
CHAPTER 2

Union and separation: love stories are never simple

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In societies where the institution of marriage is the norm for family-building¹, collecting nuptiality data should, in principle, pose no problem. Most people have no difficulty defining their conjugal status at any particular point in their life course and the classic surveys define several precise states: never-married, married, separated, divorced and widowed. But simply recording the succession of conjugal states is less and less useful for describing the variety of conjugal processes that exist in different societies today, and the changes over time. In many societies, the marriage institution is giving way to new conjugal arrangements. In the West, consensual union has emerged as a new way of forming a couple and founding a family and is becoming ever more common (Lapierre-Adamcyk and Charvet, 1999). As new forms of union emerge, if demographers are to account for the processes involved, pinpoint the moments when changes of state occur and identify their social significance, they need relevant temporal markers for the formation of the couple. So it is useful to try to identify complex states involving various biographical dimensions: type of union or relationship, type of formalisation, mode of cohabitation, sexual relations or not, etc.

Behind every union lies an accumulation of individual events such as the first encounter, the first sexual intercourse or a promise, and/or collective events such as an agreement between families, payment of a bride price or a dowry, etc. The diversity of founding events, their chronological order, their variable importance, the chance occurrences involved, are all factors in the complexity of the process leading to a given conjugal situation. In other words, the greater the number of events identified, the better we will be able

¹ This was the case in Western societies until the late 1960s.

to construct combinations that properly take account of complex states. For a deeper study of the transitions from state to state, for example from married non-cohabitation to married cohabitation, or from unmarried cohabitation to married cohabitation, we need to identify numerous events and try to establish their order in time. However, a multiplicity of dates brings a wider diversity of possible transitions but will not give a systematic chronological classification.

Norms and practices regarding nuptiality change over time, even in the course of one person's lifetime. Although an individual's conjugal state may seem "fuzzy", the complexity is greater at each end of the sequence. It is at the start of the union, at the time of its formalisation (if any) and at the time of the break-up that the transitions are most gradual and the boundaries fuzziest. Individuals' interpretations of the events they describe also affect the data: these events are sometimes emotionally charged (divorce especially), and the attribution of dates is affected by the meaning the respondent gives to the events. Men and women do not always perceive them in the same way.

This chapter first describes norms and practices concerning "marriage" and "preconjugal" relationships and then considers entry to and exit from the union. This leads to questions about the temporal ordering of events and the credibility of that ordering. Some conjugal events are imposed by the family/social circle or the partner. Other stages are not imposed, but are sometimes anticipated. Comparing qualitative and quantitative information confirms that some situations remain complex and that what is involved is the retrospective reconstruction of event histories. Finally the chapter shows that the diversity of conjugal processes poses problems for comparisons between societies.

1. RECONCILING NORMS AND PRACTICES

The marriage institution is strongly determined by the social and legal norms in force in a given society. And these norms evolve over time. Thus the start of a union in France in 2005 does not correspond to the same social and legal realities as marriage in the 1960s, and statistics on marriage no longer have the same meaning; they now give an incomplete view of unions. Whatever the society considered, changes in conjugal state conform to common norms, though these may differ between social milieus. Social, religious and customary norms impose a more or less restrictive framework on couple formation (Locoh, 2002). The stakes involved in marriage vary depending on the social capital the future spouses possess (Singly, 1987a). This social capital is negotiated in ways that vary according to the group a spouse belongs to. The choice of spouse, lover and sexual partner is always rooted in a set of consensual rules, but individuals may distance themselves from these rules to varying degrees (Bozon and Héran, 1987).

This may undermine homogamy² and so significantly alter the meaning of the changes of state and, even more, their timing.

² Whichever way the society in question defines homogamy: social, ethnic, religious etc. Many societies still favour endogamy within the kinship group, lineage or ethnic group (Locoh, 2002). For Northern societies, see also François de Singly (1987b).

People marry, or form couples, in different ways depending on whether they are at the far ends of the social scale or in the middle classes. These differences are largely a function of educational level. Broadly, girls from disadvantaged categories marry earlier than those of the more affluent classes; this applies in Southern countries as well as the North. Girls from more affluent families continue into higher education and tend to focus on a career.

In sub-Saharan Africa, norms about entering a union vary from country to country and sometimes between regions of the same country (Antoine, 2002a). Many surveys ignore such differences. Local legal and customary norms provide precise markers for the formation and break-up of unions, and to properly understand the phenomena it is important to know these markers. The question of legal norms is important in itself. A new law often ratifies a behavioural change that has already taken place, recently or less so, but it can also spark off a new behavioural model. Take for example the impact of laws that set a minimum age for marriage and the general trend towards later marriage in African countries and also, very topically, in some Western countries.

Things are more complicated when practices, legal norms, customs and social norms diverge. It may become difficult to identify clear markers. This applies to sub-Saharan Africa, where practices are shaped by a subtle mixture of customs and laws, and also to Western countries, where practices tend to conform less and less to the legal norms³. Some thinking is required, to see what can best be taken as the marker of the start of a conjugal state. Which event marks the start of the union: keeping regular company, cohabitation, payment of a bride price, civil ceremony, religious ceremony? Should it be the one that counts for the individuals concerned? Should individual perceptions⁴ (which are indefinite, based on a person's life experience) count for more than customary or legal norms sanctioned by tangible acts (and sometimes formally registered so that they can be precisely dated)? The decision to conduct a life course survey seems to imply opting more for the individual's experience, but the degree of freedom in the respondents' discourse will vary according to the pressure of their society's social norms and conventions. In some countries people have no problem declaring a consensual union, while in others such unions may be consigned to silence. Where consensual union is a minority phenomenon it may be considered deviant, and respondents with such a marginal lifestyle may not admit to it. This makes it even more marginal in the statistics⁵. The life course survey always leaves room for the respondent's reinterpretation of events – all the more easily where there are no clear markers.

