

MORE SINGLE WOMEN IN AFRICAN CITIES: PIKINE, ABIDJAN AND BRAZZAVILLE

Radical changes in demographic and social behaviour have started to appear in recent years in African cities. These are affecting the marriage market. Although most women still marry young in Africa, the mean age at first marriage is gradually increasing.

This evolution towards later marriage is linked to schooling, but changes are also emerging among women who have not attended school. The 'single' state covers a variety of forms of behaviour. Philippe ANTOINE and Jeanne NANITE-LAMIO** show that the growing proportions of single women are not merely the result of marriage postponement, but a sign of more in-depth changes which are transforming African urban societies.*

The demographic and social behaviour of Africa's urban populations is undergoing a transition. The capitals have expanded at a dizzy rate. Dakar grew from 230,000 inhabitants in 1955 to over 1,500,000 in 1988, while Abidjan increased 15-fold, from 128,000 to more than 2,000,000; between 1951 and 1984, Brazzaville expanded from 75,000 to 595,000 inhabitants. Such a context was favourable to rapid social change.

On this backcloth, new patterns of marital behaviour are emerging. Although in most African countries, women generally marry early, mean age at first marriage is increasing in the cities, and so women are single for longer. This stage, which takes place in an environment where the family rein is slackened, affords an opportunity for a new experience: adolescence. Previously, early marriage meant that women left childhood to become wives and mothers directly. This transitional stage gives them breathing space for a new personality to emerge and assert itself, which bears consequences for their present and future behaviour.

Three capitals, Pikine, Abidjan and Brazzaville, illustrate the change in attitudes towards marriage and celibacy. The definition and concept of celibacy differs from one city to another, for cultural, sociological and

* Demographer, ORSTOM, B.P. 1386, Dakar-Hann, Senegal.

** Psycho-sociologist, IFAN/CAD, B.P. 206, Dakar, Senegal.

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religious reasons. To throw light on the diversity of situations, we shall refer to studies conducted in Abidjan (Antoine and Herry, 1982), Brazzaville (Nanitelamio, 1982; 1987) and Dakar-Pikine (Antoine and Diouf, 1988, 1989; Nanitelamio *et al.*, 1988)⁽¹⁾.

Celibacy and the marriage market

Statistics of demographic events do not always accurately reflect current social practices. In Africa, as elsewhere, the categories traditionally used to collect information on nuptiality are proving increasingly inadequate to describe societies in which traditional forms of marriage mix with 'westernized' behaviours and in which new types of man-woman relationships are evolving. As early as 1973, van de Walle stressed the drawbacks of rigid methods of data collection which did not take into account the great variety of unions encountered in African cities.

This criticism applies to the study of celibacy. The existence of several reference systems in Africa means that an individual may consider himself single or married, depending on the system to which he refers. He/she may be married in the eyes of his/her family group, if a traditional or religious ceremony has taken place, but will still be single in the eyes of society at large if "the papers have not been filled in". The term 'single' seems to be essentially linked to civil registration. But in most cities, only wage-earners are concerned by civil registration and the need for administrative documents. In Dakar, for instance, only one-third of unions in 1971 were officially recorded (Ferry, 1977).

How are we to define the 'single' person in this context? Strictly, in administrative terms: anyone not legally married? Or according to the perceptions of the different parties involved? Or on the basis of all these elements? We can see how imprecise the concept is, and the difficulties of employing it in a society where the single state has so many different facets. This lack of precision affects the accuracy of the data, since celibacy may be measured differently from one operation to another, depending on the definition adopted (*de jure, de facto...*). However, these shortcomings cannot be avoided, since to study growing female celibacy in African cities, we have to refer to the existing data.

To analyse marriage patterns, spouse choice must be examined. Henry (1972) has shown that marriage is the outcome of encounters within 'circles' of potential spouses. But most of the models used in this demonstration are based on monogamous societies in which spouse choice is rela-

(1) This paper is a developed version of one presented at the IUSSP Seminar on Nuptiality in sub-Saharan Africa in Saint-Lambert-des-Bois (Paris), 14-17 November 1988. It has been limited to single women, since we consider that women's behaviour is revealing of the changes under way in African urban societies. We gratefully acknowledge T. Locoh's critical remarks.

tively free. In Africa, strict social rules may govern the marriage market, and in this case spouse choice is very limited, or even non-existent. The age of entry into the marriage market varies with the prevailing social and legal constraints.

Two features continue to characterize the marriage market in Africa:

— the influence of kin groups in spouse choice, in particular for first marriages;

— polygyny, which means that any married man continues to be a potential spouse.

Urbanization has broadened the marriage market, but it remains very segmented, either because of ethnic or caste stratification, level of education, or urban social fragmentation. Since the never-married are the principal actors on the marriage market, a study of their behaviour will throw light on the distortions which are emerging. We shall focus our analysis on three different markets: the first, in Pikine, Senegal, is branded by Muslim traditions; the second, in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, is diversified by a strong inflow of migrants from other parts of the country and from all over West Africa; the third, in Brazzaville, Congo, is diversified like the latter, and in addition has a 'fragmented' aspect which contrasts with the situation in Pikine.

Pikine: later marriage

Pikine, which forms the suburbs of Dakar, has a population of over 600,000, roughly half the total population of the conglomeration of Dakar. Most Pikinese are illiterate Muslims; the extended family persists, and many of the heads of household are elderly.

In this suburb, where social behaviour seems to be still very traditional, changes in nuptiality can be observed between 1966 and 1986 (Figure 1). The proportions single are gradually increasing among younger women. However, the rise is small compared with Dakar, and even more so compared with the city centre Plateau district (Figure 2). At ages 20-24, for instance, at the census of 1976, there were 21.7 % of single women in Pikine, 44 % in Dakar and 53 % in the Plateau district alone. Suburban women do not have the same cultural norms or life style as those living in the city centre. This has already been illustrated by A.B. Diop (1982), who showed that, in the city centre, the proportion of single women at age 20 was high even among uneducated women.

