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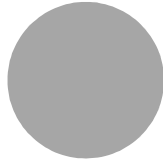
Generational control over young urban couples in West Africa: Involvement of elders in union formation and infant care in Ouagadougou

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Generational control over young urban couples in West Africa: Involvement of elders in union formation and infant care in Ouagadougou

ANNE-EMMANUÈLE CALVÈS¹

Résumé

Les transformations importantes qu'a connues le processus de constitution de la famille dans les villes africaines au cours des dernières décennies se sont accompagnées de bouleversements tout aussi marquants dans les relations intergénérationnelles. Les statistiques sur le sujet demeurent pourtant rares. En mobilisant les données d'une enquête réalisée en 2010 à Ouagadougou, la capitale du Burkina Faso, l'étude explore l'implication des parents dans la sélection des conjoints, le mariage et l'entrée en maternité des jeunes adultes. Malgré une liberté manifeste des jeunes dans le choix de leurs partenaires, le mariage demeure une «affaire de famille» à Ouagadougou et les parents sont encore très impliqués dans le paiement de la dot. Le rôle des «vieilles», et notamment celui de la belle-mère, dans la transmission du savoir maternel et dans l'assistance des jeunes mères après la naissance demeure également central, et ce, peu importe le profil socio-économique et culturel des jeunes femmes.

Mots-clés

Afrique, Burkina Faso, mariage, première naissance, contrôle intergénérationnel, choix du conjoint, savoirs maternels, individualisation hybride.

Abstract

The major transformations observed over the last decades in the process of family formation in African cities seem to have been accompanied by equally important changes in intergenerational relationships. Statistics on the topic are rare, however. Using unique survey data collected among young adults in Ouagadougou, the capital city of Burkina Faso in 2010, the study assesses the extent of the involvement of parents in the partner selection, marriage and transition to motherhood of their adult children. Despite clear indication of freedom of partner choice among youth, the study suggests that marriage in Ouagadougou remains a «family business» and

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parents are still actively involved in bridewealth payment in the majority of marriages. Female elders, especially «mothers-in-law», also remain central in the transmission of maternity knowledge and assistance of young mothers after birth, regardless of young women's socioeconomic and cultural profiles.

Key words

Africa, Burkina Faso, marriage, first birth, intergenerational control, partner choice, maternity knowledge, hybrid individualization.

Introduction

In Ouagadougou, as in many other African cities, the family formation process among youth has undergone major changes over the past decades (Antoine, Marcoux, 2014). Under the combined effect of prolonged schooling and deteriorating employment conditions among young generations of city-dwellers in Burkina Faso, age at first union has risen consistently since the 1980s (Calvès *et al.*, 2007). Transition to parenthood is also postponed and although changes in the age at first birth are still timid at the national level, the postponement is marked in cities (Calvès *et al.*, 2007). These transformations in the timing of family formation events have been accompanied by equally important changes in intergenerational relationships. Thus, although African marriage is traditionally a union between two lineages rather than two individuals, qualitative studies have documented the decreasing control of elders and kin over younger people's unions, as well as growing agency on the part of youth with regard to marriage, notably in the choice of their future spouse (Attané, 2007; Hertrich, 2007; Smith, 2007).

Like marriage, youth's transition to parenthood is traditionally a family matter in Burkina Faso. When pregnant, a young wife will learn her role as future mother from older women, especially her mother-in-law, who enhance their prestige and justify their rank in the familial hierarchy through their teaching (Ouedraogo, 1994). As in other African countries, however, with the increase of female education and the multiplication of governmental initiatives to improve maternal health, the sources of information on reproductive health available to young pregnant women have become more diversified in Burkina Faso over time (Moran *et al.*, 2006), and the central role played by older women in the transmission of maternal knowledge is likely to be on the decline.

