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## SOCIOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The social context of widowhood rites and women's human rights in Cameroon

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**Abstract:** Since the United Nations Decade for Women (1975–1985) gender-based violence (GBV) has increasingly received global attention and eventuated in the earmarking of June 23rd, 2011 as the first-ever International Widow's Day. This case study examines the social logic of superstitious beliefs and associated fears sustaining the dehumanizing practice of widowhood rites and practices (WRP) with its negative consequences on women's well-being among the Balengou of Western Cameroon. It argues that WRP should be understood through the double process of *disavowal and projection*, "false consciousness" and as a "patriarchal bargain". It argues for the strengthening of women's rights through gender-neutral marriage, succession and inheritance legislation based on notions of equality and social justice between the sexes, the harmonization and humanization of WRP, and an intersectionalist approach to GBV and development.

**Subjects:** Area Studies; Development Studies; Social Sciences

**Keywords:** widowhood rites; women's health; human rights; social justice; gender-based violence; development



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### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The present study highlights various socially and culturally entrenched beliefs about the death of husbands allegedly caused by the witchcraft powers or transgressions of their wives among the Balengou tribe of Cameroon. These wives exonerate themselves through participation in stringent and dehumanising widowhood rites and practices that violate their human rights. It demonstrates how generations of women have grown up and been socialised into accepting and reproducing these widowhood rites and practices in the name of maintaining tradition whereas they are actually upholding the hidden male authority structure that oppress them. The paper argues that these rites and practices intersect with property and are actually about taking control of the woman's sexual and reproductive prowess by male relatives of the deceased husband. The adoption and implementation of laws that prevent the dispossession of widows alongside sensitisation against stereotypes and stigma about women are required for ensuring women's socioeconomic wellbeing.

## 1. Introduction

Social hierarchies between men and women are symbolically maintained through social practices. These social practices include but are not limited to—food taboos, female circumcision, breast ironing, son preference, female infanticide, sati and widowhood rites and practices (WRP). These gender-based practices violate women’s human rights and human security and have devastating effects on their health, physical well-being and psychosocial development. The series of conferences marking the UN Decade For Women (1975–1985), articulated issues of GBV and eventually led to the designation of June 23rd, 2011 as the first-ever International Widows Day. Despite intense feminist strategizing, WRP have remained deeply entrenched in the patriarchal social order of Balengou society in the Western region of Cameroon.

This paper examines the constellation of beliefs informing the continuous support for traumatic WRP among Balengou women even in the face of modernity and Christianity. The continuous saliency of these WRP, we maintain, suggests that this concatenation of social customs is entangled in the double process of disavowal and projection (Gilman, 1989). To foreground understanding of women’s acceptance of these dehumanizing WRP, we draw insights from feminists theories of “false consciousness” (Eisenstein, 1983; Gorelick, 1991; Mackinnon, 1982) and “patriarchal bargain” (Kandiyoti, 1988; Bourdieu, 1992; Foucault, 1977). Disavowal and projection examine the internalization of behaviour and attitudes based on socialization. Older widows reproduce WRP while new widows internalize and assimilate these practices into their habitus as a sign of identification with the former. It involves processes of alienation and exclusion as well as the conflicting aspirations for belonging and inclusion. This self-hatred results from outsider’s acceptance of the mirage of themselves as generated by their reference group. That is that group of women in society which they see as defining themselves in relation to (Gilman, 1989, p. 2). Subjection to WRP is simultaneously a manifestation of “false consciousness” (Eisenstein, 1983; Gorelick, 1991; Mackinnon, 1982) and a “patriarchal bargain” (Bourdieu, 1985; Foucault, 1977; Kandiyoti, 1988). This is because women are “capital bearing objects” whose value accrues to the primary groups to which they belong through marriage or birth (Lovell, 2000). Balengou women undergo these degrading rites as proof of their innocence for allegedly causing a husband’s death through witchcraft. Paradoxically, although WRP is in sharp contradiction with the notion of women’s human rights and human security, and against their interests, they are the victims, the perpetrators and active enforcers of the practice. They are also those who oppose any form of change. Women should be strengthened through appropriate legislation. They should be encouraged to change practices that affect their social well-being, sexual and psychological health. After all, the balance of democratic values and the promotion of women’s rights lie in women being partners in development, rather than unduly suffering under the intense burden of culture, tradition and societal stereotypes.

Below, we examine some inconsistencies and practices that are at variance with WRP, present the data elicitation process and then examine the social context and the social logic supporting WRP among the Balengou. Lastly, we make some suggestions towards the achievement of social justice for women.

### 1.1. *Legal position of women: Inconsistencies and practices*

The heightened wave of feminist mobilization within the UN system and particularly the series of conferences culminating in the UN Decade for Women (1975–1985), resulted in global publicity to the situation of women. This mobilization culminated in calls for the elimination of customs that substantively or procedurally violate women and children’s human rights norms. And that compromise their human security including food taboos, female circumcision, breast ironing, son preference, female infanticide, sati and WRP. The elimination of these traditional practices subsequently became a key focal point for international development policy and cooperation as well as a benchmark for good governance, democracy, women’s human rights, and development aid.

In line with this position, a wide range of international, regional, and national conventions deplore all forms of GBV. These acts of GBV include WRP that are meant to purify widows from the ill-luck

purportedly brought to them by their husband's death. Globally, these treaties and policy documents include among others—the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (UN General Assembly, 1948), the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 2004) and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment (CADCID, 1984). Article 1 of the CEDAW Convention states that:

Any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field. (UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 1979-1981)

The CEDAW further states that:

State parties are urged to modify the social and cultural patterns of the conduct of men and women with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority of women (Ibid.).

