Cultural Practices and Human Rights Violation in Cameroon: The Case of Wan-Kincho Custom in the Nso Fondom.

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Abstract
Generally Nso people regard marriage backed with dowry bride wealth as commercialization of female children and therefore extinction of the maternal family lineage which is the cornerstone of their cultural heritage. As a result Nso people do not usually demand bride wealth from potential suitors of their daughter. Rather to continue the family lineage, the couple is asked to send back the first female child born of the marriage to compensate for bride price, and therefore continuation of the maternal family lineage which could be threatened to extinction if the first female child of any marriage is not sent back to the maternal family. This article examines the Wan-kincho cultural practice of the Nso people, the problems it poses to female children, challenges, contradictions, and its impact in contemporary Nso society trapped between preservation of cultural privileges and demands from human rights conventions to which Cameroon is a signatory. According to the paper though there is opposition to traditional changes, harmonization between modernity and culture is necessary because Nso daughters may be finding it difficult to get bestrode out of their community, because people out of Nso fondom are against the human rights abuses meted to children from the spouse maternal family.

Key words: marriage, lineage, customs, Wan-kincho, rights, community

CULTURAL PRACTICES AND HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATION IN CAMEROON: THE CASE OF “WAN-KINCHO” CUSTOM IN THE NSO FONDOM

Introduction
The Wan-kincho is a traditional marriage custom in Nso that does not demand bride wealth in marriage. Dowry paid for a woman is looked upon as commercialization of female child; a phenomenon which is highly disliked in the Nso tradition with respect to marriage. Rather than receive bride wealth from a suitor to their daughter, they ask for the return of the first female child of the marriage to the maternal family in order to continue the family lineage. This acts as compensation or a substitute to the bride price or wealth which is not demanded for the marriage. The first female child of the marriage is sent back to the maternal grand-parents with the consent of the biological parents whom in the past used to be Nso people. Inability to send back the first female child to her grandparents usually results in conflict in the marriage mostly brought about by the maternal family of the woman. In extreme cases of cultural opposition, refusal to send back the female child may invite
witchcraft or witch hunting which is usually directed to the up springs and even the woman. Witchcraft or witch hunting is seen as punishment for disobedience by the couples. In the olden days marriages were mostly contracted between Nso men and women who have respected this cultural heritage from time immemorial. Challenges to this heritage are emerging when Nso girls are to get married to non Nso’s who have a different cultural heritage with respect to marriage and children because in most societies out of the Nso tradition, bride price is usually demanded as condition for marriage. Therefore it becomes difficult for Nso girls to marry men of their choice out of the Nso community because most often than not the men do not agree to the cultural norms of the Nso. For fear of the accompanying repercussions most men fear to marry and dowry girls from the Nso Fondom since children may become victims of witch craft if the father does not allow his female child to go back to the maternal family. As a result many Nso women who are opportune to marry out of the tribe are not normally given the guarantee to do so because of extreme opposition from their husbands. This culture is more likely to lead to a proliferation of spinsters because not all women may be interested to abide to their tradition in the face of modernity which requires protection and freedom of human being to choose where to marry and whom. In essence Nso women who are not opportune to marry within the tribe are refused from marrying elsewhere and are normally forced into polygamous marriage most often against their will. Some are forced to migrate out of the Fondom and seek refuge to unknown destinations, where they never come back to Nso, may be in their life time. The Wan-kincho traditional practice has been identified with many short coming and has adverse effects on women and the girl child in particular. As women are most vulnerable to the practice, these age-long tradition not only encourages discrimination but abuses the fundamental rights and freedoms of the women. Despite its contradictions with modernity in contemporary Nso society, many Nso people still respect the custom with the detriment to women who by cultural dictates can only marry within the Nso Fondom and nowhere else. In a dynamic world with rampant changes in human orientation, a Nso woman is not limited to marry only a Nso man. If she does marry out of Nso, is the Fondom is forced to accept bride price for “selling” their daughter. Must Nso women only marry the Nso to preserve this custom? What happens if the marriage produces no female children at all to uphold the family lineage? The study examines problems and contradiction emerging from the Nso cultural heritage vis-à-vis modernity and human rights enshrined in the constitution and international conventions to which Cameroon is signatory.

