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Burnautzki, Lydia

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Violence, Gender, and Poverty in the Context of *Sweba* Accusations in Burkina Faso

Lydia Burnautzki (lydia.burnautzki@univie.ac.at)

Abstract: This article analyses the main patterns of a culture- and gender-specific violence phenomenon among the Mossi of Burkina Faso: The *sweba* phenomenon. Women are accused, deprived of their livelihood, violently expelled from their villages, and permanently socially excluded. Based on qualitative and quantitative evidence from 1965–2009 of the two biggest shelters in the capital Ouagadougou, the argument is made that *sweba* accusations are the main reasons for female poverty and homelessness which rose at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s to a significant extend and led to change in social care structures. Conflicts over land use, economic interests, and a rising misogynist environment play a major role in the deprivation of women's rights. In this context, the term "witchcraft" is part of a legitimizing discourse that helps hiding multiple forms of violence against women and must be rejected.

Keywords: Burkina Faso, homelessness, poverty, stigmatization, violence against women

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Lydia Burnautzki

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Introduction

In the countryside of Burkina Faso, Mossi women are violently excluded and expelled from their villages. No longer accepted by their social environment, deprived of their livelihood and homes, they seek refuge in Catholic or state shelters in the capital Ouagadougou. Stigmatized through the incidents in their villages, women have no possibility of building a new life outside of the shelters. The public discourse in the villages stigmatizes them as *sweba* (singular: *sweya*), which is often wrongly translated as "*sorcière*" ("witch") or *mangeuse d'âme* (soul eater) in the dominant lingua franca and administrative language French.[1] In contrast, I argue that what happens in the villages is not "witchcraft" but instead multiple forms of violence against women.[2] The accused women are stigmatized, which is itself a form of violence that causes poverty and homelessness. The stigma[3] of *sweya* legitimizes violence and the deprivation of women within their communities.[4] The "witchcraft" discourse hides these forms of violence against women. I call this the *sweba* phenomenon, which is culture- and gender-specific.[5] This present study is based on qualitative and quantitative records from the two biggest shelters and shows the scale and main patterns of this violence phenomenon from 1965 to 2009 in Burkina Faso, shedding new light on female poverty and homelessness.[6] Approaches highlighting health (Pagéard

1 All three terms are widely used. *Mangeuse(s) d'âmes* is a neologism introduced by Europeans that, translated back into Mooré, would be *siga ritba* (Pagéard 1970, 301, 305). I use the emic term *sweya* for analysis, which refers to the causative concept (Ouédraogo 2002). Here, "witchcraft", for non-European contexts, is written in quotation marks.

2 On "witchcraft" terms in anthropology, see Ronald Hutton (2004).

3 I refer to Erving Goffman's definition: "We construct a stigma theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents, sometimes rationalizing an animosity based on other differences" (Goffman 1963, 15).

4 Samantha Spence makes a similar argument but cannot provide data. Her theory that "witchcraft" is always a gendered ideology is proven wrong by the cases of accused children (Spence 2017, 210). "Witchcraft" is not an analytical concept and not detached from time and place.

5 Only Mossi women in Burkina Faso are affected, although similar concepts exist among other ethnic groups in Burkina Faso. There are no accounts of comparable violence phenomena in Mossi communities in other countries. However, the phenomenon in northern Ghana could provide worthwhile comparison.

6 The evidence was collected in a two-part database (Burnautzki 2009a; 2009b) that I created for the women's-rights association Woo-Laa (woolaa.org) in 2008 and 2009. This database

1969; 1970), education, and economic income for women (Barbier 2020, ix, 279) as factors reducing accusations of women, or stressing the negative impact of urbanization (Fischer/Bope 1990, 128) in the context of accusations sustain a development discourse. I present results that point to a different conclusion. My analysis, based on a feminist-violence-studies approach (Zuckerhut 2010, 296p.), shows that women's material resources are, in some cases, at the center of *sweba* accusations.

The Sweba Phenomenon – The Approach

The *sweba* phenomenon refers to the concept of the *sweya*, a person who captures and eats souls, especially of close kin, who then die. A *sweya* case implies several loose rituals and practices to detect the responsible person(s): A diviner (*bugo*)[7] is consulted to perform rituals such as sacrificing a hen to determine whether a *sweya* is responsible for a death case. If this is determined to be the case, the body is carried through the village. If the body pushes against the door of a hut, the inhabitant is presumed to be a *sweya*. In another ritual, the accused is forced to drink a so-called truth serum (*tim*), which is often poison.[8] If the accused shows no reaction, her innocence is proven. Otherwise, she is socially isolated and must leave the village. However, these rituals are not obligatory; an accusation alone can lead to expulsion. The accused may be beaten. Cases of suicide have been reported (Pagéard 1969, 125). The *sweba* phenomenon consists of forms of physical, psychological, social, and structural violence.

The *sweba* phenomenon in Burkina Faso has existed at least since the beginning of the 20th century (Tauxier 1912; 1917; Mangin 1914a; 1915/1916; Dim Delobsom 1934). Rituals and ideological aspects[9] have changed, but the culture and gender-specific character of the phenomenon have been maintained. Louis Tauxier, the colonial administrator, reported of protection charms among the

represents the most extensive data collection and archive on the *sweba* phenomenon accessible to research and was first analyzed in Burnautzki (2018). James Shepley provided a quantitative analysis up to 2007 (Shepley 2007).