Other global initiatives include the Programme of Action Adopted at the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (1994) and the Programme of Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing (Beijing Declaration & Platform for Action, 1995). At the African regional level, the African Charter on Human and People's Rights ("African Charter") (1998), and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's rights on the Rights of women in Africa ("The Protocol") (2003) explicitly call for the elimination of "harmful traditional practices". Several articles of "The Protocol" call attention to widow's rights. For example, article 2(1) (b) prohibits discrimination that endangers the health and general wellbeing of women. Furthermore, article 2(2), deals with the elimination of harmful cultural and traditional practices while articles 3 and 4, which deals with the rights to dignity, and life, integrity and security of person respectively, ensure that women such as widows are treated in a respectful, humane and non-degrading manner. In spite of these provisions, article 20 and 21(1) address the unique issues associated with widows. Article 20 caters for situations where widows are subjected to all sorts of degrading and humiliating treatment by virtue of their status as widows. It also envisages and seeks to prevent situations where widows are denied custodianship of their children. Other harsh realities such as forced marriages and the inability for widows, from certain societies, to remarry have been recognized and dealt with admirably in article 20, which states as follows:

States Parties shall take appropriate legal measures to ensure that widows enjoy all human rights through the implementation of the following provisions:

- (1) That widows should not be subjected to inhuman, humiliating or degrading treatment;
- (2) A widow shall automatically become the guardian and custodian of her children, after the
- (3) Death of her husband, unless this is contrary to the interests and the welfare of the children;
- (4) A widow shall have the right to remarry, and in that event, to marry the person of her choice.

Article 21(1) seeks to tackle the problems associated with inheritance as follows:

A widow shall have the right to an equitable share in the inheritance of the property of her husband.

A widow shall have the right to continue to live in the matrimonial house. In a case of remarriage, she shall retain this right if the house belongs to her or she has inherited it.

However, these conventions only replicate the mistakes of their predecessors: powerful words without functional meaning (Rebouche, 2006/2008). Some even conflate women and children's rights thereby negating the latter's individual and collective agency as well as their individual rights.

Despite subscription to, and ratification of the above-mentioned gender equality and social justice treaties, respect to the Constitution of Cameroon remains superficial leading to a lack of substantive policies that would promote women's rights. In most of Cameroon, widows are dehumanized and dispossessed of their inalienable rights- including the right to succession, inheritance and property ownership. In both the customary and received laws applicable in Cameroon,<sup>1</sup> a husband is duty bound to maintain his wife or wives and children as well as members of his immediate and extended family, whether or not they might have a means of their own. "However, intestacy rules fail to make a proper inventory of all beneficiaries. The patrilineal system of succession excludes women from the list of beneficiaries for, not being family members" (Nzalie, 2009, p. 3). Although matrilineal systems profess equality of sexes, they are "patrilineal systems with matrilineal emphasis" (Howard, 1972, p. 16). Apparently under the influence of received laws, customary law has also adopted the system of succession going primarily to persons closest to the deceased. Women should accordingly be in their husband's homes and not around upon their father's death to lay claims to property. The choice of customary law beneficiaries is influenced more by the land tenure system. Land belongs to the group, tribe, village or family and not to individual members thereof. Customary law believes in keeping land in the family rather than continuing with the obligations of the deceased towards his family (Nzalie, 2009). As Joseph Nzalie states:

It is an accepted rule of law that succession to property cannot occur unless it is regarded as belonging to individuals rather than to groups. Group ownership of land is more of a rule than an exception in customary law. The guiding principle of courts in their attitudes towards widows in matters of succession is not the desire to deprive them of their maintenance. The maintenance of widows has always been one of the main preoccupations of customary law. (Nzalie, 2009, p. 20)

While the family has absolute ownership of land, women and widows are considered as non-family members by both their natal groups and the kinship group into which they get married. Although there is no uniform pattern in the custom depriving women of succession rights (whose basis is group ownership of land), this conflict of laws in Cameroon has left a gap that permits for the "selective appropriation of gendered laws" that negatively affect women's rights. While international law supersedes the constitution, and the latter supersedes culture, the rights enshrined in the constitution are more declarative than actual, mostly due to the patriarchal mindset that is the basis of these laws. Men make the laws and the social structure at all levels is dominated by men (see Pemunta, 2011, p. 85).

Although African customary law as a legal system is timeless and is expressed through daily cultural practices, rituals and traditions of a people (Bennett, 1995, p. 63), the legal system of most African countries, including Cameroon is characterized by socially institutionalized patriarchal domination. Since the colonial era, customary law has co-existed with the received systems of law in the context of legal pluralism. The importance and continuous relevance of these indigenous laws in African societies is a testament of the continuous relevance of legal dualism in most African countries. Under Cameroonian customary law, the wife is defined as the property of the husband. Estate letters of administration are invariably issued only to male relatives and not to the widow and her children. Most often, exclusion from property inheritance also includes expulsion from the matrimonial home- particularly when a widow refuses liverate. This inheritance law is clearly a "harmful traditional practice" (Pemunta, 2011, p. 86).

The United Nations recently estimated that in Sub-Saharan Africa 44% of women against 7% of men are widows. Generally, "... women have longer life expectancy because of frequent age disparities between partners" (UN, 2000, p. 3). Cameroon has some 500,000 widows, with over 90% unaware of their rights. They consequently suffer from diverse abuses preceding the death of their husbands ([www.Cameroon-info.net/stories/0,28911](http://www.Cameroon-info.net/stories/0,28911). Last Accessed 23 June, 2011). It can also be suggested that the number of widows in most of Sub-Saharan Africa is on the rise owing to the early death of men from HIV/AIDS. It is estimated that about one out of every three women in the Western

Grassfield region is a widow. This estimate represents 33% of the total female population over 15 years of age (Karawa, 2002). Pingpoh's (2004) random survey of 92 women, aged 15 and above revealed that 30 of the women were widows. This finding is in line with Karawa's findings. Through extrapolation of population growth rate in the area, Pingpoh suggests that more than 18% of the total female population are widows, with older widows bearing the effects of widowhood since younger widows are more likely to remarry. The Committee for Assistance to Needy Women of Cameroon received over 1,843 complaints from widows who were reportedly beaten, sent off their matrimonial homes, or at times, forced to remarry either their brothers-in-law or fathers-in-law in tandem with some cultural conventions that are sharply at variance with women's human rights, their human security and health.