³ In France, the PACS law on civil unions is probably the most recent example of the legal system adapting to changes in conjugal practices.

⁴ See Chapter 1 on factual data and perceptions.

⁵ See Gigi Santow and Michael Bracher (1997), who compare nuptiality trends in different countries.

2. CASUAL UNIONS, LOVE AFFAIRS AND “PREMARITAL” UNIONS

Do men and women see a “union” in the same way? Why do men mention more unions than women do?

The survey on sexual behaviour in France (Spira *et al.*, 1993) showed that for their lifetime as a whole, women declared fewer partners than men, only declaring those that “counted” for them. Although male and female behaviours are becoming more similar, starting a sexual relationship still does not have the same meaning for the two sexes. Men are seeking mainly a sexual experience while women are looking for a developing relationship (Bozon, 1993). Often, the quality of the declarations is highly sensitive to the social image accorded to multiple partnerships and sexual relations outside of marriage. And this image varies according to gender, the relationship scenario in question and the society concerned (Gagnon, 1999).

One may imagine that in situations where a deterioration in living conditions postpones the possibility of formalising a union, people do not also postpone entering into sexual or love relationships. In most cases, it is important to identify long-lasting love relationships that do not end in formal union⁶, because they will have a major impact on postponement of the marriage age. In some societies, such sexual and/or love relationships constitute a “preparation” for starting a union: everyone is free to choose their partner, who need not necessarily meet the social criteria for choosing a future spouse. But this possibility is not quite the same for men and women. It is still marked by the persistence of male domination, whether that domination is institutionalised as it is in Africa or functions more through a more or less conscious process of internalisation, as it does in Western countries.

In her work in Libreville, Gabon, Myriam Mouvagha-Sow (2007) highlights the development of new forms of non-cohabiting consensual union referred to as *fréquentation* – “keeping company”⁷. To take account of changing trends in nuptiality, she took into account all stages of the process of starting a union: “keeping company”, cohabitation, the introductions⁸, the customary wedding ceremony, the civil ceremony and the religious ceremony. She compares the conjugal situation declared by the respondent at the time of the survey with the situation observed by the life course survey, and reveals significant differences. In particular, unions of the “keeping company” type were not declared, the respondents concerned stating that they were “single”. Some of the “single” women were in fact “friends” (35%), cohabitantes (3%), “introduced” (10%),

⁶ How is the start of a love relationship to be identified and how is it to be distinguished from a childhood love and a brief fling? Should one use criteria of age, duration or the individual's perceptions?

⁷ These premarital unions surely existed before in Gabon, where customs have always been fairly sexually permissive overall. In many ethnic groups it was seen as a good thing for a woman to prove her fecundity before she married, and not necessarily with her future husband.

⁸ The man and his family “introduce” themselves to the woman's family at a special ceremony – whence the term.

separated (15%) or even (in one case) widowed. Are these non-cohabiting relationships new forms of union or simply premarital relationship of a form that has always existed? Can one still use the term “premarital” for relationships that do not lead to marriage, or where marriage takes place long after the start of the woman’s reproductive life?⁹

This is why information is needed about sexual and love relationships as markers of a union, while taking account of societal differences in the ways access to sexuality is considered. How is one to compare the start of sexual life in societies that focus on marriage as the context for sexual relations and other societies where regular sexual intercourse is regarded as the start of a union? The comparison is all the more complicated where the dominant norms, even if they are not complied with, have a major influence on respondents’ answers to questions. While in some African countries it will be difficult to obtain information about pre- or extra-marital sex, in Europe one may come across people who find it hard to admit that they have no sex life. Moreover, casual unions are often left out of quantitative surveys because in practice, interviewers and respondents implicitly agree not to record unions that did not reach some minimum level of formalisation or duration. What about extra-conjugal relations¹⁰, which Florence Vatin (2000) presents as almost “state secrets”? Such relationships can be lasting, or even permanent.

3. THE START OF A UNION: A PROCESS OVER TIME

Dating the different stages in the formation of a union is a delicate task, especially where the process is spread over a long period of time. Depending on the society and lifestyle concerned, the transition from singledom to “being in a union” can be a long process. Increasing the number of temporal landmarks make data gathering and analysis more difficult; events are forgotten, responses are vague, data are under-exploited, interpretation is complex, etc. One revealing example is that of unions in Lomé, where a union is formalised through a series of specific stages. The first stage is when the future wife’s family is approached by the suitor’s paternal or maternal aunts, who present the suitor’s (and his family’s) intentions¹¹. This stage requires several visits. The young woman’s family also take the time to find out about the suitor and his family. Gifts are offered and their acceptance marks the start of the engagement. Then the bride price is paid, validating the marriage and materialising the alliance between the two families. The couple can then live together; it is the wife who joins her husband in his compound. However, Thérèse Locoh

⁹ Myriam Mouvagha-Sow (2007) writes that the date of the first marriage proper is much later than the dates of other events concerning love and sexual relationships.

¹⁰ According to Florence Vatin (2000), “living with” a spouse can be combined with shorter periods of live-in partnership with other partners.

¹¹ Whereas in Western countries marriage is mainly an individual choice, in Africa marriage is generally a more collective matter, with the families of both spouses being responsible for its smooth running.