7 Also mentioned as *devin/bagha*, *féticheur* or *marabout*. These terms do not allow conclusions on customary or religious ideology. The term *bugo* (plural *bugba*) is translated as "diviner-priest" (Langewiesche 2003, 100), "lord" or "priest of fertility" (Izard 1971, 152; 1976, 74). The *bugba* are members of the social group of *têngbiisi* (singular *têngsoba*), children of the earth, classified as "indigenous" or of the smiths (Gérard 1986, 132). The duties of *bugba* and *chefs de terre* are clearly distinct (Bonnet 1988, 62–67).

8 *Tim* may contain water from a special swamp, maceration fluid from plants such as *Afzelia africana*, toxic substances, blood from sacrificed animals, or parts of *Erythrophleum africanum* (Pagéard 1970, 327).

9 Ideology must not be reduced to its legitimizing function or an empty theory; it is a practice itself. Ideology is the precondition of individual action. It is situational, coupled with differing motives and pre-existing practices. It shows common patterns in which power relations are central, although the action's outcome is not necessarily planned by the actors (Wolf 2012, 469p.).

Mossi of the French colony Upper Senegal and Niger (1904–1921). These charms would help preventing "*un sorcier*" (a male "witch") from eating someone's soul (Tauxier 1912, 539). He described cases in which men and women were equally accused of "witchcraft" (Tauxier 1917, 363). Father Eugène Mangin, one of the first missionaries mentioning *seuya* practices and believes among the Mossi, highlighted the focus on women already (Mangin 1915/1916, 213; 216). He spent ten years in the region around Koupéla and reported brutal killings of women accused as *seuya* by heating their heads in a cauldron. Elderly women were primarily accused of the "crime" of "eating souls" especially that of little children (Mangin 1914a, 123). Twenty years later, A.A. Dim Delobsom, member of the Mossi elite, named chief of the Sao district by the Moro-naba, and one of the Church's bitterest critics (Skinner 1970, 107), reported conflicts between women in the village and the accusation of being a "*sorcière*" (Dim Delobsom 1934, 128). Based on his analysis of 57 court cases of suspected "soul eaters" from 1958 to 1963, Pagéard stated that sweba are mostly female and elderly (Pagéard 1970, 313).[10]

In early studies, economic implications in social conflicts were stated by providing materialist and structural-functionalist approaches (Hammond 1962; Pagéard 1969; 1970; Roy 1979). The specific conflict potential among kin (Bonnet 1988, 106), the inferior role of women in Mossi society, and the imaginary of the "*mangeuse d'âme*" (Ouédraogo 2002) have been indicated as relevant factors.[11] The *sweba* phenomenon is a culture- and gender-specific violence phenomenon in which perpetrators can and want to accuse and exclude women (Burnautzki 2018). The question of how the phenomenon operates cannot be answered by a monocausal approach. This present article focuses on economic aspects and the functionality of the *sweba* concept as well as on particular practices of this violence phenomenon[12] in a rising misogynist environment.

A feminist-violence-studies approach aims at the specific context of violence (Peters 2003, 408) and inquires power relations and hierarchies following different categories, analyzing their meaning, function, and impact (Zuckerhut 2010, 276p.). Both violence against women and violence against men can be

10 The 57 cases involved about 170 women and only 15 men, about one third was under 40 years old. In very few cases, they were foreign (Pagéard 1970, 313).

11 Ouédraogo refers to four other studies: one ordered by the *Action Sociale* in 1997; "La sorcellerie ou soodo: une nuisance sociale. Le cas des provinces Zoundwéogo et du Kadiogo" by Remy Taita (n.d.), the "Étude de la situation des femmes marginalisées et accusées des mangeuse d'âmes dans la ville de Ouagadougou" (2000), financed by *Action des Chrétien pour l'Abolition de la Torture*; and "Exclusion des femmes accusées de sorcellerie dans le département de Bokin" by O. Douamba (2000) (Ouédraogo 2002, 11p., 46).

12 Violence is not always functional, but it is never entirely meaningless or irrelevant (Zuckerhut 2010, 293).

part of a gender order based on male dominance that distances men from women as well as from other men (Meuser 2002, 53). Male and female gender identities and solidarity are, in many cases, constructed by violence (Meuser 2002; Kersten 2003; Zuckerhut 2010, 135) which can provide destabilizing as well as stabilizing aspects in societies (Zuckerhut 2010, 135). Gender violence, different from "witchcraft", is not tied to the binary concept of tradition versus modernity.[13] What happens among the Mossi is no "witchcraft" as known from European concepts (Pagéard 1970, 301) but a violence phenomenon that started to rise after independence[14] and has significant impact on female poverty and homelessness. Anthropologists' efforts in stating the objective reality and intellectual validity of indigenous categories and practices in studies on "witchcraft" have shaped postmodern approaches (Rutherford 1999, 92) and helped to make "witchcraft" a normative category in academic discourse (Rutherford 1999, 92; Green 2005, 260).[15]

The terms used in public discourse serve a specific function, although not necessarily intended by the speakers. Terms applied belong to perpetrators or bystanders[16] and preconstruct the phenomenon (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1992, 235p., 250p.) in a false way. Patriarchal rural Mossi society in Burkina Faso is a specific misogynist environment. It provides the violence context in which the *sweba* concept is powerful and different forms of violence can take place and interact (Grewe/Blättner n.d.).

In the following, I first discuss my data and the shelters. Then, I show the impact of the phenomenon through its regional outreach and its development over time. Main patterns are highlighted by economic aspects as well as the social and political context of a deteriorating misogynist environment. This article focuses on economic profit and the functionality of the *sweba* concept and practices in a misogynist environment. I argue that *sweba* accusations can serve to deprive women of their land and livelihood in a socially accepted way. Finally, I discuss the results of my analysis.