Most widows live in rural areas and have usufructuary rights over their late husband's property since they cannot dispose of it. Under Cameroon's patriarchal customary law system, a widow has only user rights because she is considered as "property" and "property cannot inherit property". In addition, the fear of witchcraft makes it impossible for a widow to enjoy her right of administration. She can only inherit property by proxy through her son. This situation is however compounded by the fact that in a polygynous family, any of the deceased man's sons can become the overall beneficiary of his property. The next of kin may dispossess her by taking the land for other uses, and may even toss her out of the matrimonial home, if she refuses to marry him. Property is the exclusive preserve of sons and not daughters because the latter are considered as "strangers" since they will eventually get married. Bourdieu maintains that: "the structure of the social world is defined at every moment by the structure and distribution of the capital and profits characteristic of the different particular fields" (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 734). As "capital bearing objects" women's value accrues to the primary groups to which they belong (for example, husbands or the family) (Lovell, 2000; Skeggs, 2004).

Although I was innocent about the cause of my husband's death, I accepted the rituals because I and my children will need care now and in the future from my in-laws. Remember that I also have male issues. (Aminatou, Interview of 11/24/09)

Against this backdrop of economic calculation, son preference has become a double social security mechanism and threat to women's reproductive health and rights. Most women are inadvertently compelled to have many children with the hope of getting an heir as a proxy access to property in the eventuality of the man's death. In addition, having male issues serves in cementing a woman's position within the matrimonial home. This qualitative, case-based study examines the cultural understanding underpinning WRP among the Balengou of the Western region of Cameroon.

## 2. Method

This study combines ethnographic fieldwork on "harmful traditional practices" and participant observation conducted between October and December, 2009 in the Balengou community. Although the brief timespan did not permit for greater in-depth exploration, the authors are natives of Cameroon's Western Grassfield region. Furthermore, they boast of more than two decades of ethnographic research in the entire region. Through systematic and purposeful sampling, 39 women, from a total sample of 48 and 8 male elders were interviewed. These interviews provided an insider's perspective on women's experiences of, and the cultural logic sustaining widowhood rituals (see also Pemunta, 2014a, pp. 22–23). Purposive sampling was explicitly used to project the role that certain respondents (particularly elderly men and women) were likely to serve in the study (Bernard, 2006, p. 189) given their deep knowledge of the cultural field of WRP. A case study strategy was deemed appropriate because it provides an apt context to answer the research question under study (Yin, 1994). Following Bernard (2006, p. 189), the men were purposively sampled on the basis of their knowledge of the cultural field of WRP. The use of multiple methods helps to address the problem of reliability and validity (Burns, 2000, pp. 418–419; Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 41; Yin, 1989, p. 94). Due to the sensitive nature of my study, extensive ethnographic interviews were appropriate (Spradley, 1980, p. 51). Although all interviews were tape-recorded for further reference,

we simultaneously made detailed notes as the interviews progressed (Stake, 1995). We also kept a field diary so as to provide an “in-depth elucidation of it” (Bryman, 2004, p. 50).

To a limited extent, the selection of the Balengou tribe was based on the “sampling logic” or “those that are representative of the total population of similar cases” (Yin, 1994, p. 47). In this regard, we opted to work in one ethnic community, the Balengou that meets the criteria of familiarity, proximity and willingness. We however also extended out to the whole Bamileke region of the Western Grassfield region where we have done research for over two decades through informal interviews, casual discussions and participant observation. Text from transcripts of interviews and notes from the informal discussion and participant observation sessions were analyzed thematically with an emic focus on widowhood, beliefs and practices about death within the context of the Balengou world view. Various cases were analyzed using a cross-case method. Emphasis was placed on the related aspects of setting, group or person under investigation—the case—rather than breaking the whole into separate parts. In other words, WRP was seen as embedded in the larger cultural complex and world view of the Balengou.

In tandem with the concept of voluntary informed consent, subjects of research are entitled to know the nature, purposes and implications of research and to autonomously choose whether to take part in it or not (Bryman, 1988; McNamee & Bridges, 2002), informants were debriefed (Bernard, 2006, p. 77). They were further reminded that they had the choice not to participate and to disengage at any time from the research. In line with principle of respect for the terms of participant involvement and to ensure confidentiality (Burns, 2000, p. 20; Reynolds, 1982), we use pseudo-names to obscure personal information that could betray a respondent’s identity. Additionally, the names of respondents as well as places where interviews were conducted are either anonymized or deliberately rendered fictitious.

### 3. The social context of widowhood rites and practices

#### 3.1. Patriarchal mirage: The construction of widowhood as social security

The Balengou Chiefdom, a sub clan of the larger Bamileke ethnic group, counts approximately 1,300 people (National Office for Population and Statistics, 2010). Characterized by the dominance of patrilineal economic and political relationships, some of the people, including the Chief practice polygyny. Polygyny is however increasingly becoming unpopular due to economic hard times. A woman’s position is dependent on her husband’s status and achievements in the community and within the lineage group (Pemunta, 2014a). Against this backdrop, the loss of a husband spells doom and causes his widow(s) a multiplicity of psychological, social, financial, material, and cultural traumas. This echoes Wells and Browning’s (2002) observation that despite gendered differences in experience, widowhood is characterized by feelings of depression, mood changes, disrupted sleep patterns, obsessive thoughts about the deceased and disorientation. The disorganizing and traumatic experiences accompanying the loss of a husband tends to be greater on women than on men (Nwosu, 2007). Whereas, a widow is held to be the primary suspect for her husband’s death and needs to absolve herself through WRP, the widower is readily offered an appropriate substitute to comfort him following the demise of his wife.

To ensure biological and social reproduction and to keep “property” within the group, the Balengou practice liverate. Through the practice of liverate, patriarchy as a social scheme and form of governmentality is simultaneously a multidimensional actor in both its actions and intents. As a power field, patriarchy uses coercion and the incorporation of the interests and priorities of widows as social actors for the achievement of its hegemonic agenda and projects through this test of innocence and the justification for liverate (Gramsci, 1971). We suggest that WRP seek to inculcate innocence in the psyche of women, to control and to punish them through the regulation of their lives after a husband’s death. We argue in line with Nwosu (2007) that it is human greed and acquisitiveness that basically controls the treatment of widows. All other activities serve the same purpose and any mystification and other rituals; superstitious actions are geared to the oppression of the widow.

Dehumanized and humiliated by the religious rituals and other practices, the widow becomes more amenable to keep silent over other forms of oppression that end up ultimately as economic disposition.