Study site
The study was carried out in Bui division of Cameroons North west region inhabited by the people of Nso. The division has a population of about 119,981, and their main occupation is agriculture and animal husbandry. The Nso fondom is one of the largest Fondoms in the Bamenda highlands of the Western Grass field of Cameroon. The Nso Fondom is located in the eastern edge of the North West region. It occupies a surface area of approximately 23,000 square kilometers. It is located or delimited by latitudes 5-10°C North and 10-20 and 11-05 °C East of the Greenwich meridian, The economy of Bui division is highly diversified though dominantly subsistence in nature. Activities include crop farming animal husbandry and trade. Agriculture is mainly subsistence and constitutes crop farming and animal husbandry. Dominant crops produced include finger millet, maize, and beans and cultivated tubers like yams, coco yams, sweet potatoes, groundnuts and native carrots. Leguminous plants also produced include cow peas, huckleberry and bitter herbs are also produced. Other farm products produced in the Fondom include plantains, bananas, sugar canes; coffee and kola nuts are groan for local consumption and also sold. Kola nuts area popularly used for local consumption and during cultural manifestations. Animals reared include cattle, goats, pigs, fowls, horses and donkeys. Horses and donkeys are popularly used as beasts of burden for transportation. The other animals are reared for meat for local consumption and for market. The Nso Fondom is noted for production and sale of dairy products.
MAP 2: LOCATION OF THE STUDY AREA IN THE NORTH WEST REGION

KEY
- Study area
- International Boundary
- Regional Limit
- Divisional Limit
- Divisional capital

Source: Adapted from the New Administrative map of Cameroon (1992), N.I.C. Yaounde.
Methodology
Information for this research was gathered from two sources, namely primary, and secondary sources based on related literature from documentations. Primary data was developed from field investigations through individuals, groups and organizations in and out of the Nso Fondom while focus group discussions were held and included representatives from women groups such as the Bongsuru Women Empowerment Group based in Bamenda the North West regional capital of Cameroon, and 10 girls who are victims of the cultural practice of wan kincho. Separate discussions were held with the custodians of the wan kincho practice to avoid conflicts between victims of the cultural practice and its custodians. The custodians include the Faay and the Shufaay who constitute the maternal lineage heads of families and members of the traditional councils respectively.

Results and discussions
The concept and meaning of” WAN-KINCHO”
Kincho–ke wan comes from three Nso words. Kincho is a verb which means to remove, or to choose and ke, a possessive adjective which indicates ownership and (off) and then “wan” which is a noun meaning child. The literary translation of “kincho –ke – wan” means the removal of the child or the child’s removal from her biological parents to the maternal grandmother. The removed child becomes the “chosen child” or ‘the removed child’ or ‘the selected. According to respondents it is through this process that the technical term “wan-kincho” has been developed and accepted with respect to the Nso cultural practice.
“Wan-kincho, in the Nso ‘traditional marriage is practiced whereby prior to getting married to a woman a man agrees to give back to the maternal home of his wife, their first female child. The wan-kincho culture has been practiced in Nso for generations though its origin has not been documented. Even undocumented history of the Nso fails to explain how culture originated though it has been nurtured and maintained overtime. According to the study the Nso people from time immemorial observed bride-wealth with fear and suspicion. Fear in the sense that accepting bride wealth for a female child is tantamount to trading in human beings thereby commercializing marriage which many implications. The Nso people were also aware of the fact that their female children would be regarded as property to the husband and his family and could be maltreated because money has been paid on her behalf. From this research evidence it was realized that Nso people believed that money accumulated from bride – wealth does not last long in usage after losing the female child to the husband. They discovered that after losing the female child for marriage backed by bride-wealth her parents would have no right what so ever to demand any assistance from their married children, who have been considered “sold”. This according to respondents led to the introduction of the practice of wan-kincho, with its problems and contradictions in contemporary Nso society which is sandwiched between the demand from modernity and human rights and the adherence to the cultural practice which have been seen as complete violation of human rights and the rights the rights of children victimized by the culture.
The Wan-kincho tradition has over time under gone challenges especially as only the first borne female children were victimized. It was later realized that some couples had only male children and could not be given out for Wan-kincho. Realizing this over time the Wan-kincho tradition was later moderated to include the male in situations where the couples had no female children to offer for the heritage. The concept of the male wan-kincho though mentioned in some portions of this study is not the purpose of this study. According to respondents it was the absence of female children in marriages that posed challenges to the Wan-kincho tradition, hence the involvement of male children which had never been the case as in ‘shuntfaay’ of Taviner and Takum villages in the Nso Fondoms which preferred males to females. The female child involved in this practice is called “Wan-kincho” while the male victim to the practice was called “Won-kincho”. Over the test of time the won-kincho has disappeared while only Wan-kincho practice has survived. In the contemporary Nso society it is becoming difficult to make a trace of any Won-kincho or male “wan-kincho”, though the female situation still prevails with married couples sending back their first born daughters to the maternal
family. During the study the won-kinchos interviewed were mostly old men who had liberated themselves from the cultural practice. The respondent won-kincho expressed bitterness over their plight and advocated for changes in the heritage.