13 On "witchcraft" and modernity, see Moore/Sanders (2001).
14 So far, missing "hard evidence" (Ashforth 2015, 9) in assertions of rising violence is presented here.
15 However, local, colonially invented "traditions" played an important role in the context of "witchcraft" accusations in power dynamics between generations and gender (Ranger 2014, 254–258).
16 On bystanders, see Raul Hilberg (1992). Introducing violence as category means to question perpetrators' right to harm and denies them to choose the words in which their actions are described (Bauman 2000, 30). On violence and legitimacy, see Zygmunt Bauman (2000, 31–35) and Peter Imbusch (2002, 52).

The Database and the Shelters

My qualitative and quantitative data is based on records from the two biggest shelters for women in the capital Ouagadougou, covering the period from 1965 to September 2009.[17] The database contains information on dates of arrival and dates of death, origin, ethnic and religious identity, marital and health status, number of living and deceased children, co-wives, names of husbands and parents, and short reports. Most women did not know their exact age, often estimating to be between 50 and 60 years old. In Paspanga, the average was 70 years.[18] In this period, over 745 women were registered in the shelters as part of administrative work.[19]

This study approaches the subject from an angle of a modern state's reaction to the phenomenon: providing care for women who lost their homes and livelihood to regulate a social phenomenon, collecting data, and gaining knowledge (Burnautzki 2018, 7, 9, 30–38, 45, 113). The shelters' origins show the context of the phenomenon, poverty and homelessness, and how *sweba* accusations changed social care structures as the number of accused women rose. The shelter Delwendé is run and financed by the Catholic Order of the White Sisters (Orden online 2009)[20] and housed over 400 women in 2009. The *Cour de Solidarité du Secteur Douze de Paspanga* (Paspanga) is run by the Social Ministry[21] and had 156 database entries in 2009 (Burnautzki 2009b).[22]

Since the colonial administration had banished "practices of witchcraft, magic or charlatanism able to disturb the public order or to harm people or their property" (Pagéard 1969, 127, translated by the author) in article 265 of the *Code Pénal* of 1947, diviners, parents, neighbors, and village chiefs could be prosecuted by the colonial administration. Robert Pagéard cites Gilbert Mangin's estimation that most Mossi in 1960 were still afraid to sue accusers and diviners,

17 Smaller shelters exist in the towns Pabré and Bokin, in Pissila (Scheuer 2012, 13p.), Baam (Sonnen/Schmitz 2000, 72p.), and Kaya (Palaver et al. 2011, 75).
18 Age was between 48 and 80 years (Ouédraogo 2002, 51).
19 The data base covers 156 cases for Paspanga. 19 of these entries have only names. In my analysis, I used 138 of these cases. For Delwendé, the database contains 589 cases, but the data are partly fragmentary. 530 of these cases list the date of arrival. Background stories can be found for 161. 337 have a comment. In 78 cases, there is no information regarding from which province they came. In 116 cases, there is no department entry or the entry could not be confirmed (Burnautzki 2009a; Burnautzki 2009b). All names are anonymized.
20 Founded in 1965 (Sœurs-Blanches 2017). In 1983, the administration was handed over to the Catholic mission and named Delwendé in 1989 (Orden online 2009).
21 Paspanga reports to the *Ministère de l'Action Sociale et de la Solidarité Nationale* (Ministère de la Femme, de la Solidarité Nationale, et de la Famille 2017).
22 Barbier states decreased numbers in the shelters in 2016: 206 in Delwendé, 36 in Paspanga, and 30 reinsertions from 2016 to 2018 (Barbier 2020, 146p., 242, 257, 271, 279), compared to over 400 in Delwendé and more than 100 in Paspanga in 2009 (Burnautzki 2018, 40; 42). It remains open what happened to the missing women.

but the fear of accusations was slowly disappearing ten years later (Pagéard 1969, 127; 336). Shortly after independence in 1960, the government of Upper Volta provided a garage for shelter, the later Delwendé, which was soon expanded because of the growing need. The focus was not on women, yet (Fischer/Bope 1990, 125).[23] During the socialist military dictatorship of Thomas Sankara (1983–1987), begging was forbidden and poverty criminalized. The later Delwendé was handed over to the Catholic Church, and Paspanga was founded in 1985 by the then *Ministère de l'Essor et de la Solidarité Nationale* to fight against begging and homelessness by providing a daily residence for disabled or infirm beggars (Ouédraogo 2002, 15). When Blaise Compaoré (1987–2014) came into power, the shelters closed, and people were back on the streets (Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 02.12.2005). In 1990, however, Delwendé received aid from the government, the city, and charities and was again run by the White Sisters (Fischer/Bope 1990, 125). A report of 1990 gives crucial insight into the situation shortly before only women were housed:

> "Its inhabitants, about 200 women and 47 men, were mostly elderly, poor, infirm, disabled people or criminals who lived at the fringe of society. The biggest problem at that time were men. They were often mentally disturbed, some epileptic or disabled because of leprosy. For men, a jail sentence was often a reason for social exclusion, and former prisoners were brought to the shelter by the police. As a result from the gender-specific division of labor, men had not learned to provide for themselves and were completely helpless. Most women arrived independently because they had heard about the shelters and traveled for several days. Many women had been expelled from their villages because they had been accused of being *mangeuses d'âmes*, or 'witches'" (Fischer/Bope 1990, 126p., translated by the author).

The report shows that the reasons for women's and men's homelessness and poverty were different. Men were in need because they were not cared for by women due to disability, sickness, or criminality, while women were able to provide for themselves but had to seek shelter because they had been accused of being *sweba* (Fischer/Bope 1990, 130).[24] In 1994, Paspanga reopened for the permanent housing of women accused of being *sweba* (Ouédraogo 2002, 15).

