

*(Draft—not for publication or citation)*

## **The Church's Impact on African Women's Marital and Social Conditions, with a Special Focus on Marriage Practices in Northern Cameroon**

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### **Abstract**

The quest to understand the causes and to appreciate the outcome of fast and profound marital, economic, religious and social changes in African women's conditions is an important factor for the ongoing life of churches and theologians in Africa, today. This presentation seeks to define and measure the church's impact on African women's marital, social and religious conditions in Northern Cameroon.

### **Introduction**

In a paper presented during the pastoral retreat of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Cameroon (ELCC) held in Ngaoundéré in 1978, Verna Syverson,<sup>1</sup> a missionary of the Sudan Mission, then coordinator of the women's work within the Church in Cameroon, rightly pointed out the important changes that were taking place within the church and the society in Northern Cameroon since the beginning of the missionary work. She argued that with the advent of Christianity in Northern Cameroon, the conditions of African women had considerably improved. It was, however, with mixed feelings of both satisfaction and expectation that she went on stating: "It is pleasant to note the step ahead made by the EELC<sup>2</sup> to recognize the rights of women. A change in many stages of our work [women's work] will be necessary, and this may lead sometimes to some disturbances."<sup>3</sup>

In this way, Verna Syverson tried to draw the attention of the church leaders in Cameroon to the issue of the women's inclusion in church's activities and leadership.

Furthermore, in the introduction of her book on the image of the woman in the Black Francophone African novelists, Kembe Milolo pointed out that:

The fundamental obstacle to a full equality between sexes resides in traditions and people's mentalities. (...) They [women] do not accept discriminations, vestiges of received ideas and habits

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<sup>1</sup>Syverson, V., "The Role of Women in the Church and Society", Unpublished paper, presented during the pastoral retreat of the Church held in Ngaoundéré, June 25-July 8, 1978.

<sup>2</sup> EELC stands for Eglise Evangélique Luthérienne du Cameroun, which is the official and French name of one of the two LWF member Churches in Cameroon, the other being the Brethren Lutheran Church of Cameroon. In the following lines, I will use interchangeably the terms "Church" and "EELC" or "ELCC", to refer to the same thing.

<sup>3</sup>Syverson, V., *Op. Cit.*, p. 1.

of the past anymore; that which, for centuries, had been presented, lived and psychologically integrated as realities regulated by norms of nature. More and more women want to be judged according to their competence, their talents, their spirit qualities and their heart than according to their physical appearance. They want to act because they believe that everyone, of whatever sex it may be, has the right to choose his or her role in society. They want to be spouses of equal value with the men, free, and enlightened educators.<sup>4</sup>

Since the early 1980s, when the national government of Cameroon began to enrol women in the army and other civil works hitherto reserved for men, there was a major change in the mentality of people towards the role of women in society. From that time on, new opportunities were granted to women in terms of job opportunities and wider responsibilities within the society. The opportunities, in hitherto male-preserved domains, began to open up for women.

Presented as one of the fast changing societies in the world, the African societies in general and the Northern Cameroonian society in particular, are the places of both fast and profound social changes today. Among these changes, the ones that affect the lives of women in family and conjugal life, in social, and even in political and economic domains, are the most prominent. This explains why the situation of women in Northern Cameroon today is different from the one in which their foremothers lived a century ago, and one of the aims of this presentation is to assess the impact of the church on these changes.

### **1. Framing the Problem: Social Evolution of Women's Life Conditions in Northern Cameroon**

At the time of the arrival of the first missionaries from the West in the early 1920s, the normal role of a woman in Northern Cameroon was that of wife and mother in the household. However, this situation was not unique to African women. The social perception of a woman as a wife and mother was a worldwide-shared reality. As pointed out by Syverson, the usual role of a woman in the White society was also that of a wife and a mother. As a consequence of this ideology of the confinement of women to domestic and motherly roles, those among the women in the West who chose a different career, like working as missionaries overseas instead of choosing to marry, for most of the women missionaries in both the Norwegian Missionary Society and the Sudan Mission fields in Northern Cameroon remained single, were considered as “abnormal” by the rest of the society.<sup>5</sup>

Given the social context of the time, women were not offered many alternatives for their social and cultural performances as members of the society as a whole. Instead, they were limited to specific domains of activity and could not perform in other spheres of life apart from the ones in which society confined them in their roles of wives and

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<sup>4</sup>Milolo, K., *L'image de la femme chez les romancières de l'Afrique noire francophone*, Editions Universitaires, Fribourg Suisse, 1986, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> See Syverson's paper mentioned earlier in the beginning of this chapter.

mothers in the homes. Thus, the family life appeared to many as the only reason of being for women, the principal goal in life that each and every woman was supposed to reach in order to be considered as a true woman in African traditional society.

