

The economic position of Beti widows, past and present

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« Whoever says wealth, means number of men to command... All of Ewondo social and political life therefore rested on marriage, on women » (Ngoa : 225).

Since the commercialisation of the Beti economy, material possessions — cocoa plantations and cash income — have replaced dependants as the most important source and symbol of wealth. This radical change in economic structure and standards of value has necessarily placed the institution of marriage in a changed context ; its form and many of its functions bear little resemblance to the system which Henri Ngoa described in such fine detail. Polygamy has declined both in frequency and the number of wives per man, and the proportion of women who are married at any one time is certainly lower than it was in the past. Consequently new categories of marital status have emerged which barely existed or existed under a different form is the pre-colonial system : unmarried motherhood, divorce and separation, and widowhood. But in spite of the dismantlement of the indigenous political and economic structure which gave marriage its meaning, the inter-personal relationships of the present marital system in the rural areas are almost entirely guided by customary law. Although unmarried

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motherhood and widowhood existed in a very different context in the past, it is a reinterpreted version of « tradition » which governs the lives of unmarried mothers and widows in the present.

This paper explores the themes of continuity of cultural principles and change in the basis of wealth, by singling out the status of widowhood.

The cardinal importance of marriage in the past meant that a woman was *nkus*, a widow, strictly speaking only for the few months between the death of her husband and the formal inheritance of his property of which she was a part.

« (T)he traditional society had provided mechanisms intended to ensure, whatever happened, the stability of marriage..., the death of the husband did not, in the view of the clans, put an end to the marriage : the widow did not regain her freedom, she simply changed her allegiance » (Ngoa : 231).

By contrast, the census of 1962 shows that twenty-three per cent of women of fifteen or over in the rural area around Yaounde, were widows (R.F.C. : 56). My own censuses of two villages in the Lekie in 1975 and 1976 showed twenty-one per cent widowed, and M.-P. de Thé found a very similar pattern in her own research (de Thé, 1965 : 133). It is worth noting that these rates of widowhood for the Beti are considerably higher than the national average of fourteen per cent (R.U.C. : 15). There are, therefore, two related issues : the more theoretical question of how widows fit into an economic and legal system in which women are no longer the major item of wealth, and the more practical question of how these women, who account for a large proportion of the adult population, make a living for themselves.

There are four parts to the paper. The first is concerned with the economic status of widows in pre-colonial society ; I draw on my own field-work and the works of Laburthe-Tolra, de Thé, and Ngoa. The second is a brief history of social and legal changes in widows' status during the colonial period. The third analyses the present position of widows, using my own field data from two villages in the Lekie, studied in 1965 and 1976. Finally, four individual cases are described to illustrate the range of variation in widows' situations.

Table 1

WIDOWS, BY AGE GROUP. LEKIE, 1975-76

<i>Adult Female Population</i>		<i>Widows</i>	<i>(b) as % of (a)</i>
<i>Age Group</i>	<i>(a)</i>	<i>(b)</i>	
16-30	119	—	0
31-45	91	8	9
46-60	51	19	37
61 +	50	40	80
Total	311	67	

Before proceeding to part 1, it is important to look at the demographic characteristics of the present widowed population in order to identify which would be the corresponding category of women in the pre-colonial system ; *minkus* of the past and *minkus* of the present are only partially comparable categories of women. The following table summarizes the age distribution of the widowed female population in two villages in the Lekie.

Widows are, for the most part, women past menopause ; one therefore needs to compare their position, not only with the widows of the past with old women in general.

1. Widows and old women in pre-colonial society

The pre-colonial economic system was defined in terms of the social adults, the men who had passed through the initiation ritual *ssò*, married and founded their own village. All the other people — women, children and slaves — formed part of the wealth of the man they belonged to and their main economic function was to increase his fortune. Wives were the key people in the process of accumulation because they contributed in several ways : they bore children, they produced food for daily subsistence and for the feasts which accompanied exchange, certain of their agricultural and artisanal products could be exchanged against the indigenous money (*mimbas*, *bikie*), and their presence alone cemented the political alliances between clans. All the wealth generated by a wife automatically belonged to her husband ; she controlled only subsistence products. The widows a man left when he died were the most valuable part of his estate, especially young women who could still bear children, and therefore contribute to the male economy to the maximum degree. They were inherited by his successors, and became their wives (*beyal*, sing. : *ngal*) with the same status as if they had been acquired through the payment of bridewealth.