When my husband died, my in-laws asked me to leave my husband's house even though I had a one-year-old daughter in hand. Within three months, ... the house was sold. I was not even allowed to take part in the funeral ceremony. I stayed for seven days without taking a bath. I was not allowed to wash my hands. I ate and drank from a broken container. (Melly, 36 years-old, interview of 16/11/2009, Auberge)

Despite the risk of being witch-hunted, a few widows have however challenged this system of oppression by seeking redress in a court of law.

From the moment my husband took ill and was on the verge of death, my brothers-in-law started taking away his property. And when he eventually died, they sent me and my children away because I refused to marry one of them. After protecting myself because I knew they could kill me ..., I engaged them in a long legal battle. It finally took eight years, after numerous court sessions and up to the Supreme Court in Yaounde to get back part of my husband's property. (Mme Fokou, interview, 16/11/2009, Bamenbou)

Many victims of succession-based violence abstain on their own volition from going to court. Court procedures are quite expensive and time-consuming, and many widows are neither aware of their rights nor have the social capital to seek legal redress in a court of law. Ironically, as next of kin, a woman's husband is endowed with full rights and privileges over both movable and immovable property. As Michel Foucault maintains, governmentality lumps together, identifies women as individuals, establishes the terms for defining women as "devils", on the one hand, while simultaneously constructing particular types of subjects (Foucault, 1979). Although a widow can decide to co-habit with a man of her choice, it is considered sacrilegious for both to live together in her late husband's compound. However, the children resulting from such a relationship traditionally belongs to the deceased spouse's family (see Hodgson & McCurdy, 2001, p. 151).

The institution of liverate has been indicted for violating a widow's human rights and human security by obliging her to remarry from within her late husband's kin group and for the spread of HIV/AIDS. Ironically, while a widower can remarry as soon as he wants, he is not compelled to remarry from his late wife's kinship group/lineage. Sarpong (2013) suggests that widowers are neither submitted to rites nor prohibitions because it is a man who dowrs a woman and not the contrary.

The Balengou profess to be Christians and Muslims. They however simultaneously practice ancestral worshipping. Although the people appropriate both local and modern concepts of disease and therapy, the dead of a man is not seen as a natural phenomenon, but rather, as orchestrated by his spouse(s) through evil spirits.

### **3.2. Perception of death, widowhood rites and practices**

John Mbiti has pointed out that death marks the separation between the physical [visible] and the spiritual [invisible] worlds: "death stands between the world of human beings and the world of the spirits, between the visible and the invisible" necessitating elaborate rituals (1969, p. 145). Upon the dead of a Balengou man, his wife/wives are submitted to a test of innocence as part of the widowhood rite. The people believe that a man's death might be orchestrated by one or through a conspiracy between his wives so as to "own his property" and become "happy widows". Death is never seen as a natural and biological end to life. According to Talbot P. Amoury, "nearly every death is, in the first instance, at all events, attributed to or associated with the accursed magic [of witchcraft] ... through the machinations of some enemy, and in any case, whether deserved or not they attempt to revenge themselves on those who are deemed instrumental in causing" (Talbot, 1906/1969, p. 174). Similarly, Ilugu (1974, p. 40) maintains that "the immediate or remote cause [of death] is

sought in the wicked machinations of a human enemy or of malevolent ancestor, ghost or juju". Nadege and NkongMbu captured the repugnant treatment they individually received thus:

When I refused to submit myself to the strange widowhood rituals and practices because of my Christian belief, my in-laws implored my husband's spirit to destroy me, if I knew anything regarding the cause of his death .... (Interview of 11/11/09)

I was accused of causing my beloved husband's death and forced to drink the water that was used to wash his corpse. I did it to avail myself of any blame because it is tradition. Why would I kill my husband and be suffering alone? They took away everything from me, including his bank book and all the property we had jointly amassed during our twenty years of marriage. (NkongMbu, interview, 08/12/2009)

The Balengou worldview that a meaningful life is achievable only through the maintenance of harmony with the spirit of the dead relatives: "the living the dead", makes death and the accompanying customs sacrosanct. Funeral rituals symbolize feelings of sorrow and loss as well as emphasize the belief that death does not mark the end of a person's existence. The spirit of the deceased, Mbiti maintains, will continue to influence the lives of his living relatives with blessings [through achievements] or failures, [through curses] depending on the treatment meted out to him by the living (1992, p. 119). Among the Balengou, this usually entails the conservation of the corpse for varied periods of time to ensure extensive mobilization of financial and material resources for a befitting funeral. This often consists of an expensive casket, shroud, different varieties of food and refreshment for invited guests, extensive publicity on local radio and television. If the deceased was a prominent member of society, sympathizers from professional, religious, political, and other affiliations will most likely also put together financial resources for the funeral rites.

### **3.3. Widowhood rituals as boundary markers and exoneration from guilt**

Widowhood rituals and practices serve as boundary markers between a dead husband and his widow. Additionally, it symbolizes purity for the latter and an exoneration from suspected guilt for orchestrating the former's death through suspected feminine witchcraft powers. Mary Douglas (1966) pointed out that rituals of purity and impurity create unity in experience and are employed in claims and counter claims about status. Douglas argues that "The society does not exist in a neutral, uncharged vacuum. It is subject to external pressures; that which is not with it, part of it and subject to its laws, is potentially against it" (1966, p. 4). This thus constitutes pressures between "boundary and margin". Most ethnographic partners were unanimous that a woman is a man's keeper and that it is necessary for rituals to be performed to enable the man to hands-off his wife or wives once he passes away. They further maintained that the dehumanizing treatment meted out to a widow- her unhygienic and appalling appearance- is meant to prevent her from being attractive to her otherwise jealous husband. As Sarpong (2013, pp. 14–15) rightly maintains widowhood rites are embedded in religious beliefs and practices about marriage as an unbreakable institution between a deceased man and his wife. In the Akan theosophy, "at asamando (the place of the dead), a man is supposed to be married to his wife, especially the first wife, if he has more than one consort". Widowhood rites, he further maintains "are not rites of wickedness or callousness, they are rites meant to free the widow from the tyranny and jealousy of the dead partner". Additionally, respondents stated that death created the problem of gaining admission into the ancestral realm because it is disruptive and threatens the integrity of the community of the deceased's living relatives. To ensure that this transition is peaceful, "all the ritual practices associated with death and dying must be meticulously" followed through. "If not, he would be considered to have been improperly buried and would be denied admission" (Afigbo, 1975) by the ancestors.

