

mar4.doc/October 27, 1992

A REAPPRAISAL OF THE STATUS OF WOMEN AND NUPTIALITY IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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The interest of demographers in nuptiality has tended to be in its relation to fertility, particularly given the high fertility rates common in less developed countries. Recently, however, marriage patterns have been the focus of attention in their own right, enabling a re-evaluation of the received wisdom. This paper follows a line of thought suggested by this reassessment, exploring the relationship between the status of women and marriage patterns, and only briefly describes the African nuptiality regime that has emerged from the analysis.

The received wisdom had been that marriage in sub-Saharan Africa was 'early and universal' (van de Walle, 1968). This opinion was based on data that were poor in both quantity and quality. The collection of data in the last 20 years has been prolific and improved. A cursory overview reveals that both 'early' and 'universal' are misleading adjectives to apply to contemporary Africa. The data used in the analysis presented in this paper are both more recent and more representative of ethnic and social variation, and produce a wider range of values for the nuptiality measures. The mean age at first marriage for women varies between 15 and 21 years, and in Southern Africa the proportion of single adults is higher than elsewhere (over 50 per cent for adult women in some areas) (Lesthaeghe, Kaufmann and Meekers, 1989).

The difference between the contemporary pattern of marriage in sub-Saharan Africa described in this paper and that discerned by van de Walle could stem from changes occurring since the 1960s, although there was little accurate demographic information with which to describe a starting-point. The features described here are not necessarily evidence of change, but perhaps

characteristic of 'traditional' Africa. Many arguments have been proposed stating that traditional familial forms would make way for the Western family (Goode 1963; Hunter 1965). This notion of convergence, however, was based more on ethnocentrism than on evidence (McDonald, 1992). These theories tended to argue that contact with the West's industry, technology, etc., would automatically lead to nuclear, conjugal families. Whilst this has patently not been the case, such economic determinism overlooks the influence of culture on reproductive behaviour. Although marriage is the means of biological reproduction, it is a social institution and is, therefore, influenced by cultural variables. Caldwell (1980) pointed to the need for understanding the influence of ideology on social reproduction and stressed how education is important because it can change ideology, without any accompanying changes in the mode of production.

Education tends to be used as a proxy for socio-economic development at an aggregate level, but at the individual level it has different implications. For a woman, the increased education and awareness may lead directly to a change in marital behaviour (McDonald, 1985). The introduction of Western ideas and norms, such as individualism and free partner choice, may intervene with traditional arrangements for marriage, in particular polygyny (Caldwell 1982; Dries, 1985). Believers in economic and cultural determinism thought that Western influence would lead to a change in marriage practices in Africa (Goode, 1963; Gough, 1977; Hunter, 1965) such as a decline in polygyny. It has been rare to hear the contrary arguments, for example that Westernisation might lead to a strengthening of polygyny (Clignet, 1970, 1984; Capron and Kohler, 1975).

In this paper, we examine theories positing that differentials and changes in marriage patterns are related to the relative status of women. In particular, we assess to what extent factors such as women's inheritance rights, women's involvement in trade and politics, and women's contribution to agricultural labor affect a society's nuptiality patterns.

OVERVIEW OF THE AFRICAN NUPTIALITY REGIME

The societies of sub-Saharan Africa are characterized by a distinctive pattern of marriage practices. However, mapping of a range of nuptiality indices for specific regions and ethnic groups has shown that this pattern varies in three regions - West, East, and Southern Africa (Lesthaeghe, Kaufmann, and Meekers, 1989).¹ When mapping the polygyny ratio (m), the ratio of currently married women to currently married men, it was found that polygyny was highest in West Africa (over 1.2), lower in East Africa and amongst the nomadic peoples of the Sahel (below 1.2) and lowest in Southern Africa. Even the more recent surveys and censuses have found polygyny to be still prevalent.

The singulate mean age at first marriage, SMAM, for women, was seen to have a similar pattern. Women tended to marry fairly early in West Africa, the high-polygyny region, later in East Africa (above rather than below 18 years), and over age 19.5 in Southern Africa. The age gap between the spouses at first marriage (measured by the difference in the singulate mean age at marriage for males and females), varied considerably, from 3 to 11 years. The regional patterns of East, Southern, and West Africa were substantiated by the distinct average age gaps between the spouses that were found. The age gap between the spouses was greatest in those areas associated with high polygyny.