(1989) writes that in the early 20th century, Lomé's Afro-Brazilian elite¹² introduced and adopted the Christian model of marriage. In this form of marriage the young people are involved in choosing their future spouses, the civil marriage is registered or a church wedding takes place and monogamy is increasingly dominant as the chosen form of marriage. Catholicism is the dominant religion in this population and theoretically forbids the very idea of polygamy, but the practice persists. With the economic recession of the 1980s, patterns of coupledness diversified further, though it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between disruptions due to economic circumstances and underlying trends due to more general social change. Two highlights of these changes in marital practices are the emergence of consensual unions and situations where the two spouses do not live together (Thiriart, 1999). This trend is largely attributed to the economic dynamism of Togolese women (the women of Lomé especially), which gives them a degree of independence from their spouse and/or their own family. They are able to run their own households and tend to give as much importance to their work as to the marriage institution, if not more.

The "marriage" part of the questionnaire for the Lomé life course survey (URD-DGSCN, 2002b) was so designed as to take account of these local features. It defines as a "union" any form of more or less stable coupledness between a man and a woman, cohabiting or not, whether recognised by religion, custom or the law or simply based on affinity. A union can start without the couple living together. Six landmark dates were used to establish the timing of the union formation process:

- The respondent's perception of the start of the union, i.e. their answer to the question "On what date do you consider that the union began?";
- The "first steps", when (if) the suitor's family introduced themselves to the girl's family to announce their son's intentions towards the girl;
- The payment of the bride price, which emerges as the foundation and symbol of the marriage (URD-DGSCN, 2002a);
- The civil ceremony, sanctioned by issuance of a marriage certificate;
- The religious ceremony (in church or mosque, or before the traditional religious authorities);
- The start of cohabitation.

The data from the Lomé survey illustrate the complexity of choosing markers for the start of a union. At what stage does one consider that the person is no longer single? Should one count the respondent's declaration, the dates of the ceremonies or the start of cohabitation? Must there be an official step before a relationship is counted as a union, or must there be cohabitation?

¹² The (predominantly Catholic) Afro-Brazilian elite consists of the descendants of freed slaves from the Brazilian Nordeste who from 1835 came on to settle on the coast of the Gulf of Benin. They traded in imported goods and became wealthy landowners. With other traders, both African (Ewe, Mina, Hausa) and European (mainly German), they founded the town of Lomé and made it an important trading centre (Amos, 2001).

Given the increasingly informal nature of unions, there are actually several ways of moving out of singledom:

- Consensual union, freely consented between the partners;
- Formal procedure (civil, religious or customary), whether or not the couple live together;
- At least one formal procedure (civil, religious or customary) and/or cohabitation.

The order in which the events take place varies from person to person. More than one ceremony may take place on the same day, some may not be performed. All these dates together trace the matrimonial process as a whole and describe the way it unfolds over time. From these data, one can determine in what form the union (formal or informal¹³) began, and track how it developed. But this data collecting is less useful if one wants to synthesise the information to give a single date as marking the start of the union. Median ages for the various markers are higher than the median age calculated from respondents' own perceptions of the start date of their union. However, whichever indicator is taken, the trend is for unions to start later. The "civil ceremony" and "religious ceremony" markers do not seem to be relevant indicators for the move from singledom to coupledness, (i) because they concern only a limited number of couples and (ii) because they show a considerable time gap with the median age for "end of singledom". The date the couple move in together does not seem an ideal marker either, as it does not always reflect a deep commitment by both partners. Moreover, not all unions involve cohabitation¹⁴. The date of the first steps and/or the date the bride price is paid seem to be the most satisfactory markers of the end of singledom in Togolese society, for several reasons. In Lomé, the "first steps" ceremony is the one most celebrated. Secondly, payment of the bride price is the *sine qua non* for a subsequent civil and/or religious ceremony in cases where these take place. If these dates are taken as the founding events of the union, there is less risk of omitting too many people from the calculation of unions¹⁵. Moreover, the median age for this marker is closer to the median age of the perceived end of singledom.

From the qualitative interviews in Togo (URD-DGSCN 2002a), the payment of the bride price¹⁶ emerges clearly as a major marker of the start of the union. However, recent research in Benin (Dijoux, 2001) and Kenya (Golaz,

¹³ This distinction between types of union is important, as Jaël Mongeau *et al.* pointed out in their 2001 research in Québec. These authors analysed the influence of economic insecurity on union formation, making the distinction between marriage and consensual union.

¹⁴ In the African urban context where housing is in very short supply, the link between residential status and marital status is particularly complex and fuzzy. Spouses do not always live together as soon as they are married.

¹⁵ Of the 282 men who had moved from singledom to coupledness, only 35 had not had a traditional ceremony (first steps and payment of the bride price). Of the 420 women who had moved out of singledom, only 41 had not had a traditional ceremony.

¹⁶ It is not the monetary value of the bride price that counts here but its symbolic value. In Togo, its monetary value is falling.

2002) show that the bride price tends to be paid in instalments over a period, each payment marking a further step in the social acknowledgement of the union. Thus the couple may be allowed to live together before the husband has completely paid his debt to his family-in-law.

Changes in marital patterns also concern unions outside marriage. In a study of French families, Catherine Villeneuve-Gokalp (1990) highlighted the shift from cohabitation before marriage to cohabitation instead of marriage. Cohabitation as a way of starting a union reflects a variety of attitudes. Villeneuve-Gokalp identifies five different cohabitee profiles: cohabitation as a prelude to marriage (less than a year before the wedding); as trial marriage (1 to 3 years before getting married); ephemeral unions (less than 3 years before separation); stable unions with no commitment (and no children); and consensual unions, a term that author reserves for cohabitees living together as if they were married (Villeneuve-Gokalp, 1990).

