



Research Article

This article is published by JAH,
Journal of Arts and Humanities,
Volume 5, N. 1, Sept., 2021.

ISSN: 2710-3013 (Print)

ISSN: 2788-6360 (Online)

This article is distributed under a
Creative Common Attribution
(CC-BY NC-SA) 4.0 International
License.

Article detail

Received: Nov. 22nd, 2021

Accepted: Feb. 11th 2022

Published: March 5th 2022

Conflict of Interest: The author/s
declared no conflict of interest.



Pliability of Female Sexual Commodification in the City of Bamenda, ca. 1922-2018

By

Nixon Kahjum Takor (Ph.D)

Department of History and Achaoelogy,
The University of Bamenda
takornixon@yahoo.com/677546290

Juliet N. Bessem

Department of History and Achaelogy,
The University of Bamenda
bessem.juliet45@gmail.com / 679286545

ABSTRACT

The expression of sexuality is complex and varies from one society to another. It could be fashioned by different philosophies. Liberalism and conservatism, for instance, have shaped sex practices disproportionately. In areas where liberal laws proliferated, sexuality was exuded more liberally while in parts where conservative attitudes were common, sexual actions were practiced with some degree of concealment. From any vantage point, urban-oriented spaces, in spite of national legal proscriptions, usually did not command the austere traditional ethos that guarded and constrained the expression of sexuality like in conservative (usually) rural societies where sexual probity was well-regarded. The development and expansion of rural milieus into cosmopolitan settings and functions especially from the introduction of the colonial enterprise, significantly redefined the notion of sexuality. Urbanization and its correlates like migration, economic animation, and social-status

construction and generally the wish to survive in the very competitive complex urban scheme, exacerbated the urge for females to defy traditional moral norms of preserving sexuality. It is in this perspective that the paper informed by primary and secondary sources and employing a qualitative-thematic analytical approach, examines the social origins and extent to which the urban construction of the city of Bamenda provided space for an informal female sex marketing economy. The paper maintains that the resilience of female sex commodification in spite of legal and public condemnation in Bamenda was a combination of less rigorous public sexual prohibition policies, limited social welfare opportunities and economic exigencies created in the city from the colonial to the post independent periods. The paper concludes that in spite of the risks, uncertainties, derogatory inferences and criminalization of the activity by the Cameroon penal code, female sex commodification strived largely as a survival strategy in the context of an urban revolution characterized by limited access to socio-economic opportunities.

Key Words: *Bamenda, City, Commodification, Females, Pliability, Sex, Sexuality.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Sexuality is a phenomenon akin to mankind. However: expressions of sexual attitudes are fashioned by diverse philosophies varying from one society to another. Either liberalism or conservatism¹ in terms of sexuality could be attributed to existing regulations, attitudes or customs. In areas where liberal laws were put in place, people tended to practice their sexuality more liberally while in those areas where conservative attitudes

¹ Conservatism in sexuality describes a scenario whereby some societies chose to confine sexuality. That is, adopting a more sacred attitude towards sexuality. In 17th century Europe, the Bourgeoisie societies in Britain pursued repressive mechanisms against sexuality, see Michel Foucault (1978), *The History of Sexuality, Vol.1: An Introduction*, New York: Pantheon Books, 3-4. On the other hand, liberalism in sexuality connotes a more free expression of sexuality in societies wherein regulations and popular attitudes favored the practice of sexuality. See Farid Mohseni et al.(2016), "Historical Background of Prostitution and Typology: A Social-Legal Perspective" *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*7, No. 5, 1-2.

and customs were common, people practiced sexuality in secrecy.² This was in spite of the advent of capitalism³ which influenced groups to reconsider the notion of sexuality.

In the 19th century, prominent African territories where prostitution evolved as major means of sustaining livelihood included Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa.⁴ Accordingly, the growth of cities which could largely be attributed to colonization, “modernization” promoted urbanization and consequently, prostitution. This was quite understandable due to the fact that several economic opportunities were available in these urban centers. This was in the form of labor intensive jobs in the colonial army, European firms, the maritime industry and the road and railway construction sites. These opportunities invariably led to the influx of many into these towns, thus, creating gender based disproportionality as women were not allowed to work or enjoy some of these opportunities. Added to this, the attraction of European visitors to coastal harbor towns equally created wide opportunities for “wayward” women who decided to take advantage of these opportunities to commercialize sexuality through casual sex work; popularly referred to as prostitution.

A similar scenario characterized coastal societies in Cameroon like Douala and Victoria on the eve of colonization. Like the case with colonial Lagos, the women in the aforementioned cities quickly exploited

² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol.1, 3-4.

³ This involved the exchange of goods and services in a free market situation whereby private owners of businesses define strategies to adapt to existing needs and competitive market conditions such as demand, price and choice. This fostered a mentality of exchange whereby people used the available to achieve the desirable. Hence exchange was not only limited to manufacture goods or corporate services. As goods and services were intended to meet demand, so too was the perpetration of sexual services. See <https://www.encyclopadiabritannica.com> “Definition of Capitalism” Accessed on May 8, 2020 at 4.30am.

⁴ Saheed A. Aderinto, (2010) “Sexualized Nationalism: Lagos and the Politics of illicit Sexuality in colonial Nigeria, 1918-1958,” The University of Texas, PhD thesis in History, 1-3.

opportunities through casual sex work to satisfy their immediate wants.⁵ With the coming of colonialism, the growth of new towns in the hinterlands was fostered, capitalist opportunities expanded, new urban spaces emerged and by virtue of these, an influx of people to these areas. A good example was the town of Bamenda that developed under the Germans and later grew in prominence under the administration of the British. As the population of the Bamenda urbanity continued to increase, so too was the intercourse between men and women. The paper maintains that the resilience of female sex commodification in spite of its legal and public disparagement was a combination of loose sexual attitudes that prospered as a result of colonial institutional vacuums created in the Bamenda urban space as well as inadequate socio-economic opportunities. The paper thus appreciates the various concepts and the explicative considerations that accounted for the elasticity of prostitution in the Bamenda city.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In order to position the analysis within scholarship, the following concepts; sexuality, conservatism, liberalism and prostitution would be defined in context.