**The practice of wan-kincho as held by the Nso people.**

According to information from the Nso Fondoms, the practice of Wan-kincho did not only solve the problem of taking bride wealth due to fear and suspicion as earlier mentioned, but it was also practiced for economic reasons. Continuity of family lineage to avoid extinction has been examined as one of the prerogatives and invaluable features among the Nso People. Nso people go at length to maintain this lineage so as to preserve and prevent it from extinction through the maternal family. This moved the Nso people to undertake the practice of wan-kincho to preserve the culture through female children who continue the matrilineal lineage. That is why bride price has been replaced by the Wan-kincho tradition as earlier mentioned. It was also to ensure that once a Nso woman got married to a man from a different ethnic group or tribe the family lineage will not disappear in course of time. According to respondents this would not have been possible if the men concerned paid bride wealth for the Nso women. Also when men pay bride price, they still hesitate to give a child to the maternal family. From investigations men who are not from Nso fondom refuse to adhere to the cultural heritage and causes problems between the husband and the wife’s maternal family.

It was also disclosed that the practice of Wan-chinko brought about unity because it united the families and various people or the Nso Fondom. The oneness brought about the sense of assistance reducing enmities, tensions, feuds and peaceful co-existence which prevailed in those days in the Nso Fondom.

The questions often asked is “how far has this unity and togetherness fostered relations among its people in a contemporary society where modernization and civilization has penetrated the people’s heritage?”

According to respondents practice of Wan-kincho was meant to propagate the Nso’ race to prevent possible extinction of the race. According to Nso undocumented history, Ngonso the founder of the Nso Fondom was a woman and could not be made Fon. It was rather her first born son whose father was unknown who became a Fon. This has been supported by the fact that in some cases in the Nso Fondom some Lineage heads(afaays) who were Won-kincho who inherited their mother’s compound and became afaay themselves. A living example is Jem compound in Dzekwa in the Nso Fondom.

According to the above assertion, the people of Jem all perished when Nso people were attempting to halt German rule in the Fondom in what the people often call the Nso-German war. According to undocumented history every body perished in the war except one woman who survived. When the woman got married she beget a grandson called Soula, she demanded that the son be sent back to Jem and made successor of her late father who was leader in Jem. Thus the jem compound was rebuilt through Soula who replaced his maternal grandfather. It is often recalled that if not of the transfer of Soula the family would have been extinct.

When asked why this practice still continues today, some die-hards claim that it is a tradition and that they would not be the first to disrespect it. As a result many families in the contemporary Nso even the educated ones still adhere to the requirement of Wan-kincho practice. However based on the study finding some families are trying to eliminate the Wan-kincho practice in the midst of cultural opposition from die-hard advocates of the heritage.

**Difficulties of begetting a wan - kincho in contemporary Nso society**

According to informants the practice of Wan-kincho has come under severe criticism and now a days only couples of Nso origin who are traditionally married abide to the practice. Since most marriages are either official or church marriages for Christian families, it is becoming difficult for many people to forgo their female children for Wan-kincho. Christianity for instance does not respect the culture and so Christian couples in Nso are always in conflict with their family members who abide to the demands of Wan-kincho. According to the respondents many couples of Nso origin who dislike the culture do not like to settle in Nso. Also the growing disenchantment towards the heritage has been
responsible for many young girls of Nso to refuse marrying men from Nso in fear of the heritage. According to research findings couples of Nso who accept marrying at home quickly ascend to Christian marriage thereby frustrating the cultural demands. It is worthy to understand that the wan-kincho cultural practice has received growing opposition to Christianity and Islam, the two major religions in the Nso fondom. According to respondents, Islam being a male dominated heritage does not share with the notorious Nso cultural practice of sending children to the maternal family.

The process of begetting a wan-kincho

The irony behind the Wan-kincho is that the culture is affected only when the female child in question is still at tender age; most often at the age of three or less than that. On taking the child to the grand maternal home of the wife of the said couple, she is taken alongside a new raffia bag and a walking stick. The bag is an indication that the bride wealth that was taken for the marriage has been brought back; while the stick equally indicates that the support that was taken from that home for marriage has been brought back or replaced. The bag and the walking stick indicate that all has been returned. The Wan-kincho is catered for by the maternal grandparents until she attains marriage age. The same is applicable to a matured child who grows up with her parents and is sent to the grand maternal home at matured age or when she is getting married. According to information from Nso Fondom, most children who grow up with their parents have always resisted the Wan-kincho culture or tradition. Most of the girls who have resisted the culture by escaping to urban areas have most often ended their lives as street vendours, street children and commercial sex workers. According to studies by Noe et al; (2006) in Bamenda on “Street Children and families in Cameroon”, of the twelve girls in rehabilitation centres interviewed, 75% of the girls were of Nso origin. This partly helps to confirm the gravity of the Wan-kincho culture on the contemporary Nso society.

