

## Widowhood Practices in Cameroon: A Study of Charles Soh Tatcha's *Les Veuves de Mokala*

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### Abstract

Widowhood is a global phenomenon that cuts across all races. However, in Africa, the death of a husband usually portends obnoxious cultural practices. This paper demonstrates the devastating effect of HIV/AIDS virus on a family tree as a result of widowhood practices in Charles Soh Tatcha's *Les Veuves de Mokala*. Its aim is to highlight how some unlettered women escape being infected with this virus through the assertion of their humanness. Humanistic psychology forms the framework. The paper contends that the patriarchal objectification of the African woman coupled with superstitious beliefs constitute the strongest forces of resistance to the abolition of harmful widowhood practices in Cameroon and in Africa in general. The paper therefore recommends that raising awareness in women of their humanness through public outreach campaigns will help to liberate them. Also, disabusing the minds of the widows of their belief in the danger of noncompliance to widowhood rituals through punctilious evangelism will go a long way to deliver them from this bondage.

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### **Background to the Study**

Widowhood is a state of having lost one's spouse to death. It is a global phenomenon that cuts across all races. However, in Africa, there is cultural imbalance in the performance of widowhood rites by widows and widowers. Ajayi et al. (2019) observe that "widowhood practices have become the exclusive preserve for widows ... and not for widowers ...making women undergo various dehumanising treatments and abuse while mourning her spouse" (p.13). One of the interviewees of Vitalis and Fubah (2016) explains:

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. (p.13)

Widowhood practices in Africa differ from one culture to the other but bear a semblance of unity with regard to some of the obnoxious cultural practices the widow is subjected to. Ajayi et al. (2019) note:

In the Nigerian context which could be the case in other African countries, women whose spouses are deceased are subjected to numerous widowhood rites that expose their vulnerability. These rites include: consuming the water used to wash the corpse, sleeping in the same room where the corpse is laid, forced to marry her deceased husband's brother, confined to a room and forced to sit on ashes, served food on broken plates... (p. 2)

Chukwu-Okoronkwo (2015) observes that one of the horrendous nightmares that confronts a widow in various African cultures is the "scandalous accusation from the deceased husband's relations of having a hand in the man's death" (p.3). Ankiambom (2017) confirms that in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon, "widows took oaths or swore that they were not guilty of their husbands' death... When the corpse was laid in the grave, the widow usually made her last declaration, stating that she was innocent of her husband's death" (pp.840-841). Meanwhile, Cha (2019) holds a dissenting view to the cultural belief that when a man dies, the wife is culpable. She attributes the untimely death of husbands to polygamy. She argues that "polygamy helped to wear down most African Men which eventually led to their death but this was never seen as any cause of death" (p.124). Obviously, the accusers of the widow of having a hand in her husband's death hardly give a thought to this possibility. Widow inheritance or levirate marriage is also a common practice in many parts of Africa. Tati (2018) records that in Balikumbat in Cameroon "the widow was practically forced into the levirate" (p.59).

This study explores the devastating effect of HIV / AIDS virus on a family tree as a result of widowhood practices in Tatcha's *Les Veuves de Mokala*. The study anchors its argument on the theory of humanistic psychology. The aim is to highlight how some women, though unlettered, escape being infected with the HIV / AIDS virus through the assertion of their

humanness. There is dearth of research on the works of Charles Soh Tatcha, a Cameroonian writer, despite his significant literary output. This paper makes an attempt to fill the lacuna.

### **Theoretical Framework**

David Moss asserts that Abraham Maslow is the author of humanistic psychology and that his theory of the self and of self-actualization serves as a foundation for later humanistic psychologists (p.13). Polkinghorne (2015) states that humanist psychologists such as Allport, Rogers, May and Bugental postulate that “the self is this natural tendency force to actualize the fullness of an individual's personhood...the self is not a static object but a “self-in-process,” collaboratively created and re-created in the context of relationships” (p.88). He submits:

The need for acceptance by others and the press of social conformity produce self-concepts that distort and hide aspects of people's true selves... When people's self-concepts are in tune with their real selves, they are free to let their human potential manifest itself. (pp.90-91)

Serlin and Criswell (2015) affirm that humanistic psychologists focus on “the human qualities of choice and self-realization... Their ultimate concern is with the dignity and worth of humans and the development of the potential inherent in every person” (p.32). Strangor and Walinga (2014) on their part assert that humanistic psychology holds “a hopeful, constructive view of human beings and of their substantial capacity to be self-determining” (p.68). Evidently, self-in-process' is a central focal point in humanistic psychology. This framework will be employed in the exploration of widowhood practices in Tatcha's *Les Veuves de Mokala*.