Far from being universally early as van de Walle (1968) proposed, the timing of marriage in sub-Saharan Africa can be seen to vary substantially in the different regions. More importantly, the data showed that polygyny has not been replaced by monogamous nuclear families in accordance with Goode's theory. There was a slight rise in the singulate mean age at marriage for both sexes. This meant that age difference between the spouses remained stable, supporting polygyny.

It has been suggested that much of the interest in marriage was related to fertility, i.e. to the exposure of women to the risk of conception within marriage. The dissolution of marriage obviously affects this risk, and again mapping marriage dissolution patterns reveals the tripartite division. In West Africa divorce is common, remarriage fast. In Senegal 92 per cent of divorced and widowed women had remarried by the time they were 50 (Lesthaeghe, 1984); in East Africa the marital dissolution and remarriage rates are more moderate (without the polygynous tendency to absorb the women). In Southern Africa the dissolution rates are very high (75 per cent in Lesotho) and the remarriage rates low, reflecting a trend against marriage in general there. It is arguable whether these rates are related to polygyny or not, but it has been observed that divorce is frequently related to the status and position of women (Cohen, 1971); and the large age gaps between spouses, concurrent with polygyny, ranging between 15 and 20 years on average, are hardly conducive to equitable relations (Casterline and McDonald, 1983).

EXPLAINING THE SUB-SAHARAN NUPTIALITY REGIME

Given that there is a distinctive regional pattern in African marriage practice, the next step is to seek an explanation of it. In summary, West

Africa has high levels of polygyny, marital dissolution, remarriage, and a large age difference between spouses; East Africa has lower values; and in Southern Africa the marital regime appears to be quite different, having been seriously disrupted by migration.

The starting-point for many authors is Boserup (1970). Her seminal work linked the economic subsistence regimes in a systematic way to marriage practice. In essence she argued that there were two systems of farming: male and female. In areas with little population pressure, such as Africa, shifting cultivation, using hoes, is practised. Women tend to do the work and, according to Boserup, consequently have a high economic value to men, encouraging polygyny. She added that if they contribute economically in other ways, through trade for example, their value is enhanced and polygyny is augmented. In male farming systems, with plough cultivation because of dense settlement, women are an economic burden to men, not an asset, resulting in monogamy (ibid.). To this dualistic model Goody (1976) added the notion of the transmission of property (inheritance, dowry, and bridewealth). He associated diverging devolution, female as well as male inheritance, with the plough cultures, suggesting that they were associated with emerging social or hierarchical stratification. Although he used ethnographic data to test his hypothesis (it held), his results do not offer much in the way of explanation for Africa, mainly because the ethnic groups in sub-Saharan Africa that are represented fall almost exclusively into the female-hoe-simple society category. Yet nevertheless, Africa exhibits the strong regional pattern in marriage outlined above.

The explanation of marriage in Africa may be found by a more subtle analysis. Even concepts as seemingly harmless as marriage and the family should be

considered for their appropriateness with regard to African systems of kinship (Oppong, 1992). The way in which demographers, anthropologists, governments, and individuals judge what is marriage and what is not is subject to considerable variance in practice and interpretation. Here we have chosen the widest definition of marriage, namely regular sexual union, thereby including consensual unions. An initial analysis suggested that the regional pattern of marriage and polygyny in Africa was related to features of social organisation such as the practice of agriculture or pastoralism, the lineage system, diverging devolution, and indeed all the features that Goody isolated; but that model accounted for only 25 per cent of the variance in African polygyny (Lesthaeghe, Kaufmann, and Meekers, 1989). It is proposed here that this regional pattern in polygyny arises because women are valued as wives more in West than in East Africa and barely at all in Southern Africa. It is proposed, furthermore, that the observed regional pattern in nuptiality is related to the perception of female value, rather than an absolute, measurable value, and that this perception is related to the relations of power and dominance in the various societies under study.