A Wan-kincho of the first generation has no problem of whom she was going to bestrode for marriage since it is the maternal grand-parents who makes a choice for her. She has no right whatsoever to make a choice of who to marry, because she is never given any right to preference. Most often they marry against their wish which is a human right abuse still in practice in the Nso Fondom. In any contemporary society where human rights are respected a woman is not suppose to marry against her consent. The most amazing element of this abusive practice is that the biological parents of a Wan-kincho also have no rights over her because she is not regarded as part of their biological origin. Moreover she has no right to objection and cannot go back to her biological parents who according to the culture have no right to her destiny. According to Mair L (1971) with respect to marriages in his book titled “The study of African Societies”, this classical structural analysis took no account on relationships formed by individual choice; that choices may not have been that of contacting parties. The choice is dictated by lineage heads or men of traditional authority who have rights to bestow the hands of girls”. While this inhuman practice is still permitted in the contemporary Nso society remains a dilemma, as a sense of awareness is now increasing among the victims of the cultural practice. Victims of the culture who were secretly contacted testified that in addition to their inability to make choice of whom to marry, most of them are not allowed to go to school, are given out for marriage by their maternal uncles in exchange for debt settlements, labour in farms with little or no rewards from farm incomes. They are more often regarded as slaves among their people. According to the victims some of them are given out as house help to uncles or are sent to work in hotels and Kiosks in town while the income they receive is remitted to their maternal grandparents or uncles. All these cultural virtues are contrary to the requirements of modern societies where human right and freedom of choice and expression is the cornerstone to human aspiration and development.

The practice of giving out the chosen child in marriage out of the family lineage continues until the fifth generation. A wan-kincho of the first generation that gets married and makes a female child sends back the female child as Wan-kincho to the grandparents who gave her for marriage. The practice continues until the fifth generation wan-kincho who is either given as wife to the successor of lineage head or she stays without marriage. The situation of the fifth generation Wan-kincho is rather pathetic as traditions demands that she remains wife of Faay or lineage head because she is not allowed to get married out of the family lineage. If she refuses to marry the family head she remains as “Ngonjuu
“yeeee maondze” meaning that she has been tabooed and no body can marry her. Such women could remain without marriage throughout their lives, unless the escape from the cultural bondage out of the Nso fondom. In this case she can never return to Nso for fear of traditional repercussion ranging from witchcraft to physical assault.

The people’s perspective about the violation of the Wan-kincho cultural practice

One of the greatest reasons why the practice of Wan-kincho is going unabated despite the advent of modernization has been the importance the Nso people have attached to the cultural practice from time immemorial. It is surprising and embarrassing that even some of the Nso educated elites are in support of the heritage despite conflicts to the cultural practice in the wake of modernization and globalization which advocates human rights to citizens of countries which are signatories to international conventions, of which Cameroon is among. The Nso people despite their adherence to Christianity to which many of their sons and daughters have compromised its teachings still have a deep believe in their ancestors. Thus Nso people who refuse to adhere to the demands of the culture are seen as defying the authority of their ancestors who are regarded as supreme. The ancestors are believed to inflict punishment to those who go contrary to the tradition (Bambooye W, Nso, 2003). The respondents testified that the ancestors inflict untold suffering on both the couple and the entire family who defy the cultural practice. The punishment for defiance includes the infliction of incurable diseases, bareness and untimely death of some family members which are all tantamount to the extinction of the defiant family. Disputes have often erupted between families of the couples when the husband refuses to guarantee the female child for Wan-kincho. Under such circumstances, husbands are bound to have conflict with the wife’s family and even the wife herself for failing to respect the cultural norms. This may lead to differences between the maternal family of the proposed Wan-kincho and the husband. According to the respondents who asked for anormity once the conflict is not settled by given out the Wan-kincho to the maternal family, witchcraft is often intervenes by inflicting diseases or untimely death for disobedience; making it extremely difficult for Nso elements to do away with the Wan-kincho practice.

According to respondents, time may be running out for the practice of Wan-kincho practice as most Nso men and women of vision are refusing to marry in Nso due to the inhuman practice. Most Nso women marry out of the Fondom are paid dowry which is often accepted by the Nso families. From this analysis it is proven beyond doubt that the practice of Wan-kincho is often fully adhered to in marriages between Nso men and women, since other tribes are unlikely to adhere to the practice when they become bestrode to Nso women. According to the respondents Nso women married out of Nso Fondom who adhere to the culture are often in conflict with their spouses who regard the culture as strange and abusive to men’s right over their children.

Women and the Wan-kincho practice in the contemporary Nso society.

This research finding reveals Nso women’s concerns over the Wan-kincho culture. Opinion was voiced by women who have been given out for marriage to the palace. It was discovered that most of the palace wives or vikiynto were first born daughters given to the palaces around for various reasons which were not necessarily to satisfy the Fon’s quest for women. Many of the vikiynto lamented their life situation while the very young ones in some palaces were rare to come by. Most of the youngsters married in the palaces are forbidden to have discussion with outsiders for fear that they may institute a sense of awareness to their plight and consequently escape from the palace. According to respondents most Wan-kinchos married in the palaces have been escaping when they realize their plight in life. Some of the vikiynto were given out at tender age to the palace and in course of life they believed to be princesses, only to realize later that they were forced or arranged to marry the Fons.