### **Analysis of the Text**

Tatcha's *Les Veuves de Mokala* opens with the announcement of the death of Mokala: «on annonce le décès de Mokala» (p.9). The reader is at once informed that he is survived by five wives: «Mokala avait construit sa fortune. Et payé la dot de cinq épouses. » (Mokala has built his fortune. He paid dowry on five wives.) They are: Ma Ali, Mala, Matah, Mamba and Sufo: «Le fruit de son labeur» (p.9) (The fruit of his labour.) We are also informed that the widows would be inherited by his brothers according to their tradition: « Heureux les frères de Mokala qui vont héritier de ses biens. Et surtout, je dis bien, surtout des veuves, de ses veuves» (p.14). (Happy are the brothers of Mokala who are going to inherit his belongings. And especially, yes, I mean, especially the widows, his widows.)

No sooner had Mokala been buried than his brothers, Tenteu, Temenoss and Abo began to scramble for the widows. Tenteu visits Mala and informs her : « je voulais seulement que tu saches que le moment venu c'est moi qui vais...m'occuper quoi... Tu as compris? » (p.23). (...I only want you to know that I'll be the one to take care of you when the time comes. Do you understand?) In like manner, Abo visits Mamba very late into the night and the following conversation ensues:

Abo: 'Je t'aime et que je voudrais t'offrir ce pagne en signe d'amour...Maintenant, tu as bien compris que je serais désormais à tes côtés dans toutes les circonstances de la vie n'est-ce pas ?' (... I like you and I'd like to give you this wrapper as a token of my love...Now, you've understood that henceforth I'll be by your side in all circumstances of life, or not?)

Mamba : 'Ah bon ! Mon mari est à peine mort que tu oses, tu oses ?'  
(Really! My husband has only just died and you dare, you dare?)

Abo: 'Ose quoi ? Ose quoi ? C'est moi qui ose ? C'est la tradition qui l'exige, Madame. Et si tu n'es pas avec moi, tu serais avec quelqu'un d'autre, avec l'un de mes frères. Obligatoirement avec l'un de mes trois frères...je suis sûr que tu ne seras heureuse avec aucun d'eux ; c'est l'objet de ma visite de ce soir. Alors réfléchis.'  
(Dare what? Dare what? Is it me who dare? It's the tradition, Madam. If you're not with me, you'll be with another, with one of my brothers. Compulsorily with one of my three brothers, ...I'm sure that you'll not be happy with any of them; this is the reason I'm here this evening. So, think about it.)

Mamba: 'Réfléchir à quoi ? ... Tu n'as pas honte ? Oh mon Dieu ! A peine l'a-t-on mis en terre que vous voulez vous emparer de ses biens et vous partager ses veuves. Pourquoi n'avez-vous pas partagé sa dépouille ?' (pp.24- 26)  
(Think about what ? You're not ashamed? ...Oh my God! No sooner had he been buried than you long to take possession of his belongings and his widows. Why have you not shared his corpse?)

Mamba continues:

'Dis-moi. As-tu songé un seul moment que je suis un être humain comme toi et que je peux avoir envie de choisir ? Comme de n'épouser aucun de vous quatre et rester seule?'  
(Tell me. Have you ever thought for a moment that I am a human being like you and that I could make a choice? Such as refusing to marry any of you four and remain alone?)

Abo: 'Madame, ton mari mort, tu n'as pas de mot à dire, tu obéis, tu écoutes, tu exécutes ce que te dissent les frères de son mari qui deviennent automatiquement, je dis bien automatiquement, tes maris...'  
(Madam, your husband dead, you have no say, you obey, you

listen, you take instructions from your husband's brothers who have become automatically, I mean automatically, your husbands...)