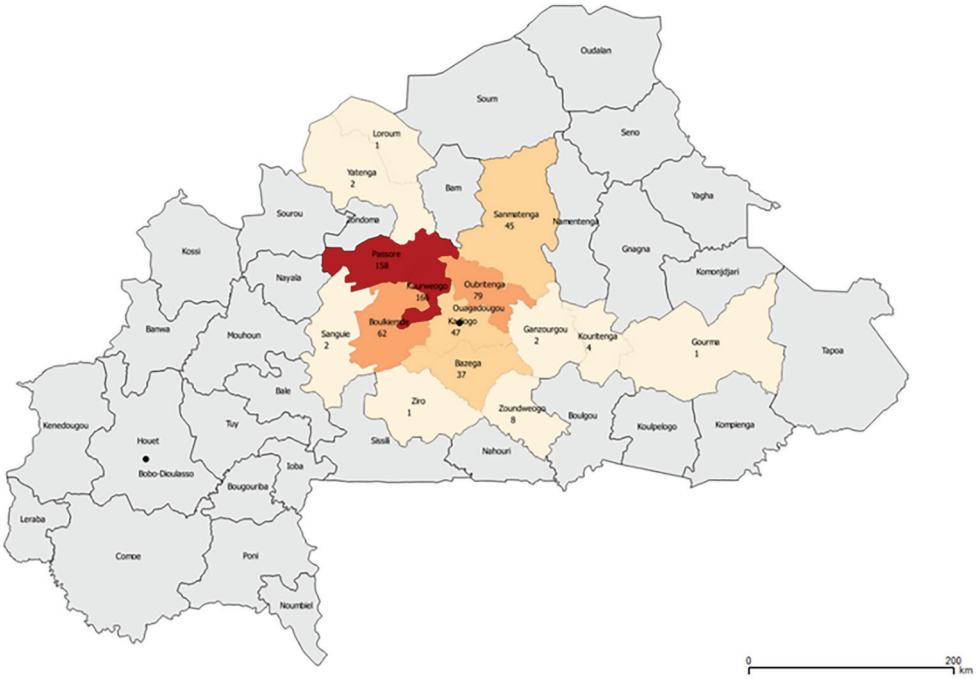
23 The authors' description of the shelter *Centre des Mouvement ATD* (*Aide à Toute Détresse*) and the address that Jaques de Boissezon gives match that of Delwéndé (de Boissezon 2010, 48). ATD was founded in 1956 and has worked with people affected by extreme poverty and social exclusion, in Delwendé from the 1980s on (ATD Quart Monde 2016; 2017).

24 A government report from 1995 states that 352 women had been accused as *sweba* in that year (Ouédraogo 2002, 10). According to my data, 124 women were accused in 1990 (Burnautzki 2009a).

The Outreach of the Phenomenon

The *sweba* phenomenon is culture- and gender-specific. My data shows that only Mossi women are registered in the shelters[25], all of whom had been living in the central provinces of Burkina Faso (Figure 1; Pagéard 1970, 304).

Figure 1: Number of women accused in provinces of Burkina Faso



Source: Lydia Burnautzki

Regarding the relation between the *sweba* phenomenon and religion, the data base reflects a complex situation that points to Mossi custom as an ideological link. Religion is a category introduced and interpreted by the shelters' staff members in different ways. The Catholic Mission has an interest in conversions to the Catholic Church and is clearly distinct to other confessions. Still, most women in Delwendé were registered as "traditional", which means their practices and beliefs followed Mossi custom.[26]

The term religion has no direct translation in Mooré. Following Katrin Langewiesche, the expression *rog-miki* ("what we found at birth") comes closest to it (Langewiesche 2003, 96). It means tradition as well as customs and implies concepts of identity, religion, and everything passed on by ancestors, such as rituals,

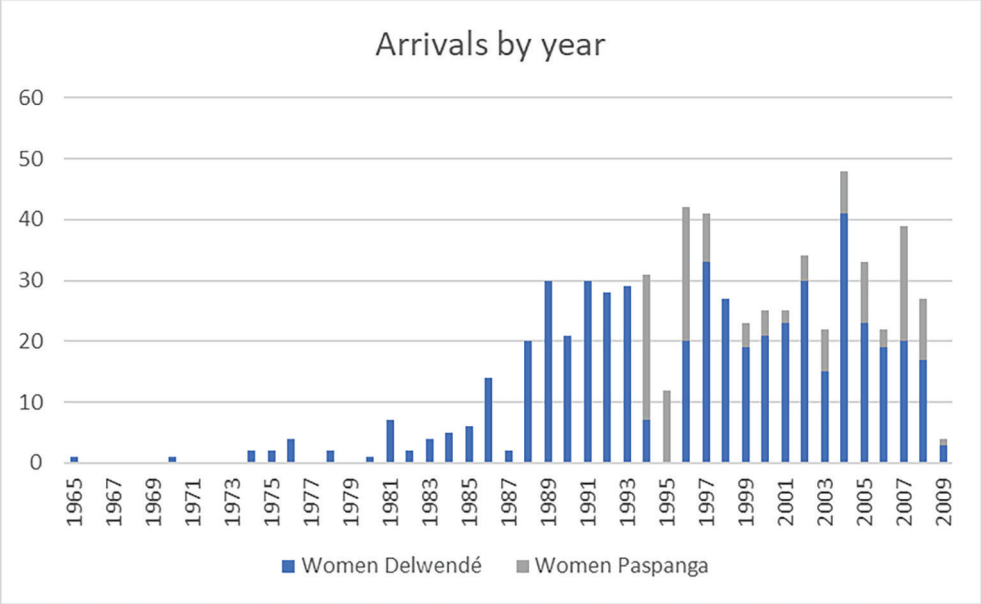
25 Except from one woman from Niger who was not accused of being a *sweya* and is therefore not part of the data analysis.