While according to modernization theorists, this trend towards the decreasing control of elders in favor of freedom for the younger lineage

members in sub-Saharan Africa with respect to marriage and family formation is part of a universal transition toward a Western conjugal family system (Caldwell, 1982; Goode, 1970; Lesthaeghe, 1980), existing evidence suggest that a complete convergence towards a Western family system may not occur (Kayongo-Male, Onyango, 1984; Meekers, 1995). Instead, qualitative studies indicate that young adults in African cities are developing «hybrid individualization» strategies in the sphere of marriage and family formation where they negotiate compromises between their desire for autonomy, notably for partner choice, and their obligations towards elders (Marie, 1997; Calvès, Marcoux, 2007; Hertrich, 2007; Roth, 2010).

Despite the importance of the topic for theories of nuptiality and family change, however, statistics on parental control over the marriage and the first birth of young people in African cities, and how it may actually be changing, remain rare (Meekers, 1995; Antoine, 2007). In such a context, the objective of the present study is to quantitatively test the hybrid individualization hypothesis in the context of Ouagadougou by assessing the extent of generational involvement of parents in the partner selection, marriage and transition to motherhood of their adult children, and how this implication varies across sub-groups of youth, using data from a survey conducted in 2010 among young adults in the capital city of Burkina Faso.

Generational control over marriage and motherhood in Burkina Faso

As in most parts of Africa, gerontocracy has historically been a key element of social stratification in Burkina Faso (Pageard, 1969; Pascalis, 1992; Gruénais, 1985). The cultural emphasis placed on descendants and ancestors explains the age grades of authority and gerontocratic power that characterize the social relations within the lineage (Lallemand, 1977; Bonnet, 1988). The authority of elders within the extended family is particularly obvious in matters of marriage and childbearing. In Burkina Faso, as in most African countries, customary marriage is traditionally regarded as an alliance between two kinship groups, rather than as a union between two individuals (Capron, Kohler, 1978; Badini, 1994). For example, among the Mossi, the predominant ethnic group in Burkina Faso, the head of the «budu» (lineage), the *budu kasma* or someone representing him, has historically been responsible for choosing the future spouses of

young girls under his authority (Pageard, 1969; Lallemand, 1977). Although the *budu kasma* could be influenced in his choice, typically, the girls and boys did not have the right to refuse it. In fact, while the number and status of elders involved in spousal selection and the marital negotiations of young adults varied across ethnic groups, overall, youth had little input in the decision-making process. Girls generally married at a very young age. Among the Mossi, a girl could be sent during childhood to go and live with the family of her future husband, who would refer to her as *pug'bila* («little wife») and raise her (Lallemand, 1977). In Burkina Faso, as in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, marriage of the young was traditionally seen as a way for creating links among kinship groups and the choice of spouse followed a complex set of explicit and implicit rules often reflecting the political and economic agendas of the elders (Bledsoe, Cohen, 1993, p. 39; Laurent, 2013). Once an agreement had been reached, the process of bridewealth exchange could start. A marriage was considered valid only when the bridewealth had been transferred from the family of the future groom to the kin of the future wife. The bridewealth was generally composed of small gifts including small cattle, goats, chicken, money, tobacco and beer, as well as agricultural tools given over the years (Lallemand, 1977; Vinel, 2005). Bridewealth gave the husband rights over the children resulting from the union and control over his wife's economic contributions, and compensated the bride's kin for the loss of her productive and reproductive powers.

As in most African countries, the main purpose of marriage in Burkina Faso was to have children and soon after marriage, generally within less than a year, the new wife was expected to become pregnant (Badini, 1994). Like marriage, youth's transition to parenthood was placed under the strict supervision of elders. Maternal knowledge was traditionally «a collective and popular knowledge transmitted by female circle», from older to younger generations (Ouedraogo, 1994, p. 27). As noted by Suzanne Lallemand (1991, p. 28) concerning older women: «their prestige within the family [and] their place in the family compound [does] not depend on the fertility they lost, nor on their declining work productivity but on their moral authority in the domains of motherhood and child care».

