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***Transition to adulthood in rural Africa:  
are male and female experiences converging?  
The case of the Bwa of Mali***

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## **Summary**

Men-women relations in sub-Saharan Africa are still subject to strong normative rules and social controls, but recent developments point to changes occurring in gender relations, particularly in the stages of the transition to adulthood — a reduction in the age difference between men and women at first marriage, a development of female migration, and increasing dissociation between the timetables of sexual initiation, couple formation and the beginning of parenthood. This paper analyses the emergence of this 'time of youth' in a rural population of Mali. Are the timetables and stages that characterise this period the same for both sexes? In what extent, are social controls on youth declining? These questions are examined with a focus on youth migration and on marital processes. Results show converging trends in male and female experience of migration and an important decline of family controls on marriage. They are clearly associated with changes in the relationships between generations; it is possible that they promote also new, more egalitarian, relationships between men and women.

## **Résumé**

Alors que les rapports entre hommes et femmes sont encore fortement codifiés et socialement contrôlés en Afrique sub-saharienne, des évolutions récentes laissent à penser que des changements se dessinent dans les rapports de genre, en particulier dans les étapes qui marquent l'entrée dans l'âge adulte : réduction de l'écart entre l'entrée en union des hommes et des femmes, essor des migrations féminines, dissociation des calendriers d'entrée dans la vie sexuelle, dans la vie conjugale et dans la vie féconde. L'objet de cette communication sera d'analyser l'émergence de ce "temps de jeunesse" dans une population rurale du Mali. Ce temps est-il marqué par un calendrier similaire et par des étapes de même nature pour les deux sexes ? Les changements dans le passage à l'âge adulte sont-ils révélateurs d'une évolution du contrôle social de la jeunesse ? L'analyse met l'accent sur la mobilité des jeunes et sur les modalités d'entrée en union. Elle met en évidence la convergence des expériences des jeunes hommes et des jeunes femmes dans la pratique migratoire et un recul notable des contrôles familiaux dans la formation des couples. Ces changements sont révélateurs d'une transformation des rapports entre générations et annoncent peut-être une redéfinition, sur un mode plus égalitaire, des rapports entre sexes.

As a period of transition from childhood to adulthood, youth provides an appropriate field for observation of the changes in gender relations. Indeed, in that period of life, people go through many different experiences, which are involved in the building of sex-specific identities: sexual initiation, couple formation, starting in working life, residential autonomy, migration... How and when these events occur all along the transition into adulthood are largely revealing of what models were transmitted by past generations, specially because they are achieved at young ages, while family authority is still strong. In that sense, the changes observed about the stages of transition into adulthood may mean that new forms of behaviours are being recognised, but also that social control over youth is loosening and that new places are allotted to individuals in the gender and generation order. Thus, the decline of the early marriage pattern, as it existed for girls in many African populations, can be viewed both as a sign of weakening family authority over couple formation and of a recognition of young women's new status (Locoh, 1996; Hertrich and Locoh, 1999). Indeed, as they get married later, they are "free" to get mature outside the conjugal sphere, and are in a better position to develop and defend personal plans. On the other hand, changes that occur during the transition into adulthood may entail more changes about gender relations in subsequent ages. Many of the events experienced during youth provide social status attributes and define the basis of ensuing relationships. For instance, the relations between spouses are probably not unrelated to the circumstances in which the couple was formed (including the ages of man and wife and the age difference between them, how the marriage was decided on, whether the couple had its own plan...). Likewise if a woman gets longer training and a salaried job in early adulthood, this will impact on her capacity to take her own stand in decision-making later on.

In the developed countries, youth became a field for study in the 1980s, at a time when lengthened education caused transition into adulthood to occur at a later age and in a more gradual way, with the stages of access to autonomy ever growing more dissociated and reversible (Chamboredon, 1985; Galland, 1991; Bozon, 1996; Villeneuve Gokalp, 1996, INSEE, 1997). In African demography, research on early adulthood developed in the 1990s in relation with reproductive health issues<sup>2</sup> (Bledsoe and Cohen 1993; Delaunay, 1994; Westoff et al., 1994). In the context of the aids epidemics, of the increasing age at marriage, and of the weakening traditional controls over sexuality, adolescents (especially girls) have come to be viewed as a "population at risk", whose behaviour with respect to sexuality and fertility should be analysed. The issue of youth has also been fitted into the area of the consequences of economic crises. The surveys on urban insertion conducted in various African capitals have highlighted how the young generations go through longer processes before they reach occupational, residential and family autonomy, due to social and economic conditions that are now extremely precarious (Antoine et al., 1998, 2001a, 2001b).