Wives past menopause were also inherited, although their value was diminished and varied from woman to woman according to their achievements during their husbands' life, and their personal skills. Old women still contributed to the agricultural economy of their inheritor, and could be very important to his prosperity through the practice of medicine, midwifery, and particularly through expertise in the women's ritual *mevungu* which counteracted failing productivity in human reproduction, in agriculture, in hunting or in any of the activities which were basic to the economy. The value of the widows and the way in which each had added to their husbands' wealth was discussed during the division of his property ; it could vary from the *nnya nnam*, « mother of the country », who had borne her husband many children, both sons and daughters, to the *ngun*, « rubbish », the childless with no other redeeming value.

All widows, regardless of their value, were attributed to an inheritor, but their past and possible future contributions to the male eco-

nomny were an important determinant of the situation in which they had to re-establish their lives. In their inheritor's village all wives had the right to a house to live in, land which they could cultivate and basic security of life in case of illness or attack. But they came to this new residence impoverished, essentially starting again in certain domains of their lives. Their own personal stores of food and planting material had been exhausted by the combined demands of the funeral and the ceremonies of purification, and a change of village residence meant leaving their own fallow land (*bikodog*) and their old houses. A woman past child-bearing age whose son was already a social adult generally went to live in his village where she was respected and looked after by her son's wives. An old woman with no children or only daughters who had married away was much more vulnerable to neglect ; she might get land, but no help with the clearing, a house, but no help with repairs, and food, but few of the specialities. All this depended on the personal character of her inheritor and her own relationship to him. The relative abundance of both time and subsistence goods probably meant that no one was seriously neglected, but childless old women were certainly a vulnerable section of the population. They needed to be able to work and thereby feed themselves to be sure that their needs would be met.

2. The colonial period and changes in the law

The conditions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provoked extreme exaggerations in some of the characteristics of the Beti marriage system. Alliance between clans remained a very important aspect of marriage, initially to cement trade links and later to establish relations of protection between colonial chiefs and their subjects. At the same time the pressures on the rural population to intensify agricultural production for the world market and to supply labor to colonial enterprises, meant that the work which wives did for their husbands became more important. The result was a system of exchange of women which many observers and participants found differed little from servitude. With respect to widows, administrator Bertaut wrote in 1935 that the main aim of the inheritor amongst the Bulu was « to sell her again to the highest bidder » (Bertaut : 172), and Owono's novel *Tante Bella* documents the life of a widow during the 1920s and 1930s who was inherited and re-inherited, regardless of her welfare, because of the high value her daughter commanded in bridewealth.

The manner in which women were transferred from one « owner » to another became one of the polemic battlegrounds between the Administration, with its contradictory policies of « civilisation » and repression, the church and the indigenous elite. The church was intransigently opposed to widow inheritance since it automatically returned christian converts to polygamous marriages with pagans. But even the christian chiefs refused to accept the rupture of marriage without repayment of the bridewealth. Because it depended on the chiefs, the Administration

accepted their position, and issued a series of decrees granting widows free choice to remarry under various more or less complex conditions of return of bridewealth, most of which depended, in the final analysis, on the intervention of the local european administrator. The following passage from the law of 11th Jan. 1936 illustrates the futility of these measures for the ordinary rural woman.

« The death of the husband does not *ipso facto* imply the rupture of the marriage contract. In principle the wife is required to stay in the family of her husband, but she can ask to go home to her own family to live and subsist there under the ordinary conditions of indigenous family life. In this case the widow has only to present herself to the *Chef de Subdivision* who will give her a certificate of the decision... In no case can the remarriage of a widow take place without the previous repayment of the bridewealth to the inheritor » (*Journal Officiel du Cameroun*).

