



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Imperial debris, intimate partnerships and family law reform in Cameroon

Brenda K. Kombo

Institute for Global Law and Policy, Harvard Law School, Cambridge, MA, USA
Email: brenda.kombo@aya.yale.edu

Abstract

This article explores the enduring impact of efforts by the French mandate administration and Spiritan missionaries to regulate intimate partnerships in French Cameroon between 1916 and 1956. Drawing primarily on French archival material, I show how administrators and missionaries sought to domesticate ‘modernity’ through activities targeting women’s status and roles within intimate partnerships. Spiritans promoted monogamous Christian marriage by advocating for Christian legal status and through ‘schools for fiancées’ called *sixas*, which often provoked violent confrontations. Despite decrying these activities as culturally disruptive, the administration passed significant marriage legislation. While these efforts are characterized as exercises of epistemic violence because of their attempted erasure of women’s and broader local perspectives, I nevertheless highlight their ambiguity. Moreover, garnering insights from history, anthropology, critical legal studies, postcolonial and feminist theory, I argue that remnants of these attempts to reshape intimacy endure as ‘imperial debris’, contributing to the impasse in reforming the Cameroonian Family Code. Further research unearthing local historical perspectives and experiences of intimate partnerships can facilitate more egalitarian family law in Cameroon.

Résumé

Cet article explore l’impact durable des efforts déployés par l’administration du mandat français et les missionnaires spiritains pour réglementer les partenariats intimes au Cameroun français entre 1916 et 1956. En s’appuyant principalement sur des documents d’archives français, l’auteur montre comment les administrateurs et les missionnaires ont cherché à domestiquer la « modernité » à travers des activités ciblant le statut et les rôles des femmes au sein des partenariats intimes. Les Spiritains promouvaient le mariage chrétien monogame en plaidant pour un statut juridique chrétien et à travers des « écoles de fiancées », appelées *sixas*, qui provoquaient souvent de violents affrontements. Bien que décrivant ces activités comme culturellement perturbatrices, l’administration adopta d’importantes lois sur le mariage. Bien que ces efforts soient qualifiés d’exercices de violence épistémique en raison de leur tentative d’effacement des perspectives féminines et locales plus larges, l’auteur souligne néanmoins leur ambiguïté. De plus, en s’appuyant sur l’histoire, sur l’anthropologie, sur les études juridiques critiques et sur la théorie postcoloniale et féministe, l’auteur soutient que les reliquats de ces tentatives de refaçonnage de l’intimité perdurent comme des « débris impériaux », contribuant à l’impasse dans laquelle se trouve la réforme

du Code de la famille camerounais. Des recherches plus approfondies mettant au jour les perspectives historiques locales et les expériences de partenariats intimes peuvent faciliter un droit de la famille plus égalitaire au Cameroun.

Resumo

Este artigo explora o impacto duradouro dos esforços desenvolvidos pelos administradores do mandato francês e pelos missionários espiritanos para regular as uniões íntimas nos Camarões franceses entre 1916 e 1956. Com base principalmente em material de arquivo francês, mostro como administradores e missionários procuraram domesticar a ‘modernidade’ através de actividades que visavam o estatuto e os papéis das mulheres em uniões íntimas. Os espiritanos promoviam o casamento cristão monogâmico, defendendo o estatuto legal cristão e através de ‘escolas para noivas’ chamadas *sixas*, que frequentemente provocavam confrontos violentos. Apesar de condenar estas actividades como culturalmente perturbadoras, a administração aprovou importantes leis sobre o casamento. Embora estes esforços sejam caracterizados como exercícios de violência epistémica devido à sua tentativa de apagar as perspectivas das mulheres e as perspectivas locais mais generalizadas, não deixo de realçar a sua ambiguidade. Para além disso, ao recolher conhecimentos da história, da antropologia, dos estudos jurídicos críticos e da teoria pós-colonial e feminista, defendo que os vestígios destas tentativas de remodelar a intimidade perduram como ‘detritos imperiais’, contribuindo para o impasse na reforma do Código da Família dos Camarões. Uma investigação mais aprofundada que revele perspectivas históricas locais e experiências de parcerias íntimas pode facilitar um direito da família mais igualitário nos Camarões.

A 1933 *Libre Belgique* newspaper article¹ tells the dramatic story of the murder of a French Spiritan priest named Henri de Maupeou in an incident highlighting the significant relationships between gender, violence and intimacy in former French Cameroon. In March 1932, Father Maupeou was east of Yaoundé, visiting a mission in Akonolinga, when a young Christian girl asked to be taken to a *sixa*² or residential ‘school for fiancées’. A man named Gabriel Edanga wanted to make this girl his second wife. Seeking to prevent a polygynous and apparently non-consensual marriage between Edanga and the girl, Father Maupeou arranged to transport her to the *sixa* the next day.

As recounted in the newspaper, that evening Edanga arrived at the *sixa* armed with two spears, a machete and a knife. He attacked the girl, injuring her slightly before Father Maupeou intervened. Angry and apparently drunk, Edanga rushed at the Father and stabbed him. Monseigneur Alexandre Le Roy (former Spiritan Superior General) recounted that Edanga suddenly realized what he had done, crying, ‘Oh, Father, forgive me. I acted like a fool!’³ to which Father Maupeou responded, ‘Yes, yes, I forgive you,’⁴ and then blessed him. However, the Father succumbed to his injury

¹ ‘Un martyr de la morale Chrétienne’, Georges Goyau, *Libre Belgique*, 3 January, Yaoundé/Problèmes de mariage, (2) Problèmes de mariage 1930–33, 2J1.10.7, Congrégation du Saint-Esprit (CSE), Archives générales spiritaines (General Spiritan Archives), Chevilly-Larue.

² ‘*Sixa*’ is a pidgin derivative of ‘Sisters’.

³ ‘*Ah Père, pardonnez-moi, j’ai agi comme un fou!*’ All translations from French are mine, unless indicated otherwise.

⁴ ‘*Oui, oui, je te pardonne.*’

on 21 April and was celebrated as a Christian martyr both by the church and in the newspaper account, which ends with the confident assertion ‘the blood of martyrs never flows in vain’.⁵

This violent confrontation occurred in the broader context of contestations among missionaries, the French administration and local⁶ people over intimate partnerships. Although it was particularly striking, Father Maupeou’s death was far from an isolated event. It offers a window into the multiple forms of violence both characterizing and resulting from missionary and administration efforts to regulate intimate partnerships in French Cameroon.