This paper deals with the conditions of transition into adulthood among a rural, isolated population in Mali. Changes will be examined through analysis of the timetable of events

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<sup>2</sup> Some three quarters (2,569 out of 3,313) of the titles indexed by *Popline* with a reference to the notion of youth (« adulthood » or « adolescence » or « youth ») and to sub-Saharan Africa also included reference to reproduction or health (« fertility », « sexuality » or « health »).

during youth as well as the social circumstances in which they were experienced. So, we will show that the changes during the transition into adulthood are linked to the decline of social control over youth, especially to the new place allotted to individuals in the family sphere and generation order. To what extent these changes affect gender relations will be discussed by comparing the way men and women lived out their youth.

This research is based on an in-depth biographical survey conducted in two Bwa villages in Mali, and updated in 2000. Analysis will focus on two main behaviours: youth migration and marital processes.

The population and the data are presented in the first part. A brief description of the dominant features of the social organisation of the Bwa is also given, so as to provide a glimpse into the actual circumstances in which the period of youth is lived out at the village, as well as the community control over it. In a second part is described the dramatic increase of youth migration. The circumstances of migration are analysed (location, duration, degree of family control over departures, the circumstances of insertion, the context of returns), showing how expanding juvenile migration is changing the relations of young people to their family, though a contrast is still to be observed between sexes. The third part is on marriage practices, which are here viewed from an enlarged perspective, in that not only first marriages are taken into account, but also the components of the attendant matrimonial process and generally all the matrimonial procedures that were launched, whether these resulted in marriage or failed before any marriage was concluded. Marriage is necessarily a key in understanding the changes occurring in the transition into adulthood, first because it gives a new status in the family, and secondly because it was managed by the elders, leaving the young people out. Through analysis of the components of matrimonial procedures, the evolution of family control over couple formation will be brought out in relation with the changes in the age at first marriage. To sum up, a last chapter examines the itineraries followed by males and females in their transition to adulthood and discusses the nature of the converging trends in male and female experiences.

## **I. POPULATION AND DATA<sup>3</sup>**

### **1. The population under study**

The two villages studied here - Kwara and Sirao (Hafwa'ui) - are located, in south-east Mali, about 450 kilometres from Bamako. They belong to the ethnic group of Bwa. The population was respectively 630 and 840 at the time of the last local census, in 1999. Dirt tracks lead to the nearest towns, San and Tominian, about 30 kilometres away.

The social and economic characteristics are those commonly shared by Sahelian farmers populations. The economy is centred on agricultural self-sufficiency and family-based production. The Bwa have little invested in trade and cash crops. School enrolment rate was low but the situation has been improved since to the early 1990s, thanks to the policy of "basic schools" supported by the village communities. In the adult population, 28 percent of

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<sup>3</sup> Please refer to Hertrich, 1996, for a more detailed presentation of Bwa society and of the questionnaire.

the men and 6 percent of the women born in 1950-74 had been to school (there were no schools at the time of the previous generations), but only 8 percent of the men and 1 woman had completed primary education. One distinctive feature is that, in a country that is more than 90% Moslem, the Bwa never embraced Islam, but partly joined the Christian churches (about half the population surveyed).

From a demographic point of view, the natural growth rate is high in the region (over 3 percent per year), though it is partly brought down by migration. Mortality rates have definitely decreased since the 1950s, but mortality under five still affects 1 child out of 5. Reproductive behaviours have not changed yet and fertility remains high, at about 8 children per woman and 9 children per man.

The family organisation is based on a social and political unit, the father's lineage, and an economic unit, the domestic group or *zu*. The lineage, as represented by its eldest member, is the reference unit in the political, social and matrimonial relations with other groups. Attached to it are land ownership rights, as well as the political and ritual prerogatives in the village. The family also serves as a unit for worship, especially ancestor worship. Lastly, matrimonial alliances are organised at lineage level: as an exogamous unit, all the matrimonial procedures related to finding a wife or giving a daughter away to another lineage are necessarily processed through it. The lineage, depending on its size, includes a varying number of domestic groups, which are farming and consumption units. The size of *zu* is rather large and their structure often complex: over half the population live in poly-nuclear families and belong to an economic unit comprising at least 10 members. Those characteristics have hardly changed in the last thirty years (Hertrich, 2001a). Polygamy is not very widespread, as it concerns one fifth of the men and one third of the married women. Transmission of authority within the lineage as a domestic group is based on gender, generation and age criteria: responsibility for the family group is incumbent on men, and among the latter on the eldest, namely the oldest among the men in the oldest generation.