More radical changes in widow inheritance did not, and probably could not, take place until after the abolition, in 1946, of the *indigenat*, forced labor and the chieftaincy system which administered them. By this time cocoa was replacing all other sources of wealth in the rural areas. Cocoa farms were individually owned and the restricted family replaced the village economic organisation of the past. The vested interest in the maintenance of bridewealth as the determining factor in the « ownership » of women and children, were clearly weakened, while the opposition to it was militant. After 1946 measures were passed giving widows increasing areas of freedom, culminating in the last major marriage legislation in 1966. This act defines the widow as a free person, whose liberty and property can in no way be compromised by supposed inheritors of bridewealth rights in her. The legitimacy of any subsequent children she may bear is not determined by the conditions of her former marriage, and she alone has the right to consent to her own children's marriage. In principle, a widow also has rights to her deceased husband's real property, especially the house and farms to which both of them contributed their labor.

The law is most clearly enforceable where it prevents certain practices from taking place, as S. Melone writes, those customary practices judged to be contrary to « the public order ». The decisions which determine people's rights in particular cases are left to a great extent in the sphere of customary law, interpreted by a group of designated notables in each district. Determination of the rights of « uninherited widows » is an issue which is hammered out from day to day, in family conferences and in the local courts. The patterns of residence and economic activity which emerge are discussed in the following section.

3. Widows in the present-day rural economy

The basic reality of women's economic lives is the fact that men are the ultimate owners of the land. Very little land has been surveyed and registered with the local courts, so that all questions relating to ownership, devolution, and boundaries fall in the sphere of customary law. The tradition does not provide any precedent for women to inherit land with full freehold rights, and with the stiff competition about land and cocoa farms amongst men, it is very unlikely that a precedent could be created. A case was heard in the Okola court during 1975 where a widow was trying to register her deceased husband's cocoa farm under her own name, citing the principle of « *mise en valeur* » ; she had helped to plant the cocoa and therefore had a right to it. The issue finally provoked violence, between her and other villagers, the extent of which became the subject of further dispute. A lawyer commented that it would be very unusual for a widow to win a case of this sort. Women's rights in land are use rights. These do have a legal status and can be defended in court, but the land tenure system implies that women get access to their livelihood through their relationship to a man. As long as land is inherited certain aspects of widow inheritance continue to survive. Every widow is still attributed to a male kinsman of her husband, to whom she « belongs » ; the beti term *a woge ai*, « she belongs to », is now translated as « she depends on ». Court records on land disputes between widows and their inheritors still cite inheritance agreements which include the widow as come of the items, along with the bridewealth rights in her daughters, the cocoa farm and fallow land.

Widows are therefore tied to their husbands' village, not by compulsion but by the kind of rights in property and income they can defend in the various possible alternative homes open to them. The following table summarizes the attribution pattern of the sixty-seven widows living in the two eton villages studied ; that is, it shows which men the widows primarily depend on.

Table 2

ATTRIBUTION OF WIDOWS. TWO ETON VILLAGES

1975-76 N = 67

<i>Attribution</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Husband's patri-kinsman	89
— own son	45
— husband's son	12
— other	32
Own patri-kinsman	10
Other	1
Total	100

The majority of widows are clearly living in their marital homes. But the pattern is somewhat influenced by whether individual widows have children or not. Those who are living in their natal village are, without exception, women with no living sons ; one has a daughter and the remaining six have no children at all. On the other hand, not all the childless widows choose to return home. Table 3 shows that three fourths of the widows without sons are still living with their husbands' people.

Table 3

ATTRIBUTION OF WIDOWS, BY MOTHERHOOD STATUS
PERCENTAGE OF ALL WIDOWS. TWO ETON VILLAGES, 1975-76

<i>Attribution</i>	<i>Motherhood Status</i>	
	<i>With Sons</i>	<i>Without Sons</i>
Own son	45	—
Husband's son	1	11
Other kin of husband	12	20
Own patri-kinsman	—	10
Other	—	1
Total	58	42

The pattern suggests that there are two kinds of interest which widows have in their husbands' home ; one which is imperative, relates to the function they fulfill in the transmission of property from husband to son, and the other, more open to individual variation, relates to personal rights to support and the means to earn a living.