The woman's performance in domestic work and farming was of utmost importance in keeping the home as a place where African solidarity and hospitality took place, since it was the duty of the wife to cook for friends and for extended family members who came in for a visit to the family. Furthermore, a woman's ordinary activities as wife and mother in Northern Cameroon revealed itself in the maternity and the education of children. Numerous offspring assured a woman of joy, happiness and respect from her husband and her family; and her profound attachment to her husband and her children explained her sense of responsibility towards her family members.

Customarily, the educational systems in Northern Cameroon aimed at training women to a life of initiative, endurance, and foresight in the housework. According to missionary Verna Syverson, "One of the first responsibilities of a woman [in Northern Cameroon] was to give herself, her time, and her energy for her husband, her children and her house."<sup>6</sup> However, this did not imply that such women could not hold other responsibilities outside of their homes.

In interviewing women of the Lutheran church in Northern Cameroon, it clearly appears that some women find their fulfillment in their roles as wives and mothers, while others realize themselves only through activities performed outside of the homes.

Since the beginning of the missionary work in Northern Cameroon in the early 1920s, and especially after the official launching of the women's movement in the Lutheran church in 1975, husbands have been encouraged by the church members to take part in the housework, and to allow their wives also to take on jobs outside of their homes, like working in an office as secretaries, as nurses in hospitals or as teachers in schools. Within the women's movement, there was a specific focus on the Christian teachings that "a good Christian husband was the one who helped his wife in the housework like cooking, cleaning up the house as well as bathing the children." In their teachings, the church people as well as missionaries in Northern Cameroon, like Verna Syverson<sup>7</sup>, emphasized the fact that in countries with a very long Christian tradition like Sweden, sometimes it was the husband who stayed at home doing the housework, cooking and looking after the children, while the wife was working in an office outside of the home in order to earn the necessary money for a living for her family.

With the financial assistance of international Christian organizations like the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), some projects of women's social development were realized. For instance, the sinking of a well in a village, in order to minimize the long distance, which women used to travel to collect the necessary water for their family's

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<sup>6</sup> Syverson, V., *Op. Cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Syverson, V., *Op. Cit.*, p. 4.

needs. In other words, the time spared because of the closer proximity of the water to her home, affords a woman the opportunity of doing much more than before when she used to collect her water far from the village. This means that, even in the rural areas, the Church has various ways of impacting on the lives of both women and men in the sense of a positive evolution of their social, economic and political roles and responsibilities within the new context.

We, as Christians, however, are expected to critically examine the claims for equity in the roles and responsibilities of women and men in both the church and society. We must examine with close attention anything that can be profitable and determinant for the lives of individuals and families in our communities. We must also be careful about social structures we put in place, to make sure that they serve the needs of everyone in our society as a whole. Therefore, a thorough assessment of the contribution of Christianity towards the amelioration of women's conditions in Northern Cameroon, will require that the researcher not only be conscious of the fact that women often do not speak out easily about their plight, but also bear in mind what H el ene Yinda and Ka Mana<sup>8</sup>, in their excellent co-authored book, *For the New Theology of African Women*, refer to as "two ways which lead nowhere". In other words, the temptation of an ideology of drawing up a balance sheet of what happened in Africa in the course of colonial times, and the temptation of falling into a false conscience are unfruitful ways of dealing with the contribution of Christianity towards women's liberation in Africa today.

An intellectual debate aiming primarily at finding out whether or not Christianity in Northern Cameroon has contributed to the improvement of the social, political, economic and cultural situation of women can be misleading. Therefore, all the current intellectual debates focusing on the struggles of African peoples during the times of the colonial domination in order to draw conclusions on whether Christianity and Western colonization had positive or negative impacts on African peoples, may constitute an obstacle to any attempt made by African people to understand and solve the problem of the marginalization and exclusion of women from leadership positions in African societies today.

## **2. The Women's Life Conditions in Society and Church in Northern Cameroon**

Today, when one looks at the social structures of society in Northern Cameroon, especially with regard to the role played by women in the public institutions of a modern state, one scarcely doubts the significant changes brought to the people of Northern Cameroon by the Western colonization agents and Christian missionaries. However, if

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<sup>8</sup> Yinda, H. and Ka Mana, (ed.), *Pour la nouvelle th eologie des femmes africaines*, Yaound e, Editions CLE-CIPCRE, 2001. This book is an accurate response to the challenge that the churches are facing today, regarding the marginalization of African women in both the church and society. Well documented and based on surveys and researches conducted under the auspices of the WCC as well as the CCAWT, *For the New Theology of African Women*, analyses in depth the situation of crisis which exists between men and women in African marital and social systems today.

the Christianization of African peoples by Western mission societies brought significant changes in the lives of African peoples, the impact of Christianity on the lives of women in Northern Cameroon today must be measured according to the capacity of the Christian faith, as a social practice, to respond to crucial problems like those of misery, powerlessness, despair and the lack of creative confidence in which women live their daily lives. In other words, we must look at how Christianity oriented the lives of women towards the affirmation of their rights and their responsibilities in Northern Cameroon, rather than debating on what the missionaries brought to liberate women from African oppressive marital and social systems.