One of the dominant features of the Bwa social system is that the village community, as well as family institutions, plays prominent role (Capron, 1973, 1988a, 1988b). How important this role is can be perceived through the social and political organisation of the village, collectively assumed by different lineages, but also through the way the village is structured in space and the importance of community practices, particularly of celebrations. Unlike the spatial organisation patterns of other West African populations, family units among the Bwa do not belong to any delimited residential space (compounds or groups of houses). On the contrary, the members of a domestic group usually live in variously located huts, often far away from one another and merged in the village crowd. Those huts are mostly small, open on the street, and most of the daily activities are performed in that public space. Community life, which is kept up by means of interpersonal exchange and tight relations between neighbours, is also enhanced by a wealth of festivities. The ritual ceremonies, whether traditional or Christian, the family ceremonies (weddings, funerals), the sessions of farm labour provided by a group of young people - as part of the bridewealth due by one of their peers or as a duty in an association -, are as many festive occasions in which the villagers participate. In addition to these occasional events, in every village there is one day of

the week that is devoted to drinking millet beer while daily chores are held up. Social relations in the village are constantly kept up, thus building a sense of belonging and strong attachment of individuals to their village. Simultaneously, social relations are one way of ensuring permanent, diffuse but extensive social control over the community members. Such all-pervasiveness of the village community is an important component of the way youth is experienced at the village.

The Bwa have a word, *yaromu*<sup>4</sup>, for the period of youth before marriage. It is supposed to be a period of carelessness, of leisure, in which peer relations prevail, but also some wooing of the opposite gender. How relations between young people of the same age are valued is particularly obvious among boys, who in early adolescence settle together in some empty hut in the village, while still working and taking their meals with their parents. Sometimes girls also leave their parents' house, but, unlike boys, they remain under the control of an adult (usually some old woman in the village). Friendship and mutual assistance prevail in the relations between young people, but also competitiveness and self-assertion, as is particularly apparent in sporting activities. In labour sessions, dancing – which always attends festivals – and, in former days, wrestling sessions, young people, particularly boys, could pit their strength against one another and express themselves both collectively and individually through promotion of physical strength. Such public scenes were also places for young people of both genders to judge, approach, “woo” one another. Adolescence is a time for games, for “holidays” before marriage, when boys and girls meet and establish egalitarian, freely chosen relations. However there is little room for privacy in boy-to-girl relations, which are usually mediated by peers. As in other African societies (Tabet, 1985; Mair, 1974), pre-marital procreation is strongly disapproved of in Bwa society. Pre-marital sex is kept within very limited bounds: sex in the bush is prohibited and liable to heavy punishment, while at the village, community control is such that young people can hardly do anything away from the group's watch. Up to the early 1990s, pre-marital births were probably a very rare occurrence: abortion or hasty marriage were possible responses to pre-marital pregnancy. Very few cases of children born of single mothers – they are referred to as “street children” and taken into their mother's lineage, since they have no father – were identified at the village, but there are more and more of them as girls are increasingly migrating, and the fact is beginning to get an amount of visibility.

Those relations between young people belong to a different type from those between married people. Marriage results not from any step taken by young people themselves, but from the control of family institutions. All the while adolescents are enjoying their youth, the elders of the family plan marriages for the members, seeking wives for their sons and giving their daughters away. Matrimonial procedures, which are very formal and involve both material and symbolic resources, extend over a long period of time, usually about three years. The relations between spouses-to-be are of a different nature from those between girls and boys while they are enjoying their “youth” – the young people then characteristically shun each other, and their modesty foreshadows the remote, unequal relations that, as a rule, are established between man and wife. Marriage signals an end to the time of youth, at least for

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<sup>4</sup> *yaro* = young man, *mu* refers to a condition, hence *yaromu* = condition or manifestation of youth.

women, as for men the freedom attendant on youth may endure even after they have got married. Man and wife live together, usually in a hut apart, though the couple is not economically independent. It becomes part of the domestic group to which the young man belongs; the latter will become economically responsible much later, at an average age of 35, through either inheritance or segmentation of property (Hertrich, 2001a).

It thus appears that changes in marriage procedures may entail new relations between the genders: if the socially constructed dissociation between freedom in youth and control in matrimony is disrupted, then the very nature of the relations between man and wife may also change. As a result, if pre-marital affection is made official through marriage, then the relations based on feelings and equality are likely also to influence the relations within the married couple.

## **2. The data**

Data were gathered from an exhaustive biographical survey in two villages, Sirao and Kwara. The survey covered resident men and women as well as male emigrants belonging to the patrilineages represented in the villages. First carried out in 1987-89, the survey has since been updated twice, in 1995 and 2000. During these follow-up surveys, the biographies previously recorded were updated, and those of new residents - i.e. immigrants and the children born since the last visit - were recorded. The biographies were updated up to the time of the survey for the residents and the men who had left on migration since the preceding visit, in which case the information was collected from their relatives residing in the village. The women who had migrated were also monitored as long as they were single, but were no longer included in the survey if they had migrated to get married.