All property passes from father to son. It only passes laterally, from a man to his junior brother, under two circumstances : first, if there are no sons, and second, temporarily, if the sons are still children. But by virtue of descent from a common ancestor in the male line, all « brothers » have residual rights in each other's land. Under the present circumstances of land shortage, in the Lekie, boundaries are very difficult to defend against encroachment by kinsmen unless the land is worked ; it is the twice-yearly clearing of new food plots on fallow land by his wife which reaffirms a man's ownership of the land, and defines the share which will pass to her sons. This principle can be traced back to the pre-colonial inheritance system, described by Laburthe, where « the value of the mother defines the value of the share of the group of her sons » (Laburthe-Tolra : 475). Where her value in the past was defined in terms of the amount of her bridewealth, the number of daughters she had borne, and the number of other women she had, directly or indirectly, recruited to her husband's village, it is now reflected in the amount of land she has maintained and cultivated and which her sons can therefore lay claim to. She is the one who knows her husband's land the best and can draw on her long experience of its history in case of dispute, over either the fallow land or the cocoa farm. A widow is therefore a resource to her sons, even after their

adulthood ; she is the only person of the older generation who is unequivocally on their side. But she has to be there, since a woman cannot claim land if she has abandoned her husband's village.

In the case where a man dies while his sons are still minors his widow plays an even more critical role. A trustee is chosen from among the brothers of the deceased, to look after the widow, the children and the property until the oldest son can take the responsibility. Since the trustee already holds residual rights in the land the temptation is very great to profit from the situation and rent, loan it, or adjust the boundaries for his own benefit. In the tradition, the trustee is entirely within his rights ; the whole matter would be considered internal to the domestic group because he would have inherited the widow as well. Consequently, there is no clear precedent for anyone else to intervene. But if the widow is forceful in her defence of her husband's property she is almost always found in the right by the village chief and notables. The outcome, for the sons, depends on their mother's determination. One widow told how her husband's trustee was gradually taking over the cocoa farm. In protest she went out to the farm and started cutting down the trees with her matchet. The matter was hastily regulated by a village meeting and she was allowed full control of the farm, in trust for her son, who is now the owner. In another case, the widow had let things slide because she cohabitated with her inheritor and had borne him two children. Her oldest son by her husband, then a young man of nineteen living in the city, was extremely concerned and was considering trying to claim the inheritance before there were any further losses. A widow, therefore, does have rights of trusteeship in her husband's property, but she has to claim them : they do not fall to her automatically, and she cannot pursue and defend them unless she lives in her husband's village.

It is clear that women without sons do not perform the same function in the property system. They do maintain their husband's land and they do defend the interests of the sons of co-wives, if there are any. As Table 3 shows, twenty-five per cent of widows without sons depend on their husbands' sons. One household consisted, for example, of two sisters who had been co-wives. One was sterile but much brighter than the other, so she managed the property for other's son. But in cases where a man had no sons at all, his widow is inherited by a more distant kinsman, to whom she is an obstacle rather than an asset. Because she can claim the absolute right to continue to cultivate the fallow land, and the probable right to some share of the cocoa income until she dies, the inheritor of the land may see her as standing in the way of his full enjoyment of the property. A childless widow who is even mildly demanding may find herself effectively evicted. The outcome depends, to a great extent, on the personal situations of the protagonists ; but twenty-four per cent of childless widows have left their husband's village to live with their natal kin, where they perform no function at all in the transmission of property.

Turning to the question of widows' conditions of life, they obviously have stronger claims on the use of property where their

claims reconfirm ownership rights for the man to whom they are entrusted. In general, a woman is either a « wife » or a « daughter » : wives establish ownership rights, daughters do not. Whether widowed or married, a woman has the land rights of a wife in her husband's village ; that is, she has the right to enough land for her food farms, and having once cultivated a plot she has the prior right to return to it or loan it to a friend. It becomes her plot, and even her husband is not free to do as he likes with it without her consent. By contrast, a daughter is assimilated to her mother's economy and does not establish on-going rights in the plots she cultivates. The greater the land shortage the more important the difference between the two statuses and the greater a widow's interest to stay where she has maximum rights.