The proportions of single men, on the other hand, are very similar for Dakar and its suburb (Figure 3). Diachronically, however, we observe that between 1966 (Lacombe, 1970) and 1986, the proportion of single men aged 30-34 has risen from 18 % to 27 % in Pikine. Does this reflect the evolution of the dowry system, as suggested, for instance, by N. Diop

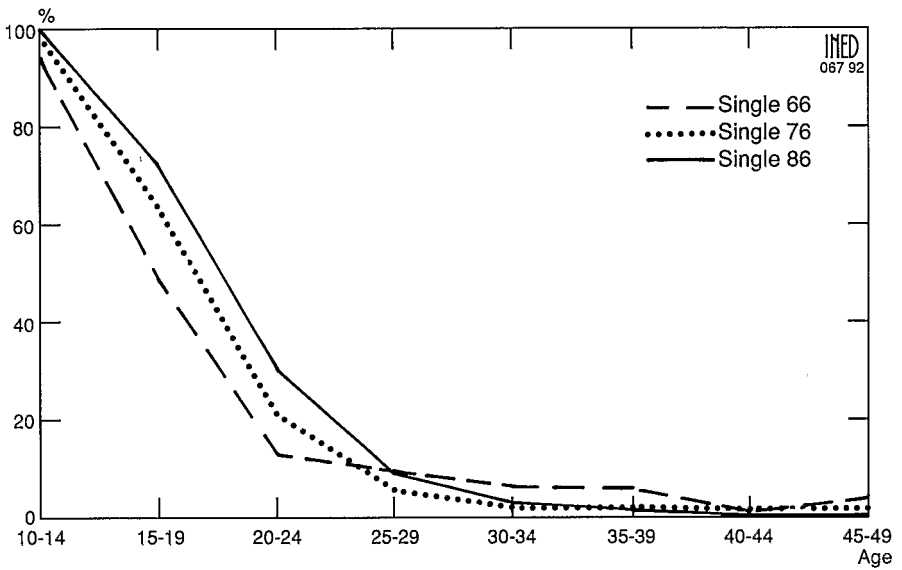


Figure 1. — Proportions of single women, Pikine, 1966-1976-1986

Sources: Pikine 1966 — Lacombe, 1970; Pikine 1976 — National population census, Direction de la Statistique, Senegal; Pikine 1986 — Antoine and Diouf, 1988.

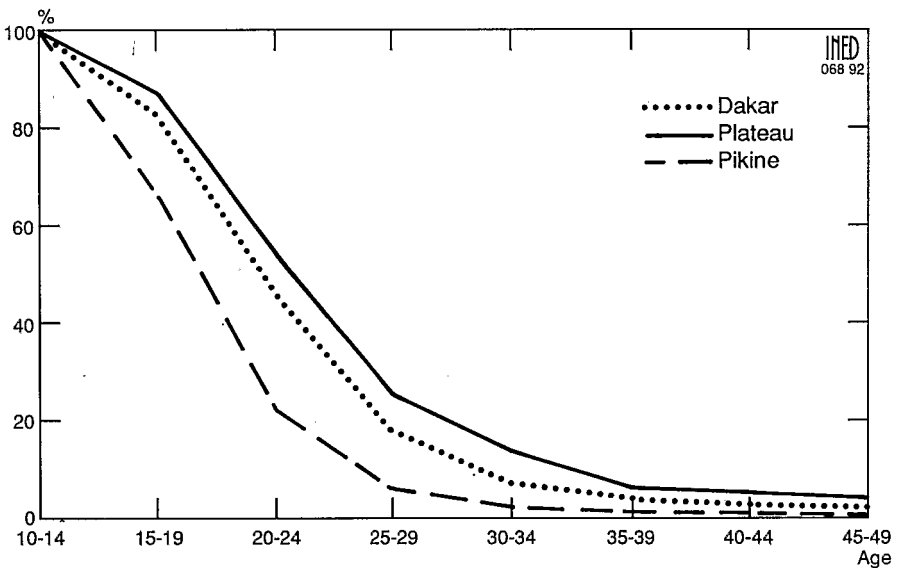


Figure 2. — Proportions of single women, Dakar and Pikine, 1976

Source: National population census, Direction de la Statistique, Senegal.

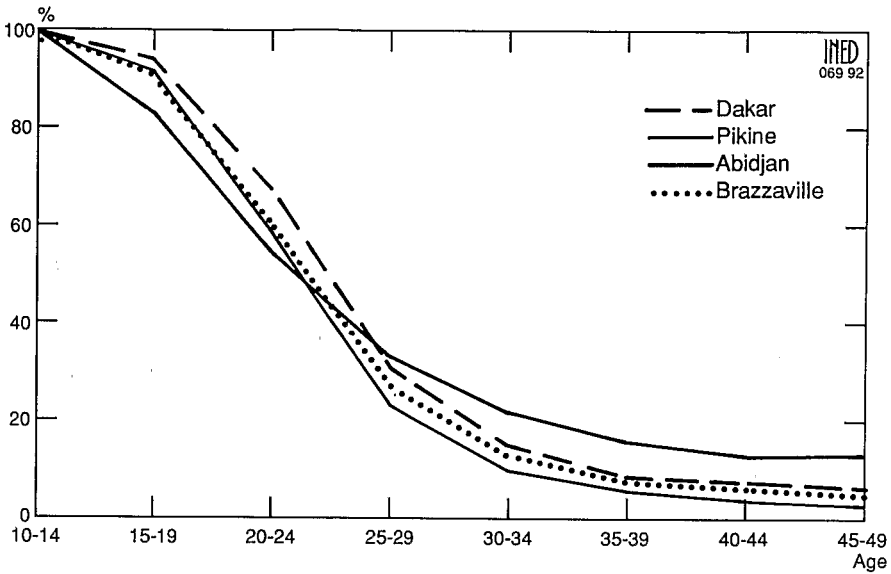


Figure 3. — Proportions of single men, Dakar and Pikine (1976), Abidjan (1975) and Brazzaville (1984)

Sources: Dakar — National population census, Direction de la Statistique, Senegal; Abidjan — National population census, Direction de la Statistique, Côte d'Ivoire; Brazzaville — National population census, Direction de la Statistique, Congo.

(1987)? According to her, "girls become a source of income for their fathers, and this monetary compensation makes it difficult for the young people to marry". This explanation (which is often put forward), does not seem satisfactory, since even if bridewealth is increasing, the father only receives a very small part of the sum⁽²⁾. It seems more plausible to explain later marriage by the material difficulties (employment, housing...) of founding a family (see A.B. Diop, *op. cit.*).

A finer analysis at the cohort level shows substantial changes in female celibacy in Pikine, or, more precisely, a change in marriage timing. The median age at first marriage rises from 16.38 years for women born in 1937-41 to 16.83 in 1947-51 and 18.17 in 1957-61. The proportions married decrease regularly over the cohorts (Figure 4a). In the space of 30 years, the proportion married by age 18 has fallen by half. Schooling levels have increased at the same time: 42 % of women aged 15-19 have attended school — a third of them to secondary level — compared with only 12.5 % of those aged 40-44. This factor strongly influences age at first marriage and marriage patterns. We therefore distinguish two groups of

⁽²⁾ Substantial money transactions circulate around the bride-to-be and her mother at the time of the wedding (Niang, M., 1973).