26 216 "traditional", 68 "catholic", 55 "protestant" and 21 "Christian" (Burnautzki 2009a). In Paspanga the majority was "catholic" or "protestant", but staff members and Ouédraogo point to the fact that women in Paspanga tend to convert even if not required. Most women here have "traditional" names besides their Christian names (Ouédraogo 2002, 53). Women of "Muslim" believes were the minority in both shelters although they were the majority in 2006 in Burkina Faso (Ministère de l'Économie et des Finances 2009, 93). Pentecostal churches have no significant relevance in *sweba* accusations.

techniques, religious celebrations, housebuilding knowledge, dancing, rules of conduct toward god-parents, and distribution of political power (Langewiesche 2003, 96). The *sweba* phenomenon, ideology, and practices are Mossi custom and culture-specific. They were not introduced or legitimized by the respective monotheistic religions.

From the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s on, the shelters' data show rising numbers of expulsions, which confirms the sudden need for such facilities (Figure 2). The data on arrivals by year show a correlation to political and social change in Burkina Faso. In the 1980s and under Sankara's socialist government, numbers of accused women increased already. But from 1987 on, with the beginning of Compaoré's politics of "rectification", strengthening of customary structures, economic liberalization and structural adjustment measures, the numbers of accused women increased significantly (Figure 2). This change was manifested not only in arrival numbers but also in the shelters' reports.

Figure 2: Arrivals by year



Source: Lydia Burnautzki

There is no singular explanation for all cases. Often, victims could not say who had initially accused them, and the database contains little information about the accusers. Yet, several patterns become visible and must be highlighted, in particular rising misogynist practices and economic motivations for accusations.

Economic Aspects of Accusations

Louis Tauxier and Antoine A. Dim Delobsom stated that the *moro-naba* (king) and the *tingsoba*[27] would receive the accused's possessions or get payed for their rituals (Tauxier 1917, 363; Dim Delobsom 1934, 128). In the records, the mentioned traveling diviner had a business interest in accusations, too (Ouédraogo 2002, 43)[28] which provides a motive for the 114 cases of group accusations.[29] In 12 cases, one or several diviners from 1989 to 1992 and from 1994 to 1996 were explicitly mentioned as having found one or more women guilty at once (Burnautzki 2009a, 2009b).[30] Seven of these cases happened at the department of Boussé, which had until 1996 the highest accusation rates. From 1996 on, two developments become visible in the shelters' reports. First, the "center of accusations" shifts from Boussé to the department of Yako in the province of Passoré. Second, no diviner is mentioned anymore.[31] The diviner is an outsider to the village community who profits significantly from *sweba* accusations and therefore from violence against women. Further studies are needed on the impact of diviners on women's rights and structural changes on a local level.

A second economic factor are women's fields. Mossi women, married or not, have the customary right to own fields, which can lead to a certain wealth and economic independence at a higher age; their husbands have no power over this land (Mangin 1914b, 488; Tauxier 1917, 371; Pagéard 1969, 256; 1970, 313p.; Kunze 1998, 180).[32] With women's rising age, their land parcels increase in size (Kunze 1998, 179). Customary land use among the Mossi is based on loan, and land-use distribution is organized by the *chef de terre*, but over the last

27 Also known as *maître de terre/maître du champs/chef de terre* (Dim Delobsom 1934, 127; Pagéard 1969, 394p.; Kevane/Gray 1999, 7; Langewiesche 2003, 100).

28 See also Christopher Roy (1979). Social workers and mission members state that a diviner earns 10,000 CFA francs per *sweya*.

29 Up to 16 women were accused during one case (Burnautzki 2009a; Burnautzki 2009b).

30 One diviner asked for 5,000 CFA francs to confirm the accused's innocence (Burnautzki 2009a: O.O.).

31 In the same year, the new province of Kourwéogo was founded. Diviners involved in accusations were found in Dapeologo, Niou, Toeghen, Ziniaré and Boussé, which belonged to the province of Oubritenga up to 1996. With the new decree of 1996, Niou, Toeghen and Boussé became part of Kourwéogo (Burnautzki 2018, 67).

32 Some authors doubt that women can decide over their harvest (Kevane/Gray 1999, 9) or have access to land (Barbier 2020, 92). However, Article 78 of the Customary Law of Ouahigouya County of 1950 defines it as the duty of a husband to provide his wife with her own field (Pagéard 1969, 256). In 1955, land rights following customary law were recognized in the French colony of Upper Volta with decree number 55–580 of 20 May 1955 on the reorganization of the state and country in French West Africa (*Afrique Occidentale Française*, AOF) and in French Equatorial Africa (*Afrique Équatoriale Française*, AEF) (Ouattara/Traoré 2005, cited via Hochet 2014, 8). During the socialist revolution, land was nationalized, and the population did no longer legally own their fields up to the land reform in 2009, but customary land tenure was not fundamentally changed (Kunze 1998, 64p.). While some authors state that this led to insecurity among the population (Delouvroy 1987, 239, cited via Sepp 1991, 59; Hochet 2014), it could be shown that this was overestimated (Kunze 1998, 111; Sawadogo/Stamm 2000, 281).

century, the right to distribute land has shifted to the head of the household (Kunze 1998, 65). Land or land-use rights cannot be sold nor borrowed for material or monetary compensation but can be given as a temporary or long-term gift to any asking individual, especially inside the family or the neighborhood: when asked for, the land or land-use rights must be given (Kunze 1998, 65; Sawadogo/Stamm 2000, 287). This leads to the situation that "[l]and-use rights are frequently exchanged" (Sawadogo/Stamm 2000, 285). The compensation "depends entirely on social relations and obligations" (Sawadogo/Stamm 2000, 285). Respect and gratitude can be shown in form of symbolic gifts, such as chicken or beer, via contributions to feasts and events of sickness or death in the family, or by respecting the taboo of the field (Sawadogo/Stamm 2000, 285pp.).