Rights to fallow land for food cultivation are a widow's basic personal security, to provide subsistence and a cash income for the daily necessities of life. During her husband's lifetime, however, lump sum costs of living were financed out of his cocoa income : housing, school fees for children, important medical expenses, and bridewealth for the sons. After his death the trustee or inheritor of the cocoa farm is supposed to take over these expenses for his dependents. In many cases the demands of the widow on this income and the demands of the trustee are in conflict. The trustee sees himself as the manager and worker on the farm, and consequently wants the same kind of free choice about spending the income as with his own farm ; in this case, he is bound to favor the needs of his own wife and children over those of the widow and her children. The widow, meanwhile, sees her standard of living fall and many struggle to gain complete control of the farm, which she may succeed in doing. But she then has to either work it herself, which competes with her food farming and often results in a decline in technical standards and/or overwork, or hire laborers to do the work. She is much better off than a woman who accepts an ungenerous trustee, but can never get as high an income from the farm as men, whose food is taken care of by their wives. A woman's right to a cash income from the men's side of the economy is markedly compromised by the death of her husband ; one hardly ever meets a woman whose situation would make her a « merry widow ».

The same difficulties arise with rights to male labor as with rights to a man's income. Unless she has a son to clear her fields and repair her house, a widow will generally manage to do the work herself or pay for it out of her own income. One very old widow used most of her small income from the cocoa farm to pay laborers to clear her food fields. Even with the best will in the world, a man with his own cocoa farm, his own wife's fields to clear and possibly his mother's as well, cannot easily find the time and energy to clear for his brothers' widows, although he can, if he makes it a priority, pay the laborers or help to call a work party. Some men, even with very low incomes, do try to provide support for the older women of the family, but it is simply not dependable so that the production possibilities open to them are affected by the necessity to be self-sufficient.

In general, the rights which a widow can claim against the men's

side of the economy are greater in her husband's than in her father's village, so that even childless widows remain after their husbands' death. But their position is not only determined by their rights, but by the contribution they can make to a household. Only six of the sixty-seven widows (nine per cent) are living entirely alone, and hardly any are totally incapable of any kind of work. An elderly woman can be a great asset to a household because she makes a contribution to the food supply, the cooking and household chores, the child-minding, often to the money economy as well, and her presence gives some flexibility to women with young children in case of sickness and childbirth. A woman may be positively welcomed into a household where her rights are not strong if an extra pair of hands is needed. Every woman supports herself and a great many work harder than they should. Young men sometimes try to persuade their mothers to take life easier, but most simply refuse, in spite of illness, back trouble or aching joints. Her work is the basis of a woman's pride and of her personal security.

4. Cases of widows' situations

The following cases are not intended to be typical, but simply illustrative of the range of variation in widows' lives.

Marie

Marie is about forty years old and has been widowed for four years. She was the second wife of a much older man who had no children by his first wife. She has borne about ten children of whom six are still living ; the oldest son is eighteen and the youngest child is eight. These two, and one other child who is severely handicapped, live with her. Two daughters are already married and another lives with her sister and attends school there. Both widows remained in their husband's village, and are now considered to « depend on » Marie's oldest son. The cocoa plantation they inherited was small and in poor condition by the time her husband died. She and her son tried to start another, but it did not do well so they get very little income from cash crops. Marie cultivates food plots, from which she sells some produce, and her son cuts firewood for sale to the city. She lives, on and off, with an unmarried relative of her husband, but he is poor and makes no contribution to the household in labor or in cash, although he does bring palm wine which Marie drinks regularly. The money they earn covers minor food and household costs, but not much else. When her kitchen needed repairing she was able to recruit the help of one of her sons-in-law. Their dominant concern is how to raise bridewealth funds for the son to marry. His sisters were married long ago so the bridewealth received for them has already been spent. At the moment, raising any large

amount of money seems virtually impossible unless the son tries something more lucrative.