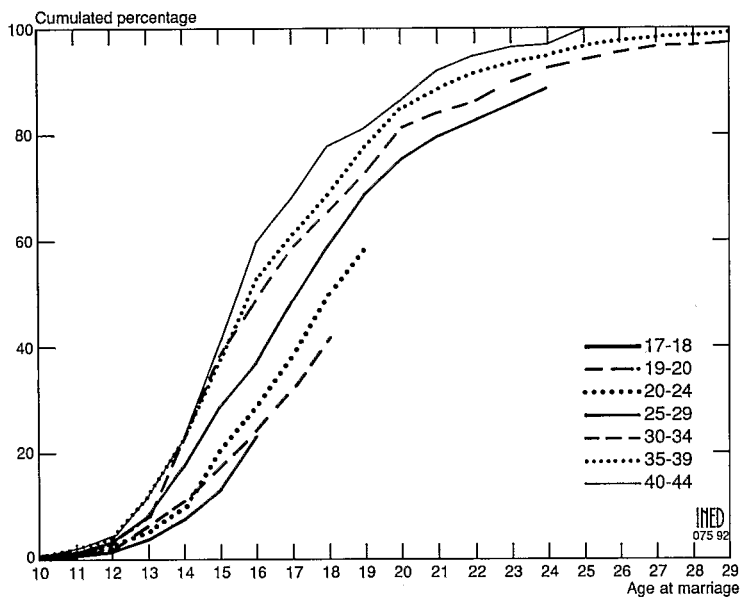


Figure 4a. – Age at first marriage, Pikine, 1986

Source: Antoine and Diouf, 1988.

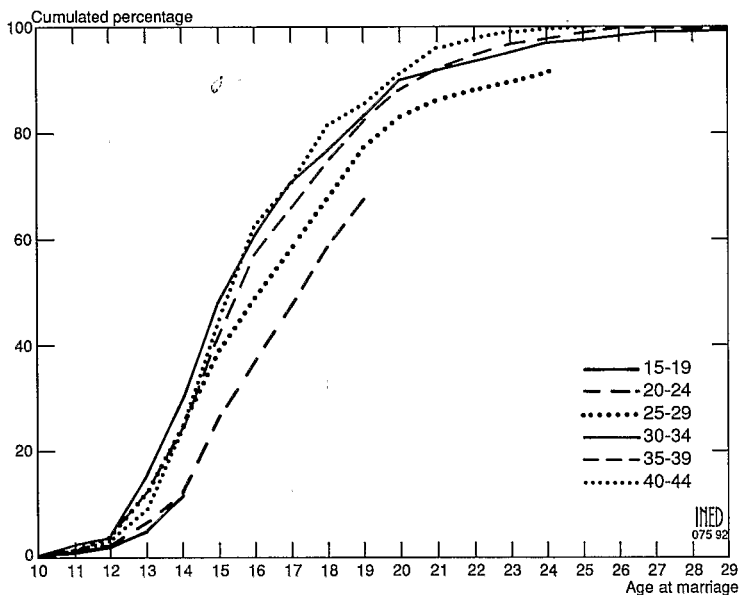


Figure 4b. – Age at first marriage – women who have not attended school, Pikine, 1986

Source: Antoine and Diouf, 1988.

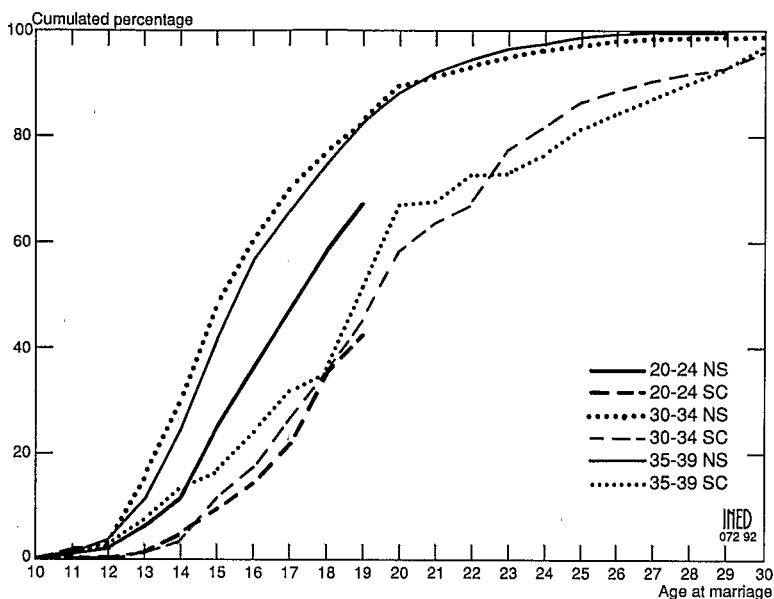


Figure 4c. – Age at first marriage – women who have (SC) and have not (NS) attended school, Pikine, 1986

Source: Antoine and Diouf, 1988.

women, those who have not attended school and those who have (we could not break the latter down any further because of low numbers). The proportions single are seen to be higher among literate women (Table 1). We now examine cohort changes in these two sub-groups.

Among women who have not attended school, a change begins to emerge at ages 25-29, that is, women born between 1956 and 1960, and the following cohorts marry later and later (Figure 4b). The behaviour of the older cohorts is strikingly stable.

When we distinguish women who have and have not attended school, other changes come to light (Figure 4c). Literate women, even those born between 1946 and 1950, have married later than those who are not. But a new trend towards slightly later marriage is also emerging among young women who have not been to school. Is this simply the result of legislation (legal marrying age is now 18 years) or does it express the wish to choose, a choice which is made more difficult by the economic conditions?

Gradually, a new conception of marriage is emerging. During the 1960s (Thore, 1964), first marriages were frequently arranged without the future bride being consulted; but after this first marriage, a woman gained independence from her parents (Table 2), and in her relationships with

TABLE 1. — MARITAL STATUS OF WOMEN WHO HAVE AND HAVE NOT ATTENDED SCHOOL, PIKINE, 1986 (PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION)

Age group	Marital status					Total numbers
	Single	Monogamous marriage	Polygynous marriage	Divorcee	Widow	
<i>15-19</i>						
Total	71.9	20.6	6.2	1.2	0.1	694
No schooling	62.1	26.9	9.2	1.5	0.2	402
Schooling	85.5	12.0	2.1	0.7	—	294
<i>20-24</i>						
Total	30.0	49.6	16.7	3.6	0.2	611
No schooling	23.7	52.1	20.6	3.4	0.3	388
Schooling	40.8	45.3	9.9	4.0	—	223
<i>25-29</i>						
Total	9.4	50.3	33.3	6.6	0.4	519
No schooling	7.3	48.6	39.4	4.3	0.3	327
Schooling	13.0	53.1	22.9	10.4	0.5	192
<i>30-34</i>						
Total	1.9	43.6	44.7	8.4	1.4	366
No schooling	1.1	45.2	46.3	5.9	1.5	270
Schooling	4.2	39.6	40.6	14.6	1.0	96
<i>35-39</i>						
Total	1.1	38.2	55.1	4.1	1.5	267
No schooling	0	37.4	57.8	3.0	1.7	230
Schooling	8.1	43.2	37.8	10.8	—	37
<i>40-44</i>						
Total	0.5	40.2	48.9	4.9	5.4	184
No schooling	0.6	42.2	46.6	4.3	6.2	161
Schooling	0	26.1	65.2	8.7	—	23
<i>45-49</i>						
Total	0.8	30.0	58.5	1.5	8.5	129