Despite the role it has historically played in structuring social relations in Burkina Faso, this generational control over youth's marriage and transition to motherhood seems to have declined over time, especially in Burkina's cities. With the rise of schooling and a globalized culture that places greater emphasis on «romantic love», most urban young people today say

they want to marry for love, with a mate of their choice (Rossier, Sawadogo, Soubeïga, 2013). Like in several African cities, unmarried relationships constitute for many young city dwellers a way to find a «soul mate» and test a relationship before they settle down in a formal marriage (Rossier, 2007; Attané, 2007). The financial involvement of elders in youth's marriage is also believed to have declined in some African countries and the groom is now more likely to shoulder the responsibility of bride-wealth alone, rather than rely on his family (Lardoux, 2005; Hertrich, 2007). Likewise, the role of female elders in preparing young women for their transition to motherhood has been weakened by the multiplication and diversification of sources of information on reproductive health available to young pregnant women (Moran *et al.*, 2006).

Importantly, however, despite these indications of increased youth agency and decreased lineage control and influence on transition to marriage and motherhood predicted by convergence theories of nuptiality and family change (Caldwell, 1982; Goode, 1970; Lesthaeghe, 1980), existing evidence suggest that young adults are developing hybrid individualization strategies instead (Calvès, Marcoux, 2007). In fact, qualitative studies indicate that arranged marriages still remain current practices in most African countries and that, even when spouse selection is individually made, social and parental approval largely remains a pre-requisite for marriage in African cities (Attané, 2007; Thiriart, 1999; Hertrich, 2007). In Ouagadougou, for instance, some young women interviewed by Traoré (2005, p. 116) pointed out that it could be «dangerous and disadvantageous» for them to refuse their parents' choice regarding marriage, since they will find themselves without support in case of divorce or widowhood. As for preparation to motherhood, results from a qualitative study conducted in 2006 on the experience of first maternity across generations in Ouagadougou show that older women, especially mothers in law, remain a precious source of information and help for young generations of females at the time of the birth of the latter's first child (Lewis, Calvès, 2011).

Data and Methods

This paper uses primary data from a representative survey titled *Becoming a Parent in Ouagadougou (BPO Survey)*, conducted among 2036 young adults in the Burkinabe capital city between November 2009 and February 2010. Since the primary purpose of the survey was to study transition to parenthood, we needed to account for gender differentials

in age at first marriage and first birth, and the survey therefore targeted young men aged 25 to 34 and young women aged 20 to 29. The sample is a two-stage stratified random sample, representative of the city of Ouagadougou² and comprises 927 young men and 1'109 young women.

The richness of the data collected provides a unique opportunity for quantitatively exploring the involvement of elders in the live of young adults at various stages of the family formation process, i.e., partner choice, marriage and transition to motherhood. In fact, besides information on social origin (such as ethnic group, religion and parents' occupation) and detailed retrospective residential, occupational, relationships (all «significant» sexual relationships lasting longer than six months), marriage and childbearing histories, selected indicators of generational control over youth's lives were also collected. More specifically, for each relationship, respondents were asked how they met their partner and for each marriage men were questioned on who paid for the bridewealth. Additionally, each female respondent who had had a life birth was asked about the sources of information and advice on maternity they received at the time of pregnancy and after birth, and who helped them on a daily basis following the birth; this allowed for evaluating the involvement of parents in mate selection and the payment of bridewealth as well as the role played by female elders in supervising the transition to motherhood.

In total, information on mate selection was collected on 2'833 significant relationships, 1'437 declared by women and 1'396 declared by men. To evaluate the implication of female elders in youth's preparation to motherhood, we focused on a subsample of 654 young female respondents who had already had a first birth. The analysis is divided into two sections. In a first section, we provide descriptive statistics on elders' control over partner selection, their financial implication in bridewealth payment and the provision of information and advice during pregnancy, as well as after delivery.

We then mobilize logistics regression models to analyze factors affecting the level of parental involvement over partner selection. In these models, the dependent variable is whether or not parents introduced the respondent to her/his partner and separated models are run for men and

2. The first stage consisted of randomly selecting ten census enumeration areas (EAs) in each of the five administrative strata («arrondissements») of the city. The EAs were selected from the 2006 census database, using the probability proportional to size (PPS) sampling technique. In a second stage, based on the census database, 46 households were randomly selected in each of the selected EAs. In each selected household, one eligible young man aged 25-34 or young woman aged 20-29 was interviewed.