Most often, widows control "several fields of considerable dimensions" (Sawadogo/Stamm 2000, 292). Although the workload is high as they have to work on the family's fields first (Pagéard 1969, 254; Klaffenböck 1995, 96p.; Standler 2000, 86; Sawadogo/Stamm 2000, 289), their own fields have a reputation of being of good quality (Rohatynskyj 1988, 540; Sawadogo/Stamm 2000, 289). Women can become economically independent and even wealthy due to their fields and commerce, which can lead to jealousy among family and neighbors and makes them "easy prey" for ruthless diviners (Pagéard 1970, 313p.). Economic independence is often closely related to independence of character, both seen as suspicious, which makes these women even more prone to accusations (Pagéard 1970, 313p.). The question of character is crucial when it comes to borrowed land. The only reason to refuse a demand for land is if the borrower has not enough land for themselves or if the asking person has "bad character", which is equivalent to their marginalization or social exclusion (Sawadogo/Stamm 2000, 284). The accusation of being a *sweya* demonstrates the bad character of the accused to the community and leads to their social exclusion (Ouédraogo 2002). Accused women lose their land, which is then redistributed to members of their families or to their neighbors, according to customary law. Women reported in 98 cases that the accusation against them had come from their husband's family and in 99 cases from "the village".[33] This confirms Peter Hammond's observation that quarrels over fields are important in *sweba* accusations (Hammond 1962, 109) and Kunze's expressed concern that land registration could lead to community-driven loss of land for women (Kunze 1998, 210p.).

An additional aspect to the matter of fields is that a widow can continue working on the fields that her late husband gave to her only on the condition

33 In 12 cases, the first accusation came from the women's own families (Burnautzki 2009a; 2009b).

that she stays in his compound (Sawadogo/Stamm 2000, 289). But a *sweya* accusation implies that she is denied the right to stay. Eight women mention their lost fields and livelihood explicitly.[34] Two of them continued cultivating their fields for several years after their husbands' deaths, one of them for eighteen years (1987–2005) until she was accused (Burnautzki 2009a, H.Y.O.; 2009b, O.Y.). Access to fields is an economic factor that must be considered in regard to *sweba* accusations, especially in the context of a general decrease of access to land (Kunze 1998, 65, 110) that goes along with rising numbers of accusations (see Figure 2).

For numerous women, being banished meant that they had to beg for a living. In 10 cases in my data, women reported that they had come to the capital for begging or had already been living as beggars in the capital when they learned about the shelters (Burnautzki 2009a; 2009b). Further studies on women's access to their fields and the conditions of losing them are needed (Kunze 1998, 210p.; Sawadogo/Stamm 2000, 292). Women lose their homes and their livelihoods when accused of being *sweba*. The accusation can be a powerful tool for family members and neighbors to get access to fields. Women are made poor and homeless with these accusations. But why is the concept of *sweba* so powerful in the first place?

Ideological Context: Misogynist Environment

Not only are *sweba* accusations perceived to be Mossi custom, they are also embedded in a misogynist environment in which women's social positions make them vulnerable to violence (Dackweiler/Schäfer 2002, 13; Popitz 2017). Following the logic of patriarchy, violence against women might be against the law but is seen as a legitimate male right (Teubner 1988, 36p.; Meuser 2002, 56). *Sweba* accusations are possible in the specific violence context of rural Mossi communities in Burkina Faso because different forms of violence against women are accepted. Misogynist practices intensified at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s.[35]

Mossi society is patriarchal, patrilocal, gerontocratic, and highly hierarchical (Grohs 1998). Women suffer from several violent practices that are perceived as customary. Female genital mutilation – despite its prohibition –, child marriage, and polygamy as well as levirate marriage are widely practiced (Amnesty International 2016; Unicef 2021). In the countryside, the state has often little

34 Two women had been chased away from their fields (Burnautzki 2009a, O.S.; Burnautzki 2009b, K.S.O.). One woman insisted on a ritual to prove her innocence, but it was denied (Burnautzki 2009a, I.O.).

35 On the decline of human rights in Burkina Faso since 1995, see Ouedraogo (2004, 216).

to no authority to act against such customary practice (Amnesty International 2015; Hochet 2014, 5–11). Political efforts to improve women's social positions by banning these practices during Sankara's dictatorship failed not least due to opposition by women (Ziegler 1993, 196p., 295p., 299pp.).[36] In the context of *sweba* accusations, it must be highlighted that women are dependent on men.[37] Only a husband allows the relative integration of women from outside and justifies the *pam roogo*, the assignment of the hut, and the *pam zindi rogoî*, the right to settle on the soil of the concession (Lallemand 1977, 179). This denies women the possibility to settle anywhere else after an accusation, contrary to men (Pagéard 1969, 100, 126), unless they remarry. Female relatives who belong to the husband's household cannot give shelter (Burnautzki 2009a, K.D.; 2009b, S.K.M, T.S.K). Here, the difference between *sweba* as a concept, which includes men as well as women, and as a practice, which has devastating consequences exclusively for women, becomes visible; the phenomenon is gender-specific. The few women who try to live without male protection have even more violent experiences (Burnautzki 2009b, B.K.; L.S.S.; G.K.). Their right to live and stay at their homes is already questioned when their husbands die. When accused, their exclusion from society becomes final. In this respect, levirate marriage serves as a social security system that grants widows the right to stay (Rohatynskyj 1988, 547). However, in my data, about half of all accused women were widows, and levirate marriage proved to be of no help to them.[38] From the end of 1980s and beginning 1990s on, the number of accounts of women failing to remarry or being refused by their new husbands grew.[39]