Source: Antoine and Diouf, 1988.

men⁽³⁾. In the past, domestic activities and the group's traditions confined young women within the family circle and left little opportunity for outside encounters. Nowadays more free to come and go, they have more say in the choice of their spouse. B. Ferry's study on Dakar (Ferry, 1977) has confirmed that personal choice is becoming more frequent. In 1971, 64 % of women born between 1942 and 1946 had chosen their husband themselves, compared with 30 % of women born between 1917 and 1921.

The emergence of a relative independence can be illustrated by comparing ages at first marriage and at first birth for women aged 20-24 and 40-44 in 1986 (Figure 5). Among the younger women, first birth occurs shortly after first marriage, indicating that some marriages were the result

⁽³⁾ A married or divorced woman is much freer in word and action than a young girl. A divorcee can thus be courted more easily.

TABLE 2. - SPOUSE CHOICE, PIKINE, 1960 (%)

Type of marriage	1st marriage	2nd marriage	3rd marriage
Woman not consulted	59	11	0
Woman consulted	34	48	18
Free choice	7	41	82

Source: Thore, 1964.

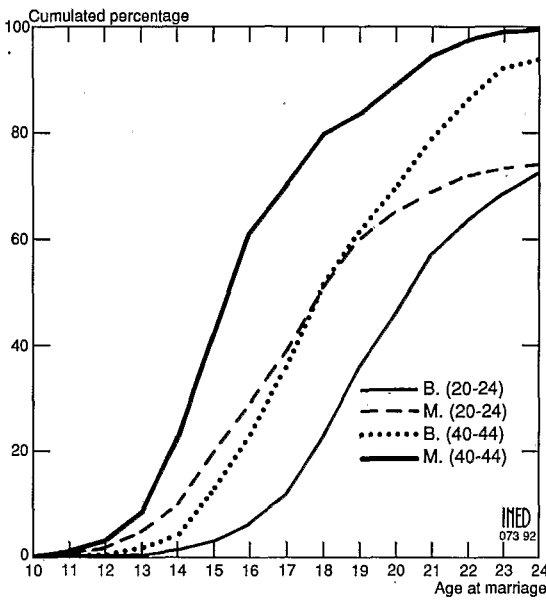


Figure 5. - Age at first marriage (M) and at first birth (B), women aged 20-24 and 40-44, Pikine, 1986

Source: Antoine and Diouf, 1988.

of premarital conceptions. These aggregate results cover a variety of situations, as can be seen from Table 3.

A cohortwise increase can be seen in the proportion of first births occurring outside marriage: from 1 % among women aged 30-35 it rises to 12.5 % for those aged 15-19. When the number of first births to unmarried mothers is divided by the number of women in each cohort, the frequency is seen to be 2.5 % among teenagers (15-19), compared with 0.3 % among women aged 35-39. The proportion of women already married at the age of 19 has decreased in recent years, leaving more scope

TABLE 3. — DISTRIBUTION OF WOMEN BY SCHOOLING LEVEL AND MARITAL STATUS AT TIME OF FIRST BIRTH, PIKINE (%)

Age group	Unmarried mother*	Birth before marriage	Birth year of marriage	Birth after marriage	Numbers	% women married by age 19
<i>15-19</i>						
Total	12.5	3.7	13.2	70.6	136	
No schooling	13.5	2.9	10.6	73.1	104	
Primary educ.	17.6	11.8	17.6	52.9	17	
<i>20-24</i>						
Total	8.0	6.9	7.6	77.5	435	58
No schooling	6.1	4.8	5.5	83.6	393	
Primary educ.	12.7	12.7	8.9	65.8	79	
25-29	2.8	5.2	11.1	80.6	459	68.2
30-34	0.3	1.1	8.5	89.7	351	72.6
35-39	0.4	2.0	6.6	90.6	256	77.8
40-44		1.1	3.9	95.0	180	81.0
45-49			3.3	96.7	123	80.7
* Unmarried mothers who did not later marry the child's father. Source: Antoine and Diouf, 1988.						

for premarital sexual relations. The transition is more limited than in other African cities (see below), but its emergence over the last 15 years shows that profound changes are occurring in a society which is still strongly marked by traditions forbidding premarital intercourse⁽⁴⁾.

In Pikine, society is on the move, but women's independence cannot, as yet, stretch so far as to allow them to remain single. Women necessarily marry, and maternity continues to be closely linked to marriage.

Abidjan: a range of marital strategies

Abidjan is a very cosmopolitan city, a catch basin for migration streams from all of West Africa. In 1985, Abidjan counted 1,625,000 inhabitants, 100,000 living in residential housing, 375,000 in modern economic housing, 920,000 in 'yards' and 230,000 in shanty housing. Tenancy is the most common form of tenure in all these categories, reflecting the widespread instability of the urban population (Antoine, Dubresson and Manou-Savina, 1987). The most privileged socio-occupational categories live in residential housing, while salaried workers in

(4) Early marriage made it all the easier to respect this interdict.

the tertiary sector and skilled workers occupy modern economic housing. Evolutive housing, commonly known as 'yards', comprises several dwellings and life is organized on a community basis; this is home to a very heterogeneous population, both socially and culturally. Shanties are the lot of a largely foreign and illiterate population in precarious employment.

Table 4 and Figure 6 show the high proportions of single women aged 20-24 in the upper and middle classes (55 % and 40 % respectively). This contrasts with the early marriage widespread among shanty dwellers; mostly non-nationals, these young women come to join their husbands in the city, which accounts for the high proportion of married teenagers (15-19). Considered globally, there is a clear evolution towards later marriage between the censuses of 1955 and 1975 (Figure 7). The pattern is very different from that of Dakar-Pikine: in Abidjan, the proportion of single women levels off at ages 20-24 in 1975, and more women remain single above that age (Figure 7); more men are also single above age 30, because of large-scale immigration of foreign workers (Figure 3).

Schooling level and type of housing are closely linked, as we can see from Table 4. At ages 20-24, 55 % of women living in residential housing have reached a secondary school level of grade 3 and above, compared with none of those living in shanties.