A rich body of scholarship emphasizes the centrality of the regulation of the family and, more specifically, intimate partnerships to colonialism and, in turn, to the constitution of (Western) modernity (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 276–7; Stoler 2002; McClintock 1995; Sheik 2014; Bruner 2014). Some of the literature pays particular attention to the impact of missionary (and local convert) activities (Awoh 2012; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Nkwi 2015; Walker-Said 2018; Orosz 2002; 2012), while other research focuses primarily on the work of colonial administrators (Schaper 2014; Burrill 2015; Sheik 2014). Taken together, the literature demonstrates that the debates over intimate partnerships were not simply about the supposed suitability of certain local customary engagement and marriage practices in light of the colonial ‘civilizing mission’ (*mission civilisatrice*); rather, they had to do with morality, labour, the extraction of wealth and the maintenance of colonial domination, as well as meaning-making and power struggles within local communities (Hunt 1991; Sheik 2014; Chuku 2018; Burrill 2015).

Filling a considerable gap in the Cameroon literature, Schaper (2014) challenges the view that gender relations were at the heart of German colonial policy in Cameroon because colonial officials sought to improve women’s status. Rather, for Schaper, gender relations presented other key ‘problems’ (*ibid.*: 244) for the administration – namely, regarding maintenance of public order, ensuring the availability of local labour, and managing the large influx of legal cases primarily around bridewealth (*la dot*) and divorce. In some ways, my article picks up where Schaper left off by considering the French mandate administration’s engagement with similar issues. Nevertheless, despite a similar interest in the regulation of intimate partnerships, I seek to expand the scope by looking not only at the mandate administration’s policy and practice, but also more closely at the role of missionaries, with a focus on the *Pères/Congrégation du Saint-Esprit* (Holy Spirit Fathers or Congregation of the Holy Spirit) or Spiritans.

Scholarship on missions across various disciplines challenges the simplistic notion that missionaries were agents of colonialism and instead highlights their contestations with various administrations and the ‘unexpected consequences’ (Sharkey 2013) of their activities (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; White and Daughton 2012; Awoh 2012). In the Cameroonian context, significant attention has been paid to the contestations between the mandate administration and Spiritan missionaries in the

⁵ ‘... le sang de martyrs ne coule jamais en vain.’

⁶ I use ‘local’ to distinguish the people originating from the territory from French colonialists. Although not ideal, this is intended as a geographical signifier more neutral than ‘native’ or ‘indigenous’ and less broad than ‘African’.

1930s – or what Orosz (2012) calls a ‘Catechist War’ – as missionaries condemned polygyny, promoted education in local languages and criticized the administration’s use of forced labour. As Awoh (2012: xiii) argues, the mandate administration largely came to see Christianity as ‘a destabilizing force’.

Ironically, despite their disagreements and the often contentious relations between mandate administrators and Spiritans, intimate partnerships were crucial to both of them. Chanock (1989: 78) contends that British administrators and missionaries had a shared interest in creating ‘stable, patriarchal marriages’. Their actions perpetuated what West (2002: 69) refers to in his work on Zimbabwe as a ‘bourgeois domestic ideal’. French administrators and missionaries were similarly involved in what I refer to as the domestication of modernity, a phrase I borrow from Geschiere and Rowlands (1996: 552). However, I use ‘domestication’ for two specific reasons. First, European colonial misrepresentation of Africans as ‘undomesticated’ (McClintock 1995: 226; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 68) was used to justify colonialism. Second, the construction and reinforcement of the domestic sphere played a central role in the constitution of Western modernity (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; 1992; 1997; Stoler 2002; McClintock 1995). Hence, ‘domestication’ is meant to highlight the centrality of the domestic as well as the complex, ‘violent’ (McClintock 1995: 226) colonial attempt to normalize particular values and practices.

How, then, should we understand ‘modernity’? I place it in quotes to emphasize its contested nature and contingency. While critical examination of modernity is beyond this article’s scope, I join many other scholars in rejecting the idea of a singular modernity and, instead, consider modernity as an object of study (Ferguson 2006; Cooper 2005). Inspired by Cooper (2005: 126), I consider ‘modernity as a representation, as the end point of a certain narrative of progress’. Within their progress narratives, administrators and missionaries posited particular kinds of intimate partnerships as a modern ideal. However, even as they claimed interest in creating modern subjects in Cameroon and elsewhere, they lacked a coherent vision and strategy. Their endeavour to transform intimate partnerships towards this ideal was complicated by other considerations regarding religion, social order and labour as well as by the diverse local responses to their activities.

Nevertheless, administrator and missionary efforts have far-reaching effects that I seek to trace to present-day debates around the Family Code using Stoler’s (2008) concept of ‘imperial debris’. Stoler (*ibid.*: 193) challenges us to reflect more critically in postcolonial scholarship on the past that has not passed, emphasizing the ‘dissociated and dislocated histories of the present, in those sites and circumstances of dispossession that imperial architects disavow as not of their own making, in violences of disenfranchisement that are shorn of their status as imperial entitlements that go by other names’.

Along these lines, Burrill’s (2020: 25) ‘history of the present’ seeks to understand governmental efforts to ‘render marriage legible’ through the reform of family law in Mali. Elsewhere, Burrill (2015: 10–11) alludes to the structural violence of such a project. This article seeks to push the debate further by drawing on postcolonial theory to emphasize the violence of the modernity project in French Cameroon and its enduring impact even as I recognize its contradictions and ambiguities. Writing about marriage regulation in colonial Natal in the 1800s, for example, Sheik (2014: 88) demonstrates how women were excluded from the ‘coproduction of a legal regime

that augmented the customary authority of husbands in the household'. Toungara (1994: 37) and Jean-Baptiste (2008) similarly emphasize the exclusion of local women from crafting the colonial law that determined their status in Côte d'Ivoire and Gabon respectively. Jean-Baptiste (*ibid.*: 219) contends that, in colonial Gabon, 'varied coalitions of French missionaries and colonial officials, village chiefs and elite African men' monopolized debates about codifying so-called 'customary' marriage law as they sought to gain 'power and control over wealth-in-women'. The silencing of women that these scholars describe and the broader "'disappearing" of [local forms of] knowledge' (Dotson 2011: 236) in favour of 'alternative, often Western epistemic practices' (*ibid.*: 236) is what Spivak (1993) calls 'epistemic violence'.