Mamba: 'As-tu un seul instant songé que je suis un être humain...Sommes-nous à vos yeux différents des objets ? Des chèvres, des moutons et des plantations de Mokala?'  
(Have you ever thought for once that I am a human being...Are we in your eyes different from objects? The goats, the sheep, the plantations of Mokala?)

Abo: 'Quelles sont ces idées? Qui t-a mit tout ça dans sa tête ?' (What are all these? Who put all this in your head?)

Mamba: 'Avant de venir me solliciter, es-tu sûr de satisfaire les deux autres femmes ?' (Before coming to woo me, are you sure you can satisfy the other two wives?)

She dismisses him at this juncture saying: 'maintenant, tu veux bien m'excuser, j'avais une rude journée' (pp.28-29). (You can leave me now; I had a rough day.)

In the vein of Tentue and Abo, Temenos also approaches Sufo to declare his intention to inherit her: « Tu sais que je t'ai toujours aimée, même du vivant de mon frère, ...j'ai eu la patience d'attendre qu'il parte. Maintenant, tu ne dois regarder aucun des trois autres...ce sont des gens bizarres ». (pp.31-32)

(You know that I've always liked you, even when my brother was alive...I've been patient to wait for his exit. Now, you shouldn't consider any of the three...they are queer.)

There are other ways widows suffer abuse in this milieu. They include: shaving of hair, not having a bath till the ninth day of the decease of her husband, sleeping on the bare floor and wearing black clothes through the period of mourning. However, one of the widows, Mamba, refuses to participate in all of these. Tenteu reports her to Abo :

Vous avez remarqué que notre femme Mamba n'as pas les cheveux coupés comme les trois autres, elle s'est lavée alors que la tradition exige, et c'est très clair, que chaque veuve ne doit se laver que le neuvième jour après le décès du mari. Et en plus, elle ne dort pas à même le sol, elle dort sur un matelas... (p.45)

(You have noticed that our wife, Mamba, did not cut her hair like the other three, she bathes whereas there is no ambiguity about the tradition which stipulates that a widow should only have a bath the ninth day after the death of her husband. And again, she does not sleep on the floor, she sleeps on a mattress...)

Abo retorts : « scandale, elle va attirer sous nous la malédiction, il faut la rappeler à l'ordre » (p.46). (Foul! She's going to bring misfortune on us, she should be called to order.) This is reminiscent of what one of the interviewees of Vitalis and Fubah (2016) says: “For a widow not to submit herself to the rite is a sign of bad luck” (p.13).

Mokala's brothers hold a meeting to share his property including his wives. During the meeting, Tentue addresses the widows :

Ma Ali, Mala, Mamba, Matah, Sufo, vous savez ce que prévoit la tradition en cas de décès du mari. Lorsque vous entrez dans une famille, vous y restez toute votre vie. Notre frère décédé, vous devenez automatiquement nos femmes, nos épouses.  
(p.51)

(Ma Ali, Mala, Mamba, Matah, Sufo, you know what the tradition demands concerning the death of a husband. When once you're married into a family, you remain there the rest of your life. Our brother dead, you become automatically our women, our wives.)

He presents Mala to Temenos saying « À compter de cet instant et de ce jour, Temenos est ton nouveau mari. Tu vas le respecter, lui obéir... » (pp.51-52). (From this moment and from this day, Temenos is your new husband. You should respect and obey him...). In like manner, he hands over Sufo to her new husband. Before presenting Mamba to her new husband, Tentue probes : « on m'a dit, et j'ai du mal à croire que tu as osé te laver avant les neuf jours prescrits par la tradition pour les veuves. Tu veux changer quoi ? Le monde ? Tu veux inventer ton monde à toi et y vivre ? » (p.54). (I was told and I found it difficult to believe that you had the audacity to bath before the nine days prescribed by tradition for widows. You want to change what? The world? You want to invent your own world and live there?) She answers : « Non, Ndi, je voudrais vivre avec vous, mais dans un village où on respecte la femme, où on la traite comme un être humain et non comme un objet ou comme une chèvre dans l'enclos » (p.54). (No Ndi, I'd love to live among you, but in a village where the woman is given due respect, where she is treated like a human being and not like an object or a goat in the pen.) Turning a deaf ear to what she says, Tentue presents her to Fomo, her new husband. Mamba interjects : « Qui ? Moi ? ...De quel droit tu choisis homme de ma vie ? » (p.54) (Who? Me?... What right have you to choose the man of my life?)