In this study, we will focus on the individuals, born before 1980, who were interviewed as residents during at least one of our visits. There are 1,037 such biographies: 482 related to men and 555 related to women.

The biographical questionnaire is meant to collect the complete marital, reproductive, migratory and religious histories of individuals. Though initially designed for an ordinary, mainly events-based recording of facts, the questionnaire was enhanced in the middle of the first survey so as to capture the family control over individual events. More questions were then inserted with a view to capturing how the family was involved in the way various events, especially migration and marriage, were brought about.

### *Migration biographies*

Migration biographies consist in recording all travels that extend over a minimum period of 3 months. The basic questionnaire was designed to collect information on the migration itself – migration rank, destination, date, type of travelling (marriage, employment, visit, etc.) – and two items of information on the context (whether the migrant travelled individually or with other family members or friends; and whether the migrant knew anybody at the place (s)he was going to).

The revised questionnaire included additional questions on how the family was involved in the migration, from two different points of view, i.e. control over the departure (who took the initiative for the migration, and whether the family elder gave his agreement), and the economic gains for the family farm (what kind of profits were brought back, and how much; what use was made of the profits handed in to the *zu*). Answers to the latter questions were recorded for each migration for employment purposes, if the person interviewed was personally answering. Otherwise, particularly concerning people who were away on migration, the questions were only on family control over the last departure.

### *Union history*

The initial version of the questionnaire was designed to record successive marriages, how they ended, as well as a number of characteristics about the man and his wife – union rank, marital status and religion at the time of the wedding, how many wives the man had at the beginning of the marriage, how the marriage ended, the dates when the marriage was concluded and ended.

In its second version, the questionnaire was meant to record not only marriages but also the matrimonial procedures that were initiated by the families, but were interrupted before they had resulted in marriage. “Potential marriages” or “marriage plans” were thus recorded from non-single persons. Specific questions were asked on each marriage as well as each procedure initiated with a single woman<sup>5</sup>, so that the evolution of family control over couple formation could be appraised.

The questions were on the various stages of the matrimonial process:

- the *union decision*: the initiative for the marriage and the acknowledgement of the formal agreement from the girl's family, which is the formal signal for the traditional procedure to be launched;
- the *bridewealth*, both traditional (performing farming tasks on the fields of the girl's parents, grain offerings), and modern (cash presents or indirect money presents through the purchase of millet beer from the girl's parents at a high price);
- the premarital transition period—referred to here as the “*entrustment*” period—in which the girl is placed in the care of a family designated by the family of her future husband;
- the *length of the process*;
- the *social recognition of the union*: wedding celebration in the village, legal marriage, religious wedding.

As the questions on family control were inserted during the investigation and often concerned only a limited part of the population (matrimonial processes were recorded with non-single persons only, some questions related to migration were not asked when the migrant was not there to answer them in person), they are analysed on the basis of fewer

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<sup>5</sup> Women's remarriage is more a result of personal initiative, and requires no social approval ; such cases were then characterized in the survey mainly from an events perspective.



records than that used for the timetables. For instance, the records used to calculate the marriage timetable are twice as numerous as those used to analyse matrimonial procedures – 819 persons, both single and married, in the former instance, and 395 non-single ones in the latter, from among the generations born before 1975. However, unless otherwise stated, we checked that the trends were similar on the overall population and at the sub-group level. Analysis of family control should then be viewed as a more in-depth, more qualitative and explicative form of the study on the overall population.

Last, it should be mentioned that certain events that are usually viewed as stages of the process into adulthood were left out. Indeed, ages at school leaving, or at access to employment or independent lodgings seemed irrelevant because school attendance is rare, wage earning does not exist, and access to independent accommodation is easy<sup>6</sup>. Age at access to family economic responsibilities was not included in the analysis either, because it occurs at a much later age and is definitely considered an event apart from marriage. Lastly, age at first sexual intercourse was not recorded during the investigation, as the question is thoroughly unwelcome.

## **II. THE EXPANSION OF MIGRATION AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE**

The Bwa are sedentary people, and much attached to their village. Yet migration has always existed, on a large scale for women who, as a rule, go and settle in their husbands' village at the time of the wedding, but also among children – as is the case for foster children – and men and families who may either go on temporary visits or leave the village for good, for example when a new village is created. In the last fifty years, however, migration has been tremendously increasing. At the scale of the villages under study, it was ascertained in previous publication (Hertrich, 1996), on the basis of genealogical materials on the one hand, and intercensal migration rates on the other hand. The same evolution is to be observed, in a more significant form, as a result of comparing the migration experiences of the different generations of individuals who were interviewed as residents during either visit.

