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**I**n the developed world and in many developing countries, the adoption of birth control by couples has been preceded by a fertility decline caused by later female marriage. What evidence is there for this « nuptiality transition » in sub-Saharan Africa where the fertility transition has recently got under way? With a view to producing a systematic and homogeneous analysis of nuptiality changes and their impact on fertility for the whole of Africa, the CEPED, backed by the AUPELF-UREF, is setting up a comprehensive computerized data base of information on nuptiality and fertility from censuses and national surveys. The first results, presented here by Véronique Hertrich and Marc Pilon, focus on the changes affecting the conditions in which women form unions<sup>1</sup>. In a second article, Philippe Antoine and Marc Pilon give a synthesis of the most recent results from the DHS surveys concerning polygamy. The results of these two analyses are complementary and show, for example, that the regions where polygamy is the most prevalent are also those where women marry relatively young and where the age difference between partners is the greatest.

## CHANGING PATTERNS OF MARRIAGE IN AFRICA

The main characteristics of African marriage patterns are well known : early marriage for girls and almost universal marriage for both sexes ; prompt and generalized remarriage for widowed and divorced women of child-bearing age ; polygamy ; and often large age differences between partners. Within the continent, however, a wide variety of situations exists, which in the 1960-1970 period were organized into fairly distinct regional forms. On the one hand, in West Africa (and especially in the Sahel), the age at marriage was low for women (17.5 years) and later for men (after age 26 on average). The proportion never-married was small and polygamy was widespread (involving between a quarter and a third of married men). At the other extreme, in East Africa, the average age at marriage was relatively high for both sexes (between 20 and 30 for women, between 26 and 30 for men), while the proportion never married (above 5 %) was no longer insignificant and polygamy was rare. Between these two patterns,

intermediate situations were observed in North Africa and in Central and Eastern Africa, characterized by a lower age at marriage for the men and higher than that in West Africa for women ; the proportion never-married was very low and polygamy rare (for long concerning less than 5 % of married men in North Africa).

### A decline of regional differences

Analysis of the results from the most recent censuses and surveys shows a narrowing of these geographical differences. The average age at marriage of women is increasing in all regions. It is often over 19 years and is nowhere below 17.5 except in Niger and the Islands of Sao Tomé and Príncipe. A country-by-country comparison<sup>2</sup> of the earliest and most recent statistical data shows that of the 37 countries for which both figures are available, in only 4 (Cape Verde, Burundi, Comores and Mozambique) has

<sup>1</sup> Published in French in the *Chronique du CEPED* n° 26

<sup>2</sup> The earliest data used here are for the period 1950-1974, while the most recent are for the period 1975-1995. See Véronique HERTRICH, Marc PILON, 1997, *Transitions de la nuptialité en Afrique*, Rapport de recherche n° 15, CEPED