Tentue: 'De quel droit ? Tu es devenue folle ou quoi » (p.54). (What right? Have you become mad or what?)

Mamba: 'Folle? Tu oses penser que je suis devenue folle parce que je demande de quel droit...sur quelle base vous vous fondez pour choisir l'homme avec qui je vais vivre ?' (Mad? You dare say I've become mad because I asked what right...on what ground would you choose for me a man with whom I want to live my life?)



Tenteu : 'Tu as un problème ? Si tu ne veux pas de Fomo, alors on peut changer. Dis-moi, qui préfères-tu ? Moi ? Abo ? Temenos ? On peut toujours revoir ça et réajuster' (You have a problem ? If you don't want Fomo, we can always change. Tell me, who do you prefer? Me? Abo? Temenos? We can always revisit and make some adjustment.)

Mamba: 'Vous n'avez pas compris, vous n'avez rien compris. Ce n'est pas vous qui allez choisir avec qui je vais refaire ma vie ! C'est ça que je dis. Dans quelle langue vous voulez que je le dise ? Je demande, j'exige d'avoir la liberté de refaire ma vie avec qui je veux et comme je veux...'

(You don't understand, you've not understood anything. It's not you who would choose with whom I'll start a new life. It's what I'm saying. In what language do you want me to say it? I ask and I insist to have the liberty to start a new life with whom I want and when I want...)

Temenos : 'si je comprends bien, tu veux choisir de vivre avec quelqu'un qui n'est pas de cette famille...au nez et à la barbe des frères de ton feu mari. C'est ça?' (If I understand you well, you want to choose to live with a man who is not a member of this family right under our nose, the brothers of your late husband. Right ?)

Mamba : J'ose affirmer que je suis un être humain entier comme vous, que j'ai droit à tout, que j'ai mes sensations, mes rêves, mes indicibles espoirs, mes amours, et je vais refaire ma vie, sans que ce soit interprété comme un acte de rébellions, ...Je suis un être humain... (pp.54-56)

(I reiterate that I am a human being like you, that I'm entitled to my feelings, my dreams, my ineffable hopes, my affections, and I'll start a new life without its being interpreted as an act of rebellion...I am a human being...)

Here, Mamba claims ownership of her life. Her undaunted stance gives credence to Polkinghorne's submission that "the realization that the socially imposed notions of their selves do not represent who and what people really are frees them to turn their attention to the submerged voices of their selves" (2015, p.88). Mamba turns her attention to the submerged voice of women in her milieu and asserts her personhood.

Mamba is also filled with indignation at some other widowhood practices. She confronts her brothers-in-law :

Vous les hommes, vous qui aimez la tradition et qui en êtes les esclaves, vous la respectez lorsqu'elle vous satisfait. Comment pouvez-vous accepter qu'une femme reste assise à même le sol, couchée neuf jours de suite sans se laver ? Ça vous semble normale ? ... En tout cas, moi j'ai choisi le blanc comme habit de deuil, je ne mettrai pas le noir, c'est tout. (p.57)

(You men, you who love tradition and have been enslaved by it, you only honour it when it suits you. How can you endorse the idea that a woman should remain seated on the floor, sleep for nine days in a row without bathing? That appears normal to you?... In any case, me, I've chosen white as my mourning cloth, I'll not put on black, that's all.)

Ma Ali, shocked at Mamba's audacious interrogation of the status quo, renders apology on her behalf to their brothers-in-law saying « notre sœur est devenue folle! Ndi ! Excuser son effronterie ! Elle ne sait pas ce qu'elle fait ni ce qu'elle dit ! Elle parle sans réfléchir » (p.57). (Our sister has become mad. Forgive her effrontery. She doesn't know what she's doing nor what she's saying. She speaks without thinking.) Mala also confronts Mamba saying: « ne vois-tu pas que tu radotes? Qui te permet de parler de cette manière aux hommes ? Tu as de la chance, mais je pense que tu mérites une bonne bastonnade » (p.58). (Can't you see that you're rambling? Who permits you to talk to men in this manner? You are lucky, but I think you deserve a thorough beating.) The reaction of Mamba's brothers-in-law and her co-wives recalls Polkinghorne's contention that “the voice of one's actual self as a force for growth and actualization of positive possibilities can be drowned out by conceptual schemes imposed by society and enforced by significant people in one's life” (2015, p.88). But this is not the case with Mamba. She refuses to be intimidated. Rather she warns: «J'ai les mêmes droits que les autres épouses de Mokala...que les biens soient équitablement répartis faute de quoi je vais porter l'affaire à la gendarmerie et même au tribunal si je suis lésée dans le partage » (p.58). (I have equal rights with the other wives of Mokala...that his property be shared equally; otherwise, I will invite the police and even take the matter to the tribunal if I am sidelined.) Mamba's assertions coupled with her threat to drag the family to the tribunal show that women in the village are not ignorant of the government's position on harmful widowhood practices.