The notion of sexuality has received intensive scholarly attention with different angles of perception. According to Foucault, sexuality is a mood whereby individuals “recognize themselves as sexual objects.”⁶ He adds that sexual behavior determines “desire” “desiring” and “expression.”⁷ Again, this introduces the notion of controlled and uncontrolled sexuality, otherwise, conservatism and liberalism in the practice of sexuality. Where conservatism was encouraged, legislations or

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Michel Foucault (1990), *The Use of Pleasure: Volume 2 of the History of Sexuality*, (Trans.) Robert Hurley, New York: Random House, Inc., 3-5.

⁷ Ibid.

regulations and even African traditional ethos restricted individuals to exercise restraint in the practice of their sexuality.⁸

Ringdale⁹ argues that sexuality is innately linked to human existence and therefore the necessity to permeate a conservative setting. Perhaps this explains the instances of elaborate sexual behaviors that existed across Africa before the imposition of colonial rule. Oral traditions and written sources by European explorers who visited Africa before the nineteenth make reference to sexual behaviors that seemed to be highly entrenched in the life of several communities. The Zulu people of South Africa, kikuyu in Kenya and Massai in Tanzania portrayed public collective expressions of obscenity in ritual ceremonies, traditional songs and dances.¹⁰ Among the Akan of modern Southern Ghana in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, communities kept select women (mostly slaves) called *abrakee* (public women) who rendered sexual services to men especially bachelors. These women were not expected to charge money for their services but could receive gifts. Married men who slept with them could be fined. Within the Nkwen community of the Bamenda grassfields, some women (mostly unmarried) used *ngwene* (spell) to induce men (married or unmarried) to have sexual intercourse.¹¹ Also, few instances of sexual exchanges for particular favors were characteristic of this community.¹² However these forms of sexual behaviors¹³ rarely involved direct payment for sexual service hence Aderinto's description of such as complex socio-sexual behaviors.¹⁴ Contrary to the view that these socio- sexual behaviors would have

⁸ Michel Foucault (1978), *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*; Ronald Ryam, (1990), *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience*, New York: Manchester University Press, 3-4.

⁹ Nils Ringdale, (2004), *Love for sale: The World History of Prostitution*, New York; Grove Press, 4.

¹⁰ S. O. Okechi, (2018), "The Indigenous Concept of Sexuality in African Tradition and Globalisation", *Global Journal of Reproductive Medicine* 6, Issue 1, 2.

¹¹ Joseph Nkwenti, 65+years, Quarter head of Menda-Nkwen, interviewed at Mile 4 Nkwen, March 17.,2020.

¹² Idem The trade by barter phenomenon applied in this situation.

¹³ These forms of sexual behaviors included concubinage, ritual sex and sex for favors.

¹⁴ Women were not expected to charge for their services but they could receive gifts. See Aderinto, (2010).

resulted in indiscriminate sexual activity, Okechi posits that there was a "...relatively a system of pressure from both the peers and the elders to control individual exercises in sexual activities."¹⁵ In fact, stringent unwritten rules, which guided and enforced discipline among members of the society existed.¹⁶ In the Nkwen community for example, women caught sleeping with married men were publicly shamed and in extreme cases treated as outcasts.¹⁷ This goes to buttress the conservative setting existent in Africa before colonial rule and evidences bias in punishing what was legally considered wrong. Section 343 of the Cameroon Penal Code criminalises *"Whoever, of either sex, engages habitually for gain, in sexual intercourse with others."* The punishment is imprisonment of 6 months to 5 years and a fine.¹⁸ Although the law is not rigorous on meting out sanctions nor distinguishes who bears the brunt on the gender divide, most of those who usually are first targets are women. This is because they conspicuously ply their trades in some well-known neighbourhoods of the city especially at night and are at times subject to arrests by forces of law and order. There is therefore gender bias in what could be considered as stigmatization and punishment.

In another way, Aderinto postulates liberalism in sexuality as a means of sustaining a livelihood.¹⁹ To him, the discourse of sexuality in Africa squares perfectly within the context of her colonial experience.²⁰ In his argument, with particular focus on colonial Lagos, he proves the

¹⁵ The issue of human sexuality was well recognized and individual right was subject to group norms and values. The elderly members of the society initiated the individual members of the society into the concepts and the act of human sexuality through a well-organized and consistent socialization process. See Okechi, (2018), *"The Indigenous Concept..."*¹

¹⁶ Sylvester Funwie, 75-years, retired trader, interview at Mile 4- Nkwen, Bamenda, May 9, 2020.

¹⁷ Idem

¹⁸ See Republic of Cameroon, Law no.2016/2016 relating to regulatory provisions of the Penal Code.

¹⁹ Saheed A. Aderinto (2016), *"Pleasure for Sale: Prostitution in colonial Africa, 1880s-1960s"*, in Frank Jacob(ed) *Prostitution: A companion to mankind*, Frankfurtam Main: Peter Lang, 469.

²⁰ Ibid.

correlation between sexuality, morality and the search for opportunities amid challenges posed by the entrenchment of colonialism. This is quite puzzling because the dual forces of colonialism and African tradition and customs most especially, encouraged conservatism in popular opinion about sexuality. Consequently, African traditional ethos closely associated the expression of sexuality in terms of morality, while the colonial master's view focused on public health issues. Colonial Nigeria conscribed the indigenous people towards a more conserved sexuality.²¹ That is, both the colonial administration and African traditional ethos agreed that sexuality must be controlled in order to protect indigenous values, morality, as well as guard against medical pestilence. However, important to note is, the imposition of colonial rule had a duple impact. On one hand, it promoted a conservative society but on the other, its institutions and agencies generated or horned activities that permitted the expression of sex liberally. The furtherance of capitalism significantly redefined the notion and possibility of exchange, demand, pricing and market strategizing. As goods and services were intended to meet demand, so too was the perpetration of sexual services otherwise referred to as prostitution. The expression of sexuality became a means of sustaining livelihood. Money was important in the affair between the prostitute and her client wherein "...women sold sex partly because it guaranteed financial mobility and freedom. Hence prostitution was considered based on the ability to maintain a consistent pull of men, who found the room of the prostitute welcoming."²²

Broadly, prostitution has been construed as the exchange of sexual services for compensation, usually in the form of money or other

²¹ African traditional customs and values permitted polygamy as a means of portraying one's sexuality. Women were conscious of their place within the society, since it was acceptable to either to be the fourth or fifth wife. On the other hand, the colonial administration was preoccupied with public health concerns like the spread of venereal diseases which may pose a serious challenge to colonization.