What does it mean for women in Northern Cameroon to become Christian today? Does Christianity help women to participate in the decision-making structures of the society and church in Northern Cameroon? Does the church as a social institution contribute to giving a woman the social image that deepens the respect she deserves in both society and church? These are some of the questions I try to raise in this presentation. However, given the particular context in which women live in Northern Cameroon, a region known for its Islamic practices,<sup>9</sup> one cannot give a straightforward answer to such questions, thus the necessity to critically examine Yinda and Ka Mana's assertion according to which:

Without Christianity as it outspreads itself in Africa from the times of colonialism until today, with its ups and downs, its strengths and weaknesses, its successes and failures, the woman's condition would have not reached the stage of consciousness which characterizes the groups and women's movements in African countries today (...). Without Christianity, without its international networks and possibilities to circulate and diffuse the ideas, some women's fights would have been unthinkable and some of their victories concretely unimaginable.<sup>10</sup>

Applied to the situation of women in Northern Cameroon, Yinda and Ka Mana's assertion needs to be nuanced, for the position of women in both the church and society in Northern Cameroon still requires much effort from both men and women, in order for the church especially, to take the important step of including women in its leadership positions.

My own observation of both society and the Lutheran church in Northern Cameroon of which I am a part, however, did not reveal the equality and justice necessary to govern the relationships between men and women as social partners. Rather, after having observed the way in which people relate to one another in terms of gender, I realized that women were undervalued and even discriminated against in some cases. The

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<sup>9</sup> The presence of Islam in Northern Cameroon is determinant when it comes to the issue of women's status in social and religious matters. For instance, the main argument of the Church in Northern Cameroon to deny women the right to lead is that the Muslims will not respect the Christian faith if women begin to lead worship services in the Church.

<sup>10</sup> Yinda, H. and Ka Mana, (ed.), *Op. Cit.*, p. 39-40.

African traditional and Islamic systems of educating people, acquiring wealth or taking decisions in Northern Cameroon had impacted on the whole society in such a way that even within a Church like the ELCC, it seems normal to take the subordination of women to men for granted.

In this context, the women of the Church and those who live under the rules of traditional and Islamic societies in Northern Cameroon are treated alike. Despite Mfoulou's<sup>11</sup> argument according to which, by fighting against the traditional system of dowry, the Christian church would have been an agent of progress and the emancipation of women in Cameroon, there is still a long way to go to bring women of Northern Cameroon into social and religious leadership.

As a Church historian, one of my assumptions is that the women's role as builders of the Church, which is supposed to be a community of believers, both men and women, is of paramount importance, and for this reason needs to be acknowledged and encouraged by the entire society.

Historically known as a marginal or even oppressed group, women in Northern Cameroon were, and are still not, given the same opportunities as their male counterparts in terms of receiving a good education, which would enable them to play a leadership role in their respective communities. Rather, right from their earliest youth, women are brought up in such a way that even as adults, they can only perform specific tasks which are mainly domestic, such as drawing water from a well or from a river, cooking and cleaning dishes, and caring for the elderly people and the children. In this society, women still own nothing in terms of property. Married, they belong to their husbands and are much more valuable in the eyes of the latter when they can bear children to them.

Thinking of this situation in which women still live in Northern Cameroon reminded me of what Johannes Skauge, the General Secretary of the Norwegian Missionary Society (NMS), wrote in his mission report on Cameroon in 1950:

The women of Africa have been for so long mere merchandise and beasts for labor without any human value that it seems almost impossible to elevate them to a level where they may have an interest in spiritual things and become accessible to the Gospel. The women of Sudan [and the term Sudan used to designate that part of Africa which lies south of the Sahara Desert and north of the Equator which includes the actual Republic of Cameroon<sup>12</sup>] are sold, bought and given as presents by the man's will. According to the

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<sup>11</sup> Mfoulou, J., "The Roman Catholic Church and Cameroonian nationalism: from misunderstanding to opposition", in Edward Fasholé-Luke et al. (ed.), *Christianity in Independent Africa*, London, Rex Collings, 1978, p. 217-227.