In Nkar palace for example, it was revealed that some very young vikiynto escaped in 1998. One of the respondents who escaped from the Nkar palace said she did not know that she was to become a palace wife because she grew up in the palace from the age of seven and understood that she was a princes like any other female children who grow in the palace. It was later she discovered that, she was to be the wife to the Fon who was old enough to be her great grandfather. This respondent has
been barred from entering Nso Fondom and also forbidden to marry a Nso man living in Nso Fondom. She is only free to marry a Nso man who resides permanently out of the Nso Fondom or to someone who is not from Nso. Also in same year (1998) some Nso vikiyto attempted to rebel in the palace but the situation was put under control while some escaped. This evidence is enough to show that modernization is having a negative impact on some of the cultural practices in most of Nso Fondom because prior to modernization it was difficult for palace wives to rebel, talk less making attempts to escape from the palace due to lack of awareness. Most of the vikiiyto, wives of the shuufaays, prominent lineage heads got married to them only through this means.

About three quarter of the palace wives interviewed in various palaces got married by force and intimidation, a practice tantamount to human rights violation. Most of the women underwent torture before they accepted marriage while some refused completely and ended up marrying husbands of their choices. Prior to the impact of modernity, when a wan-kincho resisted forceful marriage and escaped to prostitution or accepted sisterhood in a Catholic mission convent, a concession was given for the girl’s follower to replace her. Whenever the sister got a suitor, she was then sent to the maternal grandparents to ward off trouble from befalling the family. However according to respondents the trend is changing as there is growing opposition to the culture with its human rights abuses. Also as most Nso women are becoming bestridden to people from different heritage, the possibility that bride wealth may be substituted are becoming real since most female elites are refusing to marry from Nso with this cultural contradictions.

Some elderly women who were wan-kincho revealed that women were used in Nso to settle debts. Women who were given out for debt payment never sent their children back to their maternal parents when they got married. They remained the exclusive “property” of the man who received her as instrument for debt recovery. The man had the right to marry the girl or send her to work under somebody on agreement that income earned by the girl will be remitted income to him. According to the respondents, most girls from Nso who work in hotels, restaurants, house helps in big towns and cities are mostly victims of the Wan-kincho culture. Some are given out for child trafficking. It is therefore not surprising that economic gains obtained by perpetrators of the culture are preventing the elimination of the abusive practice.

It was also discovered that as a result of this practice, many faays extort money from their in laws married to wan-kincho when they contributed nothing in the upbringing of these children; talkless sending them to school. This factor has contributed much to the under scholarisation of both male and female children since most men are unwilling to send their children to school or train them in any vocation or profession because the children belonged to their maternal parents. Most men use the advantage by not training because they expressed disgust over the problem of sending their daughters to people who instead of taking care of them rather exploit them. After all legal marriages recognized today do not necessarily depend on tradition before they are contracted.

A painstaking issue concerning the research findings involved 15 girls from133 divorced parents. Out of the 15, twelve were single handedly taken care of by their mothers because their fathers did not see any reason to continue training them as they belonged to the maternal grandparents according to tradition. The greatest injustice came from the Wan-kincho wo-lumen, the male chosen child. From the three interviewed, for example, Pa Tukov of Melim a victim of this traditional practice was so bitter and “cursed” the day his mother brought him into this world. According to this respondent the Wan-kincho wo-lumens suffered the worst type discrimination all through their lives. They are considered as sacrificial lambs of the heritage. Those who are conscious of the injustice meted to them over time most often resolve to buy land and leave the compound of their grand maternal parents for good. In course of this research we did not identify any respondent victim who was less than fifty years of age. The respondents testified that if they were to change any tradition in Nso, it should be that the practice of wan-kincho should cease to exist, let alone that of the male child. The sad experience of one Pa Chin of Taviker compound in Yer village exposes the injustice and human rights abuses associated to the culture. This age long victim of the cultural heritage confessed that he has his blood brothers in Emil village but has never been used to his real family because he was taken away while he was young to replace his mother as a Wan-kincho in Taurier compound. He testified that he grew up more or less
as a beggar with no parental attachment coming either from his own parents or his maternal grand-parents. He only survived through the running of errands for the Vikiybar as he grew up. He also vowed that he will never allow any of his children to settle in Taurier.

The practice of wan-kincho in contemporary Nso society has much to be desired because its advocates and propagators do not seem to be aware of its implications in a globalizing society where legal action could be taken and court charges levied to human rights violators. The wan-kincho practice has been characterized by violation of Human Rights due to the inhuman and degrading treatment suffered by the victims especially with respect to discrimination against women and the female children in particular.