women. Thanks to the retrospective nature of the data, generational control over the selection of partner of young adults are related to the social and economic origin of young men and women as well as their characteristics at the onset of relationship, which allows examining how generational control varies across sub-groups of youth. Based on background characteristics, as well as occupational and residential histories, several individual characteristics could be included in the models as covariates. These include variables related to social, cultural and economic origins such as religion (Christian or other, mostly Muslim³), ethnic affiliation (Mossi or non-Mossi), father's occupation (agricultural/informal sector worker or employee in the formal sector), and childhood poverty indicator⁴ (poor, medium, rich) and place among siblings (eldest son/daughter or not). Characteristics measured at the time of onset of the relationship such as age (less than 20 years of old/20 years old or older), educational attainment (no formal schooling, primary, secondary and higher) and place of residence (Ouagadougou/Bobo-Dioulasso or other), are also included in the model.

While few studies have examined factors affecting free partner choice in African marriages (for a noticeable exception, see Meekers, 1995), the existing literature points out different social, economic and cultural factors that may affect the youth's autonomy in partner choice. According to the convergence theory, a shift away from arranged marriages is associated with increased education and exposure to Western ideas and values that encourage individual partner choice and conjugal closeness (Caldwell, 1982; Goode, 1970; Lesthaeghe, 1980). Thus, one would expect parental involvement in mate selection to be less likely among the more «westernized» groups of youth, i.e., the more educated, those living in urban areas and those from upper socioeconomic origin (the sons and daughter of employees from the formal sector and those who grew up in wealthier households).

Youth who have greater economic independence are also more likely to escape the control of elders. In his analysis of data on partner choice from the 1988 Togolese Demographic and Health Survey, Meekers (1995) found that employment prior to marriage was negatively associated with the odds that a woman would have an arranged marriage. The study also

3. Only six respondents declared being animist.

4. The residence poverty index was constructed based on information collected on housing quality: house location (zoned versus spontaneous unzoned neighborhoods), wall materials (cement/stone, mud, brick, or other), main source of drinking water (pipe into dwelling or other [public outdoor tap, well, vendors, other]) and lighting fuel (electricity, other).

reveals that women's religion and ethnicity significantly affect the autonomy of spouse selection. More specifically, consistent with the emphasis of Christian ideology on conjugal bonds and alongside the importance of premarital chastity among Muslims, the study indicates that being Christian increased the likelihood of self-choice union and that, in opposition to this, Muslim women were more likely to be in an arranged marriage than other women. While the effect of religion is likely to be the same in Burkina Faso, the impact of ethnicity on generational control over partner selection in Ouagadougou and more specifically, the differentials between the Mossi and the non-Mossi, remains an empirical question. In fact, although marriage practices vary according to ethnic groups, we found no anthropological evidence for the interference of parents and relatives in the choice of partners to be less common among the Mossi when compared to other ethnic groups. Demographic characteristics such as age and position among siblings were also found to be likely to affect youth agency with respect to partner choice. Not surprisingly, Meekers' study (1995) showed that partner selection was more likely to be controlled by parents when marriage took place at early ages. As for birth order, anthropological evidence from urban Burkina Faso (Attané, 2002) suggests substantial differences in the ability of young city dwellers to freely choose their partners, depending on their rank among siblings. Although arranged marriages used to be more common among the eldest sons, Attané's study suggests that today, contrarily, first-borns are granted more freedom in their choice of future spouses compared to their younger siblings. The author argues that exercising this free choice is a way for establishing the sibling's social status within the family.

Results

Elder's involvement in partner selection, bridewealth and preparation to motherhood

Table 1 presents the level of implication of elders in the selection of partners of both male and female respondents and whether parents contributed to the payment of bridewealth of married male respondents. As shown in Table 1, BPO survey data confirm the decline of intergenerational control over partner selection in Ouagadougou. In fact, only a minority of «significant» partners declared by young women (11%) and young men (6%) were introduced to respondent by her or his parents

(father, mothers, aunts or uncles). In the large majority of cases, respondents met their partners alone (63%) or through friends (24%).