TABLE 4. - WOMEN'S CHARACTERISTICS BY TYPE OF HOUSING, ABIDJAN, 1978

Women's characteristics	Type of housing			
	Residential	Modern economic	Evolutive	Shanty
Proportion single among women aged 20-24	55 %	40 %	21 %	15 %
Proportion of women aged 40+ not in union	21 %	34 %	33 %	25 %
Proportion of female heads of household	15 %	12 %	10 %	11 %
Proportion of women aged 20-24 with secondary education grade 3+	30 %	10 %	1 %	0 %
Proportion of girls aged 15-17 attending school	55 %	33 %	22 %	4 %
Average parities	2.89	5.07	5.71	7.88
Mean age at first marriage (years)	23.7	21.7	19.5	17.7

Source: Antoine and Herry, 1982.

MORE SINGLE WOMEN IN AFRICAN CITIES

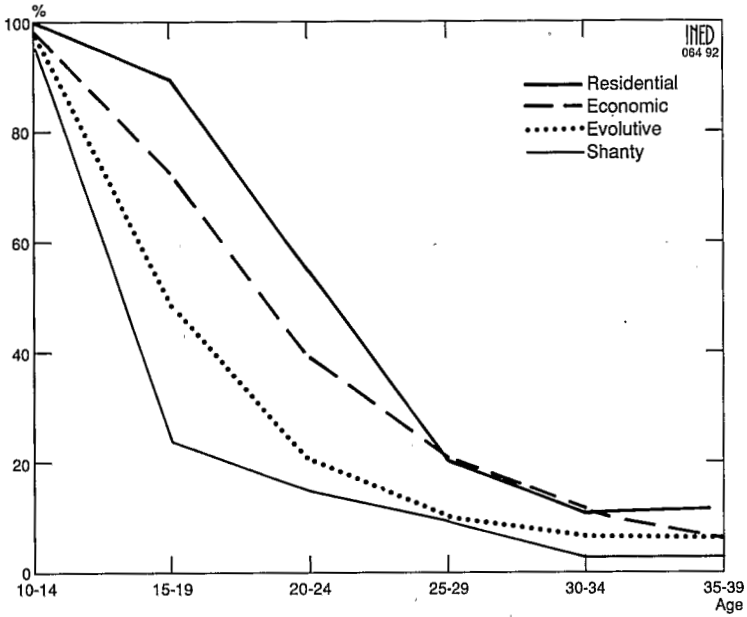


Figure 6. - Proportion of single women by type of housing, Abidjan, 1978

Source: Antoine and Herry, 1982.

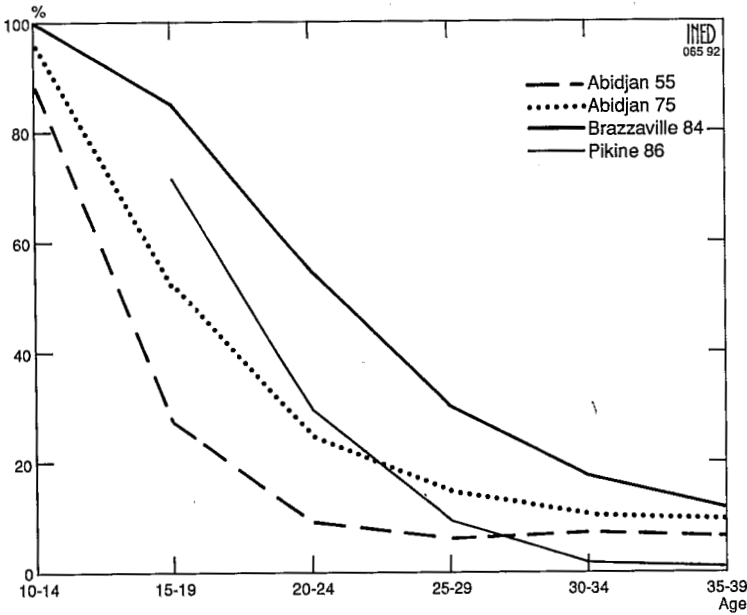


Figure 7. - Proportions of single women, Abidjan, Brazzaville and Pikine

Sources: Census of Abidjan 1955 and National population census of 1975 - Direction de la Statistique, Côte d'Ivoire; Brazzaville 1984 - National population census, Direction de la Statistique, Congo; Pikine 1986 - Antoine and Diouf, 1988.

For some men, spouse choice is still largely governed by tradition and is more rarely a matter of personal choice. In general, they prefer to marry down intellectually: the woman is generally much less educated than her husband, except when he has reached grade 3. In the middle classes, educated women are not always first choice as potential wives.

With the economic crisis, more and more 'uneducated' women who are unmarried mothers are continuing to live with their parents⁽⁵⁾. According to M. Le Pape (1986), this situation is spreading: young uneducated couples do not marry, but have children and continue to live apart, at their parents' homes. The desire for independence comes up against the harsh realities of life. Without a job, how can they find a home of their own, with rising rents and housing further and further out from the city centre? In Abidjan, urbanization is supposed to serve as a vehicle for the European family model, but the effects observed are the opposite of those expected.

Even those young women who have had no or very little schooling, and come from shanty-house families on which Muslim traditions lay most heavily, are no longer ready to marry against their will and are less and less in a hurry to find a husband. Young men from their own social class are not their idea of a good catch, but, as A. Bonnassieux (1987) points out, they are on a tightrope, because the longer they wait to marry, the more chance there is that their parents will interfere in their choice. But they are not ready either to 'go on out there', since their education has not prepared them for living independent lives, like migrants from Togo and Benin. They are torn between their culture and the more permissive urban models.

Population statistics mask an important aspect of society in Abidjan: the 'mistresses'. This practice is common in all walks of life; what differs is the nature and the value of the presents they receive. Many young women are 'helped' by a man, who is frequently married (a 'sugar daddy'), but they know that their more independent behaviour does not pave the way to marriage. The man prefers to marry someone from his own village who will be easier to handle, and perhaps keep this woman as a mistress. This unbalances the marriage market: some of the city dwellers choose a wife from the country, but leave her there. In part as a result of the distorted sex ratio, a strong demand for 'sexual' company thus emerges, from single men (who marry on average at the age of 27), married men whose wives do not live with them, and married men looking for an outside relationship. Moreover, the fact that some women are tempted by a new way of life leads them to enter into unions other than marriage. These new unions are informal, in that they are confirmed by none of the recognized marital rites, whether religious, traditional or civil.

⁽⁵⁾ By 'uneducated', we mean those who have not obtained even the lowest grade at school.

Brazzaville: the gradual separation of marriage and maternity

The population of Brazzaville amounted to 595,000 inhabitants in 1984, roughly one-third of the total population of the Congo. School enrolment is currently very high (90 %) for both boys and girls. First marriage is occurring later and later: in 1961, 13 % of women aged 20-24 were still single, while this proportion rose to 33 % in 1974 and 52 % in 1984. Single women are socially well accepted, and the propensity to live alone (observed by Balandier as early as 1955) has grown rapidly. Young unmarried women do not hesitate to rent an independent dwelling when they start working.