After the burial of my husband's corpse, he came in a dream and told me that he was still not at peace and that the ancestors had driven him away. I immediately revealed this dream to my brothers-in-law, and they went and consulted a soothsayer who prescribed the necessary rituals that should be performed. (Kombo, Interview, 19/11/2009, Bamenbou)

The Balengou widowhood ritual “fo” (white) symbolizes purity and is synonymous to one of the fundamental colours of kaolinite clays. The widows are expected to solemnly prove their innocence regarding their husband’s death through a ritual bath in a river. Every widow is given a calabash smeared with kaolinite clay powder to take to the stream and to allow the calabash there. The guilty individual’s calabash will mystically return and meet her. Similarly, in his ethnography of the Igbo Basden (1966) observes that the guilt of a widow is established if she dies during the mourning period, and “no people of the village will touch the corpse”. The reason for this repugnance, he maintains, “may arise from the belief that a woman dieing shortly after her husband is by that proved to be guilty of causing his death”. Whosoever was suspected of orchestrating the death of an individual, Basden maintains, is obliged to drink the water used for washing the corpse and death will befall him/her within a year. The contrary will hold if no one is guilty. This Balengou test of innocence also resonates with the use of oracles among the Azande as an effective means of diagnosing witchcraft, benge and of establishing guilt. As reported by Evans-Pritchard (1972), a poison is fed to a baby chicken and the chick’s death or survival provides the oracle’s answer.

In the past widows were further clean-shaved and camwood smeared all over their body, but today, kaolinite clay powder serves this purpose. A robe made from the bark of a fig tree is smeared with a mixture of kaolinite clay powder and palm oil and tied around her waist. She was then given a bamboo staff that she takes along with her everywhere she goes (Pemunta, 2014a, pp. 34–35).

In addition, she is secluded and confined at home during the nine days of mourning to prevent her from polluting the outside world. When asked why a widow is secluded, both elderly women and men were of the opinion that “she is dangerous to whoever comes in contact with her at that time”. It is a taboo to touch even her belongs except by other widows. After that, she was taken to a river for a purification bath and is given a piece of bamboo smeared with kaolin powder. She was supposed to keep until she left the confinement room following blessing and fortification from traditional healers, meAgni tse. Next, she is scarified using a razor blade and a concoction of kaolin powder and other substances was applied onto the wounded surfaces. She is from now on considered purified and absolved from any suspicion. In the words of Mary Douglas, it might be suggested that the impurity resulting from a man’s death as symbolized by his widow threatens the “edifice that sustains the system”. Pollution ideas are evoked and a man’s widow(s) are/is submitted to WRP to curb the danger that her/their action may have caused the members of society. Douglas argues that “wherever lines are precarious, pollution ideas sustain the edifice of political and economic forces to maintain the system. Physical crossing of the social barrier is treated as dangerous pollution ... pollution becomes a double wicked object of reprobation, first because s/he crossed the line and second because s/he endangers the others” (1966, p. 140). Widowhood is particularly traumatizing. Apart from the dehumanizing treatment meted out to a widow, it also entails other social restrictions during the obligatory mourning and cleansing period, which today lasts for between two and seven weeks. Additionally, the widow is neglected, dejected and isolated. She sleeps on banana leaves on the floor and moves barefooted. She is not allowed to cook, but the food is served to her on a plantain leave by older widows. On the final day of the funeral, she is obliged to crawl on her buttocks around the celebration yard. From the moment that a husband is pronounced dead until the commemoration of the first anniversary, his widow is supposed to wear only black or white dresses. The degradation, risk to health and human rights violations a widow goes through in this region has been succinctly captured (see Pingpoh, 2004).

### **3.4. Suspicion, governmentality, discipline and punishment**

In the Balengou’s theosophy, a married man’s death is largely explained in terms of witchcraft- a type of gendered symbolic power attributed to women. The dehumanizing WRP, for this reason, serves as a retribution for a husband’s death. In addition, it is a form of negative sanction to the widow for having disobeyed the husband-most likely through adulterous relationships while he was alive. The ritual requirement of abstention from sexual intercourse for a year with whosoever serves as a fidelity test for the widow. Sarpong (2013, pp. 15–16) maintains that this prohibition is because it is the man who marries the woman and not the reverse and therefore “it is the woman who should

not be unfaithful to her husband, both when he is alive and when he dies. All this boils down to deep-rooted and deep-seated religious conviction which is not removed by condemnation or denunciation or ridicule". Douglas maintains that "Holiness means keeping distinct the categories of creation" (1966, p. 60). It could be argued that widowhood sexual morality is about the categorization of all sexual activity into two diametrically opposite categories: good vs evil or acceptable vs. unacceptable. As Douglas asserts, those things that violate the social order or the separateness of the holy from the carnal are evil, or unacceptable (1966, p. 53) for windows. Older widows routinely administer these rites whenever a man passes away in the name of tradition: As one elderly widow stated:

We are following tradition. That is what our mother taught us. It is done for the good and well-being of the widow and society. If it is not done, something bad will happen to her. (Mami Rebecca, 12/08/09)