Tenteu takes his new wife home and introduces her to her co-wives: « voici votre nouvelle coépouse. ...vous la connaissez » (p.64). (This is your new co-wife...you know her.) Anna, one of his wives, retorts: « dès que tu trouves une femme n'importe où, tu la ramasses et tu la ramènes à la maison. (Anywhere you find a woman, you pick her up and bring her to the house.)

Tenteu : 'si quelqu'un n'est pas d'accord, la porte est ouverte. Vous pouvez partir quand vous voulez eh ! Moi je ne peux pas manquer de femme... ' (If any one doesn't like it, the door is



opened. You can leave when you want to eh! Me, I'll never be in want of women...)

Anna : 'moi je veux juste savoir comment ça se fait que tu prennes une femme sans savoir de quoi son mari est mort ...Sa maladie m'a semblé mystérieuse et bizarre'

(Me I just want to know how come you bring a woman without knowing the cause of her husband's death ...His sickness looks mysterious and bizarre to me.)

Tenteu : 'tu parles de mystérieux sur mon propre frère ? Qui te donne le droit d'oser ? D'oser qualifier la maladie de mon frère?' (pp.65-67) (You talk of the mysterious about my own brother. Who gives you the permission to do so? You have the guts to label my brother's sickness?) Anna cuts off sexual relationship with her husband to underscore her protest.

In the course of time, death begins to ravage Mokala's brothers' nuclear families. Tenteu laments :

Ma dernière épouse est décédée des suites de courte maladie, après avoir mis au monde un enfant qui n'a pas survécu. J'ai perdu deux enfants en l'espace de six mois. Temenos en a perdu un, et Abo, un. Nous sommes toujours en deuil, mes frères et mes femmes. Notre concession est devenue un lieu d'éternel deuil... (p.83)

(My last wife died after a brief illness, after giving birth to a child who did not survive. I've lost two children within six months. Temenos has lost one and Abo, one. We're always mourning, my brothers and my wives. Our compound has become a place of eternal mourning.)

Consequence upon this, Tentue and his brothers consulted with native doctors and performed all the sacrifices prescribed to arrest death in the family but to no avail : « nous avons pourtant fait tous les sacrifices...nous avons demandé pardon pour nos fautes...les miens ont continué à mourir les uns après les autres...ils sont tous morts...Qu'ai-je donc fait ? » (p.115). (Yet we performed all the sacrifices...we've asked for forgiveness for all our mistakes... members of my family continued to die one after the other... they have all died...So what have I done?) Tenteu and the rest of the family eventually submit themselves to medical examination. The doctor explains the result to Tenteu: « vous êtes malade de sida...vous et tous les autres, vous souffrez de la même maladie, le sida, vos femmes sont mortes de sida, vos frères et leurs femmes sont morts de sida » (p.117). (You are sick with AIDS, you and all the others, you are suffering from the same sickness, AIDS,

your wives died of AIDS, your brothers and their wives died of AIDS.) Meanwhile, Tenteu does not believe that AIDS exists. Hear him : « non, Docteur, ce n'est pas possible...C'est un mauvais sort qu'un nous a jeté, le sida n'est qu'un prétexte » (p.117). (No, doctor, it's not possible...it's an evil spell that is cast on us, AIDS is just an excuse.) Eventually, Tenteu confronted with the stark reality, confesses :

Nous avons dépensé des sommes inimaginables pour tenter de nous sauver de ce que nous pensions être un sort, une malédiction ou la jalousie ...En fait la vérité était ailleurs. Notre défunt frère était mort de sida, et en héritant de ses biens, nous avons contaminé nos femmes et nos concubines... (p.140)  
(We spent a huge sum of money to rescue the family from what we thought was bad luck, curse or jealousy... But the truth lies elsewhere. Our late brother died of AIDS, and in inheriting his belongings, we contaminated our wives and our concubines...)