The proportions of single women are therefore much higher in Brazzaville than in Abidjan and Pikine (Figure 7). Up to age 40, they are highest among the more educated women (Table 5 and Figure 8). The behaviour of the lesser educated women (first grade of primary school) does not diverge from that of all rural women until after age 35. The proportions never married are also high (8 % of women aged 40 and above). Over

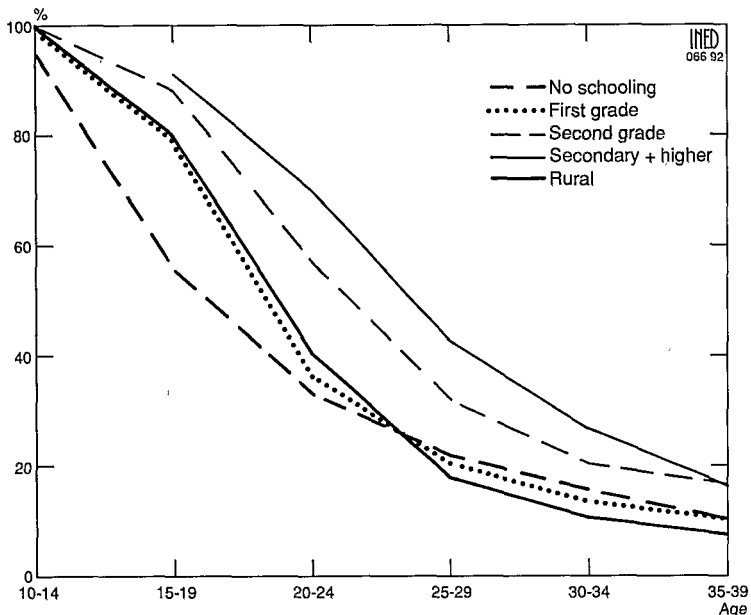


Figure 8. - Proportion of single women by schooling level, Brazzaville, 1984

Source: National population census, Direction de la Statistique, Congo.

TABLE 5. — MARITAL STATUS AND SCHOOLING LEVEL, BRAZZAVILLE, 1984
(PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION)

Schooling level	Marital status				
	Single	Married	Divorcee	Widow	Total numbers
<i>15-19</i>	<i>84.4</i>	<i>15.0</i>	<i>0.5</i>	<i>0.1</i>	<i>27 170</i>
No schooling	53.6	42.6	1.7	2.1	1 434
Primary	85.9	13.7	0.4	—	24 464
Secondary and higher	90.7	8.9	0.4	—	1 272
<i>20-24</i>	<i>52.0</i>	<i>45.9</i>	<i>1.9</i>	<i>0.2</i>	<i>28 527</i>
No schooling	30.9	65.9	2.3	1.0	3 271
Primary	50.3	47.3	2.2	0.1	18 808
Secondary and higher	67.6	31.4	0.9	0.1	6 448
<i>25-29</i>	<i>28.6</i>	<i>65.2</i>	<i>5.5</i>	<i>0.7</i>	<i>22 821</i>
No schooling	20.2	72.8	5.5	1.0	4 548
Primary	26.6	66.5	6.3	0.5	12 837
Secondary and higher	40.3	55.8	3.5	0.4	5 436
<i>30-34</i>	<i>16.7</i>	<i>71.9</i>	<i>9.7</i>	<i>1.7</i>	<i>15 714</i>
No schooling	14.4	73.5	9.6	2.0	4 704
Primary	16.1	72.2	10.3	1.4	9 194
Secondary and higher	25.9	66.5	7.0	0.6	1 816
<i>35-39</i>	<i>10.8</i>	<i>70.6</i>	<i>14.7</i>	<i>3.9</i>	<i>11 510</i>
No schooling	9.7	71.8	13.8	4.6	6 058
Primary	11.8	69.3	15.6	3.2	4 915
Secondary and higher	14.9	67.4	16.2	1.5	537
<i>40-44</i>	<i>8.3</i>	<i>68.9</i>	<i>16.8</i>	<i>6.0</i>	<i>7 920</i>
No schooling	8.0	70.5	15.1	6.3	5 572
Primary	9.2	64.3	21.0	5.4	2 178
Secondary and higher	8.2	74.1	15.3	2.3	170
<i>45-49</i>	<i>8.4</i>	<i>63.2</i>	<i>18.4</i>	<i>10.0</i>	<i>6 991</i>
No schooling	8.1	63.8	17.5	10.6	5 482
Primary	9.9	58.5	22.9	8.7	1 373
Secondary and higher	4.4	85.3	8.1	2.2	136

Source: Based on Table 809 of RGPH 84 (Congo).

70 % of women are married, and many are divorcees above the age of 35, particularly those with primary education.

In contrast, the proportions of single men do not differ much from the other two capitals; the curves more or less merge for Brazzaville and Dakar (Figure 3), suggesting a smaller husband-wife age gap in the former.

A striking feature in Brazzaville is the social tolerance of extra-marital births. The mean number of children per single woman is high: 1.5 at

ages 25-29, compared with 3 children per married woman (Figure 9). Among single and married women alike, parities are lowest when schooling level is highest. The correlation observed elsewhere between a low grade of education and the highest relative fertility is confirmed (Figure 10). At ages 15-19, on the other hand, the girls with no schooling at all are those most exposed to the risk of teenage pregnancy.

In this society, the transition has been more rapid, since it was not necessary to throw off the weight of religious or patriarchal authority. The political changes which have occurred since 1963 have eroded the authority of the elders and given greater autonomy to the young (Colonna, Lacombe and Boungou, 1985). In Brazzaville, schoolgirl pregnancies have increased but, in contrast with other countries (under the pressure of women's groups, in particular), these girls are allowed to stay on at school. In 1984, 42 % of births registered for teenage mothers (15-19) concerned schoolgirls, and 22 % of mothers in the 20-24 age group were schoolgirls or students. According to the last census, half of women aged 15-19 who reported a birth in 1984 were unmarried, and one-quarter of those aged 20-24.