The above interview excerpt echoes Foucault's (1982, p. 781) notions of subject and objectification as a "governance" strategy in which power serve "as antagonism strategies" and as a "system of surveillance". "Governance", Foucault maintains is about "the exercise of action upon action" (Wolf, 1999, p. 5, cit. Foucault, 1982, pp. 427–428). It might be suggested in Foucauldian terms, that widows become and are constituted as subjects of a given regime of governmentality-the governmentality racket- "through a process of self-making and being made by power relations that produce consent through schemes of surveillance, discipline, control and administration" (Ong, 2006, p. 737). Pingpoh maintains that "widows who have gone through these rituals feel cheated and make sure they perform this act on their fellow sisters with exactitude, with the fear that if it was discontinued, something unexpected and unpleasant could happen to society" (2004, p. 5). In this sense, femininity and age are constitutive of cultural capital: "the discursive position available through gender relations that women are encouraged to inhabit and use. Its use will be informed by the network of social positions of class, gender, ethnicity through which, it ensures that it will be taken up ..." (Skeggs, 1997, p. 10) over time. Similarly, this defence of WRP using the culture and continuity argument resonate with Comaroff and Roberts's (1977) view that ideology can be strategically deployed to achieve different aims. In line with Bourdieu's concept of habitus, it might be suggested that through the repeated performance of these WRP, these women have acquired a set of schemes of dispositions, perceptions, and appreciations, which tends to orient their practice and give them meaning. The habitus is simultaneously the effect of the actions of, and [their] interaction with, others [women]. It is both a "structured structure" and a "structuring structure"—simultaneously suggesting and constraining their future actions (Bourdieu, 1992). Critically, the habitus is embodied, that is, "located within the body and affects every aspect of human embodiment." (Shilling, 1993, p. 129). This presents women as perpetrators and supporters of violent traditional practices against themselves. Their positions will be seen as inaccessible to anybody apart from those ritually sanctioned through the experience of widowhood. As Bourdieu maintains, the power of an agent to accumulate various forms of capital and to define those forms as legitimate, is proportionate to their position in the social structure (Bourdieu, 1992). These ritual accounts and beliefs, therefore, constitute a kind of paradoxical vernacular sociological commentary on contemporary social and political life among the Balengou.

### **3.5. The paradox of womanhood and widowhood**

Women have very strong powers. They are both good and bad. They give birth, but they can also take away life very easily. They need to be controlled because they are emotional and can easily be deceived by other men into killing their husbands using their mystical powers or even poison. Our ancestors thought that if they are submitted to rigorous widowhood rites and practices, other women will be deterred from killing or even thinking of killing their husbands so as to become happy widows. (Jean-Nana, Interview of 20/10/09)

The previous interview except by a male respondent throws up interesting beliefs as well as contradictions surrounding womanhood, women's presumed mystical powers and the dangers they are

presumed to pose to the male establishment. They must, for this reason, be disciplined through rigorous WRP that will deter other women from killing their husbands in any way so as to enjoy his accumulated wealth.

In every society, women are extolled because they are the source of human life and, therefore, key stakeholders in the process of biological and social reproduction, but they are also feared because of their perceived witchcraft powers. This makes it necessary to curb their powers through dehumanizing WRP through the mechanism of disavowal and projection (Gilman, 1989) which ultimately leads to women's oppression. The life giving process is characterized by a disruption of bodily self-boundaries and by a lack of the physicality of men's experiences as the root cause of women's oppression (De Bouvoire, 1952/1989; Ortnier, 1974). The physicality of women's childbearing experiences escapes men. Feminists who endorse this view are, however, unable to transcend dualistic conceptual thinking (Butler, 1999; MacCormack, 1977). In response to Beauvoir's analysis, Mary O'Brien maintains, "there is no way for (women) to escape, except by an undignified catch-up scramble along the paths which men have beaten" (O'Brien, 1981, p. 71). While subscribing to the view that biological differences in reproduction are the root of women's oppression, O'Brien associates physical difference in reproduction with consciousness. O'Brien argues that men's discontinuous childbearing experience results in a dialectical structure of reproductive consciousness (Hegel, 1948/1802), in which conflicts exists between the negation of self in the sex act and the human tendency to resist negation of self. Since this dialectical structure of reproductive consciousness cannot be mediated by the reproductive process, O'Brien argues that men must create artificial means through which they can mediate these contradictions and verify their own integration in the human species. Patriarchy enables men to mediate these contradictions through the legal appropriation of women through marriage, and physical separation of women from other men through legal appropriation of children, men claim ownership over women's reproductive labour, thereby creating a dialectical structure of reproductive consciousness in women.

Contemporary sociological theories and research have focused much attention on the ways in which human experience both transcends dualisms and is shaped by society and culture. For instance, Foucault (1977) associates this self/body relationship with social power. Foucault argues that because the body used to be a locus of control through physical torture, power is now deployed and enforced through control over the mind. Through the control of ideas, individuals become subjects that regulate their selves through the regulation of their bodies. The result is what Foucault calls "docile bodies" or bodies that conform and submit to societal control. This dovetails with the mind/body dualism argument in which the female body is turned into a metaphor for the corporeal pole representing nature, emotionality, irrationality, and sensuality. The aim of WRP, we maintain, is to create "docile bodies" through the shaping of women's subjectivity. Put differently, the female body is always the "other": mysterious, unruly, threatening to erupt and challenge the patriarchal order, symbolizing all what needs to be tamed and controlled by (dis)embodied masculine rationality (Davis, 1997, p. 5, see also Lupton, 1994, pp. 3–4). The social gaze is accordingly always on women and not on men here because men's witchcraft activities are socially sanctioned and even licensed unlike female mystical powers which are assumed to be destructive and the cause of men's death.

Nevertheless, the gendering of emotions is paradoxical. Emotionally inexpressive women are however considered to be lacking tenderness and may be viewed as lacking appropriate femininity (Jaggar, 1989, p. 157). There is a strong symbolic link between femininity and emotionality. Women are, on the whole "naturally" good at dealing with other people's emotions. This is because, unlike men, they are believed to be in themselves inherently emotional and emotionally expressive. Although, they are presumed to have a greater capacity for emotional feeling, they also bear highly negative meanings-in regards to understandings about their self-inferiority. This emotionality is associated with weakness of will, insufficient capacity for reasoned thought and loss of control. This has led to the subjugation of women to a wide constellation of negative characterizations (e.g. as polluting, dangerous temptresses (Douglas, 1980). Even their bodies have been accused of being "inherently different from men's [bodies] in ways that made them both defective and dangerous"