Élise

Élise is about sixty-five years old and lives in a small room off the kitchen of her full brother's wife. She bore two children, but both died and she chose to return home after her husband's death, because she had « no one to build a house » for her. Her brother's household does not live from farming alone. He and his oldest daughter are both salaried, and another daughter makes a living in small trade. His wife has ten children, three of whom are in higher education in Yaoundé. Élise herself is responsible for a seventeen-year-old girl whose mother died, and the two of them farm together. She is a major resource to the household because of the heavy demands on her brother's wife as the only full-time farmer. Élise has her own farms on her brother's land, which she usually clears for herself, or pays laborers if she has the money. She takes food from her farms almost every day to prepare for the family as a whole, and sells produce to cover her own minor household supplies, clothes for herself and the girl, and contributions to her credit association. When she received the purse from her association, she gave two-thirds of the money to her brother to help pay his children's school fees. The family as a whole is making a major investment in the future of its children, to which Élise contributes in a variety of ways.

Claire

Claire is about seventy years old, living in her own house beside the houses of her three adult sons, all of whom are married and have children of their own. She shares her kitchen with her forty-year-old daughter who has returned home with a daughter after being separated from her husband. Claire has been widowed for at least thirty years and her last son was borne to her husband's brother who inherited her. Because he is a devout Catholic and is married already, he never married her nor legitimised the son. This is a source of bitter dispute about the inheritance rights of the son, now that he is grown up, married and wants to establish a viable farm. He managed to pay his own bride-wealth by working for a Greek coffee concern, but when it comes to land, he is dependent on his kinship position, which is, technically « father unknown ». Claire is often called on to testify in the increasingly complicated disagreements amongst her sons and the legitimate son of her inheritor, but she says very little and only when called on. She still cultivates her own fields, cooks and feeds herself most of the time, in spite of painful arthritis. She earns a little money by trading in cigarettes, snuff and traditional tobacco, but all her major expenses are taken care of by her sons, who also give her a cash gift after the cocoa harvest. Whenever she is sick, she is looked after by her daughters-in-

law, who also occasionally cook for her and weed her farms. She is self-supporting at the moment but seems to be gradually retiring.

Alphonsine

Alphonsine is old. She bore one child which died and she returned to her natal village after her husband's death. By this time all the close kin of her own generation had died, leaving her to find a son of the brother to depend on. She says that he does very little for her, and in fact her very small house is unfinished. She is dependent on the generosity of a man to whom she is not related at all who lives next to her house site. He, his wife and adopted son make sure she is all right, have helped with some of the housebuilding, lend her land to cultivate and the son sometimes accompagnies her to farm, especially at clearing time. Her brother's son does provide her with land, and has helped with some of the work of housebuilding but gives her no help with money. Alphonsine works the usual two fields a year. To earn money she makes manioc flour but often has to use the money to pay laborers to clear her new fields. She is very poor, and very vulnerable to the downward spiral of old age.

Conclusion

In concluding, one needs to avoid giving the impression that the present system is in any way static. Marriage and property ownership continue to evolve, and often in an irregular fashion, which a research study captures at one particular moment in time. But there have been general trends. Widows emerged as a category of the population when combined legal and economic changes destroyed the basis of the pre-colonial and early colonial political structure ; control of large numbers of women was no longer critical to the acquisition of wealth, and widows were permitted to live where and with whom they pleased. However, the inheritance of property, particularly land and cocoa farms, still follows customary principles. In keeping with the tradition, women are excluded from inheritance but play a very important role in the maintenance of men's rights against their kinsmen. A widow's residence depends largely on whether she has sons or not, because the strongest position a woman can have in the property system is as the conduit for the transfer of wealth from her husband to her son.

But even without sons widows tend to stay in their husbands' villages, where their own rights to land and housing are superior to the other alternatives. There is, therefore, a degree of long terme stability in women's residence, after a certain age and especially after the birth of a son. It is not the same stability of marriage described by Ngoa, but it is equally determined by the property system. In this fact lies the continuity with the traditional system. A widow is now married and not

married at the same time ; *nkus* is not distinct from a married woman, she is a kind of married woman. She retains the rights of a married woman in relation to her husband's kin group but she loses the particular rights in an individual man's income and labor which marriage confers. She loses the obligation to work for and feed a particular man, but she retains the obligation to bring up his children and defend his property for his son.

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