²² Aderinto(2016), "Pleasure for Sale..." 469

valuables.²³ This describes intent in the act of prostitution and eludes the notion of prostitution as an activity of survival. It brings into question aspects such as promiscuity or “waywardness” in the practice of sexuality within a morally guided society.²⁴ Edlund and Korn hold that prostitution can be likened to a business venture, capable of contributing in the country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Accordingly, it provides employment opportunities requiring “low skill, labor intensive, and female dominated.”²⁵ This intimates capitalist influence in the trade of sexuality. White corroborates this line of thought by propounding prostitution to be a capitalist social relationship not because capitalism causes prostitution by commoditizing sexual relations, but because wage labor is a unique feature of capitalism, otherwise referred to as, capitalism commoditized labor.²⁶ Therefore, Foucault’s definition affirms uncontrolled (liberal) sexuality to be, the meeting point between desire and desiring. This highlights the consciousness in the act of prostitution wherein the prostitute engages in sex work as a means of survival, taking advantage of the desires of the clients to earn wages.²⁷

To Onselen, prostitution is a “...functional consequence of the rise of the urban city created by early industrial capitalism.”²⁸ He contends that

²³ Katie Barren (2012), “Revisiting the Prostitution Debate: Uniting Liberal and Radical Feminism in Pursuit of Policy Reform” *Law and Inequality: A Journal of Theory and Practice* 30, Issue1, 19.

²⁴ M.H. Ditmore Ed., (2006), *Encyclopedia of Prostitution and Sex Work*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1-3.

²⁵ L. Edlund and E. Korn, (2002), “A Theory of Prostitution” *Journal of Political Economy*, 110, No.1, 183.

²⁶ Luise White, (1990), *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 11.

²⁷ Carol Leigh, (1997), “Inventing sex work” in Jill Nagle (1997), *Whores and Other Feminists*, Routledge: Oxfordshire, 225-229.

²⁸ Africa before colonial rule practiced the trade by barter system of exchange wherein dissimilar goods were exchanged depending on individual needs. Colonization however brought in the monetary system whereby coins instead of goods were used as a medium of exchange. Private owners of businesses defined strategies to adapt to existing needs and competitive market conditions such as demand, price and choice. This fostered a mentality of exchange whereby people used the available to achieve the desirable. Hence, exchange was not only limited to manufactured goods or corporate services. The dawn

Africa before alien rule existed as ethnic communities, with already established traditions and civilizations within clearly defined and demarcated boundaries. The imposition of colonial rule however changed this trajectory. New colonial cities aimed at meeting the colonialists' mission of "civilization" were created. Europeans imported their systems of thought and ideals on work and obligation in a bid to modernize the people. Be that as it may, the inception and resilience of prostitution in the Bamenda city was nurtured by varied considerations.

2.1 Female Sex Commodification in the Bamenda City: Motivations

The traditional socio-economic construct of Bamenda laid the bedrock of activities that elicited the perpetration and resilience of the practice of prostitution in the precinct. The city before colonial rule existed as entities or ethnic communities with already established traditions and civilizations. These traditions; patriarchal ideologies, traditional division of roles and unequal power relations fostered the process of stratification and responsibilities. By tradition, women's role as primary providers of food and indispensable labour gave them a strong spiritual and economic bond with land and thus a certain access to land. However, this customary access to and control of land was connected with marital and family rules.²⁹ In other words, only married women had relative control over land, yet they were all (married and unmarried) expected to feed and sustain their families. At the local level, while men predominated in the decision making level, only women who had attained menopause were allowed to join the decision-making councils at tribal level and "juju" houses such as the 'Kwifor'.³⁰ This

of modernized cities further provided a space for the interplay of these market conditions. See Charles Van Onselen, (1982), *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand 1886-1914*, Vol.1, London: New Babylon, 103.

²⁹ Adri Van Den Berg, (1992), *Women in Bamenda, Survival Strategies and Access to Land* (Leiden, The Netherlands: np, 16.

³⁰ Ibid. Notwithstanding, Women Sacred societies like the *Takumbeng* that grew to prominence in the 1990s with the aim of denouncing certain undemocratic policies of the government also catered for some social injustices against women. However, important to note here is that fact the *Takumbeng* only emerged later in the post-colonial era hence

paucity in representation hindered the adequate promotion of and protection of women's interests and well-being. No doubt as to why the entrenchment of colonization considerably pushed her to the lower echelon of the social ladder. Neither was she hitherto permitted to advance decisions favoring her nor was she opportune to meet up with the exigencies of modernization.

Nana Fabu reveals that capitalistic structures and institutions radicalized the traditional Cameroonian setting, altering the whole fabric of the society and in the process, largely undermining the economic status of the women.³¹ For example the breakdown of the traditional African family transformed traditional socio-economic functions bringing pressure to bear on the traditional division of labor. Men were continuously being integrated into the cash economy while women continued subsistence farming and traditional household duties without the advantages of the new agricultural techniques and equipment.³² This in the short run limited most women to self-employment as dressmakers, petty traders, food or beer sellers, domestic servants and prostitutes. Pre-colonial sexual liaisons were converted and adapted into new forms to suit the realities of the new urban life, in other words, commodification of sex. As early as 1925, complaints of "loose women" roaming around the town of Bamenda like elsewhere notably Victoria, Kumba, and Mamfe sleeping with men were already been tabled.³³ In 1933, the Native Authority Ordinance for the Cameroon Province³⁴ passed out orders meant to address and check the practice of indiscriminate sexuality. The term prostitute was defined to mean '...any woman who gives herself for hire,' prostitution was strictly

highlighting the lack of female representation in decision making, leadership inter alia in the pre-colonial and colonial epoch.

³¹S. Nana-Fabu, (2006), "An Analysis of the Economic Status of Women in Cameroon" *Journal of International Women's Studies* 8, No. 1, 149.

³² Ibid.

³³ N.A.B. File No. V787, "Measures against Prostitutes 1938," 34.