Tenteu acknowledges the evil consequences of levirate marriage and give kudos to those who rejected it:

Seul Fomo a survécu, lui qui n'avait pas accepté de prendre une veuve...Il y a aussi Anna, ma troisième femme, qui a survécu et est en très bonne santé car elle avait refusé de continuer à avoir des relations intimes avec moi dès l'arrivée de ma dernière épouse. Il y a Mamba, la troisième épouse de mon frère. Elle est là, bien portante, elle a refusé d'aucun de nous. (p.140)

(The only survivor is Fomo, he who refused to inherit any widow. ...there is also Anna, my third wife, who is alive and in good health because she stopped having intimate relationship with me from the time of the arrival of my last wife. There is also Mamba, the third wife of my brother. She is there in good health, she refused to marry any of us.)

Tenteu submits : « la tradition est bonne, mais il est peut-être temps de revoir certains aspects de cette tradition qui favorisent la prolifération des maladies...Voilà mon message d'un homme malade de sida » (p.140). (Tradition is good, but it is perhaps time for the reappraisal of some aspects of this tradition that welcome the proliferation of diseases. Behold the message of a man sick with AIDS.)

Tentue also intimates to the audience one of the lessons he learnt:

Anna, qui avait refusé d'avoir des relations sexuelles avec moi tant qu'on n'avait pas déterminé de quoi était mort mon frère Mokala a survécu, elle est saine. Il faut parfois écouter les femmes. Elle est une intuition et une sixième sens très développée. Une dernière chose, cette histoire est rigoureusement vraie. (p.140)

(Anna, who refused to have sexual relationship with me since the cause of my brother's death is unravelled, is alive and in good health. It is necessary sometimes to listen to women. Their intuition and sixth sense are very well developed. One last thing, this is a true story.)

Tenteu's statement about listening to women in the future recalls Lahbib's comment in Ousmane Sembène's *Les bouts de Bois de Dieu*. Impressed with the contributions of the women towards the anti-colonial struggle in Senegal, he says: « mais à l'avenir il faudrait compter avec elles » (Sembène, p.348). (But we will have to reckon with them in future.)

Tenteu is deserted by all the men in the village at this juncture. Mamba challenges them: « voilà, c'est maintenant qu'il faut faire la preuve que vous avez des couilles : C'est pas seulement au lit, ni quand il faut partager les richesses du défunt. ... venez donc, donnez des conseils sur la tradition, les ancêtres ont dit ceci, cela... » (p.146). (You see, this is the time to prove that you have testicles: it's not only on the bed, neither is it during the sharing of the riches of a deceased...so come, come and give advice on tradition, that the ancestors said this or that...) Anna cuts in:

En tout cas, je vous informe dès aujourd'hui qu'il n'y aura pas d'homme de venir me dire que les ancêtres avaient déjà depuis longtemps dit que « si ton frère meurt, tu deviens automatiquement ma femme » ... Je prends mon destin en main dès aujourd'hui. N'est-il pas temps de réajuster nos traditions aux réalités de notre temps et aux exigences de notre environnement? (p.147)

(In any case, I'm informing you that from today onwards, no man will tell me that the ancestors have said long ago that 'if your brother dies, you become automatically my wife'...I take charge of my destiny from now on ... Isn't it time we adjust our traditions to the realities of our times and the exigencies of our environment?)