(Lacquer, 1999). Accordingly, widows are prohibited from having sex during the mourning period because they are supposedly impure. As a result of the negative characterization of women, they have been systematically overdressed and undressed, locked indoors and exposed to public humiliation, and even burnt at the stake to placate men's fears about the hyperbolized, often mythologized, dangers their bodies are purported to pose (Arthur, 1999; Daly, 1999; Weitz, 1998). This is evident from the seclusion of widows during the mourning period. Ironically, while women are associated with unbridled sexuality, there is an apparent male/female double standard here. Jaggar has pointed to the complex association of a number of binary oppositions linking femininity with emotionality: "not only has reason been contrasted with emotion, but it has also been associated with the mental, the cultural, the universal, the public, and the male, whereas, emotion has been associated with the irrational, the physical, the natural, the particular, the private, and, of course, the female" (1989, p. 145). The persistent association of emotion and emotionality with femininity, therefore associates femininity with other negative meanings associated with emotions, such as irrationality, the chaotic nature of "grotesque" body, lack of reason and cultivation and membership of lower orders. As Brownmiller (1984, p. 208) points out, "it is commonly agreed that women are tossed and buffeted on the high seas of emotion, while men have the tough mental fiber, the intellectual muscle, to stay in control". The binary opposition that positions women with body and men with the mind denotes a view of femininity that incorporates the negative meanings associated with the body: "if, whatever the specific historical content of the duality, the body is the negative term, and if woman is the body, then women are that negativity, whatever it may be: distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death" (Bordo, 1993, p. 4, original emphases). Judith Butler's double process of disavowal and projection are useful here: "The abstract, masculine epistemological subject is abstract to the extent that it disavows its socially marked embodiment [including sexuality] and further, projects that disavowed and disparaged embodiment onto the feminine sphere, effectively renaming the body as female" (1990, p. 16). Disavowal and projection are crucial parts of the very mechanism of constructing widows as "others". Also regarding the mechanisms of projection, Sander Gilman writes: "The control of the woman's body becomes the projection of the male's own sense of lack of control over his own body" (1989, p. 302).

### **3.6. Widowhood rites and practices: "false consciousness" or "patriarchal bargain"?**

Patriarchal socio-cultural expectations have imposed WRP on women as a mark of love for their deceased husbands and as a way of ensuring their personal and social identity. They are keen, and have been socialized to project themselves as good and innocent wives. Elderly widows as ritual experts are the ones simultaneously charged with socializing younger widows and administering WRP on them. The concepts of "patriarchal bargain" and "false consciousness" are useful for explaining the exercise of this ritual power by elderly women over younger women through stringent WRP. Ritual accusations, Geschiere (1997) maintains, have both critical and conservative aspects and such accusations make that power appear magical and unchallengeable.

While this discourse emboldens elderly widows with social power, it also provides membership to new widows by serving as a stepping stone to ritual power. Accordingly, the reproduction of WRP tends to mystify ritual power in a way that enables elderly women to maintain power over time. This gendered status is accessible only to these ritually sanctioned women. These ritual accounts and beliefs are, for this reason, constitutive of a kind of vernacular sociological commentary on social and political life and its simultaneous maintenance and reproduction over time among the Balengou. The close link between elderly women and ritual power deserves closer analysis because it does not directly improve the material living conditions of these women as ritual experts, but rather, only helps to demean fellow women. Opinions are however, divided as to whether the institution of widowhood gives women some agency or not, although it is clearly a human rights violation. On the one hand, they can be perceived as victims in the predominantly patriarchal Balengou setting in which they operate. Though their actions are endorsed by the patriarchal order, the operations and organizational structure of the rite is entirely filled by women. All male elders attested that widowhood

rites are women's business and that they support it because it is dictated by tradition. One of my male respondents pointed out that:

It is a tradition that women monopolize for the well-being of society. For a widow not to submit herself to the rite is a sign of bad luck for herself. We men have nothing to do with this tradition because our forefathers did not take part in it, but our grandmothers did and have transmitted it to our sisters and mothers who are continuing with it. (Papa James, interview of 16/12/09)

This monopoly of knowledge of widowhood rituals by women would seem to weaken the claim of gender discrimination since practitioners and male village elders see it as a form of gendered social capital. On the other hand, it is possible to understand this situation in terms of a form of "false consciousness" whereby the women think they are in control but in an actual sense, they are "pawns" in a patriarchal setting (Mackinnon, 1982, pp. 535–537; Sandra, 1992, p. 151). Mackinnon (1982, pp. 535–537) for example argues that oppression is at times disguised as a feature of the natural world (false consciousness) leading to the misconstruction/glossing over of its inherently oppressive character (Eisenstein, 1983).

Nevertheless, the false consciousness argument is beset with epistemological challenges (Lynne, 1987; Stanley & Wise, 1983; Weedon, 1987). This necessitates the questioning of the implicit notion of false consciousness because it suggests the existence of a pure "essentialised" category of "woman", "widow" which those accused of false consciousness are striving to emulate. Stanley and Wise (1983) for instance disapproved the determinist attitude embedded in accusation of false consciousness and stated that "We reject the idea that scientists, or feminists, can become experts in other people's lives .... [F]eminism's present renaissance has come about precisely because many women have rejected other people's [men's] interpretations of our lives. Feminism insists that women should define and interpret [their] own experiences .... [F]eminists must attempt to reject the scientist/person dichotomy and, in doing so, must endeavor to dismantle the power relationship which exists between researchers and researched (pp. 194–195). Similarly, Gorelick (1991, p. 467) argues that the "solution [does not] lie in asserting that their [subject] understanding is perfectly valid, as if the nature of the world were merely a matter of opinion". From the accounts of the widows above, it is clear that they are conscious and even have an agenda of their own in protecting the social capital and symbolic power available to them since they continue to perpetuate WRP on other women with exactitude and without mercy (Pingpoh, 2004). Men's failure/unwillingness to submit themselves to stringent observances of similar rites and practices suggests that these women's symbolic capital is limited. This resonates with Sherry Gorelick's analysis of "hidden structures of oppression". She maintains that "In Capital, Marx (1867/1967) showed that the most fundamental social relations occur "behind the backs" of the actor. Appearance contradicts reality: Workers feel dependent on capitalists for employment and wages, yet in reality they produce daily, in surplus value, the wages with which they are paid and the wealth that permits their continued subjugation" (Gorelick, 1991, p. 463). By shaping local discourses, the gendered space of WRP with its negative prohibitions is an extension of patriarchal hegemony. In return patriarchy gives widows the illusion that they will reciprocate through liverate. The social context of WRP are shaped by factors far beyond the local context, what Smith (1987a) terms as "extra-local determinants". These are the remote causes of economic deprivation that includes the gendering of norms and the negation of women's human rights. However, in spite of the trauma of loss caused by the passing away of a beloved husband, the consciousness of a widow is raised (Mies, 1983, p. 125). The institution of widowhood defines women primarily in terms of certain bodily expectations and regimes. This suggests, in a sense that it seeks to inscribe "womanliness" onto bodies through the rituals so as inculcate a certain socially desirable femininity. Widowhood rituals are sub-components of the patriarchal complex. The institution of widowhood might be said to be pursuing a patriarchal agenda that oppresses women. These instances of oppression are however masked by what Kandiyoti (1988) called the "patriarchal bargain." Kandiyoti argues that "classical" patriarchal bargain has the "implicit promise of increased male responsibility ... and therefore a small price needs to be paid in exchange for the security,