³⁴ Cameroons Province and Bamenda Province were the two main administrative sections or arrangements brought on board during the Mandate and later Trusteeship. Cameroon Province involved; Mamfe, Victoria and Kumba while Bamenda Province was Bamenda Division, Wum Division and Nkambe Division.



forbidden with the offence of being returned to the perpetrator's native village if caught, amongst others.³⁵ In 1954, concerns were expressed by councils in the Bamenda Division over the movement of young women to the plantations to prostitute and their unwillingness to return to the villages.³⁶ Evidently the exclusion of women in the modernized scene rendered many jobless hence vulnerable to informal or odd jobs in order to earn a living. Prostitution became an easy outlet; it did not require any form of capital to start up.

With neo-colonialism, the habit of persisting in time honored practices by invoking tradition still very much played a visible role in hindering women from going after certain administrative positions or educational attainment. While men predominated in the income generating, high pay, high prestige and high profile sectors of the economy, women wrestled with food crop production, petty trade, domestic services and prostitution. Despite its illegality, prostitution is still very much rife in the city, the socio-economic setting enabling its elasticity.

In addition, culture appropriation was and still very much so remains one of the considerations that accounted for the practice of prostitution in the Bamenda city. Colonialists' effort to implement the ideals of "modernization" culminated to an adaptation or incorporation of her culture by Africans. Although this imposition clashed with the latter's determination to uphold their customs, values and ethos, change was inevitable. The colonialist vied to establish avenues that favored them and kicked against laws that threatened their belief systems and practices.³⁷ As a result, Africans inadvertently appropriated colonialist culture. The impacts were wide and varied. The implantation of Christianity for instance rather exacerbated the practice of prostitution in the Bamenda city as its teachings clashed with the traditions of the people. Kaberry cautiously established:

³⁵ N.A.B. File No. V787, "Measures against Prostitutes 1938" 10, 32.

³⁶ N. A. B., File No. 1637, Movement of Women, 1.

³⁷ Aderinto, "Sexualized Nationalism: Lagos and the Politics of illicit Sexuality..." 19.



The attitude of the Roman Catholic Church to divorce has led indirectly in some cases to an increase in prostitution, for if a woman deserts her husband or is deserted by him, she may not marry again and is likely to augment her income by becoming a prostitute. Prostitution is in part condoned by society particularly in the case of the daughters of the *Fon* since any children born to the woman belong to their father's lineage...³⁸

It was of common knowledge that Grassland chiefs like those of Kumbo and Kom ran harems in excess of one hundred royal "wives"³⁹ and consequently children. Thus, disinterested women mostly ran away finding sanctuary either with flash points in the nearest Mission villages at Shisong and Njinikom respectively⁴⁰ or in the far off Bamenda urbanity.⁴¹ These women, with the support of the Catholic Church often protested against the practice and manner in which young women were rounded up and forced to become Fons or Chiefs' wives. Also the practice of polygamy which was intended to confine indiscriminate sexuality was attacked and labeled as "sinful". Monogamy was hence promoted as "ideal" and this in the long run promoted prostitution as the people mostly men were not acquiesced with this new culture.⁴²

With respect to Western education, the situation was dismal for the Bamenda woman in particular. Education was vehemently opposed by men as it was thought to deprive women's assistance in the home and on the farm, thus a threat to her traditional role as a woman.⁴³ In fact, education constituted a menace "...to the responsibilities of parenthood

³⁸R. A. B., NW/AE.1948/1 File No.2461, Kaberry (Dr. Phyllis), Lady Anthropologist, Bansa, 29.

³⁹ Anthony, Ndi, (2016), *The Golden Age of Southern Cameroons: Vital lessons for Cameroon*, Bamenda, Spears Media Press. 40.

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Edith Berinyuy, 72years, food seller, interview in Mobile Nkwen, Bamenda, March 20, 2020.

⁴² Idem.

⁴³ It was feared that an educated girl will no longer marry according to the wishes of her father or the *fai* (fon) and when she does marry, she may despise farm work and be slack in her care of the children in order to acquire money for clothes and ornaments through trade or even through prostitution. Interview with you Berinyuy.

and to the mutual dependence of husband and wife within the home.⁴⁴ To Nana-Fabu, the shortage of schools, the limited access to the available ones and the inferior education provided by the few schools further worsened the situation to those who might have been interested.⁴⁵ Of course, when it came to choosing, men always had the edge over education than women. Many parents preferred to marry their daughters off and use the bride price to educate the men.⁴⁶ Hence, more women were illiterate and in need of independent incomes to cater for themselves. They resorted to traditional activities such as trading and pottery, informal jobs like selling cooked food and beer houses, with prostitution as a side business.⁴⁷

In the same light, frequent migrations to found new settlements led to an intermingling and integration of cultures. A popular case in point were the the Banyangs⁴⁸ who migrated in their numbers to the Bamenda urbanity.⁴⁹ Contrary to the Bamenda Grassfields whose culture and gender hierarchy expected women to behave in a certain way with regards to sex, as to preserve herself only for her husband, the Banyangs had a much more liberal attitude towards sex.⁵⁰ In a bid to maintain her identity, unity and cohesion, the latter settled in the buoyant *Abakpa*, establishing themselves in an exclusive neighborhood popularly known as (Banyang)“*Yangi*” quarter,(later to be considered a hot prostituting spot).⁵¹ In a bid to earn a living, they resorted mostly to trading, cooking the famous traditional delicacy, “water fufu and eru” in restaurants and prostituting.⁵² Over time,

⁴⁴ R.A.B., File NW/AE. 1948/1 ,29

⁴⁵ S. Nana-Fabu,(2006), “ An Analysis of the Economy...” 157.

⁴⁶ Ibid. Also, Stephen Fonene, 65years, retired teacher and successor of the “Seven Door Bar” interviewed at Old Town, Bamenda, May 12, 2020

⁴⁷ N.A.B., File No. 3337LG, “Taxation of Prostitues”1.

⁴⁸ The Bayang are people inhabiting the administrative units of Mamfe Central and Upper Banyang Sub Divisions in the Manyu Division of South West Region of Cameroon

⁴⁹ E.S.D Fomin, (2016), “Towards Deconstructing the Prostitution Stigma on Female Banyang Migrants in Cameroon, 1930-1984”, *Pantikar Journal of History* vol.3. No.4, 7.