TABLE 1 Elders' involvement in partner selection and payment of bridewealth

	Women	Men	All
Person who introduced his (her) partner to respondent			
Father/Mother	7.3	4.2	5.8
Uncle/Aunt	3.6	1.7	2.7
Sister/Cousin	2.4	5.7	4.0
Friend	14.1	34.8	24.3
Self-choice	72.6	53.6	63.2
N	1'437	1'396	2'833
Financial implication in marriage			
Person who paid for most of the bridewealth*			
Future groom		33.7	
Parents of future groom		64.1	
Other		2.1	
N		234	

Source: 2010 BPO survey.

* Among married male respondents only.

Although youth in Ouagadougou generally form relationships with partners of their choice, the financial implication of parents in the marriage of their adult children remains important and for the majority of first marriages concluded by young men (64%), the parents of the future groom paid for most of the bridewealth (Table 1). Of course, this financial contribution goes beyond economics and has strong symbolic value, suggesting that marriage is still perceived as a ceremony uniting two families.

During the survey, young mothers were also questioned about their sources for advice and information on motherhood and childcare during their pregnancy and after they had given birth. They were also asked about who helped them on a daily basis with their child following the delivery. Responses to these questions are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2 Source of information, advice and daily assistance during first pregnancy and after first birth, among young women who ever had a life birth (multiple answers allowed)

Main sources of information and advice during pregnancy	
Respondent's mother	26.3
Respondent's aunt/sisters/cousin	9.2
Mother of the child's father («mother in law»)	28.0
Friend/neighbor	14.2
Mid-wife/Doctor	57.0
<i>Has cited mother, aunt or «mother in law»</i>	<i>59.5</i>
Main sources of information and advice after child birth	
Respondent's mother	26.6
Respondent's aunt/sisters/cousin	9.9
Mother of the child's father («mother in law»)	32.9
Friend/neighbor	17.3
Mid-wife/Doctor	36.1
<i>Has cited mother, aunt or «mother in law»</i>	<i>66.4</i>
Main sources of daily assistance after child birth	
Respondent's mother	20.8
Respondent's aunt/sisters/cousin	15.9
Mother of the child's father («mother in law»)	36.8
Respondent's partner	22.2
Friend/neighbor	14.7
<i>Has cited mother, aunt or «mother in law»</i>	<i>70.9</i>
N = 654	

Source: 2010 BPO survey.

BPO data provides support for the idea that the role played by female elders in the transmission of maternity knowledge to the next generation has not disappeared in urban areas of Burkina Faso. While midwives and doctors were noted as important sources of advice and information for most young pregnant women (57%) in Ouagadougou today, so too were mothers (26%), aunts (9%) and mothers-in-law (28%). In fact, the majority of future mothers (59%) cited at least an elder woman in the family (mother, aunt, or partner's mother) as a primary source of advice during pregnancy. The role of female elders in the transmission of knowledge on maternity asserts itself after first birth, with 66% of young mothers declaring having received advice and information either from their mother, aunts or «mother-in-law» following delivery. Besides advice and information, the majority of young mothers also received daily assistance from female elders after delivery (71%). Overall, the authority of mothers over the wife or female partner of their son remains noteworthy: more than a third of young women cited their «mothers-in-law» as primary sources

of advice and 37% of them relied on their «mothers-in-law» for daily help after delivery. Importantly, this level of reliance on elder knowledge and assistance was high across all socio-economic sub-groups of young mothers and the proportion of young women mentioning mothers, «mothers-in-law» or aunts as a primary source of advice and help did not vary significantly according to age, educational attainment, social origin, place of residence, religion and poverty indicator (analysis not shown).

Factors affecting parents' involvement in partner selection

Table 3 presents the logistic regression models estimating the effects of respondents' social and economic origin and his or her characteristics at the time of the onset of the relationship on the likelihood of parental involvement in partner selection, by sex.

