment of the dowry, followed by a celebration during which their union is sealed until death do them part. This union is not only carnal but also spiritual. This implies that after the death of one of the spouses, physical separation certainly occurs, but there remains another crucial aspect for the living spouse: the spiritual death of their union to definitively cut all ties; hence the objectification of the idea of the neutralization of death.

The neutralization of death is necessary insofar as it allows to "exonerate the living spouse and also protect them from any repercussions related to the death of the other." (M. Michel, 73 years old, notable, Bamepa'a, 20-03-2021). Indeed, different authors explain that in various traditional societies like in Babadjou, the widow is the first suspect in the death of her spouse; thus widowhood allows to "absolve her of all guilt and dissolve the marriage pact to finally render her free." (Makemby, 68 years old, patriarch notable, Mbi'i, 27-09-2021).

The neutralization of death is materialized by the prohibition of any bodily care for beauty or cleanliness purposes for the widow. Indeed, given that the person for whom she previously made herself beautiful and refined is no longer alive to contemplate her, she must not hold him back. She is therefore forbidden for xxx weeks or months from beauty care, hairdressing during the entire active phase of widowhood, and at the end, she is taken to a river where her hair (a beauty adornment for the African woman) and her body hair that have been in contact with the deceased are completely removed, and she is stripped naked, then washed with traditional vinegar "letsii" which physically disinfects and spiritually purifies. She is then anointed with palm oil which finalizes her purification, allows her to establish a link with the ancestors and ask for their protection, and finally marks her desire for transition to a new status.

To cope with the constraints of widowhood, the widow is assisted by her family and other members of the community. She must visit her in-laws and certain influential members of her husband's family. During this tour, she must carry a basket on her head to receive gifts (mainly food and money). These offerings are a mark of their support and affection towards her, proof that the family community remains attached to her and that she can always count on them throughout the widowhood period, as illustrated by this widow:

"When I was brought out, I first went to the successor of my father-in-law because my father-in-law was already dead, he gave me a lot of food and an envelope, then my father too, my husband's friends and passers-by filled my basket, it helped me a lot." (Mrs. Marie Colette, 62 years old, Farmer, Bamegnie, 13-11-2021).

In short, the gifts received during the widowhood period can better help the widow to resume her professional activity or engage in an income-generating activity to provide for her needs and those of her now orphaned offspring. This family and community support will be of capital importance on psychological, social, and economic levels in the phase of the widow's social reintegration.

Social Reintegration of the Widow

After the stage of neutralizing death with the breaking of the marriage pact, the next challenge is the social reintegration of the widower or widow. The officiant of the widowhood rite is a former widower/widow who is in charge of the execution, the proper conduct of the widowhood, and is the guarantor of the facts, gestures, and words of the new widow during this time. The aim being that the bereaved person regains their former place within their entourage. During this period of social reintegration, which lasts approximately two weeks (14 days), circumstantial rituals are performed: purification rites, dances, offerings, and various ceremonies including that of removing the widow's garb and wearing new clothes. From this moment, the widow gradually resumes her usual daily activities and progressively recovers her freedom. She can go to the field, to the market, to festive and even funeral ceremonies; and even remarry without fear. However, she must preferably dress in black for a period of 12 months. The black colour is the mark of her grief and sadness following the

disappearance of the deceased, and on the other hand, an alert to men not to approach her as a sign of respect for the memory of her deceased husband and to avoid any risk of paternity confusion should she give birth to a child.

Aesthetics of Life

The aesthetics of life here refers to all activities that constitute the funeral ceremonies. These include songs performed during the ritual, dances executed, outfits, gestures, and all other acts that show that despite death, life is beautiful. Certainly, death is a loss, but the life of the surviving member of the couple must not be sad because of this fatal event. Thus, moments of rejoicing offer the opportunity for the widow to regain a taste for life. The widow's family environment provides her with advice and comfort with the aim of encouraging her to rediscover the pleasure of life, not only for herself but also for their children (if they had any).

The ethnography of the widowhood rite as practiced today in the locality of Babadjou provides a global and real overview of this practice. However, it should be mentioned that it is no longer identical to that which was done a few years ago. The widowhood rite has undergone several modifications over time and space, and it is appropriate to highlight them in this work.