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Martin N. Anyere, 75+years, successor of the Golden Fleece Bar, interviewed in Old Town, Bamenda, December 20, 2020.

the quarter gained notoriety. Other ethnicities such as the Bamoun, Nso, Bali, Meta who had equally migrated to Bamenda settled in this quarter, appropriated the culture of liberal sex and prostituted as a means of surviving.⁵³ Initially it was mostly clandestine but subsequently, the adherents got comfortable and popular spots such as “Seven Doors Bar”, “Golden Fleece”⁵⁴ and the already established *Yangi* quarters grew into prominence and were noted for entertainment and prostitution.⁵⁵

Furthermore, urbanization constituted one of the considerations that accounted for the practice of prostitution in the Bamenda urbanity. The coming of Europeans in the 1890s precipitated the growth and prominence of the town. Early stages of urbanization in the Bamenda urbanity were characterized by the mushrooming of services such as schools, dispensaries, post and a new market. Later, in the 1950s, when the urbanity became the District Headquarters of the Bamenda Province, there was an increase in services such as hospitals, banks, industries, a community hall specifically located in the colonial administrative posts at “Upstation” and “Old Town”.⁵⁶ These services were accompanied by employment facilities thus pulling migrants from the rural areas and neighboring Nigeria to settle temporarily or permanently in the town. Several women accompanied their husbands, others came alone escaping from patriarchal control and searching for economic independence.⁵⁷ These women (married and unmarried) were separated from their farms, (main source of living) but still expected to feed and clothe their families. Most times, they were forced to travel back to their villages to plant and harvest food which was insufficient for daily provision.⁵⁸

At independence and re-unification, the semi-urban town expanded even more impressively due to increased social services and

⁵³ Fomin,(2016), “Towards Deconstructing the Prostitution Stigma...” 7,8.

⁵⁴ These were the names of ‘the popular bars found in Old Town at the time.

⁵⁵ Interview with Anyere.

⁵⁶ L.Fombe,(1983), “The Bamenda Urban Space-Evolution and organization, MSc in Geography: University of Yaoundé, 14-15.

⁵⁷ Adri Van Den Berg,(1992), *Women in Bamenda...*,18-19

⁵⁸ Nana- Fabu (2006), “ An Ananlysis of the Economy of...”159

economic employment.⁵⁹ The town saw an array of unemployed women, who had been neglected during the colonial capitalist economy⁶⁰ and excluded from learning the new cultivation technologies and equipment as the Europeans were convinced that only men could and should farm. In 1968, 1969, following the minutes of a meeting held by the Mamfe Central council, strong concerns were raised with regards to the increasing migration of the Mamfe women to the Bamenda province and elsewhere to practice prostitution. In fact, suggestions were even made as to repatriating these women to their respective homes.⁶¹ However, no definite conclusions were made given "...people cannot be restricted from moving out of an area if they are unable to provide themselves with means of subsistence."⁶²

These minutes are proof of the fact that the practice was abhorred and so extensively discussed in order to mitigate its practice. The indecision between repatriating the prostituting women and providing jobs from which a means of livelihood could be derived permitted the continuous perpetration of the practice though clandestinely. Admittedly, the economic chances of the majority of the Bamenda women was limited to self-employment (in trade, selling of cooked food, beer houses, prostitution) partly because 60% of women were illiterate against 46% of the men.⁶³ Howbeit efforts were made to curtail the practice; the work of the churches and of organizations concerned with health issues (avoiding

⁵⁹ File No. SA/e/1994/1 "Impact of Urbanization of the Position of Women", Research Proposal. 5

⁶⁰ Colonialism drastically transformed the economic, political and social structures of traditional Bamenda. Subsistent economies were transformed into money or capitalist economies. Agriculture was commercialized. Cash crop production increasingly replaced food production. European plantation owners, together with their predominantly male labor force, became the driving force of the agricultural economy, thereby displacing women. See Nana-Fabu (2006), 157.

⁶¹ N. A.B., File No. CI. 1211, "Mamfe Central Council Control of Prostitution and Bride Price" 2.

⁶² Ibid 6

⁶³ M.J Hay and S. Sticher, (1984), *African Woman South of the Sahara*, London/New York: Heinemann cited in File No. SA/e/1994/1 "Impact of Urbanization, Buea: N.A.B, Buea, 1994, 2.

the spread of sexually transmitted diseases), moral welfare, family welfare, child and marriage guidance were hugely encouraged so as to bring about the necessary mental change.⁶⁴

By 1972, when Bamenda was made administrative headquarter of the newly created North West Province, master of five divisions, (Momo, Bui, Donga Matung, Menchum and Mezam) the town witnessed more improvement in her economy. Although there was a general atmosphere of optimism, life in the city especially for the woman still required a certain degree of survival.⁶⁵ There existed mostly an atmosphere of urban quandary where residents had to mobilize in order to make the urban space viable and sustainable.⁶⁶ The daily struggle for survival entwined with the realities of urbanization and this not only precipitated the choice of prostitution but equally contributed to its incessant perpetration. This motivation clearly supports Onselen's argument as in a bit to "civilize" the thoughts, ideals and pattern of preexisting defined African communities, the colonialists changed the trajectory. The consequence was urbanization which invariably created unemployment, competition, high crime wave and prostitution.

The social indigence that generally characterized the economic nature of the Bamenda urban space also fostered the need to commercialize sex.⁶⁷ The economy was characteristically made up of informal activities like petty trade, tailoring, hairdressing, embroidering, craft and arts work as well as road side food and liquor commercialization. This only added to the large dependence on primary sector activities notably, agriculture (farming and livestock rearing). These coupled with makeshift opportunities around transportation services, hotels and other public and private tertiary activities could not readily offer the much yearned for employment for the ever increasing populations of the city, hence few job

⁶⁴ N. A.B., File No. Sf/1959/1 "Prostitution and Marriage" 93-94.