4. AND WHEN DOES A UNION END?

The end of a union, like the beginning, seems difficult to identify precisely, except in the case of widowhood. Analysis of divorce in Western societies – the process and its consequences – has a long history (Théry, 1993). It is relatively easy to date if it is formalised, the legal process establishing the date – even if the legal proceedings happen months or years after the decision to separate (Bastard, 2002). Separations in consensual unions are harder to grasp, especially where the couple have no children. However, personal questionnaires usually provide considerable information, for example distinguishing between marital status and lifestyle. This information can serve to identify a person who is separated from their spouse without there having been any divorce proceedings, and is living with another partner, with whom they may have children.

But whether with marriage or with cohabitation, the beginnings of conjugal strife can only really be identified and analysed by a qualitative approach. Separation is a long process with a number of landmark events such as the time the couple's relationship starts to deteriorate, the move to separate rooms, the move to separate dwellings, involvement of the families, the separation, and finally in some cases the legal proceedings. As with marriage, these events do not always follow the same chronological order. Divorce is anticipated: in Dakar, the wife's return to her father's and/or mother's home often heralds her divorce (Antoine and Dial, 2005).

In the Dakar survey, the dates many divorcees chose were those of the husband's repudiation of his wife in traditional divorces, and the court's pronouncement of divorce in cases of legal divorce¹⁷ (Dial, 2006). The type of divorce relates directly to the type of union formation. Among Moslems in Senegal, marriage is first and above all marked by a religious ceremony. A civil

¹⁷ This type of divorce is relatively rare (about 15% of divorces). It mainly involves educated women of the middle and upper classes.

wedding is not obligatory, and often the religious wedding is not even entered in the civil register unless this brings family benefits owing to the business or civil service job on one of the spouses. This explains why, when a marriage breaks up, the procedure more commonly involves only the members of the two families. If it is the woman who seeks a divorce, she applies to the moral authorities who then ask her husband to pronounce the divorce.

A woman divorced through legal proceedings may count either of two dates for the divorce: the day her husband repudiated her, or the date of the legal decision. When legal proceedings are involved, it is usually on the wife's initiative¹⁸. In most cases, the couple have separated before the divorce is pronounced. Women tend to first give the interviewer the date on their divorce papers, but when asked how many years they have been divorced they also count the years of separation prior to the legal divorce.

5. FUZZY STATES, THE ORDER OF EVENTS AND CONJUGAL STATUS

Some women say they are in a union even though there has been a manifest break-up. One example is a woman in Cameroon who declared herself married although she was separated *de facto*, having refused to follow her husband when he retired to the village with her co-wife (Tichit, 2002). She received no allowance from him and paid her own rent. The separation was even consummated insofar as the woman frequented other men and had a child that was not her husband's. In a superficial survey, her situation would appear as one of the many forms of multi-residential polygamy. This case is comparable to that of women whose husbands have been gone for years but who continue to declare themselves "married". The symbolic value of the declaration is further accentuated by the official nature of the interview, particularly in the context of a survey by questionnaire.

In a number of societies, including Senegal, some forms of remarriage do not require the woman to live with the man or even have sexual relations with him. The older women concerned in this type of marriage are called *tako*¹⁹. This traditional institution persists because of the disrepute that falls on women who are not married, widows included. Conversely, a woman may have a stable, fulfilling relationship though not cohabiting (as with some mistresses, fiancées or other "second offices"²⁰) (Lacombe, 1987), and declare herself single. But here again, the declaration may be legally exact, but it does not cover the actual situation of a woman in a non-cohabiting consensual union. Thus these women, whether divorced, widowed or married, seem to interiorise other people's pejorative view of them so much that they feel, and call themselves,

¹⁸ In many cases women apply for a legal divorce in order to regularise their situation so that they can legally remarry. They know very well that if the courts decree alimony, there is little chance that their husband will make regular payments.

¹⁹ From the Wolof name for this form of union, *tako boume*, which can be translated as "cord marriage", indicating a purely formal conjugal tie (Geismar, 1933).

²⁰ See the novel *Deuxième bureau* by Alphonse Nkouka, 1989, Éditions Clé, Yaoundé.

single. The reverse is also possible, and that too may uncontrollably distort the data gathered.

In societies where polygamy is practiced, the dynamics of separation and remarriage can lead men and women to perceive their conjugal state differently. Suppose that a monogamous couple separate. The legal divorce proceedings are launched, and the man remarries during the process, before the divorce has been officially pronounced. This type of situation can easily occur in African countries where it is possible to juggle with religious, civil and customary types of formalisation of the union. If the dates are collected, two scenarios can be constructed. One focuses on the experiential side (taking the moment when the spouses separated, before the divorce was pronounced): the man separates and says he is remarrying. He is first a divorcee, then a monogamously married man. The second scenario reflects the legal aspect and takes the official divorce date as its basis. In this case the man takes a second wife and then divorces. He thus becomes polygamous before becoming monogamous again once his divorce from his first wife has been pronounced. His first wife becomes "first wife" in a polygamous marriage and then divorcee²¹. In terms of data analysis, if many people are concerned by situations of this kind the two scenarios will produce different results. In the first case an interpretation that includes the perceptions of the individuals concerned regarding the sequence of events will conclude that people divorce and then quickly remarry (though it says nothing about the reasons for the remarriage). The second interpretation, based on the legal events, would suggest that polygamy is a factor for divorce (Antoine, 2002b).