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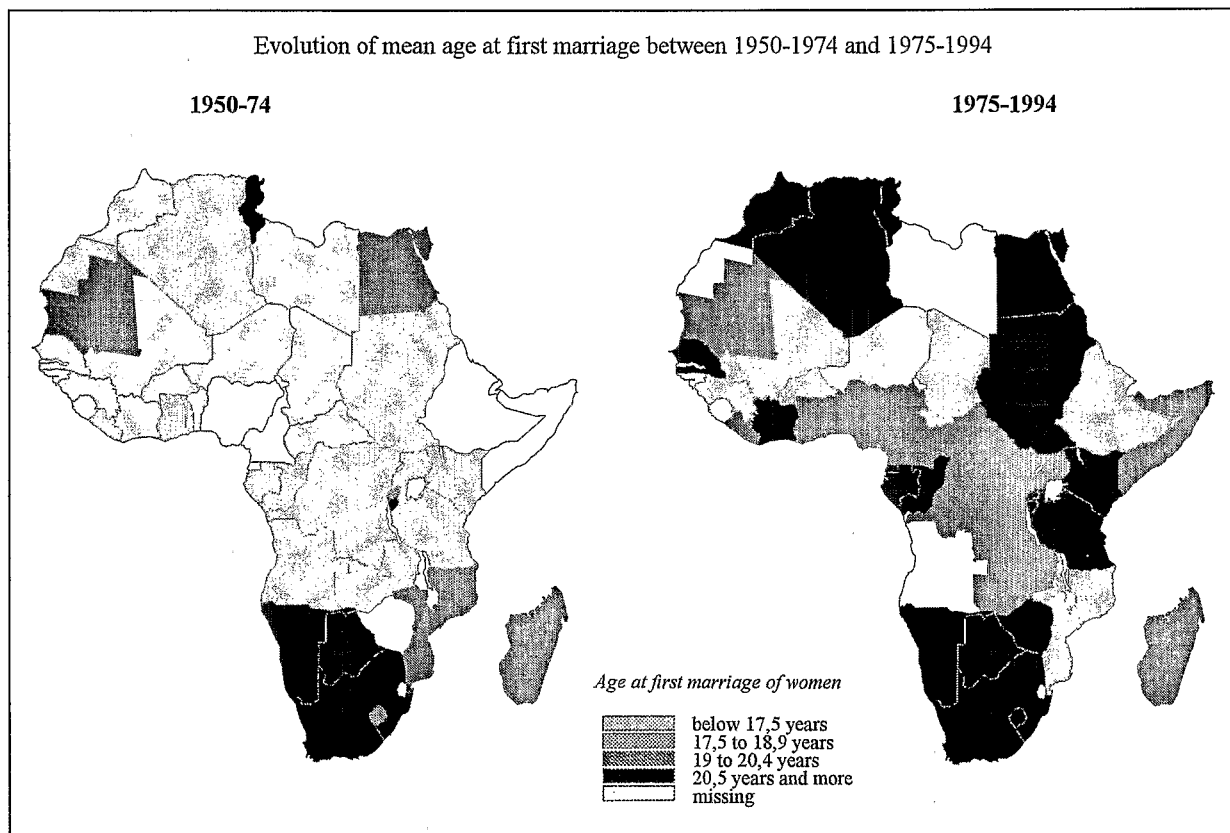
there been a fall in female age at marriage. By contrast, an increase of at least half a year per decade has occurred in 30 countries, and is more than a year in 15 countries. As the transition model predicts, Africa does seem to be experiencing a decline in nuptiality. This owes little to an increase in the proportion never-married, which remains marginal in most countries (except for East Africa), and in some has even diminished.

A decline of regional differences is also apparent among men, though less so than for women. Of the 32 countries for which information about men is available, 26 have seen an increase in age at first marriage for men, but in only 8 has the average age at marriage risen by at least one year per decade. The

The reduction of differentials between men and women in the timing of entry into union is a factor favourable to a decline in polygamy. At present, however, there is no evidence to confirm this trend. Statistical series relative to multiple marriages are generally not available. Piecemeal observations suggest that the institution of polygamy remains strong and is actually adapting to new domestic arrangements between partners, notably in urban contexts where residential separation and informal unions are increasingly elements of a polygamous lifestyle.

**The motors of change : development or crisis ?**

A pattern observed everywhere is that the longer



proportion of never-married also remains low among men, typically under 5 %.

The more rapid evolution in female nuptiality compared with that of men is responsible for a reduction in the age difference between partners in almost all countries. Of the 32 countries examined, Rwanda and Burundi (where the differences in the earlier period were particularly small, 0.8 and 2.5 years respectively) and Botswana were the only ones where the differences in age at marriage between the sexes increased over this period. The most recent statistical data show that the age difference is less than 6 years in two-thirds of the countries, as against barely one-third thirty years earlier.

women spend in schooling, the later their entry into union. In Senegal, for instance, the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) of 1992. showed that for women with no education the median age at first marriage was 16, compared with 19 for those with a primary education and 23 for those with secondary education. In Zimbabwe (DHS, 1994), this age ranges from 16 to 21 depending on the woman's level of education. However, longer education is not directly responsible for later marriage — secondary and higher education is too rare among girls in sub-Saharan Africa for this mechanism to have measurable effects at the country-wide level. Education produces changes in female marriage primarily through its role in promoting personal liberation and in encouraging new professional and

conjugal aspirations. However, what is also observed, among the Ibo of Nigeria, for example, is that the later marriage of educated daughters reflects the new strategies of families, seeking to recover through a more valuable bridewealth the investment they have made in their daughters' education.

