

Traditional Widowhood Rites and Attitudes Towards these Rites Among the Bulu People of Cameroon

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Publication Date: 2026/03/02

Abstract: Widowhood is a funeral rite of purification that allows marital ties to be broken or even rearranged following the death of a spouse. In the event of death, society often organises widowhood rites with a view to accepting the loss. The relationship that once existed between the two spouses sometimes causes psychological distress or turmoil for the survivor, particularly due to denial of the death. This article is a work of social psychology that focuses on cultural data from the Cameroonian environment. It is based on observations of the behaviour of community members who have suffered the death of a spouse. The data collected from participants using a questionnaire were subjected to chi-square analyses. These corroborate our predictions, namely that the practices of the widowhood rite are closely linked to the attitude developed towards said rite.

Keywords: Practice, Rite, Widowhood, Attitude.

How to Cite: Ndounga Tybert Yannick; Ebale Moneze Chandel (2026) Traditional Widowhood Rites and Attitudes Towards these Rites Among the Bulu People of Cameroon. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 11(2), 2229-2235. <https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/26feb1104>

I. INTRODUCTION

Funeral ceremonies are large gatherings of people to mark a death. These are, in fact, truly dramatic events during which social representations are generated (Ebale Moneze, 2006). In fact, the death of a member is always followed by a ritual, i.e. “a set of gestures, thoughts and positions taken, relating to a religion, culture, family myth or psychopathological process, and likely to bring the person performing them increased power, relief from anxiety or the possibility of moving on to another phase of the life cycle” (Héas & Héas, 2007). In this traditional perspective, the death of one spouse obliges the other spouse to undergo the practice of widowhood rites. This is according to Yanes and Eyinga Essama (1987) a “ceremony imposed on one of the spouses after the death of the other”, with the anticipated role of remedying disturbances. It is therefore in these circumstances that this rite is practised.

The ethnic group covered by this study is indigenous to the southern region of Cameroon, where they have settled. They have enormous cultural potential inherited from their ancestors, which today is gradually eroding due to the effects of colonial rule. Indeed, “colonisation is, in reality, a factor in the disorganisation, underdevelopment and regression of Beti society” (Mbarga, 2000, p. 23).

Traditionally, the widowhood rite was initiated to purify oneself from the defilement of a spouse's death. However, it

is important to examine the current social representation of the widowhood rite to see if it is linked to current practices related to it. In other words, it is important to question the prejudices, stereotypes, beliefs, opinions and attitudes relating to widowhood rites. It is these attitudes that are addressed in this article.

The aim of this work is to verify whether attitudes are closely linked to the understanding of traditional widowhood rite practices.

From a traditional perspective, several rites are often observed following a death. These are generally classified into two categories: rites that precede burial and rites that follow burial, among which is widowhood.

The concept of widowhood refers to a set of rites that are performed for the person affected by the death, but also to the period of time during which these rites are performed (Kouassi, 2020). According to anthropologists, this is a rite of accompaniment and purification that allows the widower or widow to free themselves from their marital rights to the deceased. Thus, widowhood is presented as a duty that must be fulfilled, a duty brought about by the death of one of the spouses who were duly married according to customs and traditions (Tondé, 2018).

The widowhood ritual thus allows the surviving spouse to escape certain calamities and abnormal behaviours and to

benefit from successful social reintegration. Those called upon to undergo the trials of this ritual are often apprehensive, because its implementation can also be unhealthy. From a strictly traditional perspective, widowhood is conducted by the sisters-in-law, and its normal and healthy practice will thus break all marital ties and ensure a better social reintegration for the survivor. Widowhood therefore ensures a new marital alliance (Bloch & al, 1982). It is he who ends the marital bond. Moreover, according to Noret and Petit (2011), the widow ensures that, at the end of the rites, the deceased will not mortgage their sexuality. Thus, death ends the marital bond only in the physical dimension.

However, our observations of the behaviour of members who have lost a spouse show that they no longer adhere to most of the prohibitions associated with widowhood: not washing, not sleeping in the marital bed, walking barefoot, not joking around, sleeping on bags, on a thin mattress or even on the floor next to the body... But also certain trials related to the practice of this rite: pulling up the banana tree trunk, shaving the head, simulating love in public, etc. The wearing of widow's clothes has almost disappeared. These observations reveal a decline in the practice of the widowhood rite.