### **1. Economic migration is getting widespread among young people**

Already among older generations, it was not exceptional for young people to travel: 50 percent of the men, and 60 percent of the women born before 1945 had travelled for at least 3 months by the time they were 25 years old (figure 1). However, there has been substantial increase of migration among the younger generations, as it has affected all the men who belong to the generations born between 1960 and 1969, and almost all the women (95 percent) who were born in the 1970s.

The extension of migration is closely linked to increased migration for economic purposes, which has expanded in two phases. At first, from the 1960s, men mostly accounted for the development of migration for employment purposes, which became visible starting from the 1945-1959 generations, and then continued to expand dramatically, until it affected

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<sup>6</sup> Access to independent accommodation usually occurs at the time of the first marriage with no constraints involved, as young couples build their own houses themselves

almost all the members of the next generations: at 20 years of age, 80 to 90 percent of the men born after 1960 had migrated at least once for economic purposes, whereas only 40 percent of the men born in 1945-1959 had. In a second time, from the late 1980s, labour migration extended to women. Though migration for employment purposes developed later among women, its expansion has been quite as dramatic: at age 20, over 80 percent of the women born in 1975-1979 were affected, as against 60 percent among the 1970-1974 generations and only 20 percent among the 1960-1969 ones.

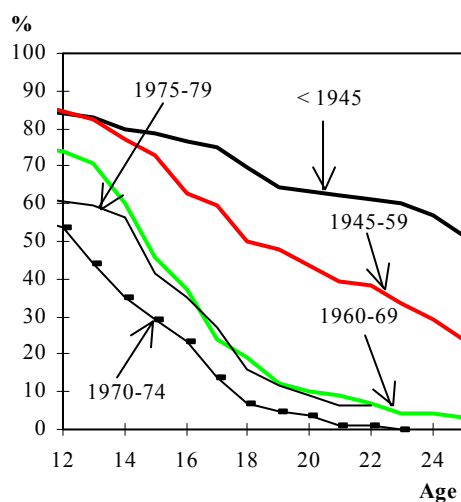
Figure 1.

### Increasing migration among young people

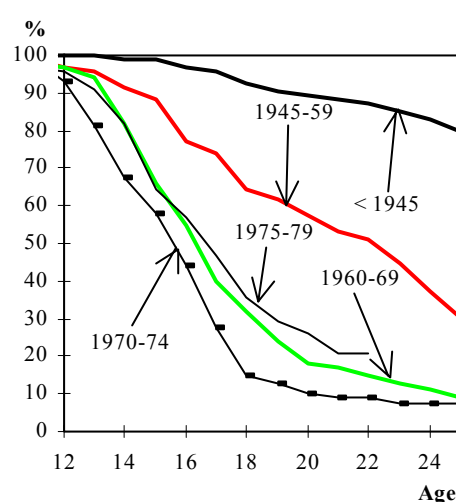
Proportion (in percentage) of individuals who have never migrated and proportion (in percentage) of individuals who have never migrated for employment purposes before age x, by sex and generations (time-table data)