The trend towards later marriage also owes something to the economic crisis affecting Africa. In Dakar, as in other African cities, the difficulty of accumulating the money for the bridewealth and of finding stable employment, forces young adults to postpone getting married and starting a family. In the countryside, migrations by young men and women are another factor tending to raise age at marriage, and are also related to the economic difficulties.

### **Later marriage and lower fertility**

When marriage is the usual framework for childbearing, a reduction of the time spent in union has the effect of reducing fertility, without the need for any other changes in reproductive behaviour. This is the mechanism which was responsible for the start of the fertility transition in many countries, to such a degree that the term « malthusian transition » has been used to describe this initial phase of fertility decline, prior to the adoption by couples of birth control methods (referred to as the « neo-malthusian transition »). But is a fertility decline associated with later female marriage occurring to the same degree throughout the continent of Africa ?

The association does not appear to be systematic. It will occur only if marriage remains the virtually exclusive framework of childbearing, in other words if the « benefit » from the decline in the length of union is not offset by an increase in births outside marriage. In the countries of North Africa, where the fertility transition has been under way for a long time, the increase in age at marriage has been accompanied by an increase in age at first birth and by a fall in fertility at low ages. In Morocco, for example, the median age at first birth and at marriage have evolved in parallel, increasing by nearly 5 years between the generations born at the start of the 1940s and those born in the mid-1960s (going from 16.3 to 21.2 years for the first marriage and from 18.6 to 23.3 years for the first birth). In a period of 30 years (between 1962 and 1993), fertility has been divided by four for girls aged 15–19 and has been halved for women aged 20–24 years.

In sub-Saharan Africa, the association is usually weaker. A growing separation has been observed in a number of different societies between the timing of the first birth and that of the first marriage. At Lomé, for example, the rise in the age at marriage of

women has had no impact on the age at first birth. In Ivory Coast, the DHS of 1994 indicates a median age at first birth actually less than that for first marriage. The effect of this separation of marriage and fertility is to increase the number of pre-marital births (though without increased teenage fertility necessarily being responsible). Among the young generations (20–29 years) in Kenya, for example, one in five women had become a mother before being married (DHS, 1989). In a Moslem rural sub-population of Senegal, which might be thought hostile to extra-marital births, these in fact accounted for 15 % of total births in the period 1983–1991, and the proportion rises to 24 % if extra-marital conceptions are included. For these reasons we must be careful when judging the likely consequences of later marriage on fertility decline until such time as the diffusion of contraception has given young women the means to control their own fertility.

### **Marital changes and social change**

The evolution of age at marriage provides only a very incomplete picture of the changes to which African marriage is currently subject. Marriage in African society is often the result of complex processes in which the interests of families are more important than the wishes of the partners themselves. The existence of lengthy and complicated negotiations, which sometimes break down before marriage, can create an authentic pre-conjugal dynamic, like that observed among the Bwa, a small ethnic group in Mali, for whom there is a 40 % probability that an engagement will be broken off. Less is known about the changes affecting union formation, but the results from in-depth small scale surveys suggest that they are often important and are instrumental in redefining the relations between the generations and within couples.

The individuals to be married are taking an increasing role in the selection of their partners, even though families are still expected to give their approval and usually arrange a formal marriage transaction. In this way conditions are becoming more favourable to dialogue within families and to the development of a conjugal partnership. These transformations are more qualitative and less directly linked to fertility than age at marriage, yet may well have a fundamental role in the shift to a regime of controlled fertility. For it is hard to see how a deliberate restriction of progeny can be planned for until the scope for individual and conjugal choice has developed to the point where elaboration of family size preferences is possible.

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