How should detailed dating be matched up with respondents' own perceptions of their life history? Too close a focus on the sequence of dates is likely to miss the individual's reasoning and the meaning they give to their conduct. In other words, dates and the formal and legal aspects of events can be deceptive. When a couple is not living together, they may be "separated" even though the man's departure cannot be precisely dated. In this case, the only actual date likely to be recorded is the date of the legal divorce, enacted (some years after the husband's departure) because the woman wants to remarry, whereas the man may have remarried in the meantime without informing his (ex-)wife.

These considerations suggest one should examine the nature of the dates collected. When a respondent is asked when their union ended, should the date of de facto separation be recorded, or the date the legal divorce was pronounced, or the date of the divorce according to custom? Recording more dates may help to avoid the problem. But the danger then is of arbitrarily reconstructing a process, projecting onto the individual's history a logic that is not theirs. In general, gathering the dates of events as emotionally charged as marriage and divorce can be heavily influenced by the respondent's perception of the events and the meanings they give them, in a context where the person's presentation of self is at stake (Battagliola *et al.*, 1991).

²¹ It is very likely that women will prefer the first scenario and men the second.

Often, the individual judgement differs from current social norms. A supposedly reliable marker like first cohabitation or a civil or religious wedding ceremony may be experienced as one stage in the formalisation of an evolving union. The dominant norm often considers premarital cohabitation as a trial marriage. Thus in a survey of female household heads in several large towns in Cameroon (Tichit, 2002), one respondent, reconstituting the successive stages of her union, recounted her conjugal experience. After completing her studies and migrating to take up her first teaching job, at the age of 22 she met a young businessman from the same ethnic group as herself. They kept company for a year, without living together, before they decided to get married. For them, the first stage of formalising the union was a religious wedding before they moved in together. This first moral contract was quickly followed by a legal contract signed before a court of law, marking the second stage, the civil marriage. The first two events only marked the couple's own commitment, as they were far from their family environment and out of touch with it. But before envisaging a customary wedding, which would represent a commitment by their respective families, they wanted to test their new life as a couple and see whether they really got on together before starting to have children. The respondent explained that she became disappointed in her husband as she got to know him better, and particularly suffered from his refusal to contribute to the household's daily expenses. In the end the couple did not take the final formalisation steps and separated after living together for five years, after the husband had abandoned the conjugal home and taken up with another woman. For the respondent, the break-up was consummated three years later, when she asked for a divorce after meeting another man.

In light of the different landmarks in this couple's story and in their particular society, the customary wedding is still the main marker in the validation of a union. This also applies to citizens well integrated into modern urban life through their profession, educational level, income and matrimonial aspirations, even when they have migrated and can thus easily escape from the influence of their respective families.

6. STAGES CHOSEN, STAGES IMPOSED

6.1. Events imposed by family or social circle

Some arranged unions are imposed on the couple concerned. Is it possible to apply a scale to the forms of pressure put on individuals? How can the distinction between an individual's free choices and those imposed on them be recorded and analysed? It is important to obtain this information from respondents, although they may not want to talk about it. Questions about the parents' intervention (or lack of intervention) in the choice of a spouse, the existence or not of a kinship link with the spouse, open avenues that can be pursued in greater depth by asking the respondent how they experienced their entry into the union. Age at marriage is also often an indication: the earlier the marriage,

the more likely it is that the union was decided by the family without the person concerned having free choice in the matter.

Apart from choice of spouse, family control also affects reproduction, which in Africa is still the issue when a couple is formed. Any delay in the calendar of expected births causes problems within the couple and worries the family circle. At best, a woman's low fertility leads to the arrival of a new wife with the family's approval; at worst, it leads to divorce. In Togo, the wife's failure to produce children is the foremost cause of divorce (Thiriart, 1998).

Families may also apply pressure during the union. This can lead in some cases to polygamy, particularly in the case of levirate marriages, in which a widow remarries into her deceased husband's lineage. The purpose is to protect the dead man's widow and children. It is particularly common for women with many dependent children, but women are increasingly opposed to the practice.

The life course narratives collected from female household heads in Cameroon show that family pressure in the matter of choice of spouse favours ethnic endogamy (Tichit, 2002). Such pressure now competes with the increasing ethnic mixing and individualisation of social life paths in urban environments. A young migrant woman who keeps company with a colleague or fellow-student and then marries him is sooner or later confronted with hostility from her husband's family. Mixed unions can end in divorce when the social necessities of the kinship group require and the rebel son is reintegrated into a marital network more appropriate to community-based strategies. One extreme example, in the 1990s, was that of the (involuntary) heir to a chiefdom in western Cameroon, an established businessman and influential politician, who had to divorce his wife and disinherit his children to take the wives that custom prescribed. As a rule, it is when the individual success of a mixed union benefits the couple more than the family that the stability of the marriage is in greatest danger of family intervention.

6.2. Situations imposed by an event concerning the partner

Some situations people experience result from actions that are not of their choice, such as widowhood or an entirely unwanted divorce. It is always a delicate matter to analyse a retrospective declaration about the voluntary or imposed nature of a past situation, as the declaration can always be suspected of being a reinterpretation. A deliberate act by the respondent may be retrospectively declared as something that happened to them, especially if the situation was one of failure. In some societies, in Africa and in the West, a union may be imposed or at least felt to be unavoidable – for example in the case of premarital pregnancy²². This was the case in France until the late 1970s. The situation has greatly changed since then, with the decriminalisation of abortion and changes in the law regarding natural paternity. The situation even seems to be reversing: the arrival of a baby is increasingly thought to require a stable

²² Similarly, some arranged marriages are imposed on the couple from outside.

relationship between the potential parents (Boltanski, 2004). A major reason for voluntary abortion today is that the woman thinks the genitor is not a "possible father": the relationship is a casual one, or too recent, or the man does not have the qualities she would want for the father of her child (Bajos, Ferrand and the GINE group, 2002)²³.