#### MEN

Proportion of men who had never migrated before age x

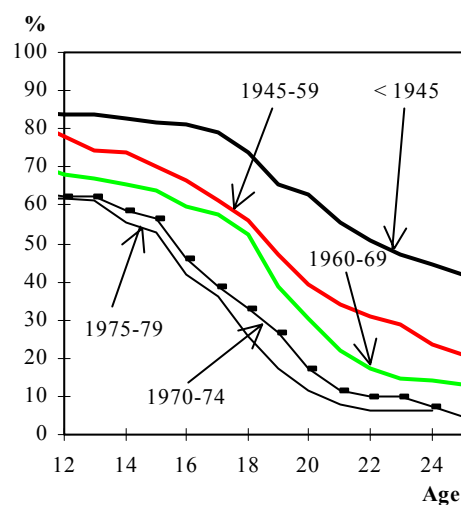


Proportion of men who had never migrated for employment purposes before age x

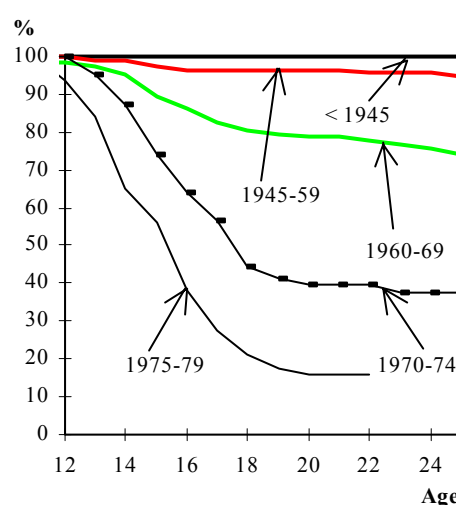


#### WOMEN

Proportion of women who had never migrated before age x



Proportion of women who had never migrated for employment purposes before age x

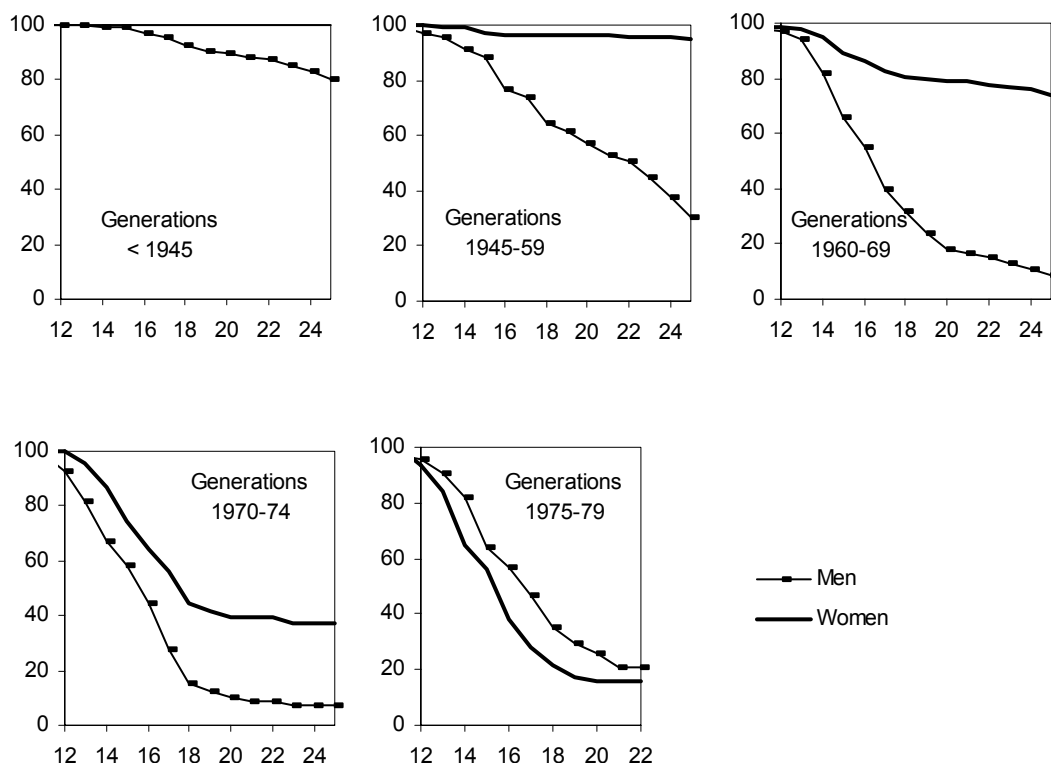


## 2. Converging migration trends among young women and young men

Migration for the sake of employment, which was long a matter for men only, is now fully a component of young women's lives. Such migration is now an almost systematic component of transition into adulthood among both sexes. In figure 2 is shown how the migration experience of women is gradually brought closer to men's: whereas the differences between the genders were still significant among the 1970-1974 generations, they have almost worn off among the 1975-1979 ones.

Figure 2

**Converging experiences of migration for employment purposes among men and women**  
Proportion (%) of individuals who had never migrated for employment purposes before age x  
(time-table data)



Just as the proportions of young men and young women who have migrated at least once for employment purposes are converging, so is the average number of migration moves (table 1). Women have been catching up with men very fast, and are now migrating for employment purposes more often than the latter do (2.1 as against 1.6 among the 1975-1979 generations).

The significance of those migratory moves, however, would be very different for the two genders if their destination points were places not far away from the village for women, and more distant for men. To measure this, we have reckoned the proportion of persons interviewed who have previously resided away from the Bwa's ethnic area (the Boo country), i.e. in a different social and cultural environment from their initial one (table 1) and the corresponding years of life (figure 3). Again, the experiences of young people of both genders

appear to be converging. Migration has caused their living space to expand for women as well as for men. Among the younger generations, 8 individuals out of 10, of both sexes, have lived in a different social and cultural environment from their initial one before the age of 20, as against 2 men out of 10 and 1 woman out of 10 among the older generations.

