



Immigration and
Refugee Board of Canada

Commission de l'immigration
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Cameroon: Whether a tradition exists in which a widow is forced by her in-laws or by the village chief to marry her dead husband's brother; if so, the ethnic groups that practise this tradition and the regions of Cameroon where it is common; the consequences for a widow who refuses to adhere to this practice; the recourses and protection available to such a woman (July 2005)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

In a document published on 29 November 2004, the Cameroonian Association for Violence Against Women (Association de lutte contre les violences faites aux femmes, ALVF) indicated that in the Extrême-Nord province of Cameroon, where the [translation] "Peuhl culture" is predominant, women and girls are [translation] "more likely to be discriminated against" for various reasons, including [translation] "traditional pressures, ignorance of the law, and confusion between religion and local traditions." Consequently, women and girls fall victim to all sorts of violence, including [translation] "the levirate" (ALVF 29 Nov. 2004).

According to the afrik.com Web site, the levirate is an African custom which is widespread among certain ethnic groups and which forces a widow to marry her dead husband's brother or even one of his sons from another marriage (11 Oct. 2004).

Country Reports 2004 reported that in some (unspecified) regions of Cameroon, a wife was considered to be her husband's property, and "[o]ften the widow was forced to marry one of the deceased husband's brothers" (28 Feb. 2005, Sec. 5). According to the same source, "[i]f she refused, she had to repay the bride price in full and leave the family compound" (*Country Reports 2004* 28 Feb. 2005, Sec. 5).

The following information was provided during a 26 July 2005 telephone interview with an ALVF representative in Maroua (capital of the Extrême-Nord province of Cameroon) who is also responsible for [translation] "strategies against early and forced marriages, rape, the low education level of girls, female circumcision, and STI/HIV/AIDS" in the Extrême-Nord province.

The levirate is widespread among all ethnic groups in the Extrême-Nord province of Cameroon. It is common for a widow to marry one of her dead husband's brothers, whether she likes it or not. In fact, when the husband's family pays a dowry, the woman automatically becomes part of his property. When the husband dies, ownership of his property-including his wife-is

automatically transferred to his family; generally, one of the husband's brothers inherits his wife. Among the inhabitants of Western Cameroon, including the Bamileke, it is common for the eldest son of a tribal chief to marry one or more of his father's widows, excluding his mother.

In general, women accept such a marriage to avoid being rejected by other members of the community, including their own parents. The social structure is so deeply rooted in people's mentalities that it would be difficult for a woman to refuse a practice that is accepted by the whole community.

Less-educated women are unaware of their rights, particularly in the Extrême-Nord province. The ALVF representative did not know of any case in which a woman had filed a complaint with the courts or the administrative authority for being forced to marry one of her dead husband's brothers. For their part, the government authorities avoid becoming involved in what they consider traditional cultural practices.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References

Afrik.com. 11 October 2004. Habibou Bangré. "Une fois veuves, elles doivent épouser le frère du défunt. Gros plan sur la pratique du lévirat en Afrique." <<http://www.afrik.com/article7702.html>> [Accessed 26 July 2005]

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Additional Sources Consulted

Internet sites, including: AllAfrica, CEDAW, European Country of Origin Information Network (ECOI.net), Famafrique, Feminist Women's Health Center, Freedom House, Human Rights Watch, Inter-African Committee (IAC) on Traditional Practices, International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC), Women Living Under Muslim Laws.

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