The Contrast Observed in Contemporary Practices

The widowhood rite as practiced today in the locality of Babadjou is undergoing significant modifications due to new development dynamics. However, although it continues to hold a considerable place in this locality, its staging no longer enjoys the unanimity it did a few years ago due to several notable facts that members point out today. Indeed, this rite is the only one in practice that would have the privilege of dictating the behaviour of the widower or widow once their partner has died, but also that of the child who would have been designated as the successor of the deceased parent.

Currently, mutations are observed in the practice of the widowhood ritual. It therefore renews them and allows them to better adapt to their new life circumstances. This place was once considered an indispensable value for the renewal of the family after the brutal or non-brutal loss of an influential member.

However, it was marked by various constraining elements such as walking naked for several kilometers during the visits the widow had to make, wearing black clothes and the "widow's bag" which served to distinguish her from other women and prevent any potential contact that another man might solicit with her, prohibitions on washing for several days or even just washing hands after a meal, having to sit and/or lie on the ground and/or on a mat without a mattress for the entire duration of the widowhood, the prohibition from carrying out daily occupations for several weeks, the prohibition from seeing daylight during the mourning period by staying indoors, etc.

These elements raise fears today in view of the potential problems and pathologies they could generate not only on a medical level but also on a psychosocial level since the woman often emerges sickly, stigmatized due to cultural factors that make death a punishment for a committed fault, deprived of her rights as a human being. If this is the result, what then is the added value of this ritual for her?

Major Contrasts

Widowhood: Idealism and Reality

N°	Situation before 1999	Current Situation (since 2000)
1	OBJECTIVE OF WIDOWHOOD	
	Formerly, within Babadjou culture, widowhood was instituted to ennoble the widow and reintegrate her socially. During	However, today, widows are forced to undergo significant hardships such as paying large sums of money – "during the widowhood, my deceased

	<p>this ritual, the widow is supported by all members of her nuclear family, her in-laws, and all other members of the community.</p>	<p>husband's sister ordered me to pay a fine of 175,000 FCFA to obtain forgiveness and free me" –, exposure of their nudity – "The day after the burial, it was 5:30 AM when they took me to the village river and I was undressed in front of everyone present, then I was washed" –, isolation – "I had to stay alone, not speak to anyone, and not greet anyone until the burial" –, violence, and even sexual abuse – "My deceased husband's brother came at night to threaten me to sleep with him, he said it was a requirement of the tradition, that I had to accept because I became their wife from the moment I was dowried by them". It has even occurred that they were forced to sleep with the brothers of the deceased at the risk of losing custody of their children.</p>
2	MULTIFORM SUPPORT	
	<p>Widows received during all this time significant material contributions ensuring she lacked nothing since she was prohibited from working. This help even extended to cultivating her fields, harvesting, selling the produce, and giving the proceeds to the widow.</p>	<p>Today, widows no longer receive this support continuously due to the daily occupations of other people, hence she could have great difficulty surviving and feeding her household if this ancestral norm were to be respected.</p>
3	CONDUCT OF THE RITE	
	<p>The widowhood rites as established since antiquity include a crucial and almost universal phase which is the shaving of the widow's head and private parts, the prohibition from lying on a bed, deprivation of sleep and meals, and even corporal punishment in some cases.</p>	

Currently, significant modifications are observed. The most severe practices, such as prolonged nudity or physical abuse, tend to be abandoned or reduced, especially among educated widows or those living in urban areas. However, other constraints persist, and the ritual's form varies greatly depending on the family.

Conformism to Traditions and Adaptation to Changes

The basic ancient conception of widowhood rites lies in an ancestral version of old customs that were considered immutable and divinely sacred. Yet, social, cultural, and economic realities change as fast as a generation passes. This has led to the readaptation of customs, traditions, and practices to the norms of current society. Thus, widows need more resources to overcome current difficulties.

Cross-Analysis of Results

Widowhood as a Process of Ennoblement and Purification: Structure and Social Protection

Data from the field sufficiently demonstrate that widowhood rites, according to their ancient vision, play a role of ennoblement for widows, through the various purification rituals that allow to ward off curses and restore social balance. This conception joins anthropological analyses done on rites of passage by Van Gennep and Turner (1970), according to which all cultural rites practiced in society had a reintegrative function of the concerned person within the social group and the cosmic order via the interpellation of the ancestors.