Thus, drawing on material I collected in French archives and secondary sources, my article seeks to make two primary interventions. First, I seek to underscore the centrality and violence of missionary and mandate administration efforts to domesticate modernity in French Cameroon through the regulation of intimate partnerships. Second, by examining the regulation of intimate partnerships from the colonial period into the present, I analyse the imperial debris created by the French and how it endures in current family law reform challenges. While I recognize that the management of intimate partnerships through both administrative and missionary practice was generally contradictory and ad hoc, it still left debris by creating a 'domestic sphere'; by advancing family law as an exceptional, autonomous legal regime; and by introducing a problematic understanding of the relationships among gender, culture and modernity.

Keeping with the theme of this special issue, intimacy is understood not only as embodied in premarital and marital relationships, but also in religious conversion and practice as well as in the knowledge exchange (Edmonds and Nettelbeck 2018: 4) that characterized this period. Violence also takes multiple forms. Administrators and Spiritans professed concern for coercive marriage practices. At the same time, physical violence often characterized contestations resulting from Spiritan and local male converts' efforts to 'rescue' wives and fiancées from non-Christian and often polygynous marriages. More broadly, administrator and missionary activities are theorized as exercises of epistemic violence.

I explore these themes in five subsequent sections and a conclusion. Following a note on methodology and scope, I examine the mandate administration and Spiritan rhetoric and practice around intimate partnerships in the second and third sections. The fourth section describes French endeavours to domesticate modernity and highlights key ways in which missionary and administration efforts constrained the imagination of more egalitarian intimate partnerships. In the fifth section, I situate these issues in the postcolonial context and describe the contemporary impasse over Family Code reform. Ultimately, I contend that a focus on local – and especially women's – experiences and perspectives can illuminate transformative possibilities.

Reading Western archives: methodology and scope

This article traces some of the history of efforts to manage intimate partnerships in French Cameroon into the present. 'Intimate partnerships' connote couples' relationships regardless of their marital status. I focus on the actions of missionaries and the mandate administration, their perception of their projects, and some of the

attendant large-scale effects. The focus on Western actors is not just aimed at understanding colonial and missionary ideologies and practices, but is a consequence of methodological challenges. My primary sources are materials collected at the Centre d'Archives d'Outre-Mer (CAOM) (the Overseas Archives Centre) in Aix-en-Provence and the Archives générales spiritaines (the Spiritan General Archives) in Chevilly-Larue between 2005 and 2006. These are complemented by secondary sources.

Such archives privilege Western male voices, and a less traditional methodological approach would have enabled deeper analysis capturing local voices and engagements, especially those of women. Such an approach might have used not only court records, but life histories, oral narratives, material objects and other sources and methodologies in an effort to amplify local women's voices (Allman *et al.* 2002). Although various constraints limited my research, I hope the article will inspire additional research on local women's agency in intimate partnerships during the colonial period.

Several Catholic and Protestant missions were active in French Cameroon, including the Spiritans, Saint-Quentin Catholic Fathers, American Presbyterian Mission, French Protestant Mission, Norwegian Lutheran Mission, Sudan Brethren and Seventh Day Adventists.⁷ However, I focus on the Spiritan mission based on its influence and role running the *sixas*.

French mandate administration rhetoric and practice in Cameroon

In 1919, the League of Nations officially partitioned the former German colony Kamerun into two Class B mandates under French and British administration. This status meant that although the mandatories had power to administer the territories, they had certain obligations, including reporting annually to the League.

The French administration immediately sought to distinguish itself from other colonizers by emphasizing its supposed humanity. In a report dated 13 April 1921, Albert Sarraut, Minister of Colonies from 1912 to 1919, wrote to the president of the French Republic: 'The morgue and brutality symbolized German colonization. The edification of the Italian colonial empire rests on bluff and violence. As for us, our colonial creation is impregnated with humanity.'⁸ France ultimately governed Cameroon much like its West African (*Afrique Occidentale Française* or AOF) and Equatorial African (*Afrique Equatoriale Française* or AEF) colonies in what was 'essentially "direct"' administration with 'an outreach policy' (Chauleur 1936).⁹ As elsewhere in the French colonial empire, Sarraut's vision of a humane colonizer was contradicted by the imposition of taxes, forced labour (*la courvée*), conscription, the arbitrary *Code de l'indigénat* or 'Native Code', and other forms of violence meted out to colonial subjects. Until 1946, under the Native Code, for example, local people could be arbitrarily punished by chiefs and any colonist for spreading rumours, organizing

⁷ 'Service: Question Spéciale – Action des Missions religieuses. Rapport fait par M. Dimpault communiqué à M. Marchand', 1930, Agence FOM, AGEFOM//355/170 bis, CAOM.

⁸ 'Morgue et brutalité symbolisaient la colonisation allemande. L'édification de l'empire colonial italien repose sur le bluff et la violence. Quant à nous, notre création coloniale est imprégnée d'humanité.' Sarraut, *Rapport au Président de la République Française*, 1921, Série Géographique, Carton XXX, Dossier 274, p. 2, CAOM.

⁹ 'une politique de contact'.

gambling, failing to pay taxes, or feigning illness to avoid forced labour. Nevertheless, under Article 2 of the mandate agreement, France was charged with maintaining order and with ‘the promotion to the utmost of the material and moral well-being and the social progress of its inhabitants’. If found wanting, France faced the possibility of the League reassigning the 1922 mandate (Orosz 2012: 234).

Chiefs played an important role in French administration. Not only did they enforce the Native Code but they were assigned the tasks of tax collection, mobilizing workers for public works and plantations, army recruitment and boosting agricultural yields (Labouret 1940: 31). They faced possible arrest, imprisonment or physical punishment if they committed a misstep (Suret-Canale 1971: 82). Although chiefs’ councils (*conseils*) were portrayed as advisory bodies, they had very little say in administrative affairs. Also, despite chiefs’ alleged ‘customary’ authority, they were often arbitrarily selected. Local policemen (*gardes de cercle*) and military police (*gendarmes*) helped them ensure compliance. Ironically, chiefs were meant to garner legitimacy for the administration as purportedly ‘traditional’ leaders despite being cogs in a ‘modern’ colonial project backed by force.