However, from a traditional perspective, rituals in general promote social regulation and relatively stable functioning. The widowhood ritual specifically prevents death from causing imbalance or even disorder in society. It encourages acceptance of the loss of a member of the community and a reorganisation of relationships between the living.

Psychologically, the widowhood ritual facilitates acceptance of the spouse's death and guides the surviving spouse towards positive mourning. Abandoning this ritual, or rather denying it, exposes the surviving spouse to pathological mourning.

Psychologically, the widowhood ritual facilitates acceptance of the spouse's death and guides the surviving spouse towards positive mourning. Abandoning this ritual, or rather denying it, exposes the surviving spouse to pathological mourning. According to Moscovici (1976), social representations consist of beliefs, prejudices, stereotypes, opinions and attitudes. These are predispositions to act, equipped with the ability to indicate what is normal, what is forbidden and what is tolerated. "This notion and that of behaviour are often assimilated with each other. Attitude is at the level of ideas and is expressed as an intention. It is discursive, while behaviour is praxeological. However, attitude makes it possible to predict what behaviour will be once the subject is in the presence of the object of attitude" (Ebale Moneze, 2019, p. 46).

Attitude is a state of mind of a subject or group in relation to an object. It is defined as "a dynamic pattern of mental activity, a coherent and selective pattern, relatively autonomous, resulting from the interpretation and transformation of social models and the individual's experience" (Moscovici, 1960). It is a mental predisposition

to act in a certain way, it denotes an intention and is therefore not directly observable. It is in fact "a mental state of readiness for action organised through the subject's experience, which determines the subject's behaviour towards the object" (Allport, 1935). This definition indicates that behaviour results from attitude, which itself originates in the subject's experience.

Attitude is also evaluative and reflects an overall favourable or unfavourable disposition towards an object. It can therefore apply to different objects, it has a positive or negative valence, it has strength, and it varies with the degree of involvement of the subject (Noumbissié, 2019). Thus, in each attitude, we observe an evaluative aspect that is also central. This explains why some individuals submit to the traditional practice of widowhood rites, unlike others. If the widowhood rite is perceived by the subject as a means of escaping certain disturbances related to the death of their spouse, they will submit to the practice of the rite (favourable evaluation of the object), unlike those who perceive it as a dehumanising practice (unfavourable evaluation of the object).

The concept of attitude refers specifically to an "individual's internal disposition underlying their perception and reactions to an object or situation" (Tapia & Roussay, 1991, p.15), performing "three main types of psychological functions: cognitive, conative and affective" (p.17). These three dimensions make it possible to anticipate behaviour once the subject is in the presence of the object. For Ajzen and Fishbein (1975), the intention to act determines behaviour, which is directly linked to attitudes. Attitudes have a descriptive aspect, and therefore describe reality, a prescriptive aspect, and therefore prescribe what should be done, and even an evaluative dimension, which serves to position oneself in favour or against something. Given the above, do the changes currently observed in the practice of the widowhood rite not reflect a change in attitude towards said rite?

II. METHODOLOGY

In this work, we aim to evaluate the effect of widowhood rite practices on attitudes towards said rite.

➤ *Participants*

The study data was collected from one hundred and fifty (150) volunteer participants, all widows and widowers, some living in urban areas and others in rural areas. Specifically, there were ninety-four (94) widows (62.67%), fifty-three (53) (56.38%) in urban areas and forty-one (41) (43.62%) in rural areas, and fifty-six (56) (37.33%) widowers, twenty-five (25) (44.64%) in urban areas and thirty-one (31) (55.36%) in rural areas. The participants' ages ranged from 50 to 70. The snowball sampling technique was used, and each participant received a personal questionnaire designed to assess the link between the practice of the rite and attitudes.

➤ *Variables*

The study has two types of variables: one (01) independent variable and one (01) dependent variable.

The independent variable (IV) in this study is ‘practices’. It was chosen on the basis of Abric’s (1994) statement that: “In situations perceived as irreversible, new and contradictory practices will of course have very significant consequences on the transformation of representation” (p. 82).

The dependent variable (DV) in this study is ‘attitude’. In his work on social representations, Moscovici (1976) [9] defined five categories that constitute these representations, including opinion, prejudice, stereotype, belief and attitude.

➤ *The Hypotheses*

The general hypothesis of the study is formulated as follows: widowhood rite practices are closely linked to the attitude developed towards said rite.