Evidently, this is the message of Tatcha. He uses Anna as his mouthpiece to pass it across to the readers.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has demonstrated the tragic effects of dehumanising widowhood practices on a family tree in Tatcha's *Les Veuves de Mokala*. It is worthy of note that the government of Cameroon had enacted laws as far back as 1981 to abolish widowhood rituals and inheritance, yet they are still being enforced as evident in the text under study which was published in 2006. Ankiambom (2017) remarks:

The government of Cameroon had enacted many laws which protected women from certain obnoxious cultural practice such

as widowhood rituals and inheritance ... In the Civil Status Registration Ordinance No.81/02 of June, 1981 (Extract of the O.G. of the U.R.C. No 14 of August 1981, some laws were enacted to protect widows. This included section 77 (1) which stipulated that the death of a man dissolves the marriage, ends the relationship and any obligations that arose under it. Section 77 (2) Section 77 (2) reiterated that in the event of death of the husband, his heir shall have no right over the widow, nor over her freedom or the share of property belonging to her,... Also, where the levirate is practiced against the widows will, it amounts to the offence of forced marriage under section 356 (1) of the Penal code and it attracts a punishment of up to ten (10) years imprisonment and a fine of up to one million francs (1000000). (p.848)

Tati (2018) also informs us:

On the 9th of May, 2003, the government of Cameroon signed and rectified the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, it seeks to promote and protect women's right (CEDAW). This law protected widows as they were considered as human beings possessing all attributes. The government carried out many awareness seminars, conferences to educate women on their basic right.... (p.61)

Vitalis and Fubah (2016) gather from interviews they conducted that the reason abolishing harmful widowhood practices is met with resistance in various cultures of Africa is because they serve as instruments of patriarchal control on women. One of the interviewees remarks:

Women have very strong powers...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. (p.10)

Ajayi et al. (2019) on their part trace the persistence of widowhood practices to internalised submissiveness of the women and their deep resignation to fate. Below are some of their findings in their interaction with widows:

There was a general perception that culture is the most determining factor for a person's conduct...that education, literacy and law could not have prevented them from observing the widowhood tradition. They would not have appreciated

anybody talking them out of mourning their husbands according to the traditional way. (p.11)

They add that even those who are “aware of their rights did not even support the interference of the constitution or any other law in the affairs of tradition...” (p.12). Not only that, Tati (2018) avers that “psychologically, widowhood purification was seen as a sort of therapy which is preventive, protective and curative. It was believed that when the rituals were not performed, the victim might be inflicted by madness, swollen legs and stomach” (p.57). She argues further that “the severity of the implications for those who failed to perform widowhood rituals frightened many widows who dreaded being mad, developing swollen legs and stomach” (p.62). This is reminiscent of Chuku-Okonkwo's submission: “even more ironic is the erroneous belief that the introduction of these rituals is understood in the context of their protecting the widow, her family and the society as a whole” (2015, p.73).

Ankiambom (2017) asserts:

Unfortunately, due to lack of education and insufficient exposure to the law, women continued to suffer dehumanizing traditional practices. Efforts by the government and international organizations to dissuade the women from this ritual have so far yielded little fruit. The practice has left many of its victims with serious health complications. (p.848)

This study takes an exception to Ankiambom's position. It contends that the submissiveness of widows to harmful widowhood rituals despite the interference of the constitution and other laws enacted to abolish them could be attributed more to patriarchal objectification of the female gender and superstitious beliefs than to illiteracy and lack of exposure to the law. Ajayi et al. (2019) confirm that “sound educational background and financial buoyancy could not suppress these dehumanising cultural practices” (p.13). Mamba and Anna play a role model function in this connection. Though poor and unlettered, they escape being infected with the HIV/AIDS virus because they assert their humanness. Mamba and Anna's doggedness confirms Polkinghorne's submission that “people act and respond on the basis of their understandings of how things are rather than how things actually are” (p.89). This study therefore recommends that raising awareness in women that before all else they are human beings to borrow Nora's words in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* through public outreach campaigns will help to liberate them from this gender violence.

Again, Ayayi et al. (2019) assert that the Christian religion “had acted as a shield for many of the widows and reduces the manifestations of widowhood rites” (p.10). This study corroborates this finding. For instance, Fomo and his family escape being infected with the HIV/AIDS virus because he sticks to his Christian faith and rejects levirate marriage. Thus, disabusing the minds of the widows of their belief in the danger of noncompliance to widowhood rituals through punctilious evangelism will go a long way to deliver them

from this bondage. This study also recommends that women should be treated as human beings that have brains and that their suggestions and opinions should be put into account. This is because if Tenteu had listened to his wife, Anna, when she insists that the cause of Mokala's death should be investigated, the calamity that befell the family tree would have been averted.

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