Consent is not always necessary for levirate marriages (Pagéard 1969, 318; Kevane/Gray 1999, 8),[40] and women mentioned conflicts in their new marriages. New husbands sometimes tried to dispose of their wives. One woman, Pougyendé P. O., was accused by her late husband's brother, whom she was supposed to marry. He blamed her to have killed her husband and expulsed her (Burnautzki 2009b, P.P.O). Another woman, Martine T., had married her hus-

36 Martin Bodenstein refers to Richard Banégas and Pasqual Labazée, commenting that Muslim husbands opposed the banning of these practices, too, because they saw their "traditional" religious practices in danger (Banégas 1993, 75; Labazée 1987, 15 cited via Bodenstein 2013, 108).

37 Du Sacré-Cœur mentions "sorcellerie" as a reason for men to divorce, see Marie-André du Sacré-Cœur (1939, 115).

38 In Paspanga, more than half (92) were widows, in Delwendé, half of them (156). 26 had living husbands. Seven were widows for the second time, 39 mentioned (a second) marriage. 19 women were married to a brother or son of their late husband (Burnautzki 2009a; 2009b). In the countryside, in 2009, 9.8% were widows (Ministère de l'économie et des finances 2009, 103).

39 Of 18 cases, 16 levirate marriages happened in the 1980s and 1990s, 2 in the 2000s (Burnautzki 2009a; 2009b).

40 For opposing positions and local differences, see Pagéard (1969, 318) and Kevane/Gray (1999, 8).

band's elder brother. When she had not given birth after one year, he said she had no place with him. He disapproved of her and threatened to kill her; she left (Burnautzki 2009b, M.T.). Both advanced age and not giving birth are used as excuses to deny women to stay (Burnautzki 2009b, H.I.), which shows double standards when it comes to a proclaimed respect for high age (Grohs 1998, 214). With the decline of levirate marriages, women lost a social-security system and became even more likely to become victims of violence, also because judicial authority was not yet effective (Grohs 1998, 215). Changing customary practices can be disadvantageous for women in a misogynist environment.

Outside of marriage, women are still dependent on male relatives and their goodwill. In my data, 66 of 108 families refused to help their expelled female relatives.[41] Following custom, a married woman or a woman banished by her husband is not allowed to be housed (Burnautzki 2009a; 2009b).[42] Some women were too afraid to ask their families for help (Burnautzki 2009b).[43] Sons can provide shelter. However, in this regard, work migration, especially to the Ivory Coast, was fatal for women: 37 mentioned that their children lived in foreign countries, far away or were deceased (Burnautzki 2009a; 2009b). Several started searching for their sons (Burnautzki 2009a, S.K.I., B.C.Y., V.O.B., N.W., V.W.; Burnautzki 2009b, K.L., H.Y.K., B.J.). Death or child death in the village (Pagéard 1970, 310p.; Bonnet 1988; Ouédraogo 2002, 55) was relevant in 475 cases, but not for all. While the death of children often served as a reason for accusations, the women's own children, living or deceased, or presumed jealousy because of childlessness can be excluded as a factor.[44] Widows were and are at the fringe of society (Grohs 1998).

In the context of polygyny and levirate marriage, Doris Bonnet (1988) describes an additional accusation pattern: The future co-wife of the accuser's mother is accused when her husband dies.[45] The younger brother of the deceased would "inherit" the widow; therefore, his son accuses the widow to prevent his mother from getting a co-wife (Bonnet 1988, 104; Lallemand 1977, 112). Co-wife relationships can lead to *sweba* accusations inside the household (Bonnet 1988, 104, 122). If the accuser is the husband, co-wives often try to get rid of their rival.

An important aspect of the stigmatization is the isolating shame that wo-

41 92 housed them for one night or more. 65 brought them to a shelter. 16 accused them again. 78 women did not turn to their families (Burnautzki 2009a; 2009b).
42 Pagéard states this only for Muslims (Pagéard 1969, 146).
43 Health was no major factor for accusations. Seven women were severely sick or had been declared "lunatics". The latter were not accused of being *sweba* (Burnautzki 2009a; 2009b).
44 234 of 606 women had three or four children, 94 had no deceased child, 23 had no living child. 63 had been expulsed without a case of death. Two had been accused of two consecutive deaths (Burnautzki 2009a; 2009b).
45 See also Suzanne Lallemand (1977).

men experience during the accusation process.[46] Banishing women implies the distribution of their possessions and removing the roof of their huts (Mangin 1938, cited via Pagéard 1970, 330). The fact that their roofs are removed or not maintained by their husbands means humiliating harassment and a form of expulsion that indicates cases of resistance by the accused women (Pagéard 1970, 331). In my data, this was mentioned in seven cases (Burnautzki 2009a; 2009b). For example, Tipoko I. was rejected by her son because through the accusation, her name had become widely known and "dirty", and the stigma could have been passed on to him and led to his banishment if he had taken her in (Burnautzki 2009b, T.I.). Relatives are no longer allowed to keep contact with the accused or provide them with water or access to the fireplace; otherwise, they themselves are expelled, too.[47] In another example, Ami K.'s "dirty" name was the reason she could not marry again and preferred to leave her brothers, who had housed her (Burnautzki 2009b, A.K.). For Sandrine C., shame was a burden even in the shelter: "I am ashamed and I do not wish to go back to my place" (Burnautzki 2009b, S.C., translated by the author). 24 women were accused and expelled twice. Some tried to hang themselves out of shame (Pagéard 1970, 331); Talaato Z. reported two suicides by hanging (Burnautzki 2009a, T.Z.). One widow tried to end her life, but the rope burst, and her son brought her to the shelter (Burnautzki 2009a, V.I.S.).

