

## Islamic marriage and start of cohabitation in Mali

Mali is a country where more than 90 percent of the population is of Islamic faith. I conducted over sixty semi-structured interviews (women and men of several birth cohorts) on entry into marriage in Bamako and in rural areas of different regions of Mali. Results from the anthropological approach help better understand specificities of marriage in Mali such as the three types of marriage (religious, customary and civil) in urban and rural places, and the almost constant age at first marriage in rural areas. In particular I am interested in the meaning of Islamic marriages as well as in the observation of religious rules by the youngest generations in conjunction with civil law; how their entry into first marriage characterizes transformations in the timing of cohabitation (i.e. when partners start to live together) and the timing of the first birth. The procedures of entry into first marriage include choice of a spouse, marriage proposal, betrothal, payments of the bridewealth (to the bride or to her parents), religious ceremony (with the consents of the bride and groom or of their representatives), customary and civil ceremonies, consummation of the union, start of cohabitation and birth of the first child.

Younger generations that have known different ways of meeting their future spouses may interpret the meaning of these celebrations differently than the older generations and they may put more emphasis on the civil marriage and the public festivities of marriage. How are times at first marriage celebration and at start of cohabitation negotiated by the parties (bride and groom themselves but also their respective families)? Qualitative interviews proved very effective in describing the stages of marriage. Furthermore, time at first birth is included in the study as the last stage of entry into marriage; the informants in the interviews reported that they were fully married once their first child was born.

Mali has had almost constant high levels of fertility and age at first marriage is very early, it has been delayed in the capital city Bamako while it has almost not changed in rural areas. The characteristics of Islamic marriages (combined with traditional pre-Islamic rituals) may have some impact on the time at first celebration, at start of cohabitation and at consummation of the union. The main question of the proposed

communication is the following: how does Islam define the specificities of the process of entry into first marriage in Mali?

Previous research argued that Islam has transformed marriage practices and wedding rituals (Cooper, 1995). Arranged marriages by parental authority are often associated to early ages at marriage of the bride and the groom. Moreover, they are generally concluded according to Muslim custom (De Munck, 1996) and the validity of an Islamic marriage depends on the consent of the bride and the groom or of their representatives, in the presence of witnesses and the *cadi* or the imam who recognize the existence of the marriage (Shaukat Ali, 1987). Abdul-Rauf (1995 [1972]) presents early marriage of Muslims as a protection against the risk of having sex before marriage. The consummation of the union is supposed to occur when the bride is brought into her new household; it gives the woman the right to obtain the “Mahr” (nuptial gift) and is interpreted in different ways depending on the Muslim schools. Shaukat Ali (1987) notes that the seclusion of the husband and the wife together with no one else may be interpreted as consummation since the conditions are favorable for sexual intercourse. A second way is by intimate acts such as embracing. But in most schools consummation corresponds to the actual coition (Shaukat Ali, 1987).

Etienne van de Walle, Kristin R. Baker and I collaborate in a project that intends to compare the parameters of unions and ages that the informants reported at each round of the last two DHS of several African countries. Anthropological sources on nuptiality will have an important contribution in this project to a better understanding and interpretation of marriage procedures across African countries. The problem of measurement and definition of marriage in African countries has often been mentioned in the literature but qualitative studies on this topic are rare.

The methodology of the proposed paper is based on the qualitative analysis of the 67 interviews I conducted in urban and rural places in Mali. In particular I will emphasize the types of unions and the marital practices described by the male and female informants of several birth cohorts. All are Muslims but they differ by ethnic group; the variable of ethnicity will be taken into account.

As for the semi-structured interviews, preliminary results show great contrasts between practices in Bamako and in rural places. In rural areas, it is widely observed that the decision of time at first marriage celebration and choice of spouse come from the parents of the future bride and groom. There is no minimum age at first marriage. Girls may be married very early with a religious marriage that is done after the first payments of bridewealth from the groom's family to the bride's family so that the imam can certify the existence of the marriage. In most of my interviews, women in various villages explained that although their consent had sometimes been asked, they were not aware of the date of the religious marriage until after the conclusion of the marriage was made known to the people with the use of drums and tambourines. The time at entry into their new household (i.e. start of cohabitation, spouses live together) varied greatly by age at religious marriage and ethnic group. For instance, the Peul observe a period of non-cohabitation of two to three years after the religious ceremony. During this interval, between the first marriage celebration and the start of cohabitation, the spouses may spend nights together (when the husband is not gone with his herd for several months) in the hut of the wife in her parental homestead. Every night, the husband comes when it is dark and leaves very early morning not to be seen by his parents-in-law. The first birth may occur during this interval, before the spouses start to live together in the husband's household and before any other ceremony of marriage is observed. A contrasting example is the case of a Tamasheq man who did not consider himself married because a year had past since his wife moved to live with him but the consummation of their marriage had not occurred (she was too young and spent most of the nights with her mother-in-law). In Bamako, ages at first marriage are older; men and women decide themselves to marry. However they have to conform to the parental authority. Cohabitation where partners live together seems to rarely happen before marriage but once there is a marriage, the spouses start to live together within a short interval after the first ceremony of marriage.

Thus this paper intends to help better understand the complexity of entry into first marriage in a West African Muslim country. The use of an anthropological approach to the study of marriage emphasizes the dynamics of change across urban and rural areas of

residence and between generations of Malian women and men of the same religious faith but of different ethnic groups.

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