stability and presumed respect that this order promised them.” Kandiyoti concedes that women create bargain arrangements with patriarchy in their communities to improve their life chances. “Different forms of patriarchy present women with distinct “rules of the game” and calls for different strategies to maximize security and optimize life options with varying potential for active or passive resistance in the face of oppression .... “women strategize within a set of concrete constraints that reveal and define the blueprint of the patriarchal bargain in any given society .... These patriarchal bargains exert a powerful influence on the shaping of women’s gendered subjectivity and determine the nature of gender ideology in different contexts”. Similarly, as Gorelick has argued “ideologies of oppression are often internalized while the underlying structures of oppression are hidden” (1991, p. 459). It is clear that widowhood privileges some women (particularly working class women) at the expense of poor women. Even more crucially the old widows have economic and political interests in the institution of widowhood which they seek to protect through claims of defending their culture at the expense of others.

The institution of widowhood has not translated its symbolic power into improved material conditions for widows. While the human rights discourse has exposed the cruelty of the WRP, women are still partisans of it. This situation has resonances with the ritual practice of female circumcision that is undertaken by women on other women as a socio-cultural practice that inscribes gendered identity, fertility and community membership to those who submit themselves to it. Its entanglement with fertility is a form of false consciousness that benefits patriarchy while imposing a particular bodily discipline (governmentality) on women who are under strong pressure to undergo the ritual procedures (see Okemwa, 1996, p. 177, Pemunta, 2014b). Through intercultural contact, those who subscribe to stringent widowhood rituals might discover the hidden structure of oppression and from now on change their condition. For the very act of trying to change the structure tends to bring the nature of the system of oppression into bolder relief” (Mies, 1983 in Gorelick, 1991, p. 465).

#### **4. Discussion and conclusion: beyond the nightmare of WRP**

This study has argued that the social institutionalization of WRP among the Balengou should be analyzed and understood in terms of “extra-local structures” that shape women’s habitus and their life worlds. As a constitutive patriarchal complex, these complex web of customary practices are a tacit expression of men’s fear of the perceived mystical powers emanating from women’s perceived emotionality and irrationality through the process of disavowal and projection (Butler, 1999). By submitting them to denigrating widowhood rites and practices as a mechanism of governmentality (Foucault, 1977), this mystical power could be harnessed and curbed. Yet, women submit themselves to WRP as an act of “false consciousness” and as a form of “patriarchal bargain” (Kandiyoti, 1988) since the institution of liverate is actually intended to reproduce and perpetuate patriarchal authority through both biological and social reproduction. Rather, it serves the interests of patriarchy since women are “capital bearing objects” whose value accrues to the primary groups to which they belong (e.g. husbands or the family) (Lovell, 2000; Skeggs, 2004). Additionally, within this oppressive patriarchal framework, women’s habituses have been shaped into accepting denigrating and traumatizing WRP as a mechanism of pleading their innocence and as a source of “security”. Patriarchy as a power field deploys both coercion and the incorporation of the interests and priorities of widows as social actors for the achievement of its hegemonic agenda and projects (Gramsci, 1971).

These oppressive WRP are embedded in customary law (particularly in the land tenure system) and religion. The co-existence of customary and received systems of law, however, calls for the harmonization and humanization of these practices. The humanization of these practices is achievable through the institutionalization of laws regarding marriage, succession and inheritance that are grounded in notions of equality and social justice between the sexes. Reforming these WRP will imply a wholesale overhaul of existing gendered laws. In other words, the balance of democratic values and the promotion of women’s rights are not at variance. Women are partners in development. They should therefore be allowed to own and dispose of both movable and immovable property. Rather than being allowed to suffer unduly under the oppressive and coercive burden of culture, tradition and societal stereotypes that are sustained by conditions of poverty and

dependability. As Sarpong (2013) rightly maintains, the cruelty of these widowhood rites and practices is misplaced. In other words, conservative forces can be balanced with reforms. As in the fight against other harmful traditional practices, we need not gloss over the theological and anthropological cultural views underpinning these practices. For instance, decades of colonial and missionary opposition to clitoridectomy because of its presumed cruelty has instead succeeded in pushing the ritual practices underground (see for instance Okemwa, 1996, p. 177; Pemunta, 2014b). The need for a holistic perspective makes it incumbent to examine all dimensions of a social practice while keeping in mind that “the key to abolition is not condemnation but understanding and persuasion” (Sarpong, 2013, p. 13).

The fight against cruel WRP and other harmful traditional practices calls for an intersectionalist perspective in the analysis, planning and implementation of gender-sensitive development strategies that will lift women out of poverty, by re-establishing their human rights, well-being, and social development. Apart from the adoption and effective implementation of policies and laws that are gender-neutral, “widows should be convinced that their late husbands have no power of the type they attribute to them. In any case their dead husbands must be presumed to be kind people who have attained their aim in life and would like them rather to be happy” (Sarpong, 2013, p. 16).

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#### Notes

1. Although jurisdiction is shared between the customary and the received laws, in Francophone Cameroon for example the parties have the option of jurisdiction and in Anglophone Cameroon the high courts have monopoly over letters of administration and on the basis of which they entertain matters normally subject to the jurisdiction of the customary courts.
2. Ibid.

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