DATA AND VARIABLES

The data used in this paper are taken from NUPFILE 2, a databank on nuptiality in sub-Saharan Africa that contains information on 170 ethnic groups, representing 69 ethnic clusters (for a description of the data, see Lesthaeghe, Kaufmann, and Meekers, 1989). For each ethnic group, the data contain several nuptiality indicators, as well as social and demographic background variables, that have been calculated using the most recent demographic surveys and censuses. This demographic information is

supplemented by ethnographic information from the Ethnographic Atlas (Murdock, 1967).

Two dependent variables were selected to represent the timing and type of marriage: the proportion of women of ages 15-19 who are single (PSW), and the proportion of married women in polygynous unions (PU). The proportion of women aged 15-19 who are single has been shown to be a good indicator of Hajnal's Singulate Mean Age at Marriage (see Lesthaeghe, Kaufmann, and Meekers, 1989: 248-250).

The indicators of the status of women and social organisation used in the analysis were the following: whether or not women as well as men can inherit (presence or absence of diverging devolution), whether or not females participate in trade and politics (they participate in neither, in trade only, or in both), the type of lineage (patrilineal, matrilineal, bilateral or duolateral), and the dominant type of religion (Christian, Islamic, other).

Boserup (1970) and Goody (1976) had argued that it is necessary to distinguish between male and female types of farming systems. But Sanday (1981) points out that it is too simple to associate pastoralism with male labour and agriculture with female labour (the basis of the Goody - Boserup simple, female agriculture system): 'Sexual segregation in work activities is most pronounced in economies dependent mainly on the processing of animals.... ironically, where hunting or animal husbandry constitutes the main subsistence focus, women do more work than men' (Sanday, 1981:81). In Africa, there is no unified mode of production and pastoralists are found throughout the Sahel and East Africa. In this database, nearly 90 per cent of societies depend for more than 45 per cent of their subsistence on agriculture; but within that

category approximately 50 per cent are dependent on female labour, 26 per cent on male labour, and 24 per cent on shared labour. In contrast, in those societies considered pastoral, men do 75 per cent of the work, but only 8 per cent of societies are more dependent on pastoralism than agriculture. Consequently, we used an indicator of both the proportion of agricultural work that is done by women (agriculture is done mostly by females, by both males and females, or by mostly by males), and of the level of dependence on agriculture as a means of subsistence (low or high dependence). We conducted Multiple Classification Analyses (MCA) in an effort to evaluate the association between these social and economic factors that affect the status of women and nuptiality behavior. The percentage of literate women and the year of observation of the marriage indicators are used as control variables.

RESULTS

Female Age at First Marriage

Table 1 shows the effect of the indicators of women's status and social organization on the proportion of women aged 15-19 who are single. In Christian societies the proportion of single women is above average, whereas among the Islamic and traditional societies the proportion of single women is below average. If we relate the proportion of single women to polygyny, this finding is not surprising. We might expect to find a decrease in traditional marriage - i.e. less polygyny and later marriage, in societies influenced by Western ideas through Christianity. If type of lineage system is taken into account, we find that women in matrilineal societies marry later than average. This effect of matriliney reduces substantially, however, after controlling for the other variables. In societies where women have inheritance rights

(diverging devolution), women tend to marriage early, but this effect disappears after controlling for the other variables.

The results for women's involvement in trade and politics are interesting. Where women do not trade nor have political status, their age at first marriage differs little from the mean. Where they have economic status through trade, but no political status, they marry significantly earlier (the proportion of single women is 21 percentage points below the mean). But in the societies where they have both economic and political status there is no postponement of first marriage, and the proportion of single women is close to the mean. This pattern holds after controlling for the other variables in the model.

It is evident from Table 1 that there is no clear association between female age at first marriage (as measured by the proportion of single women) and a society's dependence on agriculture. Women's involvement in agricultural activities does make a difference, however, at least in pastoral societies. When dependence on agriculture is low (i.e., pastoral societies) male farming is associated with a later female age at marriage, mixed farming with earlier marriage, and female farming with an average age at marriage. The extent of women's involvement in agricultural labor has little effect on age at marriage in those societies that depend heavily on agricultural labor.

