

CHRISTIANITY AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN FRENCH CAMEROON

Faith, Power and Family: Christianity and Social Change in French Cameroon.

By Charlotte Walker-Said.

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The recent resurgence of interest in the role that Christian missions and religion played in shaping policy in France's overseas empire has, until now, focused primarily on the activities of western missionaries and their often-contentious relationships with colonial authorities. Charlotte Walker-Said's *Faith, Power and Family* flips that narrative on its head. While Walker-Said acknowledges the contributions of white missionaries, her book convincingly argues that it was African religious leaders and converts who played the dominant role in struggles to reshape the domestic sphere and family life in interwar French Cameroon.

Walker-Said shows that labor recruitment in support of French efforts to develop the economy of Cameroon had a series of unintended effects on marriage practices and family structures which Christian missions and their African personnel confronted on a regular basis. Part One of her book covers the period from 1914 to 1925 and illustrates how war-time internment of western missionaries created an opening for African pastors, priests, and catechists to become charismatic community leaders, a role which was enhanced by their willingness to make use of lineage systems and other forms of rural authority. Walker-Said then documents how African Christian leaders used their influence to challenge government labor policy and reshape understandings of marriage and family.

In Walker-Said's telling, African leaders began with complaints that official labor practices delayed marriage and the formation of families by taking men from the villages and paying them too little for them to be able to afford bride price payments. By the mid-1920s, they argued that money earned from government salaries and manipulation of the labor supply enabled chiefs to develop a *de facto* monopoly on marriage as the only members of the community who could afford to pay rapidly escalating bride prices. This situation, in turn, led to the transformation of polygamy from something rare and confined to community elders into a more commercial and commonplace practice. As Walker-Said shows, government efforts to deal with these problems via laws reforming marital practices were rendered moot by the rapidity of legal changes and the administration's habit of upholding the wealth and power of chiefs. African Christian leaders stepped into the breach, developing powerful arguments that official policy not only suppressed marriage rates, but that it also allowed the rich and powerful to abuse the weak in a perversion of local marital traditions that amounted to sexual slavery. Not content with mere complaints, African clergy and catechists began actively intervening in labor and marriage practices by helping men escape recruiters and labor detachments; encouraging Christian converts to renounce polygamy; removing women from the homes and farms of chiefs so that they could obtain religious instruction and marry single Christian men; and providing refuge to women fleeing polygamous marriages. These activities were met with growing hostility from both

traditional chiefs and French officials, who resented the competing influence of African Christian leaders and saw them as a threat to political stability and economic development, leading to a campaign of arrests and fines for African clergy and catechists.

Part Two examines the years from 1925 to 1939, during which escalating income inequality continued to destabilize African family life by inflating bride price to the extent that many young men could never afford to marry. Meanwhile, ongoing shortages of western missionaries meant that African catechists and clergy became even more influential and played a major role in helping shape the reaction of African communities to these problems. They were joined in these efforts by members of the laity, who ventured into social activism via the formation of religious confraternities which helped publicize the benefits of monogamous Christian marriage, urged families to reject bride wealth, and raised funds to repay bride price and other debts of women seeking to flee polygamy. The end result was that Africans themselves played the primary role in shaping and transmitting updated ideas and goals for marriage and family life that applied adapted Christian patriarchal values to precolonial notions of male political authority. As Walker-Said convincingly shows, by the 1930s this led to the development of a world view in which women's activities outside marriage were considered illicit, suspect, and potentially immoral. As a result, African clergy in Cameroon soon began articulating a more complicated vision of Christian marriage that was consensual but emphasized reproduction, paternal custody of children, and the husband's role as leader of the family unit.

During this same period, colonial officials became increasingly distrustful and suspicious of African clergy and Christian confraternities, arguing that their piety was merely a mask for insubordination and rebellion. As Walker-Said demonstrates, this perspective formed part of a larger campaign to delegitimize both the missions and their African personnel, leading to a crackdown on their activities in the form of arrests and fines, and the denial of land grants, building permits, and the right to harvest lumber. Once again, African clergy and catechists were on the front line protesting these actions, regularly entering into physical confrontations with government agents, interfering in labor recruitment, providing refuge to women fleeing polygamy, and serving as expert witnesses for the defense in court cases enforcing arranged marriages or repayment of bride price from women seeking divorce. The result was heightened church-state tensions for the remainder of the inter-war period, especially when African Christian leaders such as Bishop Paul Etaga moved beyond efforts to reorganize the domestic sphere into politics and calls for independence.

While a few of the later chapters occasionally get bogged down in detail, this is an impeccably researched and compelling book that adds significantly to the literature on religion within the French colonial empire. Not only has Walker-Said given us new insights into the evolution of social policy in inter-war French Cameroon, she finally gives African congregations, clergy, and catechists their due as the driving force behind many of those changes.

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