Much like this reliance on chiefs as purportedly traditional authorities, French administrators recognized the importance of the family within the empire. Maurice Delafosse, a colonial army man and official who later became an ethnographer, told participants at a 1919 Union Colonial Conference that ‘the patriarchal form of the family’ was ‘the basis of all native West African social and even political institutions’ and that ‘the principle of familial solidarity is a powerful lever whose existence can singularly facilitate [our] work’ (Wilder 2005: 98). However, the administration considered marriage a particularly harsh reminder of ‘the persistence of the most anachronistic and most shocking traditional practices’,¹⁰ such as forced marriage, including levirate and sororate practices. In fact, one administrator suggested in January 1934 that ‘marriage’ was the wrong word, writing: ‘There is barter, purchase but not marriage in the French sense of the term’ (Lomo Myazhiom 2001: 103).¹¹

Yet, members of the French administration could not reconcile their universalizing ‘civilizing mission’ with their hesitation to tamper with ‘African’ particularity. Although the ‘mission’ required the eradication of aberrant customs, they feared the threat posed to colonial rule. In a 1920 circular, Governor General Brunet warned:

The work of individual emancipation which our mental concepts incline us to follow thus risks profoundly troubling the native order, weakening a social system on which, moreover, our own domination rests. I do not need to remind that it is this authority of the father of the family and, by extension, the chief of the village or district that only recently we put to work.¹²

¹⁰ ‘... la persistance des pratiques traditionnelles les plus anachroniques et les plus choquantes.’ ‘Circulaire: A.S. des mariages indigènes’, De Coppet, Dakar, 7 May 1937, no. 299-AP/2, Fonds Ministériels, Série Géographique, TGO//30/269, CAOM.

¹¹ ‘Il y a troc, achat mais pas mariage au sens français du terme.’

¹² ‘L’œuvre d’émancipation de l’individu, que nos concepts mentaux nous inclinent à poursuivre, risque ainsi de troubler profondément l’ordre indigène; d’ébranler un système social sur lequel repose au surplus notre propre domination; je n’ai pas besoin de rappeler que c’est à cette autorité du père de famille et, par extension, du chef de village ou de canton que, récemment encore, nous mettions en œuvre ...’ ‘A.S. du mariage indigène et des droits

The French relied on the patriarchal authority of chiefs and family heads to prop up the empire.

Paradoxically, the law featured prominently in colonialism and, within administrations' dualistic rhetoric, law was custom's antithesis (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 25; Merry 1991). Law purportedly liberated 'savages' (Fitzpatrick 2001: 133) and facilitated the 'rupture' (Dube 2009: 1) from tradition to modernity. Yet, locals fell under the arbitrary rule of the Native Code, while the French also established a formal, largely bifurcated justice system with French and other European citizens' cases adjudicated under the Civil Code¹³ and locals' cases adjudicated within customary and Islamic courts. The French replicated the German policy of establishing 'customary courts' for locals, in which two assessors (*assesseurs*) and a chief or notable adjudicated. Courts were expected to 'exclusively apply the custom of the parties'.¹⁴ This approach sought to prevent disruption of the family, which was a channel through which the mandate administration maintained its domination, exercising power and control over conscription, tax collection and forced labour (N'Diaye 2016: 42; Wooten 1993: 427). Nevertheless, decisions were reviewed by French administrators to ensure conformity to 'principles of French civilization' (LeVine 1964: 103).

Cognizant of their reliance on chiefs and fearful of political disruption, the French administration sought a balance reflected in a June 1939 report to the president where Minister of Colonies Georges Mandel wrote: 'Faithful to its commitment to respecting established traditions, France refrained from disrupting/disturbing the social and familial life of its subjects through premature intervention. This respect for indigenous customs must, nevertheless, not go so far as to deny the transformation brought about under our influence' (République Française 1939: 7606).¹⁵ The report accompanied what later became known as the Mandel Decree, one of many pieces of marriage legislation passed by the administration. As early as 1920, a circular by Acting AOF Governor Charles Brunet instructed lieutenant governors and commissioners to 'initiate, by judicial decisions, the evolution of custom to put it progressively in harmony with a more elevated conception of the status of women'.¹⁶ Through a series of decrees, the colonial administration attempted to foster what subsequent AOF Governor General Marcel de Coppet referred to in 1937 as the 'humanization of customs'.¹⁷ Such legislation included the December 1922 decree

résultant de la puissance paternelle tutélaire ou maritale', Governor General Brunet, 5 October 1920, circular no. 91, Fonds Ministériels, Série Géographique, TGO//30/269, CAOM.

¹³ Only the rare *évolué* fell under this jurisdiction.

¹⁴ '[L]es juridictions indigènes appliquent exclusivement la coutume des parties', Article 51. 'Décret portant réorganisation de la justice indigène dans les territoires du Cameroun du 31 juillet 1927', *Journal Officiel du Cameroun* 175 (15 September), pp. 428–37.

¹⁵ 'Fidèle à l'engagement pris par elle de respecter les traditions établies, la France s'est gardé de troubler, par une intervention prématurée, la vie sociale et familiale de ses sujets. Ce respect des coutumes indigènes ne doit pas aller toutefois jusqu'à nier la transformation opérée sous notre influence.'

¹⁶ '... d'amorcer, par des décisions judiciaires, l'évolution de la coutume pour la mettre progressivement en harmonie avec une conception plus élevée de la condition de la femme.' 'A.S. du mariage indigène et des droits résultant de la puissance paternelle tutélaire ou maritale', Governor General Brunet, 5 October 1920, circular no. 91, Fonds Ministériels, Série Géographique, TGO//30/269, CAOM.

¹⁷ 'l'humanisation des coutumes'. 'Circulaire: A.S. des mariages indigènes', De Coppet, Dakar, 7 May 1937, no. 299-AP/2, Fonds Ministériels, Série Géographique, TGO//30/269, CAOM.

recognizing Islamic and 'fetishist' marriages, requiring spouses and their family heads to consent to marriage, setting a minimum marriage age (fifteen for girls and eighteen for boys), and setting bridewealth maximums. In 1939, the Mandel Decree reinforced the requirement of women's consent to marriage and prohibited non-consensual levirate marriage. The 1951 Jacquinet Decree accorded women aged over twenty-one and divorcées the right to choose their spouses and marry without familial interference with bridewealth, waived the parental consent requirement for marriage under exceptional circumstances, and enabled registration of monogamous or polygynous marriages. Often new instruments simply reinforced previous ones or made subtle modifications. Some of this legislation was introduced following pressure from missionaries (Lomo Myazhiom 1999). The legislation was also supported by feminist groups such as the Ligue féministe Sainte Jeanne d'Arc in France, which feared that African women were 'doomed to slavery from birth to death' (*ibid.*: 58).¹⁸

Meanwhile, for French citizens and the rare *évolué* or 'assimilated' local, the Civil Code or Napoleonic Code of 1804 (Anonymous 1827) largely relegated women to the private sphere of the family in which they remained under the power of the '*chef de famille*' or 'head of the family'. Under the doctrine of legal coverture, wives' rights were generally subsumed under those of their husbands to whom they owed 'obedience' (Article 213) and whose permission was required for certain activities, such as property transactions and testifying in non-criminal court matters (Chapter VI). Moreover, under the Code, girls could become wives at age fifteen, while boys generally had to be at least eighteen to marry (Article 144).