In societies where it is practiced, polygamy can change a woman's situation without any event happening to her personally. Women do not always declare a polygamous union, either from ignorance or denial. Women particularly tend to assert their status as sole wife if they are having to live alone because their husband has migrated. In particular, if the migrant husband has a new live-in partner in the host country, the legitimate wife living apart spontaneously declares herself "sole wife" even though the situation is actually one of polygamy. In her eyes, this "omission" is justified because the other woman is not a legitimate wife. It is a declaration that saves face when the situation is experienced as unfair or humiliating. In a survey where quantitative data are gathered without insisting on the precise meaning of different terms, these women say they are "married with no co-wife". For them, it is not so much a lie as a way of rehabilitating their union. This type of declaration certainly leads to statistical underestimation of forms of polygamy without co-residence.

The triggering event always occurs on the husband's side. It is he who can decide whether to take a new wife. He may not inform his first wife of his intentions. Often, she finds herself confronted with a *fait accompli*. A wife in a monogamous marriage can thus find her marital status has changed without even her opinion being asked, although the change of situation concerns her as much as it does her husband. Under these conditions, identifying changes in men's marital status by questioning women has raised problems in some surveys. In the 1996 Yaoundé life course survey, in nearly 12% of unions²⁴, the women said they did not know whether or not there was another wife (Kouamé *et al.*, 1999). About a quarter of women in polygamous unions cannot date the moment when their husband took another wife. In Dakar, about 40% of women in polygamous marriages did not know (or said they did not know) the date their husband's union with the next wife had started (Antoine *et al.*, 2004).

Some local practices can provide markers for the effective moment of a change of state in the respondent's life course. In Dakar, when a husband takes a second wife he sends a group of friends to inform his first wife that he has just married another one. Their role is to persuade the first wife to accept the new one, by means of *surahs* and *hadiths* justifying polygamy. Or a husband may inform his wife himself after the wedding, so preventing any attempt to interrupt the union.

In these cases it is worth considering the moment of the emissaries' visit or when the husband presents his new wife to his first (if he does so), as markers of the start of polygamy. The date declared as the start of the polygamous

²³ See Chapter 3 on fertility issues.

²⁴ Out of about 700 unions declared by the women.

situation will be the moment when the first wife becomes aware of the existence of the second, and not the date of the second marriage as such.

A solution to the problem of the same event affecting more than one individual's event history would be to collect the event history of the couple. This would mean identifying changes of situation that do not imply personal events but are based on reconstituting comparative biographies. However, this method is of limited usefulness in areas of high conjugal mobility: how is the researcher to find the respondent's separated spouse (or spouses)? They are usually the ones for whom information is missing or deliberately withheld.

6.3. Anticipating an event

Marriage can also be anticipated. This is the case with couples who start a pregnancy in order to impose a union or hasten it. Such situations are frequent in countries where there is strong social pressure on marriage and the family is involved to a greater or lesser degree. Anticipation will then affect the relationship between fertility and marriage. In this precise case, it is the anticipation of marriage that leads to the pregnancy and not, as it is often tempting to assume, the reverse. The trend is quite the opposite in France, where contraceptive use is the norm (Bajos and Ferrand, 2004). Births must be planned and will only be welcome if material conditions are sufficiently good²⁵, and the institutional aspect of the union counts less than the material and emotional stability of the couple.

Anticipation is also a factor in separation. If an individual becomes aware that their union is approaching its end, they may put themselves on the marriage market again before the break-up is clearly established.

7. COMBINING THE QUANTITATIVE AND THE QUALITATIVE: COHERENCE WITH HINDSIGHT?

The method of switching to and fro between qualitative and quantitative approaches has largely proven its heuristic value. It is particularly effective for making comparisons with regard to changes of state.

It is from the "meaning" an individual gives their life course and, within that, the importance they put on certain changes of state or situation, that the researcher can construct in parallel a "model" with which to analyse the unfolding of events described by the questionnaire results. To correctly link²⁶ the two approaches the following factors must be taken into account.

- when organising data collection, think about the questionnaire and interview grid together to facilitate comparison and complementarity;

²⁵ See Chapter 3 on fertility issues.

²⁶ This works both ways: a qualitative survey is a very useful tool for defining the relevant markers for changes of state. By investigating a sub-sample from a quantitative survey in greater depth using a qualitative approach, the researcher can understand some behaviours better, or relativise them.

- make full use of the spaces allowed for qualitative or additional information in the quantitative questionnaires themselves;
- define the population sample allowing for over-representation of extreme or atypical cases (sample within sample, definition of models to calculate deviation from the norm);
- at the data processing stage, the quantitative data in the questionnaire must be read qualitatively and the qualitative interviews read quantitatively. For this, the data must be sufficiently numerous and the sample definition must have been statistically prepared.

This complementary approach to data about the same person sheds light on concurrences and simultaneous events. Below are some examples.