The age long practice of wan-kincho in Nso’ has continued unabated despite the introduction of Christianity which preaches virtues of love and protection of human dignity. According to the victims, the heritage seems to have no respect for Christian values enshrined in the holy Bible. Also even with the introduction of modern administration during the 19TH century the practice has fallen short of the requirements needed for the running of modern institutions. It is time for the government and human rights advocates to intervene in the cultural practice which is seemingly strange among hundreds of cultural practices in Cameroon. May be the government is not aware because research on cultural practices is yet to gain momentum in the country. It is assumed that this research finding could provoke other researches on cultural practices which violate human rights in Cameroon. It is therefore time for the government to practically defend it numerous signatories on treaties and convention against the violation of human rights.

The Impact of wan-kincho cultural practice on the Fondom.

The impact of the wan-kincho cultural practice on the Nso fondom leaves much to be desired. From its conception the practice was meant to with hold the Nso people from disintegrating because women were refused payment of bride wealth. Initially there was minimal resistance from the victims of the heritage because the Fons who are custodians of the people became vocal partners to the practice because of the economic gains realized from the inhuman practice. This partly explains why wan-kinchos were sent to work in chiefs palaces without compensation and were treated like sub-humans in course of history of the Fondom. Most of them even got married to the chiefs and Fons without their consent. The most pathetic aspect of the practice is that any couple who refused to adhere to the whims and caprices of its dictates was often threatened with the wrath of the ancestors and sometimes witchcraft. This deepened the practice because before modernization it was difficult to resist it. By refusing to institute the practice of bride wealth it was difficult for the Nso people to interact with other cultural practices where bride wealth is condition for marriage. Even though this cultural heritage has been condemned by other Fondoms in all the Grass field region of Cameroon, little has been done to the perpetuators of the culture. Perhaps the greatest impact of the practice has been the inability for the Fondom to share with other marriage practices of the grass field region and elsewhere in Cameroon. Although in contemporary Nso society bride wealth is being accepted from non Nso people who marry Nso women, it somehow creates conflict within the ranks of the maternal family who are bent to propagate the culture for their economic interest.

The Impact of the cultural practice on First born female children

This practice of wan-kincho was instituted with a lot of implications on the first born daughters who are sent back to their grand maternal parents as compensation for absence of bride wealth. The grandparents receive gifts and services from the husband of the wan-kincho during her life time and even after her death if she begot children in her marriage. The lamentable aspect of this cultural practice as earlier mentioned is that of extortion by lineage heads who act with impunity to demand for gifts and services whose monetary value outweighs any bride price which would have been taken from the in-laws. Nowhere in Cameroon is this type of culture practiced in marriage. According to respondents this cultural practice affects women ability to marry out of Nso because it discourages potential suitors of Nso women from making advances for marriage, thereby making it difficult for women to find spouses out of the tribe. The practice looks controversial by its applications because if the Nso were
not to take bride wealth for marriage, they would not have been extorting money, gifts and services from the husbands of the wan-kinchos throughout marriage life and even after her life for those who bear children in marriage. Women who asked for anonymity perceived this heritage as exploitative and prefer bride wealth to be offered on their behalf than guaranteeing lifelong extortion which is greater than bride price. This controversial practice would not have been instituted in absence of bride wealth because in reality it looks more of an institution to replace bride wealth in marriage. The only difference being that it is exploitative and detrimental to couples who are poor and unable to sustain the demands from the maternal grandparents’ family and lineage heads.

Another element of injustice is that whenever there is a problem like interruption of the marriage, the burden falls heavily on the wan-kincho’s themselves and their biological parents who never benefits from the exploitative demand of the marriage. Under such circumstances grand maternal parents and uncles who directly benefited gifts and services from the marriage will have nothing to compensate for the burden. It was also revealed that women who were first born daughters in their families were also used for debt settlement by their maternal uncles and family heads. Most often children who were demanded for debt settlement were transferred or taken away from their biological parents at very tender age making it difficult for the children to understand that they are being used as instruments for debt settlement. Thus avoidance of bride-wealth as seen above instead causes the wan-kincho to become more or less an object which could be used for various un-orthodox reasons. The practice has also led to general parental neglect of children who have been ear-marked for the heritage. Although in most African societies, the education of the girl child has always lagged behind that of the boy child, the case in Nso of first born female child appears to be worst.

Even though there was no quantified data to support this study informants revealed that majority of the first borne female children have no access to formal education. Parents of these victims have always regarded them as property belonging to their maternal grandparents and could not justify any expenditure for their development and upbringing. In course of the study, researchers came across respondents who were mothers whose husbands had completely abandoned responsibility of upbringing of their teenage children to their mothers under pretext of the heritage. Most of these mothers were too poor to take care of themselves; talk less of children abandoned by their biological fathers.