Spiritans, Christian legal status and *sixas*

Invited in 1916 by the administration to replace the German Pallottine Fathers, the Spiritans quickly became one of the prominent missions in French Cameroon. In 1930, the Inspector General for the Colonies, Dimpault, informed the commissioner that the Spiritans had the largest of seven active missions.¹⁹ The Spiritans maintained the highest number of converts in the interwar period and claimed that they increased the local Christian population from about 30,000 prior to their arrival to about 650,000 in 1957 (Lomo Myazhiom 1999: 144, 145). Spiritan Fathers conducted regular mission tours, built schools and advocated for favourable administration policies in addition to educating and ordaining converts who later constituted a core of local clergy.

Like the mandate administration, Spiritans expressed concern about local women's subjection to purportedly 'barbaric' local customs. Writing in 1897, Monseigneur Le Roy (Spiritans Superior General from 1896 to 1926) suggested that France's success as a civilizer and conqueror in Africa required addressing the instability of the family.²⁰ The Spiritans were mainly concerned about forced marriage, polygyny and bridewealth. Among these, Monseigneur Le Roy contended that polygyny was

¹⁸ '... vouée à l'esclavage de la naissance à [la] mort.'

¹⁹ 'Service: Question Spéciale - Action des Missions religieuses. Rapport fait par M. Dimpault communiqué à M. Marchand', 1930, Agence FOM, AGEFOM//355/170 bis, CAOM.

²⁰ 'Note de Mgr Le Roy remise à M. de Moby député de la Réunion', December 1897, Mgr Le Roy famille et mariage, 5B1.10b2, CSE.

'[t]he biggest obstacle to the spiritual conquest of pagans'.²¹ For the Spiritans, mandate administrators and other colonial administrators (see, for example, Hunt 1991), polygyny manifested the lack of value for women, who were kept 'in a slave state'²² as property accumulated by older, mostly 'syphilitic' men.²³

In the sixa and 'outside custom'

Taking over from Monseigneur Heinrich Vieter, the head of the German Pallottine Mission, the Spiritans expanded the *sixas* in the 1920s to address the perceived problems posed by customary marriage practices. The *sixas* were residences where predominantly young, single women, guided by the Spiritan Sisters, took classes in cooking, housekeeping, sewing and religion. Moreover, they helped cook for and otherwise support mission staff and did manual labour in mission fields and compounds. Single and engaged women were urged to spend at least six months at the *sixa*, but they often stayed longer. While there, the women would be baptized into the church. Missionaries also encouraged both Christian and non-Christian men raising money for bridewealth to bring their fiancées to the *sixa* to be inculcated in religious doctrine and develop the qualities of a good Christian wife. Through these 'schools', missionaries attempted to enforce monogamy and, at least in principle, premarital chastity. Fiancées anticipating church weddings were all encouraged, and often required, to attend, and unattached women in the residences were sometimes introduced to single male churchgoers.

The Spiritans considered the *sixas* tools for 'the liberation of women'²⁴ (Walker-Said 2018: 129). Joseph Wilbois (1934: 149), the director of a French national professional school in the early twentieth century, described the dominant Western view of *sixas* as 'nothing but a place of refuge for women escaping their homes; a sort of sacred wood where conjugal revolt is sheltered, and fathers approve this emancipation of women outside of the law or rather, outside of custom'.²⁵ Although the spiritual aspect cannot be discounted, women and girls used the *sixas* as an avenue towards choosing their spouses and/or opting out of unwanted marriages. The Spiritans briefly recount some of their stories in their bulletins.²⁶

Crescentia Ngowotol's Christian fiancé died before they married but after having paid bridewealth. Ngowotol's father forced her to accept to be inherited by Ngandjè, a married Protestant, but she later fled to the Spiritan Samba mission. Ngowotol was ordered by the court to return to Ngandjè twice, in 1933 after she failed to reimburse the bridewealth and on 18 June 1934. However, after fleeing to the mission, she

²¹ 'Le plus grande obstacle à la conquête spirituelle des païens.' 'Un martyr de la morale Chrétienne', Georges Goyau, *Libre Belgique*, 3 January, Yaoundé/Problèmes de mariage, (2) Problèmes de mariage 1930–33, 2J1.10.7, CSE.

²² 'en état d'esclavage'. 'Lettre d'un administrateur à MGR VOGT', 12 May 1923, Yaoundé/Problèmes de mariage, (1) Problèmes de polygamie 1923–31, 2J1.10.7, CSE.

²³ 'La situation légale de la femme en Afrique Equatoriale française', A.L.R. Yaoundé/Problèmes de mariage, (1) Problèmes de polygamie 1923–31, 2J1.10.7, CSE.

²⁴ 'la libération des femmes'.

²⁵ '... qu'un lieu de refuge pour des femmes échappées de leur foyers, une sorte de bois sacré où s'abriterait la révolte conjugale, et les pères approuveraient cette émancipation des femmes hors la loi ou plutôt hors la coutume.'

²⁶ 'Mission catholique de Samba', 18 August 1934, Mgr Le Roy famille et mariage (A)(4), Documentation de Mgr Le Roy, 5B1.10b2, CSE.

refused to leave. Her actions concerned Ngandjè, who asked the mission to intervene in order for the chief to agree that Ngowotol needed to reimburse only half the bridewealth paid by her late fiancé.²⁷

Sometimes the mission was less successful. Maria Ngongono was baptized in the church but given by her brother in marriage to a non-Christian polygynist when she was still underage. She ran away to a *sixa*, but her 'husband' claimed her when she attained marriage age. The administration subsequently forcibly returned her to him. According to the Spiritans, another young girl, Martina Ngotihé, had been kidnapped by Hiomè and sold to Chief Nlomiti. When she was considered nubile, Ngimbus, a polygynist, paid her bridewealth. However, she met a Christian man, Marcus Lugè, who proposed and reimbursed Ngimbus for the bridewealth. After getting the required certification, Lugè and Ngotihé married in the Samba church in May 1933. However, in June 1934, Chief Nlomiti successfully reclaimed her in court. Although the assessors justified their decision through custom, another chief who served as a witness disagreed, contending that Hiomè had abducted Ngotihé.