Loss of Essence and Ritual Deviation: The Crisis of Cultural Transmission

The greatest challenge of cultural transmission observed at the end of this study is the absence of a framework, the absence of written transmission channels between different generations. The new generations are abandoned and lack written support to refer to and know exactly the practices, facts, and taboos. Old ethnographic reports and discussions with patriarchs accurately report that in the past, widowhood rites were a means of support for the widow and mutual aid for the rest of the community; it was executed in strict respect of cultural norms and values, which seems very different from the rites observed today. This observation is tangible proof of a major crisis in the retransmission of cultures and ancestral know-how, a mark of intergenerational rupture and dilution of cultural identity markers.

From Community Support to Individual Initiative: Mutation of the Social Role of the Rite

Culturally, the active period of widowhood was materialized by the mobilization of almost all women of the area who came from all sides to testify their affection and bring their support to the afflicted widow. She then received multifarious help (material, emotional, physical, financial). It was an intense time of social solidarity that brought the population back to the original functions of regulation and assistance to people in distress. Today, however, this aid is deteriorating due to socioeconomic dynamics, professional constraints, and the rise of individualism. The community fabric is severely tested, and times of sorrow no longer guarantee total community support. Field data report many widows located in urban areas who lacked moral and/or physical support, something unimaginable in ancient times. This trend moving from a collective logic towards an increasingly individualistic logic aligns with the thoughts of Comaroff (1999) on community and social vulnerabilities in Africa since colonization.

The Economy of Widowhood: Between Dependency and Fragilized Autonomy

The cross-analysis of results shows a considerable economic impact of widowhood on widows. The requirements of the ritual, notably the sudden cessation of external activities for the entire year that the widowhood lasts and the absence of socio-community support, are sufficient reasons for creating new sources of income. The accounts of the informants confirm the difficulties they endured, torn between respecting the immobilization during the ritual, which generated economic dependence, and a loss of their financial autonomy. These ritual constraints were sometimes more consequential for "urban" widows due to professional demands, whether in the formal or informal sector.

Modern Pressures, Cultural Hybridization, and Endogenous Reform

In conclusion, the collected data call for a reflection on the possibilities of refining and reforming widowhood in light of current realities. It is certainly true that with the external influences already highlighted (technologies, religions, Western education...). Culture, as an object of human inventiveness for solving encountered problems, should remain the factor par excellence for cohesion in society. It would benefit from being flexible, inclusive, adaptive to avoid the risks of being completely rejected or even eradicated. The challenge here is to break it internally, from an endogenous perspective, to make it more attentive to new social norms and restore the dignity of widows. Mbembe (2000) and Nyamnjoh (2019) in their work on African modernity recalled that cultural guarantors would benefit from investing in the hybridization of African cultures to find the right balance between tradition and innovation.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The results of this research highlight a huge gap between the ancient perceptions of widowhood rites and contemporary practices of widowhood within the Babadjou locality of Western Cameroon. While cultural leaders struggle as best they can to preserve the original function of symbolic regulation and social support of widowhood, the latter is increasingly the subject of much debate both about its form and its various purposes.

A Traditionally Noble Ritual but Weakened in its Basic Conception

As suggested by empirical data, widowhood rites retain a sacred dimension and are divinized in the collective imagination. They aim to purify, protect, accompany, and reintegrate the widow into the community after the spouse's death. These different objectives are well described in the classical anthropological literature on rites of passage (Van Gennep, 1909; Turner, 1967), which identify these ritual sequences as excellent means of managing ruptures and existential crises within society.

Yet, the obtained results demonstrate that these functions are now almost all corrupted and biased. Certainly, the absence of common identity references and official regulatory authorities has led to libertine practices, often manipulated to serve selfish individuals, thus allowing them to turn these moments into times for settling family conflicts. The remarks enumerated by Geschiere (1995) regarding deviations during these practices already reported this use of rites for vengeful purposes, especially in cases of notable absence of family authorities. This then creates the ambiguity of customs discussed by Nzegwu in 2006.

A Rupture in Transmission: The Loss of a Collective Knowledge

The intergenerational discontinuity observed in the practice of widowhood rites highlights a severe disturbance in the transmission of endogenous cultural knowledge. Young generations are often distant from traditional reference authorities due to migratory movements in search of better living conditions, modern Western schooling, and the various prevailing religions, notably Catholicism, Protestantism, and revivalist churches. Thus, these new generations, lacking cultural benchmarks, no longer possess the knowledge and symbolic or practical tools allowing them to correctly perpetuate the practice of the rites. This phenomenon of deculturation evokes what some social science authors call "cultural dissonance" (Nyamnjoh, 2012), in which old norms and values are no longer able to fit harmoniously within new social structures.