While wife inheritance is considered as a bad practice in most societies worldwide, for the Nso any woman who was first born daughter and married to either a lineage head or the Fon is still victimized by the heritage. When a Fon passes away, a new one comes to inherit everything from the old one including his wives; except those that are old (Mzeka P.M, 1994).

An examination of the Wan-kincho cultural practice in the light of Human Rights

The wan-kincho cultural practice is grossly in violation of human rights and contrary to the requirements enshrined in international conventions and treaties on human rights to which Cameroon is signatory. The cultural practice is grossly a violation of the country’s penal code and constitutions is seen as violation of a good number of legal texts which are both international and national. It violates the following International conventions and texts:

- the Universal Declaration of Human Rights signed by the United Nations in 1948,
- the Convention of the Children’s Rights,
- the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and
- the convention on the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

The practice of wan-kincho is a fragile violation of human rights in a country which is partnership to all international convention on the right of humans by failing to recognize the inherent and inalienable rights of man which is a foundation of freedom, justice and peace. The fact that girls who are victims of the cultural practice are treated with indignity by not seeking their consent before engaging them in marriage and the inability to express themselves in issues concerning them need much to be desired. Secondly the torture they receive and their inability to resent injustice due to social pressures ranks them as second class citizens. In this wise they are used for debt settlement, a situation which supports
the view that they are equated to mere objects. Using human beings for debt settlement is an abuse to human dignity which attributes the wan-kincho culture to slavery and slave trade, which was abolished due to the inhuman practices. In the modern world any culture that shares attributes to slave trade and apartheid is suppose to be abolished and the perpetrators ‘punished. Therefore if such practices still exist in the contemporary Cameroon world there is need for national and international intervention to counter the extremes of the cultural practice, punish its perpetrators and free the victims from this age long bondage suffered by first female children in Nso. These writers are advocating for the total abolition of the heritage because there are no aspects of the culture that can be harmonized especially when it comes to the treatment meted to first born girls in the family. Any cultural practice which is repugnant to natural justice, equity and good conscience should be abandoned while the good elements of the heritage could be retained (Mzeka P.M, 1980). From the existing evidence respondents were unable to identify any aspect of the wan-kincho cultural practice which could be harmonized to suit the realities of contemporary Cameroon with respect to protection of human rights and the rights of the female child in particular. The giving out of girls for marriage without their consent is in gross violation of Cameroon’s penal code provisions section 356 which states that:

i) Whoever compels anyone to marry shall be punished with imprisonment;

ii) that where the victim is under the age of eighteen the punishment may not be less than two years imprisonment , whatever the mitigating circumstances

iii) It is to the effect that whoever gives in marriage a boy under sixteen years of age or girl under fourteen shall be punished as under the two last foregoing subsections.

iv) Upon conviction, the court may deprive the offender of parental power and disqualify him from being the guardian and curator of any person for the time prescribed by section 31(4) of this code.

The United Nations Charter of Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948, the Convention of the Children’s Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and a good number of articles and sections have also been violated by the wan-kincho cultural practice.

Article 2(2) of the convention states that appropriate measures shall be taken to ensure that the child is protected against all forms of discrimination and punishment on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinion or beliefs of the child parents, legal guardian or family members.

Article 6(2) is to the effect that they should ensure maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child.

Article 8(1) states that, the respect of the right of the preserve to preserve his/her identity, including nationality name and family relations as recognized by law without unlawful interference. While article 9(1) of the convention states that states parties shall ensure that a child shall not be separated from his/her parents against their will, except when competent authorities subject to judicial review determine in accordance with applicable law and procedures, that such separation is necessary for the best interest of the child. Such determination may be necessary in a particular case as such as on involving abuse or neglect of the child by the parents, or one where the parents are living separately and a decision must be made as to the child’s place of residence.

But despite all these national and international conventions to which Cameroon is signatory; it is shocking that the wan-kincho cultural practice has been nurtured with very few indicators that the culture could be abandoned without official intervention.

The fact that some categories of children are separated from their parents against their will has much to be desired in the country’s cultural policies.