⁶⁵ E.N.Sone and N.I.Ntiege, (2014), "Moralising Female Identity in Cameroon in the 1990s: Female Prostitution and the song "yu gu cry", *Journal of Music Research in Africa*, Vol.11, No.20, 104.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ S.Nana-Fabu (2009), *The Feminization of Poverty in Cameroon*, Yaoundé: Cle, 195.

opportunities. This in part contributed to sending some female folks to practice prostitution in the city of urban despite its illegality.⁶⁸

Besides, the economic malaise that hit the country in the 1980s and thereafter further exacerbated the employment precarity of Bamenda. In 1986, due to the economic crisis, there was a general fall in the prices of agricultural produce in the world market and a sharp hike in prices, living standards, trade deficits and so too, poverty level. In fact, the value of money dropped, the degree of hardship worsened.⁶⁹ This seriously shattered the economy of Cameroon in general and Bamenda in particular. The high dependence of the region on agricultural produce meant that the crisis also affected its inhabitants. Most people found themselves in a dire economic situation pushing them almost immediately into searching for “coping strategies.”⁷⁰ Others lost their jobs and the few opportune to keep them were paid very lowly.⁷¹ There was job insecurity and generalized misery and poverty in the country.⁷² The reality of such was a fall in the standards of living, high crime wave, overcrowding, fewer resources, and inadequate capital. Life became much more difficult as wants increased, money became scarce and formal jobs few and meant only for the educated or trained which sadly was male dominated given the previous advantage granted to them in the colonial days. Caught in this web, women once again, were faced with financial issues; they had to look for ways to escape poverty. From this background, Mary Fien reported:

Life in the city was very difficult in the 1980s. Most people especially women could barely survive. Prostitution seemed an easier and cheaper choice. It was the only job didn't require initial capital like other

⁶⁸ Mary Fien, 72years, retired teacher, interviewed in Old Town, Bamenda, December 15, 2020.

⁶⁹ M.D.Tambi (2015),, “Economic Growth, Crisis and Recovery in Cameroon: A Literature Review”, *Journal of Industrial Distribution and Business* Vol. 6, No.1. 5-15.

⁷⁰ Simon Chu, 80years, retired civil servant, interviewed in Mile 2 Nkwen Bamenda, February 5, 2020.

⁷¹ Idem

⁷² Interview with Fonene.

businesses. In fact, some women prostituted, got startup capital and engaged in to some other profitable business..."⁷³

This clearly sustains the argument that the practice of prostitution in Bamenda town cannot be dissociated from the difficult economic environment that followed the economic crisis that hit Cameroon in the 1980s.⁷⁴ More tragic is the fact that most of the women who inadvertently got involved in the practice led very deplorable lives, feeding from hand to mouth. The living conditions were no better. Some quarters like the *Yanghi* quarter at Old Town which was popularly known to be inhabited by prostitutes were over saturated with these women groveling for survival.

The 1990 crisis that followed a decade later, as well as the 2008 general discontent and violent demonstrations also brought pressure to bear on the socio-economic fabric of the Bamenda urbanity.⁷⁵ The former was characterized by ghost town operations, violent demonstrations, boycott of economic activities and deep salary cuts.⁷⁶ These times presented a context of economic peril in the urbanity and the consequences were deeply felt by the masses. People had to develop strategies as insurance against poverty and uncertainty, one of such strategies was prostitution. Coupled with this was the fact that new market routes from Dubai and the Mobile Telephone Network (MTN) opened up, this situation impelled new business opportunities which brought mobile phones, the internet, expensive clothing and make-up as inclusive tastes for urban residents, especially women.⁷⁷ Consequently, market opportunities and the availability of Information Communication

⁷³ Interview with Mary Fien.

⁷⁴ It is imperative to mention that the Bamenda people had within these years exploited forms of rewarding or entertaining themselves after a difficult day. This ranged from drinking beer and palm wine in the said parlors, dancing to watching movies in cinemas later in the 1990s. Hence, whilst the crisis crippled and toppled the economy, the women farmed, traded, prostituted as well as entertained themselves as survival strategies in the perplexing situation of economic stress and modernity.

⁷⁵ V.J. Ngoh (1989), *History of Cameroon. Since 1800*, Limbe: Pressprint, 299.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Sone and Ntiege (2010), "Moralising Female Identity in Cameroon..." 104.

Techonlogies (ICT) ushered in a new era of unprecedented change with new expectations in cities like Bamenda. Interestingly the concept of pricing had a direct relationship with the changing times and so was a determinant variable in the business as can be seen on table 1.

Table 1: The Function of Price and Income

Year	No. of prostitutes	Price (francs CFA)	Daily Income (francs CFA)	Contingency Dispositions
1972	15-20	200	600	Feeding, basic needs
1986	20-35	500	2500	Feeding, housing, basic needs
1990	35-50	700-1000	4800	Feeding, housing, basic needs
1995	50-75	700-1000	7000	Feeding, housing, schooling, clothing, basic needs, <i>njangi</i>
2000	50-60	900-1000	8000	Feeding, housing, clothing, transportation, schooling, <i>njangi</i>
2005	60-70	1000	9000	Feeding, rents, clothing, schooling, drinks, <i>njangi</i>
2010	70-90	1000-1200	10800	Feeding, rents, schooling, clothing <i>njangi</i> contributions
2015	90-100	1500-2000	15000	Feeding, rents, schooling, clothing, <i>njangi</i> contributions
2016	100	2000-1000	20000	Feeding, schooling, clothing, rents, <i>njangi</i> contributions

Source: Author's field Work, June 05, 2020. In the absence of recorded data, these were approximate statistics curled from field interviews.

Table 1 shows the relationship between price, income and expenses covered by prostitutes in the Bamenda urbanity. Income generated from the activity over the years seems to be highly reflective on economic conditions and contingency dispositions of the prostitutes, which varied from one to another. In 1972, based on the buoyancy of the economy and stability of market prices, prostitutes charged 200 francs CFA for a single customer within 30mins, considering that the size of the mattress was 50cm thick. Exceptionally the price was lowered to about 100 francs CFA.