If both members of a couple are asked about their separation, the man's responses will not match the woman's exactly²⁷. Each will give their own view of the event as they experienced it. The situation is all the more difficult to analyse if, as sometimes happens, the two have different expectations. The case of Aïda, a Dakar divorcee, is revealing here (Dial, 2004). The information Aïda gave in the life course survey was that her union began in 1984 and that she divorced on her own initiative in 1994, taking formal divorce proceedings. In the interview, she confirmed that she had been married for ten years, from 1984 to 1994, but that the legal divorce had happened later. She said it had happened "seven years after the divorce, because that was the year [her] child started school, between 1997 and 1998". Here there is still some fuzziness, because 1998 is not seven years after 1994. Was 1994 the year her husband left her? She mentioned seven years several times – was she thinking of the time the relationship began to deteriorate, around 1990? She confirmed that her husband refused a divorce: "Up to now he has not said he agrees to a divorce. It was the divorce court that pronounced it". An examination of this interview shows that the responses in the life course survey to questions about the separation summarise the respondent's perceptions of the situation: in her view she was married for ten years, then obtained a legal divorce, for which no date is recorded in the life course survey. In four questions, the questionnaire obtains a fairly faithful summary of the perceived situation, but loses the extent of the fuzzy seven-year period around the divorce. Moreover, there remains a doubt in Aïda's mind about her divorcee status, since her husband has never granted her the divorce. Which counts more for her, the court or her husband? The husband, meanwhile, does not consider himself divorced.

The interview explains the reasons for the disagreement between the spouses. Following a dispute, for two years she refused to fulfil her conjugal duty despite her husband's repeated exhortations. This explains why he left one day without explanation, but refused to grant Aïda's request for a traditional divorce. Failing which, she opted for a legal divorce, and obtained it even though her husband never answered the court's summonses.

²⁷ This is also true for other events. Individual's memories are different, and gender-dependent.

While the life course survey puts dates on events in a person's life, it does not reveal the moment when the conjugal crisis began, or how these disturbances were experienced. The qualitative survey gives a better picture of how the union was experienced. In this way it is possible to find out what has motivated a woman to seek a divorce or to leave the conjugal home, and the reasons behind the husband's remarriage. With the qualitative survey, information can be revealed that the life course survey cannot record, and which the woman's answers do not necessarily reveal.

The story of Coumba Sow, another Dakar divorcee, is an example of fuzziness introduced by the respondent herself (Dial, 2006). The quantitative life course survey reconstructed the basic events of her history. Coumba Sow was married at the age of 18 in February 1981, to a student, Youssouf. Her first daughter was born in 1981. She had to end her high school studies in April 1982. She was divorced in December 1982. She remarried, to a man called Amadou, in April 1985, but continued to live with her mother and never moved in with her second husband. They are still married and have four more children. Since 1997 she has been working as a check-out assistant for a large Dakar company.

At the qualitative interview, she said nothing at all about her first marriage and said she was divorced from her (second) husband. She condensed the two marriages in to one, saying, "I married very young. I've had five children. I divorced in 1996, or rather 1994. (...) Then I worked as a check-out assistant for a year and then remarried". Her second husband, Amadou, is a rural development officer and only comes to Dakar at the end of each month. He wanted his wife to go and live with his parents in his home village, did not want to pay for her accountancy studies and did not want her to work. She had always refused to comply with his wishes. Although she did not explicitly say so, it seems her decision to divorce Amadou was taken in 1994. She says the decision to remarry was taken on the day of her second daughter's wedding: "On her wedding day, I felt bad because I had already divorced her father (Amadou). That's why I went back to her father". Later in the interview, one learns that "When I started the divorce proceedings, I wanted to marry another man but then I decided not to". As it turns out she has always remained married to Amadou because in her own terms "I gave up the idea (of divorce). It's the same (wedding) certificate that's still in my files". So there remains a very vague period in her conjugal life, between 1994 and 1998, where the fuzziness is accentuated by an aborted attempt to obtain a divorce, when she was having an affair with another man²⁸. This period is glossed over in the life course questionnaire, as there are no factual dates to pin it down. But throughout the interview, she said nothing about her marriage with Youssouf, the father of her first child, only hinting at it at the end of the interview, once the microphone has been switched off.

²⁸ She did not marry him because he wanted her to leave her five children to start a new life with him. She refused.

8. ARE MARITAL PROCESSES IN DIFFERENT SOCIETIES COMPARABLE?

The advantage of working in different societies with different social norms and traditions is that it highlights the specific local features of life course calendars, so that international comparisons can be refined by comparing the mechanisms and processes found in specific socio-historical situations. By identifying clearly-defined events one can measure social change within a society. But prudence is called for: the same word can cover different realities.

In some societies, in sub-Saharan Africa particularly, marriage is a crucial event in a person's life. It is a necessary step towards the social recognition they expect and seek and therefore an ideal to be attained at any price. This is no longer the case in many Western societies (Duchêne and Wanner, 2005). Societies differ on this point, but the differences often mask major similarities. While the norm in Senegal is for a woman of thirty to be married, in Western societies it is poor form for a woman of that age not to have a "boyfriend". The spectre of the single woman who fails in her love life because she is too independent has replaced the spectre of the old maid left on the shelf (Kaufmann, 2003). Although there has been some loss of interest in marriage in Europe, the couple has by no means lost its social and sentimental value. And the couple is required to be successful and fulfilling. Such exacting demands also explain the increasing number of break-ups and separations at an increasingly early stage. It seems better to leave a partner who doesn't suit and try to find the right one (Bozon, 2002).

In France, the de-institutionalisation of marriage crept onto the stage in disguise; for at least a decade it was called "juvenile cohabitation", until it seemed it was not as juvenile as all that, and such partnerships began to produce children (Ferrand, 2004). As this example shows, refining the information gathered has the advantage of revealing changes in the union formation process: first meeting, proposal of marriage, start of sexual relations, payment of the bride price, cohabitation, wedding ceremony. In Antananarivo, for example, the age when unions begin is not changing much, but they start, increasingly often, as informal unions (Antoine *et al.*, 2000).