In addition to the refuge, Wilbois (1934: 149) suggests that women who resided in *sixas* appreciated the training provided. Scholarship on women's mission education in Africa emphasizes that women actively participated and adapted training to their needs (Mougoué 2019: 45–6; Musisi 1992). Nevertheless, more research on women's *sixa* experiences would enrich our understanding of this era.

Tensions between Spiritans and the administration

Unlike the mandate administration, the Spiritans were less wary of disrupting traditional authority through their religious emancipatory project. They aimed to create modern subjects liberated 'from the bondage of tradition and superstition' but protected from the evils of Western secularism (Walker-Said 2018: 145). From the 1920s, the Spiritan missionaries also actively but unsuccessfully advocated for the creation of a special legal status for local Christians, which they argued would serve 'the moral and material interests of the Colony by the establishment of a regularly constituted family'.²⁸ For them, a category for Christians would rightly complement those for Muslims and non-Christians or so-called fetishists.

Despite Spiritan efforts, the mandate administration refused to create a Christian legal status and tension grew between the missionaries and the administration. In his 1930 missionary activity report, Inspector General Dimpault marked 1929 as the year relations became strained.²⁹ Dimpault specifically criticized the *sixas* for exploiting women by requiring an average of five hours of outdoor manual labour. Ironically, the administration expressed concern that this work was unremunerated and inappropriate for women. However, the French administration's concerns went further. Dimpault accused the missionaries of promoting individualism and 'shattering' traditional authority structures. Many administrators considered

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ '... des intérêts moraux et matériels de la Colonie par l'établissement de la famille régulièrement constituée.' 'La situation légale de la femme en Afrique Equatoriale française', A.L.R. Yaoundé/Problèmes de mariage, (1) Problèmes de polygamie 1923–31, 2J1.10.7, CSE.

²⁹ 'Service: Question Spéciale – Action des Missions religieuses. Rapport fait par M. Dimpault communiqué à M. Marchand', 1930, Agence FOM, AGEFOM//355/170 bis, CAOM.

Father Maupeou's death (described at the start of the article) to be a consequence of missionary overreach.

Additional concerns are articulated in an account by a missionary named P. Van Bulck of his conversation with the Yaoundé police superintendent Jean de Calbiac on 17 May 1932,³⁰ just under a month after Father Maupeou's death. After berating the missionary and his colleagues for their conversion efforts, de Calbiac reportedly said:

The Sistas [*sixas*] are public refuges, open to all girls and women who want to emancipate themselves, live a tranquil and easy life without much work, far from those with whom they do not get along any more . . . One understands that the Missions favour this institution because they are for them a source of profits, a way of procuring workers at low cost, an opportunity to easily regulate marriages in escaping from indigenous custom . . . Furthermore, it is an institution that goes directly against the administration, because it is in flagrant and constant opposition with indigenous custom. And yet, it is [custom] that the administration must always protect and have respected.³¹

He further intimated that *sixas* enabled women to escape their male guardians' control and marry without the customary bridewealth. Many of the contradictions of missionary activities are vividly brought to life in Mongo Béti's 1956 novel, *The Poor Christ of Bomba* (Béti 1976). Although not all administrators shared de Calbiac's view that locals strategically feigned Christianity, they tended to agree that missionary efforts were destabilizing because they encouraged women to revolt against their fathers and husbands and they weakened chiefs' authority (Lomo Myazhiom 1999). However, some administrators, like Commissioner General Paul Bonnacarrère, were more supportive of the Spiritan cause. Bonnacarrère, for example, distinguished Muslim and non-Muslim marriage through a May 1934 decree (Ngongo 1982: 123). Nevertheless, his tenure was short (1932–34) and most subsequent administrators were less accommodating.

Sixas fomented conflict over women's bridewealth, companionship, labour and religious belief between missionaries and local converts on the one hand and local non-believers on the other. Local male Christian leaders vernacularized (Merry 2006) Christianity in particular ways, but they also embodied a 'Christian radicalism' that challenged certain colonial ideologies but embraced the patriarchal Christian family (Walker-Said 2018: 47) that *sixas* helped (re)produce. With support from missionaries, both Christian leaders and converts challenged usually older polygynous men, including chiefs, over their multiple fiancées and wives within a context where bridewealth inflation reduced young men's marriage prospects. Chiefs and

³⁰ 'Conversation du P. Van Bulck S.J. avec Mr. De Calbiac, commissaire de police à Yaoundé (17 mai 1932)', Problèmes de mariage, (2) Problèmes de mariage 1930–33, 2J1.10.7, CSE.

³¹ 'Les Sistas sont des refuges publics, ouverts à toutes les filles et femmes, qui veulent s'émanciper, vivre d'une vie tranquille et facile sans beaucoup de travail, loin de ceux avec qui ils ne s'entendent plus . . . On comprend que les Missions favorisent cette institution, puisque c'est pour elles une source de profits, un moyen de se procurer des travailleurs à bon compte, une occasion de régler facilement les mariages en se soustrayant à la coutume indigène . . . De plus c'est une institution qui va directement à l'encontre de l'administration, puisqu'elle est en opposition flagrante et constante avec la coutume indigène. Or c'est celle-là que l'administration doit toujours protéger et faire respecter.' *Ibid.*

non-Christian locals resented this interference, often accusing missionaries and local converts of kidnapping girls and women. The administration sometimes responded by imprisoning priests and converts (*ibid.*: 132). Frustrated that *sixas* made it difficult to return women to their husbands or fiancés, the administration passed a series of laws in the late 1920s and early 1930s requiring women to reimburse bridewealth if they sought a divorce or refused inheritance marriages (*ibid.*: 133, 137–8). This was not only meant to appease chiefs, but enabled the administration to curb women's migration to urban areas and keep them involved in cash crop production (*ibid.*: 138). Eventually, the administration banned *sixas* in 1956, but the Spiritans simply converted them into mission schools.

Intimate partnerships thus became a terrain where ideas about gender, culture, modernity and power were elaborated, contested and negotiated not only by colonial administrators and Spiritan missionaries, but among local populations. Despite underlying agreement on women's subordination, particularly as wives and fiancées, intimate partnerships became a battleground where missionaries, as Walker-Said (2018: 104) contends, became the administration's 'most powerful adversaries'. Father Maupeou's death was a particularly vivid example that French administrators took as evidence of disruptive missionary activity that conflicted with their supposed protection of local customs. Yet, at the heart of these engagements was epistemic violence, which, as I discuss later, has contemporary implications.