Table 1  
**Average number of migration for employment before age 20 and percentage of individuals who have migrated away from Boo country at least once before age 20**

	Generations				
	< 1945	1945-59	1960-69	1970-74	1975-79
Average number of migration moves for employment purposes made before age 20*					
Men	0.2	0.6	1.4	2.3	1.6
Women	0.0	0.1	0.3	1.2	2.1
Percentage of individuals who have migrated away from Boo country at least once before age 20					
Men	20	35	74	84	78
Women	9	18	43	66	85
Numbers					
Men	100	97	98	84	98
Women	115	114	126	85	113
* The average number of migration moves was reckoned based on the total population of migrants and non-migrants. Source: biographical survey, individuals who were interviewed as residents during either visit (1987-89, 1995 or 2000)					

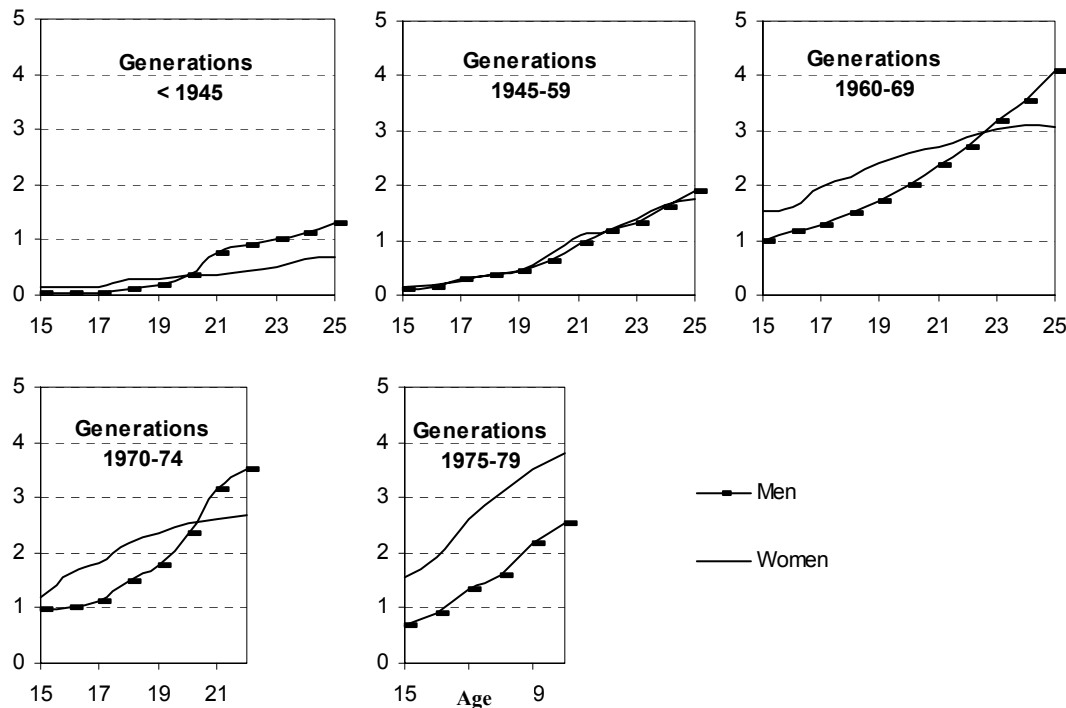
Young people not only leave their own ethnic area in greater numbers; they also stay away for longer periods (figure 3). The evolution has been more or less similar among men and among women. The expansion of stays away from Boo country has become apparent starting from the 1960-69 generations. These generations, like the next ones, had spent quite significant time (an average of 1 to 1.5 years) away from Boo country by the time they were 15, which means that their parents had migrated before them. However, all along their youth the periods of time they spend away grow ever longer, so that their experience eventually is quite different from that of older generations: at age 20, the periods men and women born between 1960 and 1969 had spent away from their own ethnic area were approximately 6 times as long as that spent by the generations born before 1945. Among younger generations, the time men spend away from their initial environment has stopped increasing, whereas it still is among women, which entails that girls eventually live a longer part of their youth away from their own ethnic area than young men.

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Expansion of migration among girls has been observed among many populations in West Africa, and is part of the social changes currently affecting rural societies (Antoine and Sow, 2000; Delaunay, 1995). Though it occurred later in Bwa villages, still it has expanded very fast.

Figure 3  
Average duration of time (years) spent away from Boo country before age x



The average duration of time spent away was reckoned based on the total population (migrants and non-migrants)

Similar migration characteristics among the sexes suggest that migration points to a new component in the relations between the genders. Boys and girls, who used to experience their youth together at the village, now share a different experience (even if they do not go through it together) out of which a new, common culture can evolve, feeding on the knowledge they have gathered and the adventures they have been through. In any case it means breaking away from the models transmitted by past generations. Migration may be viewed as a move in which is expressed young people's quest for a socialisation space different from the one that family and village communities have to offer; as a demand for such information and opening onto the world as are not available at the village, a need that schools could not meet, as so few children had any formal education. Migration for employment purposes thus turns into venues for informal socialisation, so that young people can build their own representation of the world, away from the traditional family environment (Gauthier, 1997).