To study the phenomenon of union formation in countries with very different traditions, especially if one aims to identify changes over time, one must identify the chain of social processes that have comparable implications in practices and representations. This is one of the difficulties in comparing marital dynamics in Dakar with those in Lomé. In Dakar, marriage is first and foremost a wedding ceremony at the mosque, whereas in Lomé there are several possible ways of starting a union. So any comparative analysis of the ways unions are formed in the two countries is a delicate matter. How can one compare indicators based on different types of information? One solution is to try to retain what seems to correspond to the dominant norm in each country, in this case taking the date of the each individual's perceived start of their union. In Dakar, marriage is still highly codified and consensual unions are not easily tolerated, so it is hardly surprising that the age at start of union is being

delayed more in Dakar than in Lomé, where a union may take any of various forms (Antoine and Dial, 2005; Béguy and Gbétoglo, 2005).

The “constraints” surrounding marriage may, in a quite different context, explain later marriage. Nukiro Tsuya and Larry Bumpass (2004) compare trends in age at marriage in Japan and the United States. They argue that the main reason why people marry later in Japan is that Japanese social standards require more from a marriage than is the case in the United States.

The importance of bride price payment as a marker of the state of progress in union formation in some African countries can be compared with the purchasing of home equipment in a consensual union in Europe. Jean-Claude Kaufmann (1999) considers the purchase of a washing machine as an event that expresses the shared desire to set up house together. What can be put in perspective in space and time is not so much the indicator itself as its social meaning and how it is linked to other indicators. As this example shows, one can consider comparing very different practices which have, each in its own society, a comparable significance.

The correct methodological position is thus to avoid focusing too closely on the details, as an excess of information can drown out the elements that are essential for understanding what is at stake in the change of state. A solution may also be to compare only things which it is sociologically meaningful to compare, i.e. societies with a minimum of shared societal features. This would mean, for example, identifying those societies in which the institution of marriage follows similar rules²⁹. Another solution is to find different indicators in the different societies, but which correspond to the attainment of a comparable status. Thus to someone who has hitherto been single and without a sexual partner, a long-lasting sexual relationship without cohabitation may represent the establishment of a conjugal relationship. Elsewhere, the start of conjugal life might require the same conditions but also some traditional, religious or civil ceremony to formalise it.

One of the main elements in the transformation of societies today is the challenging of gender inequality and asymmetry, to a greater or lesser extent depending on the society concerned. While in many part of Africa starting a union and having a child are for most women inseparable from the acquisition of a social status, this is not necessarily the case in Europe. There, the marker of passage into adult life is often the receipt of a certificate or diploma, or, even more, the attainment of financial independence. Coupledness and parenthood are still obligatory for acquiring status, but the calendar and the priorities are reversed.

One cannot compare countries where most children are born outside marriage with countries where everyone is meant to be married before conceiving a child. In these precise cases, it is better to compare the interval between the

²⁹ For example, societies where it is obligatory for a young woman to remain a virgin until she marries, by contrast with those where young women must already have proven their reproductive capacities.

start of the union and the birth of a child, even if that refers to very different social models in the two countries. As a rule, in countries where marriage is an essential element in adult status, the child is born very soon after the marriage, whereas in the others there may be a long gap between the start of the union and the birth of the couple's first child. In a country where birth has normally followed quickly on marriage, a prolongation of the interval between the two suggests a fundamental change in the marital model and norms.

CONCLUSION

The start of a union may involve numerous intermediate states or combinations, particularly concerning residential practices and different degrees of formalisation. In some societies, the status aspect of marriage is of greater importance than any other possible marker. In the Caribbean, for example, where the matrifocal family model is dominant (Charbit, 1987) and where consequently the man only stops by, the start of the union is identified by abstract criteria (Giraud *et al.*, 1994). Given the complexity of the in-between stages in some societies, the description of a "union" is based more on the idea the people concerned have of it. Women will define it according to the status conferred by being in a union (having a man, even if he's shared with other women).

It would be worthwhile to reflect on the idea of a "model" life course specific to each society, both in statistical terms (the most probable life course) and in terms of ideals (as codified in the society's institutional norms and incentives), for men and for women, and measure deviations from the norm. The difference between the theoretical life course and the practical life course could be partly resolved by statistically defining the deviation from the norm. This would mean first defining the norm from a coherent set of indicators. Once behaviours identified as atypical become predominant, one can speak of a transition or shift of model. For example, in France in the early 1970s, there was a shift from a situation where in most couples only the man "worked", to one where in most couples both spouses were economically active. Similarly, in African countries the need is to show the transformations taking place in some marital models and in representations of what a "couple" is. The increase in school attendance, for girls especially, does not only result in later marriage; it also changes representations of the choice of a spouse. And future spouses may see a woman's education either as additional capital or as a threat to the imperatives of male dominance and female submission and obedience.

In recent years, research into the formation and dissolution of conjugal unions has been focusing on processes. The spread of previously marginal forms of union in place of formal marriage has led researchers to adopt new approaches and to reveal new categories involving consensual union and cohabitation. However, Thomas Burch and Danièle Bélanger (1999) observe that even with life course surveys, researchers are still using the classic categories and discreet, directly observable events. They suggest researchers should be more daring and explore the whole process involved in a union, including extra-marital unions, and all behaviours, including those that are

taboo. To this end they invite researchers to better combine the quantitative and qualitative approaches.

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Antoine Philippe, Adjamagbo Agnès, Amétépé F., Béguy D., Dial Fatou, Ferrand M., Tichit C. (2009).

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ISBN 978-2-7332-6006-7. ISSN 1625-7936.