- *The Following Research Hypotheses (RH) Stem from this Hypothesis:*

✓ RH1: Individuals who are favourably disposed towards the widowhood rite are quick to practise it.

✓ RH2: Individuals with mixed feelings about the widowhood rite are reluctant to practise it.

➤ *Questionnaire Administered*

As this study focuses on the link between practices and attitudes, we opted for an attitude questionnaire, specifically the Likert scale (1932). The scale used contains several items for which each participant surveyed had to express their degree of ‘agreement or disagreement’ on a five-point scale. The instrument thus developed was first pre-tested on fourteen (14) individuals before being administered.

➤ *Data Analysis Tool*

As our variables were qualitative, we used the chi-square test to determine the dependence between them and Cramer's phi to assess the strength of the link between widowhood rite practices and attitudes towards said rite.

III. RÉSULTS

Table 1 Dependency Relationship Between Practices and Item 1 Concerning Attitudes

Items	O_i	E_i	$E_i - O_i$	df	χ^2	p
AT1	7	30.0	-23.0	4	49.733	.000
	23	30.0	-7.0			
	23	30.0	-7.0			
	58	30.0	28.0			
	39	30.0	9.0			

Table 1 presents the results of the chi-square test between widowhood rite practices and item 1 on attitudes towards the rite. Here, the sum of the squared difference between the observed and theoretical numbers has a value of 1492, for a degree of freedom (df=4) and a threshold $p=0.000$. This yielded a calculated chi-square value of

49.733. The negative values observed for the difference between the observed and theoretical numbers can be explained by the fact that, at this level, the theoretical numbers are greater than the observed numbers. Therefore, the closer the theoretical numbers are to the observed numbers, the closer the chi-square value tends towards 0.

Table 2 Dependency Relationship Between Practices and Item 2 Concerning Attitudes

Items	O_i	E_i	$E_i - O_i$	df	χ^2	p
AT2	7	30.0	-23.0	4	99.933	.000
	16	30.0	-14.0			
	14	30.0	-16.0			
	74	30.0	44.0			
	39	30.0	9.0			

The data in Table 2 show the results of the chi-square test between practices and the second item on attitudes towards the widowhood ritual. The calculated chi-square value is 99.933. The sum of the squared difference between

the observed and theoretical numbers is 2998, with a $df=4$; ($p=0.000$). Two positive values are found in the difference in numbers, simply because their theoretical numbers are lower than the observed numbers.

Table 3 Dependency Relationship Between Practices and Item 3 on Attitudes

Items	O_i	E_i	$E_i - O_i$	df	χ^2	p
AT3	39	30.0	9.0	4	158.133	.000
	13	30.0	-17.0			
	3	30.0	-27.0			
	77	30.0	47.0			
	56	30.0	26.0			

In Table 3, two theoretical numbers are higher than their observed corresponding numbers, which explains the negative values for their difference. Thus, the sum of the squared difference between the observed numbers and the theoretical numbers gives a value of 3.984. This gives a

calculated chi-square value of 158.133. This value is far from 0 because there is a considerable difference between the theoretical and observed numbers. It can also be noted that the degrees of freedom and the significance threshold have values of $df=4$ and $p=0.000$, respectively.

Table 4 Dependency Relationship Between Practices and Item 4 on Attitudes

Items	O_i	E_i	$E_i - O_i$	df	χ^2	p
AT4	5	30.0	-25.0	4	74.800	.000
	23	30.0	-7.0			
	23	30.0	-7.0			
	69	30.0	39.0			
	30	30.0	0			

The results in Table 4 are those for item 4 linking attitudes and practices relating to the widowhood ritual. This table shows no difference between the observed and theoretical numbers, simply because the two numbers are equal. As the test does not focus on these two values, the chi-

square is not zero. However, the sum of the squared difference between the observed and theoretical figures gives a value of 2244. This gives a calculated chi-square value of 74.800. We can also see that the degree of freedom is 4.