Insert Table 1

Proportion of Women in Polygynous Unions

When polygyny is examined, as measured by the proportion of married women who are in a polygynous union, we find a pattern similar to that for the

proportion of women aged 15-19 who are single (see Table 1). All of the factors have a significant influence on polygyny, the most influential being the dependence on farming and women's involvement in agricultural work and women's participation in trade and politics. The results of the Multiple Classification Analysis shown in Table 2 allow us to clarify these relationships.

If Goody and Boserup's theses were correct, female or shared farming would be expected to have a very positive influence on the levels of polygyny, and male farming (where women theoretically become an economic burden) would be associated with lower levels of polygyny. Low levels of dependence on farming would be associated with pastoralism, male labour, and therefore lower female value and polygyny levels. Although this is true in so far as low dependence on farming (pastoralism) is associated with lower levels of polygyny, the hypotheses do not hold for the societies more heavily dependent on agriculture. Whilst these all agricultural societies are all associated with higher levels of polygyny than pastoral societies, it is male farming, not female, that exerts the greater positive influence on polygyny. In agricultural societies dependent on male farming, rather than female farming, the percentage of married women in polygynous unions is 7 percentage points above the mean (i.e., 44 percent versus 37 percent), after adjusting for the other variables. This is a surprising finding for those who favour economic determinism. Since we are interested in perceived and relative appreciations of female value, the finding is not too alarming. It simply raises the question what it is that women are doing in these societies that augments their value.

The second most influential factor was women's involvement in trade and politics. Here we find a direct association between female involvement and increased polygyny. In other words, in those societies where female value is heightened by non-agricultural pursuits, their value to men as wives is enhanced. In those ethnic groups where women are involved in both trading and political activities, polygyny is less common than in societies where their activities are limited to trading, but this differential disappears after controlling for the other variables.

Insert Table 2

A REAPPRAISAL OF THE STATUS OF WOMEN AND NUPTIALITY

The results presented in Tables 1 and 2 indicate that that the levels of female status provide a good guide to patterns of nuptiality. The type of lineage system has a significant influence on both female age at marriage (as measured by the proportion of women aged 15-19 who are single) and the proportion of women in polygynous unions. Matrilineal societies tend to have a greater proportion of single women, meaning that women marry later. Matrilineal societies are also characterized by lower levels of polygyny. These associations are complementary and may be associated with the greater independence accorded women in matrilineal societies.

Diverging devolution proved to be a weak factor both for female age at marriage and for the level of polygyny. The finding that diverging devolution has little explanatory power is perhaps not surprising since diverging devolution is not really a feature of African society, and there is more divergence within Africa than Goody's (1976) hypothesis would allow.

Religion proved to be very significant both for female age at marriage and polygyny. Christianity was associated with a significantly larger proportion of single women, implying a later age at marriage, which was reflected in lower levels of polygyny in Christian societies. Conversely, in traditional and especially Islamic societies there was earlier marriage and higher polygyny. Islam is sometimes associated with lower status for women, and this may at first sight appear to contradict the theory that high polygyny is associated with high value of women. But although in Islam women legally have only half the value of men, they are highly valued by men as the mothers of sons. Pison (1982, 1986) showed how in apparently traditional Islamic societies, with explicit preference for endogamy, diverging devolution, and other manifestations of Goody's plough culture, there was in fact within castes normal African patterns of marriage. In other words, the ideology of endogamy and monogamy had been adopted as part of Islam without the practice.

Female participation in trade and politics has an important effect on marriage practices, but this effect is not linear. In societies where women are involved in trade women marry very early, but when women are involved in both trade and politics this is not the case. Similarly, in those ethnic groups where women trade and have no political status, polygyny is higher than average, but this positive influence on polygyny diminishes when women have political status too. It is possible that involvement in trade increases the economic value of women, which encourages polygyny, but involvement in politics is associated with greater autonomy for women or self-value, which discourages polygyny, thereby explaining the differential.

Lastly, the variable that most closely parallels the interest of Goody and Boserup is the indicator of the dependence of a society on agriculture for

subsistence (high or low) and the sexual division of labour, i.e. who is farming - women, men, or both. The results confirm Sanday's (1981) argument that a dichotomy between male pastoral and female agricultural societies is too simplistic. While the sexual division of labor has no effect on female age at marriage in societies heavily dependent on agricultural labor, it is associated with a substantial differentials in female age at marriage in pastoral societies. In pastoral societies where farming is done by males women marry relatively late; when there is mixed farming they marry early.