Administration and Spiritan imperial debris

Situating the contestations over intimate partnerships within the broader effort to domesticate Western modernity in French Cameroon highlights the importance of the family and particular conceptions of gender and of the 'domestic' to colonial domination, as other scholars have argued (Stoler 2002; McClintock 1995; Hansen 1992a; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; 1997). At the same time, it exposes the violence of the modernity endeavour while providing a glimpse at some of its enduring influence as imperial debris. I contend that this debris has contributed to the impasse over the Family Code.

Spivak (1993: 76) describes epistemic violence as 'a complete overhaul of the episteme'. She draws here from Michel Foucault's description of an episteme as a 'discursive apparatus' (Foucault 1980: 197) that 'defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge' (Foucault 1970: 183). For Spivak (1993: 76), colonialism is an important example of epistemic violence which she characterizes as 'the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogenous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other. This project is also the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious Subject-ivity.' The effort to impose modernity on local people in French Cameroon exemplifies epistemic violence at least because of its silencing of local women and, at most, because of its attempted erasure of certain forms of local knowledge.

The continued impact of the violence should not be taken to mean that French efforts were planned, pristinely executed or homogeneous. Rather, they were messy, sometimes seeking to impose an impossible idealized version of the world (Kaiwar 2014: 117) and at other times just haphazardly or unintentionally producing unpredicted effects. We see this, for example, in how *sixas* were refuges, sources of

free labour and sites of religious indoctrination, which the administration tried to stifle through the ‘retraditionalization’ (Cooper 2005: 144) of family law even as it empowered chiefs (Walker-Said 2018: 102) – the supposed bastions of ‘tradition’ – to enforce new legislation aimed at emancipating women.

Modernity is ‘decisively contradictory, contingent, and contested’ (Dube 2009: 8). Moreover, colonizers did not simply export (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: xvi) Western modernity to the colonies. Rather, the *métropole* and the colonies intertwined as what happened in the latter simultaneously constituted the former and vice versa (*ibid.*: xvi). Despite this messiness, I contend that the modernity endeavour now constrains the imagination of more egalitarian Family Code reform by creating the ‘domestic’ sphere; through the rise of family law exceptionalism; and by developing a problematic understanding of gender in relation to culture and modernity.

The activities undertaken by missionaries and the mandate administration demarcated ‘private’ and ‘public’ spheres, rendering the home a ‘private’ space and relegating women to it. Although the domestic arena was presented as ‘natural and universal’ (McClintock 1995: 35; Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 38), it had significant ‘ideological functions’ (Hansen 1992b: 14). As McClintock (1995) contends, this demarcation of boundaries between the private and the public – typical of colonialism’s modernity project – structured gender identities in ways that served both the colonial project and market capitalism. Women were retired from the constructed public arena, which was constituted as the space of politics and economics, in order to be secluded in a space purportedly steeped in culture and located outside the scope of state intervention. This forced seclusion brought a new set of ills. As Mama (2012: 53) asserts, ‘the domestication of women is a precondition for the crime we define as domestic violence’. Relatedly, Oyěwùmí (2000: 1095) describes how constructing the family as the private ‘world of the wife’ controlled by the absent husband precluded the possibility of theorizing gender relationally. Consequently, the domestication of women had far-reaching detrimental effects on gender equality.

Emphasizing the centrality of the cult of domesticity in British imperialism, McClintock (1995: 36) exposes the ironic amount of work it took to ‘reproduce nature’ and then conceal this reproduction. This and other contradictions are inherent in family law exceptionalism, which Halley and Rittich (2010: 753) describe as ‘the myriad ways in which the family and its law are deemed, either descriptively or normatively, to be special’. The construction of the domestic, both in the colonies and in the *métropole* and the attendant characterization of the family as private, sacred and natural made the family and its law seem like autonomous domains and ‘mask[ed]’ (*ibid.*: 755) critical links between the family, modernity and market capitalism. Family law exceptionalism supports a myth of non-intervention by the state in the family except when necessary (Olsen 1985). This idea is mythical because, as Olsen (*ibid.*: 842) suggests, ‘the state constantly defines and redefines the family and adjusts and readjusts family roles’. Like all myths, this one does ideological work, naturalizing hierarchical relations in the family and legitimizing certain state family policies (*ibid.*). Looking beyond the narrowly demarcated boundaries of family law shows how multiple regimes act in the background to shape family relations, including property, contract, tax and employment law (Halley and Rittich 2010). In French Cameroon, despite the mandate administration’s claim to respect and protect

the local family, at least eleven decrees and ordinances that were passed in the territory between 1922 and 1945 related to bridewealth and about three-quarters of the cases in lower local courts involved adultery, divorce and bridewealth (Suret-Canale 1971: 424). Less directly, actions such as taxation and forced labour were already transforming family structures and dynamics. For example, head taxes made polygyny less affordable. The introduction of taxes on childless women in the early days of the administration was also meant to discourage women from marrying older, polygynous men and to encourage procreation to build the labour force (Guyer 1980: 309). Despite the myth of non-intervention and the broader family law exceptionalism introduced by the mandate administration, the family was and remains deeply embedded in socio-economic and political relations.

At the same time, in locating the possibilities for women's empowerment 'outside of custom' (Wilbois 1934: 149), the missionaries and administration introduced a problematic understanding of gender in relation to culture and modernity. For both groups, indigenous alterity, or what Mbembe (2001: 247) calls 'non-similarity', amounted to barbarism. Bawa (2020) contends that this '*perpetual difference of distance*' continues to be used to render women the 'prime subjects for rescue by European intervention'. This view of radical African difference was rooted in an evolutionary conceptualization of culture. French engagement would purportedly help facilitate a break with backward tradition and a move closer to modernity (Mbembe 2001: 10). The underlying static, bounded, consensual notion of culture ignored its inherent dynamism (Tamale 2008) as well as the power dynamics at play in defining it. As Merry (2006: 15) writes, 'The way culture is conceptualized determines how social change is imagined.' The conception of culture described above limits the imagination of more egalitarian family law in Cameroon.