Table 5 Dependency Relationship Between Practices and Item 5 on Attitudes

Items	O_i	E_i	$E_i - O_i$	df	χ^2	p
AT5	4	30.0	-26.0	4	73.533	.000
	21	30.0	-9.0			
	17	30.0	-13.0			
	62	30.0	32.0			
	46	30.0	16.0			

In Table 5, attitudes (item 5) crossed with practices indicate that the sum of the squared difference between the observed numbers and the theoretical numbers gives a value of 2206. This gives a calculated chi-square value of 73.533. The first three theoretical numbers are higher than their

respective observed numbers, resulting in a negative difference, which is contrary to the other two. The degree of freedom, as can be seen, is 4, for $p=0.000 < 0.05$. This result is significant.

Table 6 Dependency Relationship Between Practices and Item 6 on Attitudes

Items	O_i	E_i	$E_i - O_i$	df	χ^2	p
AT6	10	30.0	-20.0	4	30.26	.000
	43	30.0	13.0			
	25	30.0	-5.0			
	47	30.0	17.0			
	25	30.0	-5.0			

Table 6 shows that the calculated chi-square value is 30.26. The sum of the squared differences between the observed and theoretical frequencies is 908 ($df=4$; $p=0.000 < 0.05$). The calculated chi-square value is not as high as the previous ones, due to the fact that the difference

between the observed and theoretical numbers is not very significant.

It proved important to specifically verify two research hypotheses derived from this general hypothesis. The results of these are contained in Table 7 below.

Table 7 Summary Results of the Two Research Hypotheses of the Study.

Items	O_i	E_i	$E_i - O_i$	df	χ^2	p
AT1	7	30.0	-23.0	4	49.733	.000
	23	30.0	-7.0			
	23	30.0	-7.0			
	58	30.0	28.0			
	39	30.0	9.0			
AT3	13	30.0	-17.0	4	15.8133	000
	3	30.0	-27.0			
	77	30.0	47.0			

	56	30.0	26.0			
	1	30.0	-29.0			
					$\chi^2_g = 103.933$	

Table 7 shows the chi-square linking widowhood rite practices and items 1 and 2 of the attitudes relating to said rite. These two items are our research hypotheses.

For item ‘AT1’, the chi-square value is (49.733; $p = 0.000 < 0.005$). This result is significant, therefore our hypothesis RH1 is confirmed.

Item ‘AT3’ in the table shows a chi-square value of (158.133; $p = 0.000 < 0.005$). This result is significant, which validates our hypothesis RH2.

Thus, by calculating the mean Chi-square of Table 7, we obtain an overall Chi-square value of 103.933 with $p=0.000 < 0.005$. This significant result allows us to conclude without risk of error that there is a link between attitudes and traditional practices relating to the widowhood rite. This link is very strong, as Cramer's phi calculation gives a value of ($V=0.416$).

However, the results between the practice of the widowhood rite and the items relating to attitudes towards this rite are presented in Table 8 below.

Table 8 Summary of the Link Between Attitude Items and Widowhood Rite Practices.

Items	O_i	E_i	$E_i - O_i$	df	χ^2	p	p_g
AT1	7	30.0	-23.0	4	49.733	.000	.000
	23	30.0	-7.0				
	23	30.0	-7.0				
	58	30.0	28.0				
	39	30.0	9.0				
AT2	7	30.0	-23.0	4	99.933	.000	
	16	30.0	-14.0				
	14	30.0	-16.0				
	74	30.0	44.0				
	39	30.0	9.0				
AT3	13	30.0	-17.0	4	158.133	.000	
	3	30.0	-27.0				
	77	30.0	47.0				
	56	30.0	26.0				
	1	30.0	-29.0				
AT4	5	30.0	-25.0	4	74.800	.000	
	23	30.0	-7.0				
	23	30.0	-7.0				
	69	30.0	39.0				
	30	30.0	,				
AT5	4	30.0	-26.0	4	73.533	.000	
	21	30.0	-9.0				
	17	30.0	-13.0				
	62	30.0	32.0				
	46	30.0	16.0				
AT6	10	30.0	-20.0	4	30.26	.000	
	43	30.0	13.0				
	25	30.0	-5.0				
	47	30.0	17.0				
	25	30.0	-5.0				
					$\chi^2_g = 81.07$		

Table 8 summarises the correlation between ritual practices and attitudes towards the ritual. The results obtained indicate that the Chi-square value is 81.07 with $p=0.000 < 0.005$. This result is significant, allowing us to conclude without risk of error that attitudes towards the widowhood rite are closely linked to the traditional practices of said rite. These results support the general hypothesis.