A contemporary adage said "words fly away, writings remain" to mention the solidity of written knowledge against the challenge of time. The verbal and non-regulatory nature of the know-how and knowledge of widowhood worsens the problem. Informants mentioned the absence of a library of customary archives and of professionals in the field of rites, thus giving free access to Machiavellian and self-interested, sometimes libertine and very mean manipulations that desacralize the rites, discredit their foundation, and destabilize widows in the community. The absence of this collective memory is a powerful cry for the establishment of urgent reflection on the modalities of endogenous restructuring of the rites, without however falling into a total rejection of this cultural heritage.

The Decline of Community Mutual Aid: Between Isolation and Precariousness

Formerly, widowhood was unquestionably part of a context of strong family, community, and lineage solidarity. Empirical data confirm that it was a time of collective mobilization around the widow, who was supposed to be surrounded, accompanied, and supported. However, this socio-community function is gradually eroding. The accounts highlight deviations towards isolation, loneliness, stigmatization, and sometimes even social suspicion of incriminating the widow. This shift is intensified by economic and professional pressures and the transformation of socio-family structures, particularly in urban settings.

Literature on gender and work (Kabeer, 1999; Chant, 2008) shows that widows are condemned to suffer a double penalty: on one hand, the loss of emotional and institutional support, and on the other, the weakening of their economic power. The obtained data further support this predisposition, demonstrating that due to the ritual requirements of widowhood, namely the seclusion and duration to observe, widows with economic or professional activities (traders, teachers, nurses, etc.) are forced to reduce or, in the worst case, to stop completely, which is likely to cause their downfall.

Towards an Endogenous and Adaptive Rereading of the Rite

In view of the gap between the ritual requirements of widowhood and the realities experienced daily by widows, this analysis invites an endogenous reform of widowhood. It would be a matter of opening up to new

horizons, keeping the focus on the well-being of the person as a member of the community, and acting accordingly instead of maintaining old and outdated practices. To this end, it is judicious for cultural leaders to consider a refinement of the rites, mutual aid based on intergenerational dialogue to find the right balance between preserving the fundamental norms and values of the ritual and the rights and needs of the current population.

As stated by several informants, updates and adaptations must come from within and be highlighted by the legitimate holders of cultural authority, namely traditional chiefs. They must also consider the voices of women, the main actors, yet long kept away from decision-making circles on customary practices. In the same vein, this study is part of a perspective of critical and constructive anthropology, which considers culture as a living, evolving, and negotiable ensemble (Mbembe, 2000) whose ultimate goal is to solve the problems of the population.

CONCLUSION

This research conducted on the role of widowhood in the lives of Babadjou widows in Western Cameroon reveals a profoundly ambivalent reality, at the crossroads of cultural heritage and contemporary sociocultural mutations. On one hand, widowhood rites hold strong symbolic significance: they are perceived as a process of purification and reintegration of the widow into the rest of the community, charged with cosmological and communal meaning. It remains, notwithstanding a few details, a witness to the community's solidarity towards the surviving spouse. On the other hand, the regulatory function of widowhood rites has gradually degraded over time, impaired by social crises, economic dynamics, the challenge of cultural transmission between generations, and the rise of intra-family tensions.

This study reveals that even if widows have not ceased to be the central actors of this ritual, they also remain the main victims of these observed deviations. Numerous current actions and practices trigger suffering, stigmatization, and discomfort for them. The rigidity of the rituals in the face of living conditions, particularly in urban areas or in a context of salaried work, places widows in situations of increased vulnerability.

In light of these findings, it is urgent to rethink the widowhood ritual no longer as a sacred cultural relic, but as an evolving complex, to be refined and reformed in an inclusive and endogenous manner. Recognizing the cry of widows, the partial formalization of ritual practices (while keeping their essence intact), and the economic and psychosocial support of women in widowhood should constitute the heart of the envisioned reforms. The active mobilization of traditional authorities, religious and community leaders, but also state and associative instances, proves indispensable to envisage a real revitalization that respects both the symbolic foundations of the widowhood ritual and the fundamental rights of widows.

Ultimately, this research constitutes an invitation to a dynamic and critical approach to widowhood, which will know how to handle the identity and social stakes of the rite. This research also gives rise to future research on women's resilience methods once the active phase of widowhood is completed, and finally on cultural adaptation strategies in a context of globalization, as well as on the establishment of public policies in line with local realities.

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