Postcolonial Cameroon and the Family Code impasse

Most Spiritan missionaries left Cameroon and the congregation's board of directors was dissolved in March 1956. The Cameroonian church became autonomous, maintaining an archdiocese in Yaoundé as well as several dioceses. However, the Spiritan church no longer actively participates in politico-legal debates. Now the church focuses on its more traditional practices of mass and the sacraments, and a relatively newer practice of marriage counselling for couples.

The Ahmadou Ahidjo (1959–982) and subsequent Paul Biya (1982 to present) governments retained many of the legal structures and policies implemented by the French administration. They did, however, abolish the more rigid division between local and European court systems, placing Francophone citizens under French civil law and Anglophone citizens under common law, unless they opted to use customary or Islamic courts. This has meant that, in Francophone Cameroon, intimate partnerships are largely regulated by legislation based on the Napoleonic Code, which perpetuates a patriarchal model of the family.

Since then, efforts have been made to update and harmonize legislation, but the ongoing development of a new Code of the Person and the Family (Family Code) is the most far-reaching (Ngwafor 2006). President Paul Biya committed to deliver a Family Code during a campaign speech in Maroua in October 1997 (Njimeni Njiotang 2018: 34). Only in 2001 did Minister of Social Affairs Madeleine Fouda indicate that the

government had formed an ad hoc committee of experts to advance the Family Code project.³²

Women's organizations have actively campaigned for more egalitarian family law. Aline Njessi Ndine (2004), former president of the Cameroonian Association of Female Jurists (CAFEJ) writes, 'In Cameroon, a Family Code that takes into account the principles of equality, liberty and dignity is necessary so that the Napoleonic Code will be repealed and it will thus put an end to 200 years of injustices and frustrations for women.'³³ A key concern is the husband's continued status as the powerful head of the family (*chef de famille*) under Article 213 of the Cameroonian Civil Code. Many women's rights activists are also concerned about the legality of polygyny, the low minimum marriage age for girls (fifteen as opposed to eighteen for boys), fault-based divorce, and the lack of provisions for cohabiting relationships.

The 2004 draft of the Family Code is yet to be promulgated (Ngwafor 2006: 124). In its 2016 Fifth Periodic Report to the UN Human Rights Committee, Cameroon indicated that consultations were under way (paragraph 34). On 15 May 2018, the Minister of Women Empowerment and the Family, Marie-Thérèse Abena Ondoua, assured the public that the document was being finalized (Amougou 2018), and, in March 2022, CAFEJ organized a workshop to discuss a preliminary draft of the Code (Eboa 2022). Government officials are quick to remind the public of the project's complexity, given that it must manage ethnic and religious diversity (UN HRC 2016)³⁴ and harmonize civil and common law³⁵ while 'advancing gender equality' (CEDAW 2012: paragraph 24). Moreover, the ongoing Anglophone crisis makes promulgation of a new Code challenging.

Conclusions

Both the mandate administration and Spiritan missionaries tried to 'protect' local women from purportedly harmful customary marriage practices and to transform local people in French Cameroon into modern, domesticated subjects. However, their actions and underlying rationales differed significantly. The administration used a rhetoric of respect for local culture and minimal intervention. Meanwhile, in addition to promoting Christian marriage through *sixas*, missionaries tried to use the law by advocating for a distinct Christian legal category. As men fought over wives and fiancées, physical violence often ensued between missionaries and locals as well as among locals. Concerned by such disorder, administrators criticized the Spiritans for actions they characterized as opposing local custom and constituting a threat to the

³² 'Un nouveau code civil en préparation au Cameroun', Cameroon-Info.net, 13 April 2001 <<https://www.cameroon-info.net/article/un-nouveau-code-civil-en-preparation-au-cameroun-61293.html>>, accessed 13 March 2023.

³³ 'Au Cameroun, un code de la famille qui prend en compte les principes d'égalité, de liberté et de dignité est nécessaire afin que soit abrogé le code napoléonien, et qu'il soit ainsi mis fin à 200 ans d'injustices et de frustrations pour les femmes.'

³⁴ See also 'Un nouveau code civil en préparation au Cameroun', Cameroon-Info.net, 13 April 2001 <<https://www.cameroon-info.net/article/un-nouveau-code-civil-en-preparation-au-cameroun-61293.html>>, accessed 13 March 2023.

³⁵ 'Inexistence du code de la famille: Laurent Easo s'explique devant les députés', *EcoMatin*, 31 March 2021 <<https://ecomatin.net/inexistence-du-code-de-la-famille-laurent-esso-sexplique-devant-les-deputes/>>, accessed 13 March 2023.

purported humanism of the colonial project. Nevertheless, lying beyond the physical violence, and the various forms the administration's coercion took, was epistemic violence as the French sought to domesticate modernity.

Debates about the regulation of intimate partnerships in French Cameroon were significant because they were part of a much larger debate about culture, gender, modernity and power. Mandate administrators, Spiritan missionaries and locals were engaged in contestations over appropriate gender relations and how such relations should be realized. In this process, the French created a separate 'domestic' sphere where women primarily resided, made the family and its law seem exceptional, and introduced the problematic view that certain local cultural practices were too barbaric for gender equality.

These actions now affect family law reform in Cameroon. The drafting of a new Family Code, which the president announced in the late 1990s, has seemingly stalled as the government seeks to draft legislation that is reflective of Cameroon's diversity, while also respecting its women's rights commitments. Much like the mandate administration, the Cameroonian government advances a rhetoric of respect for culture and a desire not to intervene in the family. Interestingly, the postcolonial administration decries the women's organizations championing women's human rights as posing a threat analogous to that of the missionaries. The Spiritans and contemporary Cameroonian women's NGOs share in being represented by their respective ruling administrations as overzealous cultural nihilists (Kombo 2010: 194). The bounded notion of culture, of the relegation of women to the domestic arena and of the conceptualization of the family and its law as exceptional narrows the imagination of more egalitarian intimate partnerships and families.

However, this is not the full story. To pretend it is would be a misrepresentation at best and, at worst, tantamount to reproducing epistemic violence in ways that Spivak (1993) cautions against. This article focuses on the perspectives and actions of Spiritan missionaries and members of the administration based primarily on accounts in French archives. No doubt, local people understood and responded to the schizophrenic modernity endeavour in diverse ways that additional research should capture. Although the article has suggested that administrative and missionary action has contributed to the Family Code impasse, the constraints on the imagination that I describe do not amount to constraints on what is possible. Looking more closely at local perspectives will open up our thinking to such transformative possibilities.

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Brenda K. Kombo is Fellow at the Institute for Global Law and Policy at Harvard Law School.