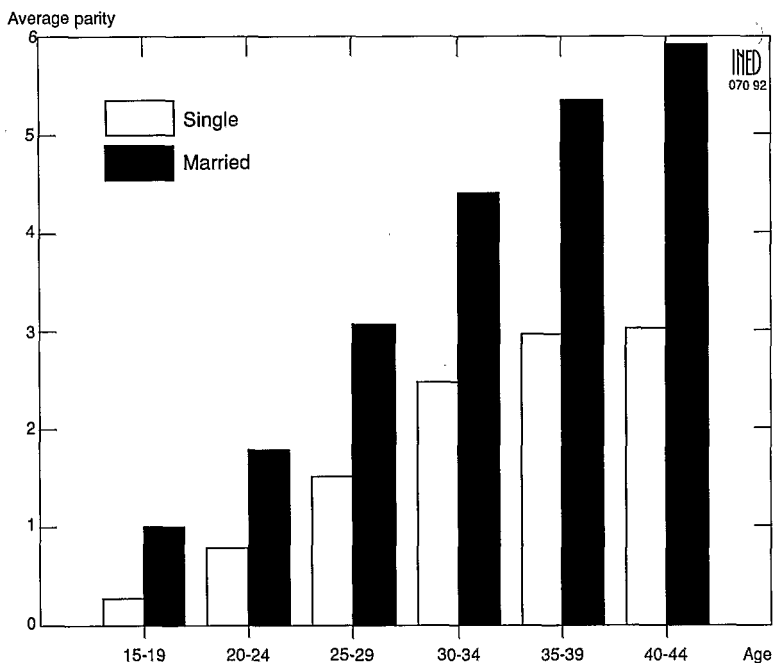


Figure 9. – Average parities by mother's age and marital status, Brazzaville, 1984

Source: National population census, Direction de la Statistique, Congo.

This extreme tolerance of extra-marital childbirth is encouraged by the dominant ideology, which is strongly pro-natalist, as would be expected in a country as underpopulated as the Congo. Furthermore, shrinking lineages and the growing unpopularity of marriage have made fertility a matter of urgent concern. Urban behaviour has rapidly become very permissive; sexual experiences outside marriage are, as in other Central African countries, more ostentatious, whether they are passing encounters or more lasting relationships of the 'deuxième bureau'⁽⁶⁾ type. The pathway leading to marriage has grown considerably longer, and may comprise several stages: consensual union, 'engagement' with or without children, traditional marriage, civil marriage. In reality, all these 'in-between' situations are so many ways out of celibacy and into maternity; maternity is thus increasingly dissociated from marriage. Another consequence of this behaviour is the existence of new forms of union alongside marriage. The

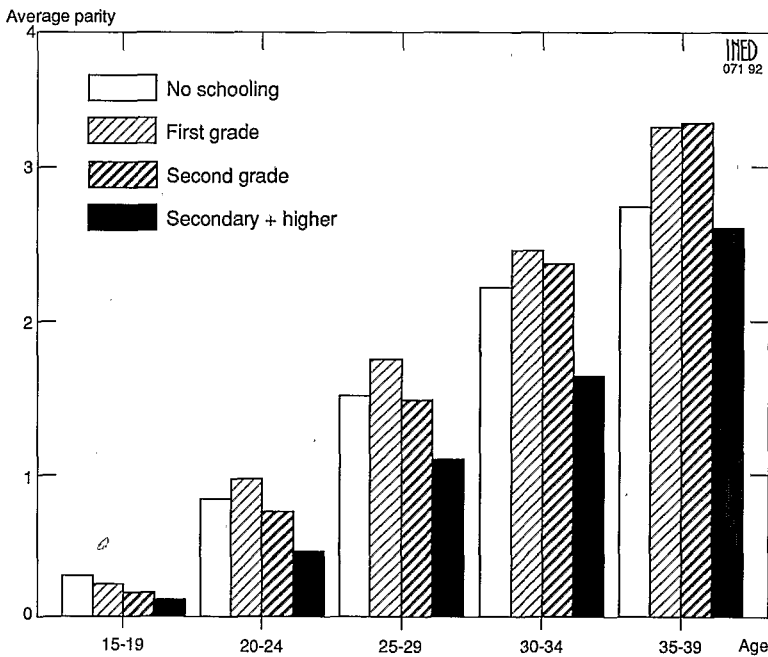


Figure 10. – Fertility of single mothers by schooling level, Brazzaville, 1984

Source: National population census, Direction de la Statistique, Congo.

⁽⁶⁾ Translator's note: 'Deuxième bureau' (often rendered by 'outside wives' in English) is an expression which originated in Central Africa and has spread throughout Western Africa. It refers to a specific type of regular extramarital relationship. See Lacombe, 1988.

women living in such informal unions have an acknowledged status, both as individuals and within their group, particularly when their partner "does everything a husband should".

The different faces of the single woman

The examples of Abidjan and Brazzaville demonstrate the co-existence of two markets, a marriage market and a 'sexual' one. Access to one or the other implies, for both men and women, specific strategies. This may lead to confusion: some women see in the sexual market a way into the marriage market. Men may foster this illusion, since sexual experiences still need to be justified (by a promise of marriage, in the case of men) or fructified, in the case of women, by money, children or marriage. Alongside the marriage market, there is therefore room for a market that we have called 'sexual' (Antoine and Nanitelamio, 1988), which covers all kinds of sexual relations, both physical and affective, occurring outside marriage. Depending on the society, the sexual market may be a way of waiting for marriage, or an 'honourable' way of escaping celibacy. In function of age and other characteristics (schooling, social background, urban residence, physique), women will follow different routes across these two markets in the course of their lives. In this context, age is seen to be a particularly discriminating variable.

Situated somewhere on the outskirts of the marriage market and the labour market, the role of the sexual market is becoming increasingly important in urban life. Although prostitution is the most explicit component of the sexual market, it is not the only one. The status of prostitute also depreciates women on this market. The development of this market is not only linked to the particularly high sex ratio in certain African towns (this is not the case for Dakar or Brazzaville), but is also due to the extension of sexual relations outside marriage. The sexual market offers the single woman, but not only her⁽⁷⁾, the opportunity to remain independent, while enjoying, in certain cities, a form of unofficial social recognition. It may also be a way of avoiding the disillusionment of marriage, often threatened by competition from the outside, while acquiring, through the partner, a certain material success.

Celibacy, or the condition of living outside marriage, is certainly easier to assume in Abidjan or Brazzaville than in Pikine; there is less group or religious pressure to conform, and alternative 'relay' structures exist which offer several possibilities for placing oneself on one market or the other. Table 6 illustrates the situation in the three cities⁽⁸⁾.

⁽⁷⁾ The potential protagonists are mainly single girls and women, but also divorcees and widows, women living apart from their husbands, and married women on the look-out for another form of relationship.

⁽⁸⁾ For Abidjan, the situation is beginning to date, since the survey was conducted ten years ago.