Overall, the results show that for both women and men, social and economic origin affects the likelihood of parental involvement in partner selection. While parental involvement in partner choice does not differ significantly across ethnic groups, it does vary depending on religious affiliation. As has been reported in Togo (Meekers, 1995), Christian ideology that emphasizes the conjugal bond has a significant and negative effect on the likelihood of being in an arranged relationship for both women and men. Economic origin also matters and youth from better-off households are significantly less likely to have their parents selecting partners for them compared to their poorer counterparts. Besides religious and economic background, educational attainment at the time of relationship onset is a strong predictor of elder's involvement in mate selection. As expected, higher educational attainment is associated with a significantly lower likelihood of parental involvement in mate selection and the effect is particularly pronounced at the post-primary level of education, especially among women. Among young women, place of residence also significantly affects the likelihood of parental involvement in partner choice. As expected, young women who met their partner while living outside the two largest cities of the country are only 61% as likely as those who were living in Ouagadougou or in Bobo-Dioulasso to have been introduced to their partners by their parents.

TABLE 3 Factors affecting parental involvement in partner selection, relationships declared by male and female respondents: logistic regressions (odd ratios)

	All	Women	Men
Social and economic origin			
Religion			
(Other (mostly Muslim))			
Christian	0.54***	0.60*	0.43**
Ethnic affiliation			
(Non-Mossi)			
Mossi	1.21	1.34	1.09
Father's occupation			
(Agricultural/Informal sector worker)			
Employee in the formal sector	0.68	0.73	0.63
Childhood poverty indicator			
(Poor)			
Medium	0.70	0.69	0.70
Rich	0.32***	0.31**	0.34**
Position among siblings			
First-born child	1.26	1.07	1.58
Situation at the time of relationship onset			
Age			
< 20			
20 years old or older	0.62*	0.64	0.56
Educational attainment			
(No formal schooling)			
Primary	0.40***	0.32***	0.60
Secondary and higher	0.13***	0.08***	0.23***
Employment			
(Not working)			
Working	1.25	1.25	1.42
Place of residence			
(Other)			
Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso	0.61**	0.55**	0.57
Sex of respondent			
(Male)			
Female	0.99		
N	33	1'437	1'396
Prob > ch2		0.000	0.000
Pseudo Chi2		0.2186	0.252

Source: 2010 BPO survey.

* p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001.

Conclusion

Providing statistical support for previous qualitative evidence collected in urban Burkina Faso (Rossier, 2007; Attané, 2007), BPO data indicate that today, the large majority of young adults in Ouagadougou entertain unmarried relationships with partners of their own choosing. Confirming our hypotheses, the analysis shows that parental involvement in mate selection is more likely to occur among those who grew up in poorer households, are the least uneducated and Muslim youth, and in the case of women, when living outside the two largest cities of the country at the start of the relationship. Although free partner choice seems to have become the norm in the capital city, the study also suggests that marriage in Ouagadougou remains a «family business» and parents are still involved in bridewealth payment in the majority of marriages. In line with past qualitative results (Lewis, Calvès, 2011), the study further shows that female elders, especially mothers-in-law, remain central to the transmission of maternity knowledge to the next generation and constitute a main source of daily assistance for young mothers after the birth of their first child. Importantly, their influence is marked across all cultural and socio-economic sub-groups of young women and does not vary significantly according to ethnicity, religion, educational attainment or social and economic origin.

Thus, despite a clear indication of freedom of partner choice among youth, the study findings support the argument that contemporary family dynamics observable in urban Africa do not mirror the universal convergence towards an abandonment of the extended family in favor of the Western nuclear family system, as predicted by modernization theory (Kayongo-Male, Onyango, 1984; Meekers, 1995). Instead, results confirm the continued central place of elders in African social organization and the persistent adherence of youth to traditional norms regarding obligations and respect toward their parents (Dimé, 2007; Roth, 2010). Importantly, by having their parents be financially involved in the payment of the bridewealth or relying heavily on female elders for advice and help in matters of childbearing and childcare, not only do youth «show respect for the elders» but, as Meekers underlines (1995, p. 175), they also «maintain their social and economic ties with the lineage». In fact, in African societies where an institutionalized welfare system is close to non-existent and where individualist behavior triggers social criticism and even ostracism, keeping close links with one's lineage remains socially and economically crucial for individuals (Marie, 1997; Calvès, Marcoux, 2007). The study provides quantitative support for the idea that, in such

context, young adults in African cities are developing hybrid individualization strategies in the sphere of marriage and family formation, in which they attempt to reconcile their desire for autonomy with the necessary compliance to the traditional authority of elders regarding their lives.

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