When the economic crisis broke out in 1986 the value of money dropped. There was a sharp hike in prices and living standards, trade deficits increased, poverty level, in fact the degree of hardship worsened.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ M.D.Tambi,(2015), "Economic Growth, Crisis and Recovery..." 5-15



Prostitutes therefore responded by increasing their prices to 500 francs CFA. As the economic hardship persisted, the price went upward to 700 francs CFA in 1990 and 1000 francs CFA in 1995. Equally, there was a significant increase in those involved in prostitution as a means to meet up with daily engagements like *njangi*, payment of tuition fees of their children, feeding and rents. For instance, in 1995, an average prostitute came in contact with approximately seven men. Seven men by 1000francsCFA charged per men gave a daily income of 7000francs CFA. However, stability in market prices with the start of the new millennium slightly modified the prices and thus no relative increase.

Between 2005 and 2015, there was sudden boom in the activities of prostitutes in Bamenda, luring many adherents to the activity. This made prostitutes to respond by increasing prices until it reached 2000 francs CFA in 2016. Averagely, by this year, a prostitute could make close to 20,000 francs CFA a day. With regards to her engagements, 3000francsCFA was the permanent price for a room daily in the Virgin Island bar for instance, implying about 90000francs CFA a month.⁷⁹ Prostitutes were expected to pay irrespective of how many clients they encountered. As a result, there was no specific time to prostitute. As early as eight in the morning, the prostitutes at the Virgin Island bar, Mobile Nkwen started business. In fact, a set of defined rules and regulations created during meetings protected the interest of the ladies and sustained the business respectively.⁸⁰ New comers in to the scene were expected to pay some sort of “new man tax”. This tax could be either crates of drinks or having free sex with an appointed client as indicated by the older prostitutes.⁸¹ This ritual introduced the women into the business. Howbeit, the escalation of socio-political unrest in Bamenda in 2016, accounted for the drop in daily income to 10,000 francs CFA for some and 4,500 francs CFA for others.

⁷⁹ It is worth mentioning that rents had to be paid in two houses; the rooms in the brothels and their individual homes wherein they lived with their families in the nearby quarters.

⁸⁰ Immaculate Bi, 40+years, sex trader, interviewed at Mobile Nkwen, Bamenda, March 12, 2020

⁸¹ Idem.



Evidently, the phenomenon of prostitution was a whole business carried out in the Bamenda urbanity. Unlike other businesses that required a certain amount of capital as start off, the business demanded just a willing woman. However, the practice followed the same pattern of demand and supply like any other businesses with the concept of price fluctuating as per demand and the exigencies of the time. Unfortunately, income made hardly met up with the prostitutes engagements thus accounting for the resilience of the activity. It was a matter of survival.

The risks and uncertainties faced by adherents in the prostituting business have in no way deterred the practice. The widespread of venereal diseases like chlamydia, syphilis, gonorrhea and HIV/AIDs, the persistence of violence through rape and harassment, increased delinquency, excessive consumption of drugs among youths and a host of others constituted some of the risks prostitutes in the city faced on a daily basis. In spite of these adversities, the practice continued. As one sex trader recounted;

Sick be dey but man for do how? Poverty be dey too. I know be want die poverty and man no be get capital for start business. Sometime we be di protect waselves, other time them we no doam A know say e no bi correct because sick bi plenty for outside, but thank God say drugs them be dey too, and the free, man no fit die e fit take drug dem fine but man fit die poverty (excerpt of a pidgin English conversation with Bi Immaculate).⁸²

We were conscious of the illnesses but poverty was more biting. What choice did I have? I did not have starting capital for a business. Sometimes, we protected ourselves, other times we did not. I know it was not safe given the prevalence of diseases but thank God, there are drugs. We can take drugs and survive HIV AIDs. Moreover, they drugs are free, but we cannot survive hunger.” (Translation, Takor & Bessem, 2020)

Clearly, the fear of death was secondary to poverty. Although efforts were made by private institutions and affiliated associations such

⁸² Interview with Bi.

as the New Life Club⁸³ in sensitizing and providing contraceptives in a bid to mitigate the practice, some prostitutes remained adamant, others boycotted and a few dismissed the help. As one of the prostitutes mentioned nonchalantly; *"I don already condemn, a di go small time."* (I'm already old, I will soon die).⁸⁴Evidently, this was proof of negligence or a laissez-faire attitude portrayed with regards to health and maintenance.

3. CONCLUSION

The discourse of sexuality remains an indispensable facet to grapple with in modern historiography given its reflection in virtually all spheres of society's engagements. The organization of every human society creates a moral value system that determines how individual members of the society participate in any form of relationship or activity as regards sexuality. In view of this, African societies developed gradually a system which guided and determined what was permissible in the quest to satisfy sexual urges. However, the advent of colonialism and furtherance of capitalism significantly influenced the notion of sexuality in Africa, hence Aderinto's argument which posited that the discourse of sexuality involving direct payment falls within the context of Africa's colonial experience. The experience had significant effects which spanned from migration, culture appropriation, urbanization, expansion to unemployment, overpopulation inter alia. In the case of the Bamenda city, the realities of such effects paved the way for the perpetration of sexual services. In addition, the economic indigence that hit the town as a result of the 1980s, 1990s, 2008 and 2016 crises further worsened living conditions. Life became increasingly difficult. Women felt the need to sell their bodies in order to make ends meet. Despite its derogatory

⁸³ New Life Club is an association affiliated to the Bingo Annex Hospital in Bamenda. It takes care of prostituting HIV patients; organizes counseling sessions, offers protection, ensures that regular visits for checkup and drugs are frequently done by prostitutes amongst many others.

⁸⁴ Mary Nangeh, 40years sex trader, interviewed at Mile Two, Nkwen Bamenda, May 22, 2020.

connotation and criminalization by the penal code, prostitution still thrives.

FUNDING

This research paper received no internal or external funding.