In view of these observations, whether or not the survivor leads a healthy life after the death of their spouse depends on the quality of their relationship with their relatives (in-laws). If the latter consider that the surviving spouse behaved acceptably during the lifetime of their deceased spouse, they may be accepted by the community. On the other hand, if the relationship between the two parties was hostile, the survivor is likely to experience double suffering. First, that linked to their rejection by their in-laws through the

deprivation of the widowhood rite, and second, that linked to their state of mind due to the suffering they may have inflicted on the deceased during their lifetime.

IV. DISCUSSION

This study aims to examine the link between traditional widowhood rite practices and attitudes towards said rite. Based on our observations, we have formulated the hypothesis that widowhood rite practices are closely linked to attitudes towards said rites. This hypothesis has been operationalised into two sub-hypotheses: RH1: Individuals with a favourable disposition towards widowhood rites are quick to practise them, and RH2: Individuals with a mixed attitude towards the widowhood rite are reluctant to practise it. These hypotheses were tested using data collected from a sample of 150 participants through a questionnaire and subjected to chi-square analysis.

Analysis of the results for research hypothesis 1 reveals the existence of a link (Cramer's $\phi=0.287$). More specifically, for a chi-square of 49.733, with a degree of freedom (df) of 4 and a significance value of $p=0.000<0.005$, we can conclude that there is a significant link between the practice of widowhood rites and attitudes towards these rites. These results are consistent with the prediction that individuals with a favourable disposition towards the widowhood rite are quick to practise it. Consequently, hypothesis (RH1) proves to be valid. The readiness with which some widowers/widows submit to the traditional practice of the widowhood rite stems from a favourable disposition towards said rite. Our results are therefore consistent with those of Thomas and Znaniecki (1918) who, in a study of Polish peasants, associated social values with psychological attitudes and showed that psychological attitudes are dispositions to act that are objective and observable, but specific to the individuals who are members of the group (Doise, 1989, p. 241).

Similarly, the results of the research hypothesis (RH2) statistically indicate the existence of a link ($v=0.513$) between practices and attitudes, for a chi-square value of 158.133. This link is also significant for a degree of freedom (df) of 4 and a significance threshold of $p=0.000<0.005$. This result supports our prediction that individuals who have experienced unpleasant feelings following the loss of a loved one will be quick to practise the widowhood rite. The hypothesis (RH2) is valid. The results of this hypothesis indicate that individuals with less clear-cut positions (neither entirely favourable nor entirely unfavourable) towards the widowhood rite will be reluctant to submit to the practice of the widowhood rite. Our observations thus coincide with those of Mgbwa and Wamba (2018) in their study on the deprivation of widowhood rites (...) and indignation (...). They observed that widows generally link their indignation to the deprivation of widowhood rites and the difficulties of social reintegration, specifically in the marriage market. The practice of the widowhood rite is therefore crucial regardless of the circumstances, because for these authors, the discourse of widows deprived of the trials of the rite is tainted by

matrimonial concerns expressed as social injunctions and an individual ideal to be achieved at all costs.

The results of this study highlighted the link between traditional widowhood practices and attitudes towards these practices. This link proved to be significant. In fact, there is a link between an individual's attitudes and behaviour. Doulevée (2010, p. 68) mentions that, Kraus (1995) found an average correlation of 0.38 between attitude and behaviour in a meta-analysis of more than forty published studies. For Kraus, the two concepts have a moderate but not insignificant relationship.

V. CONCLUSION

This article sought to evaluate the link between traditional widowhood rite practices and attitudes towards said rite. To this end, we formulated the general hypothesis that widowhood rite practices are closely linked to the attitude developed towards said rite. This hypothesis gave rise to the following research hypotheses: RH1: Individuals with a favourable attitude towards the widowhood rite are quick to practise it, and RH2: Individuals with a mixed attitude towards the widowhood rite are hesitant to practise it. These two research hypotheses were tested using data collected through a questionnaire completed by 150 volunteer widows and widowers and analysed using the chi-square test. The results of these analyses proved to be significant, in other words, these results support our general hypothesis. This article reveals the presence in traditional culture of elements/factors that are diametrically opposed to that culture, which are sometimes caused by certain circumstances or social dynamics such as modernity and the quality of social relations, but which have an impact on it. Although we are in a context of acculturation, this work we propose can enable the guardians of culture to restructure and promote authentic traditional culture for a relatively stable social life.

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