Often, women were accused in pairs or groups, but they did not seem to help each other, let alone build alliances of support. In all 114 cases of group accusations in my data, all women arrived at the shelters alone. In only five of these cases, more than one woman of the same group arrived at the shelters at all. We do not know what happened to the others. Accounts of suicide are not common, but they show the desperation of the victims. The few husbands, brothers, and village chiefs who tried to protect women were assaulted and some killed (Burnautzki 2009b, K.K.). For example, Simandé P.'s younger brother was killed by his neighbors because he refused to send her away (Burnautzki 2009b, S.P.). Poko J. O. was expelled by her husband's brothers although her husband did not want her to leave (Burnautzki 2009b, P.J.O.). The husband of Alimata S. was in danger to be expelled himself, too, if he had opposed her leaving (Burnautzki 2009b, A.S.). Téné K. was supported by her uncle, a village chief, but he was threatened himself when he tried to shelter her (Burnautzki 2009a, T.K.). In some cases, women served as scapegoats and the accusations of them as a means to damage their husbands (Ouédraogo 2002, 94), as in the case of Poko N., whose husband had lent money to a neighbor who could not pay his debts.

46 See also Wolfgang Palaver/Sabine Monthaler-Hechenblaikner/Verena Egger (2011, 75).
47 This refers to accused men only (Pagéard 1969, 99).

He accused her when his child died (Burnautzki 2009b, P.N.). The *sweba* stigma isolates the victims.

Even village chiefs and diviners have limited power in this regard. The pressure from villagers and families can be so powerful that customary as well as judicial conflict-solution systems are unable to help. Two village chiefs intervened in the course of one year for Thérèse G., trying to persuade the villagers to let her stay – in vain (Burnautzki 2009b, T.G.). Having been forced to drink the *tim*, the widow Sibdou J. G. was proven innocent by the diviner, but the villagers still threatened her. She escaped to her home village and filed charges, successfully. The accusers were imprisoned, but as soon as they were released, villagers did not allow her to return to her children; she had to leave (Burnautzki 2009b, S.J.G.). A diviner and a judge proved Nongdo K. to be innocent. Yet, her son and his wife did not let her return home, and her brothers refused to house her (Burnautzki 2009b, N.K.). Following the shelters' reports, police and gendarmerie saved three women from being beaten, two of them by villagers and one by her husband (Burnautzki 2009b, Y.M.Z., T.G.I., T.A.I.). Social workers and the Catholic Mission saved and sheltered two women immediately in the villages (Burnautzki 2009b, K.O., M.G.S.). In general, village chiefs as well as social ministry agents, gendarmerie, and police were unable to prevent this decline of women's rights.

Even if the killing of accused women (Mangin 1914a, 123; Tauxier 1917, 363; Roy 1979, 268–271) has now vanished, the phenomenon can still be life-threatening to victims and their relatives. The concept of *sweba* still enables and legitimizes violence, poverty, and homelessness as social consequences of accusations.

The humiliation of being accused of being a *sweya*, the rituals, being publicly disgraced, and deprived of all rights is a special form of violence done to the women that follows them to the shelters and is continued in the capital via the use of labels such as "*sorcière*" or "crazy". These labels, as part of the general public discourse around *sweba*, "*sorcières*" or *mangeuses d'âmes*, hide the violence and deprivation of rights that women suffer and legitimize them by implying the women's guilt.

Outlook and Discussion

The phenomenon of *sweba* consists of several levels of violence. First, it is a stigma, a form of violence that leads to public shaming and social isolation. Those accused are seen as bad characters, even murderers, and are no longer socially accepted. Second, if they refuse to leave the village, they risk physical punish-

ment. Customary and state authorities are powerless. Family members can be threatened and killed. While the ideological concept of *sweya* can be female as well as male, in practice the phenomenon targets women and can even lead them to suicide. A life outside of social-care structures becomes impossible for women because of stigma and a general misogynist environment.

Sweba ideology and practices refer to Mossi custom and have been documented since the early 20th century. At the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, however, the phenomenon grew to such an extent that social-care structures changed. This period was marked by the social and political change under the far-left dictatorship of Sankara and the "rectification" and customary-structures strengthening politics of Blaise Compaoré. Because the situation of women's rights worsened, the two biggest shelters in the capital changed their focus on women accused of being *sweba*. These accusations have become the main reason for female poverty and homelessness.

Two main patterns have become visible: an increasingly misogynist environment at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s and the economic motives of several parties. In patriarchal Mossi society, only husbands can grant women the right to stay and live at any place, which makes women dependent on men and on marriage. When levirate marriage increasingly failed, widows were denied the right to stay at their late husbands' compounds and to work their fields. Since the 1990s, levirate marriage has not provided protection anymore. New husbands, assigned by the head of household, refuse to protect women or grant them rights. Sweba accusations are a business for diviners, and banishing women provides the accused's families or neighbors with their fields. Economically independent women are especially vulnerable to accusations from ruthless individuals and groups. The system of land loan and the customary practices of changing land-use rights focusing on women need further study. Analyzing the *sweba* phenomenon by focusing on violence on women reveals crucial insights on female poverty and homelessness in a misogynist environment.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are based on the data maintenance and review of the personal data sheets (fiches individuelles) by Lydia Burnautzki in 2008/2009 and were made available by Fulgence Poyga. Restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used for the present study. Data are available upon reasonable request and with permission of Fulgence Poyga.

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