The data confirm that pastoral societies have lower levels of polygyny than agricultural societies, but there is substantial variation within each of these two groups of societies. It is significant that a high dependence on agriculture and male farming seems to be associated with an increase in the proportion of women in polygynous unions and a decrease in the proportion of single women in the 15-19 age group. If male farming is associated with higher levels of polygyny then it clear that the economic value of women cannot be the determining factor in marriage practices.

CONCLUSION

The overall analysis supports the contention that the status of women is important in influencing marriage arrangements. The simplest explanations of female value rely on economic variables such as society's dependence on females for agricultural production. But if female status is important as a variable, it is not going to be fixed by economic value alone. It has been argued that bridewealth is a direct reflection of the economic value of women (Robertson and Berger, 1986:6). But the evidence presented here, particularly that relating to women's involvement in trade and politics, suggests that

influences other than strictly economic ones determine the perceived value of women and hence nuptiality patterns. Comaroff (1980) does well to question the notion of value and how it is ascribed. The economic determination of value is perhaps particularly pronounced in the West, but it has been projected on to African societies by Western writers who see those societies as somehow 'simple' and characterised by economically determined behaviour. To expect economics to have a determining influence in non-Western cultures is ethnocentric and naive. Value is not an innate but a relative, and therefore culturally determined, quality. In West Africa women are valued as powerful, productive people: they achieve their status through their reproductive and productive abilities. In East Africa, cattle and sons are the valued objectives for the strong, pastoral patrilineages. Women's value as economic producers is secondary to their reproductive potential. In those societies status is ascribed to them by men. 'Power is accorded to whichever sex is thought to embody or be in touch with the forces upon which people depend for their perceived needs' (Sanday, 1981:11). Value and political power are closely linked. In Africa, where traditionally there has been little differentiation between the various spheres of social interaction, this is particularly the case. Meillassoux (1981) illustrates how politics, power, and access to women are tied up. Amongst the Guro, a polygynous people, the lineage elders forced the young men to work at hunting until they are old enough to marry, thereby restricting access to women (the agricultural workforce) and restricting access to the prestige associated with having many wives.

Women are valued in different ways. Most frequently they are ascribed status and value by men; less often they can achieve it through their own activities

or ascribe it to themselves. In both instances, as their value increases it is met initially by a rise in polygyny. For example, where women trade and thus have economic value to men as wives, polygyny tends to be more widespread. But where women have high status in their own right and therefore possess a measure of autonomy through inheritance rights, education, or matriliney, polygyny is not as common. Hence, we cannot say that a 'high value' of women results in polygyny, but rather we need to ask: How are women valued and by whom? It becomes a question of power. This issue is further complicated by the fact that in societies that value fertility greatly, potency has a literal meaning and women will choose marriage as a strategy to gain power.

If the above argument holds true, then it has important implications for the future as economic development changes values and distributions of power. In Southern Africa capitalism has had more impact on culture than it has anywhere else in Africa. Southern Africa is a testament to the ills of progress. The impact of male migration has had a fearsome effect on family and marriage patterns. Previously polygyny was common; now it is rare, as is marriage itself in some areas (Izzard, 1985). The disruption that Kuper (1987) describes in Botswana is not found, however, in Lesotho. In Botswana, a previously cattle-herding society, women had no access to the cattle, and this pattern continues now that the men earn wages to which the women have no access. By 1975, 65 per cent of the adult women were single. The Tswana system of low female status and power has adopted capitalism, sealing its own downfall. In Lesotho, which has experienced comparable levels of male out-migration, the situation is very different. It was traditionally a farming economy, the women had high status, and the wage earnings of the men are still

brought into this system. Eighty-one per cent of the adult women are married, and despite their husbands' absence, the kinship and marriage system has maintained itself. These cases illustrate both how important the relations between the sexes are in determining reproductive institutions, and also how resilient the indigenous patterns are. In both cases, wages have been adopted into an existing strategy and culture, rather than vice versa.