TABLE 6. — CHARACTERISTICS OF WOMEN IN PIKINE (1986),
ABIDJAN (1978) AND BRAZZAVILLE (1984)

Characteristics	Pikine	Abidjan	Brazzaville
Proportion single among women aged 20-24	30 %	28 %	52 %
Proportion of women aged 20-24 with secondary educ. and above	11 %	21 %	21 %
Proportion of women aged 25-29 not in union	26 %	17 %	38 %
Proportion of women aged 40-44 not in union	11 %	18 %	33 %
Proportion of unmarried mothers in age group 15-19	2 %	?	15 %
Average parity of married women aged 25-29	3.5	3.2	3.0
Average parity of single women aged 25-29	0.7	1.5	1.5
<i>Source:</i> Antoine and Diouf, 1988; Antoine and Herry, 1982; Tables 704, 801 and 806 of RGPH 84 (Congo).			

'Single' women are much more common in Brazzaville where, for instance, one-third of women aged 40-44 were not in a formal union in 1984, compared with 11 % in Pikine⁽⁹⁾. Abidjan is in between, but, as we have mentioned, this city houses many non-national women (mainly from Burkina Faso) who have come to join their husbands⁽¹⁰⁾. When the population is broken down into nationals and non-nationals, the proportion of single women at ages 20-24 is 35 % and 13 % respectively, while the proportion not in a union at ages 40-44 is 22 % and 10 %.

Another indicator of the permissiveness of the different societies and their tolerance towards the single woman is the proportion of unmarried teenage mothers, which ranges from 15 % in Brazzaville to 2 % in Pikine. However, the extent of this phenomenon should raise queries about the future of these children. Considerable behaviour differences thus persist between Sahelian and Central Africa, but in both regions female celibacy is gaining ground; only the amplitude of the transition varies.

⁽⁹⁾ Above this age, the proportion of women not in union increases in all three cities because of widows.

⁽¹⁰⁾ We set aside those from Ghana, many of whom come as 'Toutou' prostitutes (see Bernus and Rouch, 1957).

Conclusion

From being a temporary status while waiting for marriage (thus limited in duration), the single state may well turn into a 'definitive' status for some women, which is more or less difficult to accept in the long run. This accounts for the different ways out of celibacy which are taken by single women, depending on their environment and the sociological and religious scene. The status of divorcee may in some cases offer the possibility of living in acknowledged 'celibacy'. Indeed, there are different ways of living the life of a single woman, which are shaped by both traditional and modern influences. It can be posited that some women wish to experience new forms of union, without turning their backs on the social and psychological comfort of the cherished status of wife and mother. In the more tolerant societies, or in the ancient matrilineal ones, the status of unmarried mother is one of the ways out of an ill-accepted single state. The status of 'deuxième bureau', or certain types of informal union accepted or tolerated by the family group, allow women to 'act as though they were married'.

Women's education has no doubt favoured later marriage, but new forms of behaviour can also be seen among young women who have not attended school. New models are emerging which leave more room for independence; this modifies relationships and distorts the marriage market.

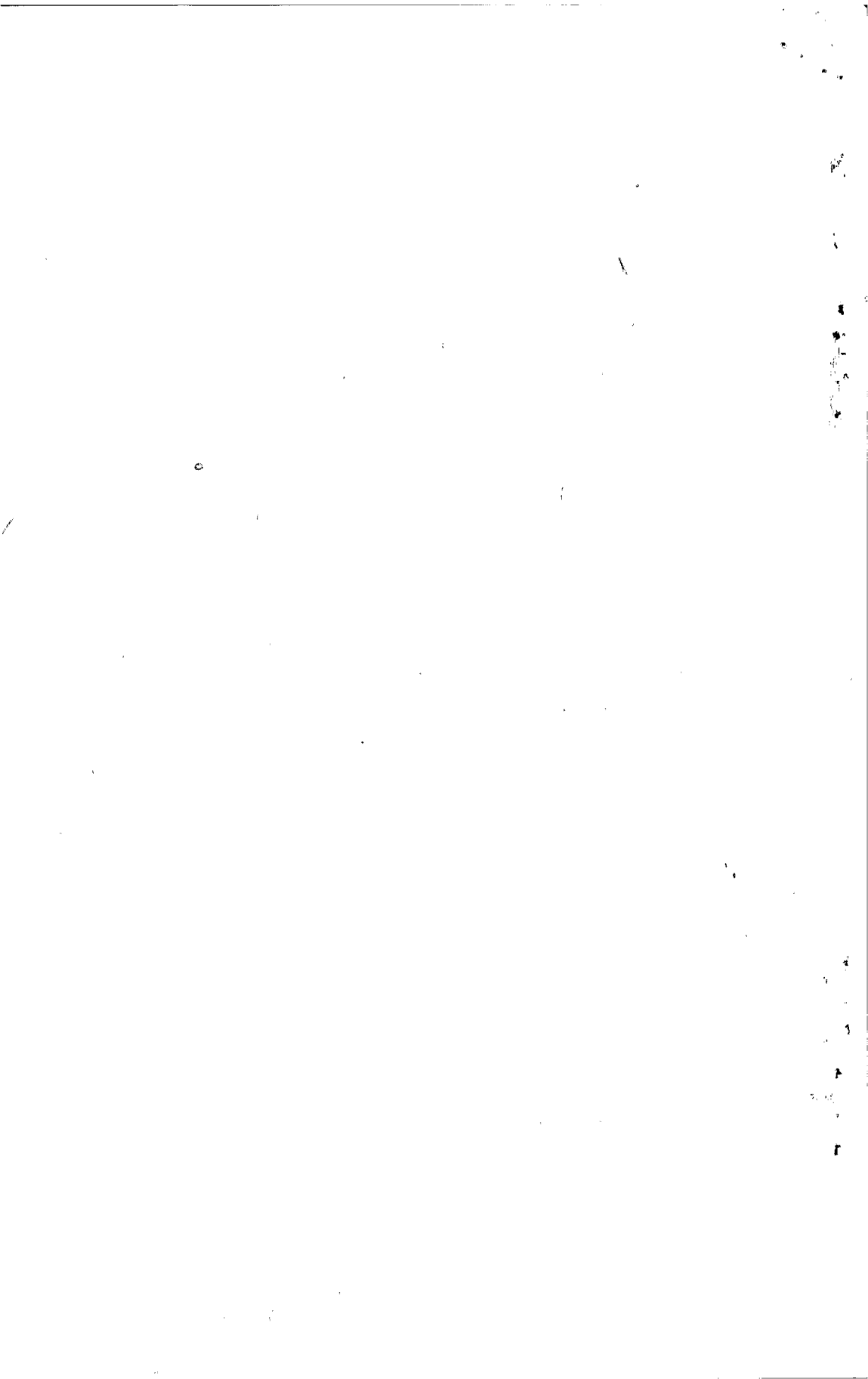
The term 'single' is a house with many rooms; women can thus take up residence in the one which corresponds to the perception they, or their group, have of the situation. Viewed in this light, the growing proportions of single women are not merely the result of first marriage postponement, but reflect deeper changes which are resculpting the face of urban Africa.

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