While Article 13(1) talks of the right to freedom to expression, article 14(1) is to the effect that the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion of the child be respected. Neither article 16(1) on it part states that, no child shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his or her privacy, family, or correspondence nor to unlawful attack his or her
honour and reputation. This exposes how repugnant the wan-kincho cultural practice to article of the United Nations and the country’s constitution
The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, aims at enlarging the understanding of the concept of human rights as it gives formal recognition to the influence of culture on restricting women’s enjoyment of their fundamental rights. That these forces take shape in stereotypes customs and norms which give rise to the multitude of legal, political and economic constraints on the advancement of women. Noting this interrelationship the preamble of the Conventions stresses “that a change in the traditional role of men as well as role of women in society and in the family is needed to achieve full equality of men and women”. And that states parties are therefore obliged to work towards the modification of social and cultural patterns of individual conduct in order to eliminate “prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either the sexes or on stereotypes role for men and women”. ( UNO Article 5).
This text in its article 1 talks on discrimination, education in article 10. Rural women in article 14 and article 16 elaborated in marriage and family life.
Article 5, states that state parties shall all appropriate measures:

a) To modify the social and cultural patterns of the conduct of men and women with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of inferiority or superiority of either or stereotyped roles for men and women.

b) To ensure that family education includes a proper understanding of maternity as a social function and the recognition of the common responsibility of men and women in the upbringing and development of their children. It being understood that the interest of the children is the primordial consideration in all cases.

While Article 16(1) which is on marriage and family life states that, all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations and in particular shall ensure on a basis of equality of men and women.
In its sub-section. (2) (a) Article 16(1) (a) it talks of the same right to enter into marriage.

c) The same right freely to choose a spouse and to enter into marriage only with their free and full consent;

d) The same rights and responsibility during marriage and at its dissolution
Article 16(2) states that the betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect and all necessary action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify a minimum age for marriage and to make the registration of marriage in an official registry compulsory

The practice of the custom of Wan–kincho is not in agreement with the functioning of institutions to protect human rights because it violates human rights of children with impunity. It fails to protect the rights of children and violates most of the articles on international and national conventions concerning the rights of children.

Summary and recommendation

Summary
This study is an examination of the Nso traditional marriage and customs with special emphasis on the wan-kincho cultural practices. An investigation was made on the historical evolution of the cultural practice which was aimed at uniting the inhabitants of the Nso Fondom by protecting the maternal family lineage through nonpayment of bride wealth in marriage. An examination of the practice exposes the must abusive form of human rights violation of first born children with special emphasis to the female children for whom this study was conceived. The fact that wan-kincho is forced to marry without her consent, used for debt payment, exploited economically and sexually, discriminated, and refused education is a complete violation of the rights of children as enshrined in the country’s penal code and international conventions to which Cameroon is signatory. Also the fact that bride wealth is
not respected and lineage heads make ceaseless demands from in-laws married to the wan-kincho which exceed bride wealth throughout her marriage life indicates that refusal of bride wealth is meant for economic exploitation than keeping the Nso Fondom intact. Otherwise how can society be united when fragments of its people are discriminated against or marginalized? The study identifies growing opposition to the wan-kincho traditional practice in the light of emerging conflicts between preservation of cultural rights, and modernity dictated by globalization which preaches universal protection of human rights and values. This growing opposition to the cultural practice has been evidenced through rebellion of wan-kinchos who are forced to marry chiefs and Fons in various palaces. Such rebellious attitudes by the Wan-kinchos could not tolerated in the Nso Fondom before globalization and the spread of human rights and freedoms. This may be among the reasons why victims of the cultural practices abound in palaces were refused from granting audience to researchers. Perhaps the greatest disadvantage suffered by the wan-kincho has been the inability of their perpetrators of the culture to send them to school for fear that they may become enlightened and later escape from the grip of tradition. The study supports these views because almost all the former wan-kincho interviewed have acquired either basic or secondary education showed regret and resentment over their heritage. Above all the cultural practice is in total violation of the United Nations Charter for human rights including the country’s articles on human rights enshrined in the constitution. The paper further argues that allegiance to cultural practices must not be done to the detriment of people’s health, dignity and general welfare. Thus, such cultural practices that promote inequality between men and women should be abolished and perpetrators sanctioned by law.

**Recommendations**

It is a duty for the government of Cameroon to take measures and outlaw cultural practices which violate the rights of the girl child in particular. Hence the existing texts and legislative instruments protecting the rights of women should be enforced at all level of the Cameroon society. In this respect cultural practices which victimizes instead of protecting the rights of women should be redressed in the contemporary Cameroon society. Such cultures can only be identified if studies of this nature could be carried out to expose those cultural practices which violate human rights and dignity in the country. Such studies are necessary because in a multi-cultural society like Cameroon with more than three hundred ethnic groups, such studies are desirable and need to be conducted as to cover the national territory, not only in the Nso fondom alone. On the other hand eradication of a cultural practice such as the wan-kincho cannot be done through coercive instruments alone. There is need for stakeholders, actors, and victims to be to embark on education and sensitization at community. Already as indicated in the study most victims of the wan-kincho cultural practice who were fortunate to acquire formal education have escaped from the grip of the obnoxious cultural practice. Thus punishing perpetrators without educating the victims cannot provide a solution towards the eradication of the cultural practice. Hence both coercive instruments alongside education and sensitization of the people could evolve to a lasting solution towards eradication of the wan-kincho cultural practice in Nso Fondom and elsewhere.

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