The homogenisation that Goode (1963) foresaw has not occurred, nor has Westernisation had a significant impact on the African nuptiality regimes. Instead, the Africans have adopted aspects of Western culture into their own systems. But there have been important changes in nuptiality patterns, caused not by Western culture but by migration, education of women, and the associated changes in the status of women. So long as the existing sexual division of labour and accompanying ideology is conserved, the system may maintain itself. If, on the other hand, changes in the mode of production destroy the existing balance of labour and political power between the sexes (Bay, 1983), then changes in kind, not degree, may be the outcome. If the future involves such changes, for example the emergence of a class system (Robertson and Berger, 1986), then the concomitant change in the position of women may have important effects on the hitherto resilient African nuptiality regime.

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TABLE 1: MCA RESULTS OF THE EFFECTS OF WOMEN'S STATUS AND SOCIAL ORGANISATION INDICATORS ON THE PROPORTION OF SINGLE FEMALES (AGES 15-19)

		Proportion of women single, 15-19 (Mean = .56)		
		Unadjusted Deviation	Adjusted Deviation	N
Lineage*				
1	Patriliney	-.01	-.01	(98)
2	Matriliney	.05	.01	(22)
3	Bi/Duo	.01	.03	(23)
eta/beta		.10	.07	
Diverging Devolution				
1	No DD	.02	.00	(122)
2	DD	-.12	.00	(21)
eta/beta		.24	.00	
Religion*				
1	Christian	.12	.05	(53)
2	Islamic	-.10	-.07	(45)
3	Other	-.03	.01	(45)
eta/beta		.43	.24	
Women's Involvement in Trade/Politics*				
1	Neither	.02	.03	(84)
2	Trade Only	-.21	-.15	(23)
3	Both T + P	.09	.03	(36)
eta/beta		.45	.31	
Dependence on Agric./ Sexual Division of Labor*				
1	Low/ Female	.09	.01	(24)
2	Low/ Mixed	-.12	-.15	(10)
3	Low/ Male	-.02	.13	(9)
4	High/Female	.06	-.03	(43)
5	High/Mixed	.02	.02	(27)
6	High/Male	-.13	.01	(30)
eta/beta		.40	.26	
N of Cases: 142				
R : .765				
R Square : .585				

Note: 'Adjusted deviations' measure deviations from the overall mean, adjusting first for the factors and then for the co-variates (literacy of women 15-19 and year of observation). * Denotes significance at .05 level.

TABLE 2: MCA RESULTS OF THE EFFECTS OF WOMEN'S STATUS AND SOCIAL ORGANISATION INDICATORS ON POLYGyny

	Prop. of married women in polygynous unions (Mean = 0.37)		N
	Unadjusted Deviation	Adjusted Deviation	
Lineage*			
1 Patriliney	.01	.01	(103)
2 Matriliney	-.06	-.03	(22)
3 Bi/Duo	.00	-.02	(23)
eta/beta	.20	.12	
Diverging Devolution*			
1 No DD	.00	.01	(129)
2 DD	-.02	-.07	(20)
eta/beta	.06	.21	
Religion*			
1 Christian	-.03	-.02	(55)
2 Islamic	.01	.01	(46)
3 Other	.03	.01	(48)
eta/beta	.21	.11	
Women's Involvement in Trade/Politics*			
1 Neither	-.04	-.03	(89)
2 Trade Only	.09	.04	(23)
3 Both T + P	.05	.05	(36)
eta/beta	.40	.28	
Dependence on Agric./ Sexual Division of Labor*			
1 Low/ Female	-.06	-.05	(27)
2 Low/ Mixed	.01	-.01	(10)
3 Low/ Male	-.07	-.09	(9)
4 High/Female	-.02	.00	(45)
5 High/Mixed	.01	.01	(27)
6 High/Male	.10	.07	(30)
eta/beta	.43	.36	
N of Cases: 147			
R : .634			
R Square : .402			

Notes: Adjusted deviations measure deviations from the overall mean, adjusting first for the factors and then for the co-variates (literacy of women 15-19 and year of observation). * Denotes significance at .05 level.

¹ Lockwood (forthcoming) argues against the validity of this mapping exercise and particularly the interpretation of the regional patterns. Despite the evident problems in the use of such aggregate data and the micro-level variation, the existence of these regional patterns seems justifiable, but their interpretation is open to doubt.