REFERENCES

Oral Sources

- Fonene**, Stephen. 65years, retired teacher and successor of the “Seven Door Bar” interviewed at Old Town, Bamenda, May 12, 2020.
- Fien**, Mary. 72 years, retired teacher, interviewed in Old Town, Bamenda, December 15, 2020.
- Chu**, Simon 80 years, retired civil servant, interviewed in Mile 2 Nkwen Bamenda, February 5, 2020.
- Anyere**, N. Martin 75+ years, successor of the Golden Fleece Bar, interviewed in Old Town, Bamenda, December 20, 2020.
- Jiti**, Rene 33years, social worker and Evangelist, interviewed at Ndamukon street, Bamenda, April 15, 2020.
- Bih**, Immaculate 40years, sex trader, interviewed at Mobile Nkwen, Bamenda, March 12, 2020
- Funwue**, Sylvester 72 years, retired trader, interviewed at Mile 4, Nkwen, Bamenda, March 8, 2020.
- Kumi**, Edith 45+years, sex trader, interviewed at Mobile- Nkwen, Bamenda, March 12, 2020.
- Bumuh**, Novela 35years, Nurse, interviewed at Bingo Hospital, Bamenda, March 11, 2020
- Nangeh**, Mary 40years, sex trader, interviewed at Mile Two, Nkwen Bamenda, May 22, 2020.
- Chianange**, Christopher 50years, policeman, interviewed at Mile-Four Nkwen Bamenda, May, 10 2020.
- Yefon**, Ethel aged 40+years, sex trader, interviewed at Ndamukon Street, Bamenda, May 10, 2020
- Nsaibang**, Jeremiah 70years, retired trader, interviewed at Old Town, Bamenda, June 10, 2020.

Nsum, Velvita 55+years, sex trader, interviewed at T. Junction Bamenda,
April 19, 2020

Books

- Adri**, Van Den Berg. (1992). *Women in Bamenda, Survival Strategies and Access to Land*,
Leiden, The Netherlands: np, 11-43.
- Ditmore** M.H. Ed., (2006), *Encyclopedia of Prostitution and Sex Work*.
Westport: Greenwood Press, 1-5.
- Focault**, Michel. (1990). *The use of Pleasure: Volume 2 of the History of sexuality*, (Trans.) Hurley, Robert. New York: Random House, Inc.,
1-5.
- Focault**, Michel. (1948). *The History of Sexuality, Vol.1: An Introduction*. New
York: Pantheon Books, 1-5.
- Hay M.J** and **Sticher S.** 1984. *African Woman South of the Sahara*.
London/New York: Heinemann, 2-5.
- Nana-Fabu**, Stella. (2009). *The Feminization of Poverty in Cameroon*.
Yaoundé: Editions Cle., 77- 195.
- Ndi**, Anthony. (2016). *The Golden Age of Southern Cameroons: Vital lessons for Cameroon*. Bamenda, Spears Media Press, 40-45.
- Ngoh V. J.**, (1989). *History of Cameroon since 1800* Limbe: Presbyterian
Printing Press, 299-302.
- Onselen**, Van Charles. (1982). *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand 1886-1914 Vol.1*. London: New Babylon, 103-105.
- Ringdale**, Nils. (2004). *Love for sale: The World History of Prostitution*. New
York; Grove Press, 4-8.
- Ryam**, Ronald. (1990). *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience*. New
York: Manchester University Press, 3-6.
- White**, Luise. (1990). *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi*.
Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 10-15.

Journal Articles and Book Chapters

- Aderinto** A. Saheed. (2016). "Pleasure for Sale: Prostitution in Colonial
Africa, 1880s-1960s" in Frank Jacob (ed.,) *Prostitution: A Companion
to Mankind*. Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 469-480.

- Barren Katie**, (2012). "Revisiting the Prostitution Debate: Uniting Liberal and Radical Feminism in Pursuit of Policy Reform Law and Inequality," *Journal of Theory and Practice*, 30(1), 1-21.
- Carol Leigh**. (1997). "Inventing sex work" in Jill Nagle (1997), *Whores and Other Feminists*, Routledge: Oxfordshire, 225-231.
- Edlund**, Lena and Korn, Evelyn. (2002). "A Theory of Prostitution" *Journal of Political Economy*, 110(1), 181-214.
- Fomin**, E.S.D., (2016). "Deconstructing the Prostitution Stigma on Female Banyang Migrants of Cameroon, 1930-1984." *Pantikar Journal of History*, 3 (4), 1-8.
- Mohseni**, Farid et al, (2016). "Historical Background of Prostitution and Typology: A Social-Legal Perspective" *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 7(5), 232-240.
- Nana-Fabu**, Stella. (2006). "An Analysis of the Economic Status of Women in Cameroon" *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 8 (1), 102-159.
- Okechi**, S. O. (2018). "The Indigenous Concept of Sexuality in African Tradition and Globalisation", *Global Journal of Reproductive Medicine*, 6 (2), 2, 1-5.
- Sone**, E. N. and .Ntiege, N.I. (2014). "Moralising Female Identity in Cameroon in the 1990s: Female Prostitution and the song "yu gu cry", *Journal of Music Research in Africa*, 11 (20), 103-110.
- Tambi**, M.D. (2015). "Economic Growth, Crisis and Recovery in Cameroon: A Literature Review" *Journal of Industrial Distribution and Business*, 6 (1), 5-15.

Dissertation and Thesis

- Aderinto**, A. Saheed. (2010). "Sexualized Nationalism: Lagos and the Politics of Illicit Sexuality in Colonial Nigeria, 1918-1958", PhD Thesis in History, The University of Texas at Austin, 1-8.
- Fombe**, Lawrence. (1983). "The Bamenda Urban Space- Evolution and Organization", MA Dissertation in Geography, University of Yaoundé, 1-25.
- Njingti**, B. Reymond. (2018). "The Growth of Illicit Petrol Trade in the City of Bamenda 1999-2017", DIPES II Dissertation in History, University of Bamenda, 42-45.

Archival Sources

National Archives Buea (N.A.B.)

N.A.B., File No. Sf/1972/1, "A Survey of Prostitutes in Victoria Town, South West Province U.R.C." 21

N.A.B., File No.87 "Penal Code Book 1 and 2"

N.A.B., File No. SA/e/1994/1 "Impact of Urbanization of the Position of Women", Research Proposal. N.A.B., File No Sg/1999/1 " North West Province-A Tourist's Dream of the Millennium; The Bamenda Millenium Celebration Forum", 1999, 30.

Regional Archives Bamenda (R.A.B.)

R. A. B. Nw/Sa/d.1987/41/Bk "Archaeological Research in Anglophone Cameroon: A Historical Perspective 1987," 487.

R.A.B. Nw/Sa/d/1983/1/Bk, "The Bamenda Urban Space-Evolution and Organisation."

Public Document

Republic of Cameroon, Law no.2016/2016 relating to regulatory provisions of the Penal Code.