<sup>12</sup>See Nissen's excellent study published by Purus Grafiske Hus in Denmark in 1968, entitled: *An African Church is Born: The Story of the Adamawa and Central Sardauna Provinces in Nigeria*.

teachings of the Koran, the woman is without a soul, and for that reason, she cannot enter Paradise.<sup>13</sup>

Commenting the socio-economic condition of women in Northern Cameroon, Skauge defended the idea according to which the African woman was her husband's property, as he went on arguing that:

She [the woman of Northern Cameroon] is arbitrarily treated as an object of utility or an instrument of production. Polygamy and slavery are in reality the same thing and the oppression of the woman is really part of the social and political systems and therefore, her status cannot be changed except by a profound social revolution. Apart from the Islamic environment [he concluded], women who live in levirate marriages enjoy more freedom than others, although they are also submissive to the dictatorship of the male-dominated society.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, what I intend to say here is that as Christians, we are not bound to follow necessarily what the other religions or traditional marital and social systems have to say about women's situation in the Church. This is not to say that we must neglect the advice of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians (see 1Cor. 8: 13), which encourages us to avoid doing anything, which can constitute a stumbling block to our neighbor because of their lack of knowledge. However, as Christians we must nevertheless find our ways to solve our own contradictions such as these marginalization systems of exclusion of women from leadership in both the Church's practices and society. After a thorough analysis of the Church's structures and practices in Northern Cameroon, there is a clear indication that women are not fairly treated by their male counterparts.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the region of Northern Cameroon, like many other parts of the African continent, has been subjected to Western missionary work. But, unlike southern Cameroon where the first missionaries, the freed Black Jamaican preachers, Joseph Merrick and Alexander Fuller, employed by Baptist missions from Europe arrived in Douala in 1844<sup>15</sup>, Northern Cameroon, known as a Muslim country by the Germans and French colonial governments, welcomed its first missionaries from the American Lutheranism in the late 1910s. This late arrival of the missionaries in Northern Cameroon was due to the fact that Western colonial powers did not allow Christian mission societies to evangelise in the region. Later on, when access was granted by the League of Nations

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<sup>13</sup> Skauge, J., "Rapport fra inspeksjonsreise til Kamerun 1950", translated by Ole Eriksen, a former missionary of the Norwegian Missionary Society in Cameroon. The original report in Norwegian language was consulted from the personal archives of Ole Eriksen in Stavanger on November 19<sup>th</sup>, 2000. But the French version of the same document can be also read in Kore Lode, *Appelés à la liberté: histoire de l'Eglise Evangélique Luthérienne du Cameroun*, Editions IMPROCEP, Amstelveen, 1990, p. 169.

<sup>14</sup> Skauge, J., Op. Cit., p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Merrick and Fuller, two former Black slaves had the honor to preach the Gospel to the Douala people of Cameroonian coast and founded a Baptist Church before the Germans colonized the country in 1884. For further details, see Elisabeth Isichei, *A history of Christianity in Africa, from Antiquity to the Present*, London, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1995.

to all citizens of its member countries to freely enter and undertake any activity in the territories under the mandate regime, Christianity made its entry through American and Norwegian Lutheran missionaries. Since that time, the encounter between the traditional cultures of the people, the Islamic religion, and Christianity has brought tremendous changes. Women who were among the first to accept Christianity in the region could count among those groups of people that underwent profound changes in their lives. However, notwithstanding profound changes brought by that encounter, the religious and social situation of women in Northern Cameroon has known no significant improvement up to now.

Through a pluri-disciplinary approach where history, anthropology, women's studies, and theology cross and complete each other, I analyzed the impact of Christianity on women's present situation in the practices of the Church in Northern Cameroon. In this sense, my research situates itself in the line of interrogations raised by theologian scholars such as Mercy A. Oduyoye<sup>16</sup> as to how much women of Africa have gained from being Christians in terms of their empowerment, their integration and their full participation within society as a whole, since Christianity was seen by its Western agents as a major event that would liberate and restore value to the outcast and deprived peoples of Africa of whom women constitute the great majority.

### **Questions for Discussion**

Based on your own experiences as a member of the Church of Christ in your context, and taking into consideration the religious and social conditions of women in Northern Cameroon presented in this paper, can you say that Christianity is an empowering factor for marginalized people of the world, today?

In Northern Cameroon, the marital status of a person is of paramount importance when it comes to entrusting people with social responsibilities in their respective communities. In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Cameroon, like in any other Protestant Churches in Cameroon, people are generally ordained Pastors after marriage. In other words, marriage plays a key role in people's social ascension (especially men). What can the Church do to protect women from being treated as mere "object of utility or instrument of production" for men, but as equal partners with their male counterparts in marriage?

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