Does this entail that growing similarity between the migration timetables of the two genders is really a sign that changes are occurring in the relations between the sexes? Does it mean that a "sexless" period of life is under way, as Claudine Sauvain-Dugerdil and Abdoul Wahab Dieng (2001) suggest, which might eventually result in more between men and women in adulthood? In a broader sense, is migration viewed in the same way by young people of both sexes, and does it relate in the same way with the family order?

A qualitative survey and an analysis of representations would be necessary to understand what young men and women think the migration they have experienced means to them. An analysis of the characteristics of the migration, especially of the family context in which they took place, though not so sharp, at least serves to weigh up the assumption that the migration expectations of the two sexes are converging and relate with the social practice in the village in the same way.

### 3. Gender-specific experiences of migration

#### *a. Gender-specific activities and gender-specific destinations*

Though economic migration affects girls as much as boys, the very nature of those moves definitely differs. Among young men, migration for employment purposes has been strongly dominated by a peculiar type since the 1970s – migration to Fulani areas. Young boys leave to work as herdsmen for Fula cattle-breeders for several months, and are paid in cattle heads. This type of migration makes it possible for families to get draft oxen with no monetary expense incurred.

It is with this type of migration that young men, starting from the 1960-69 generations, begin in migration – two-thirds of men had experienced it at least once by the time they were 20 years old (table 2). On the other hand, it is not part of female migration experiences at all. The second stage in men's migration practices, which extends until they are about 30 years of age, is when they move to urban centres. Before the age of 20, only half the male members of the young generations are affected, as against over 80 percent of the female ones.

Table 2  
Percentage of individuals who have experienced at least one migration for employment purposes by age 20. Migration to Fulani areas and other labour-related migration.

	Generations				
	< 1945	1945-59	1960-69	1970-74	1975-79
Percentage of individuals who had experienced at least one labour-related migration, out of Fulani areas before they were aged 20					
Men	9	20	37	59	53
Women	0	4	21	60	84
Percentage of individuals who had experienced at least one migration to Fulani areas before they were aged 20					
Men	1	29	66	73	55
Women	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Numbers</i>					
<i>Men</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>97</i>	<i>98</i>	<i>84</i>	<i>98</i>
<i>Women</i>	<i>115</i>	<i>114</i>	<i>126</i>	<i>85</i>	<i>113</i>
Source : biographical survey, individuals interviewed as residents during one or other visit (1987-89, 1995 or 2000)					

This difference between young men and women in the very nature of the migration experience for employment purposes is also to be observed in their activities on the site where they have migrated. When young men migrate before age 20, they work mostly as herdsmen or farm labourers (80 percent), whereas almost all the girls (90 percent of them) work as domestic servants for families (table 3).

Men and women have different jobs, thus reproducing the same division of labour as prevails at the village, with women active in the domestic sphere and men in the economic one (the cattle young men bring home with them are one way of diversifying the incomes of the *zu*).

The migration experiences of Bwa young women and men also take place in different geographic areas. Migration among young women is mainly of an urban type (70 percent) whereas there is greater geographic diversification about young men's migration (table 3).

Table 3  
The characteristics of the labour migration before age 20. Generations 1970-79.

	Men	Women
<b>Type of activity</b>		
Herdsmen or farm labourers	78	0
Services	13	9
Domestic servants	2	91
Workers	7	0
	100	100
<b>Place of migration</b>		
Foreign countries	3	2
Urban areas	37	70
Boo area	33	27
Elsewhere in Mali	27	1
	100	100
<b>Initiative and agreement</b>		
Individual initiative with the <i>zuso</i> 's agreement	47	49
Individual initiative without the <i>zuso</i> 's agreement	18	43
Non-individual initiative	35	8
	100	100
<b>Whether left home alone</b>		
Alone	63	42
With somebody else	37	58
	100	100
<b>Whether knew anybody at place of destination</b>		
yes	65	72
no	35	28
	100	100
<b>Profits derived from migration</b>		
None	9	35
Economic goods (including money)	80	40
Individual enhancement goods	11	25
	100	100

***b. Are men's migration practices better integrated in the traditional social system?***

Migration almost always results from an initiative taken by young men and women alike (table 3). However, more girls (43 percent) than young men (18 percent) steal away without an agreement from the economic official.

It seems that young men, who started migrating earlier, relate better to the economic rationale of the family. Moves often depend on the seasons – the boys leave during the dry season, a slack period in the agricultural calendar, and come back when the agricultural

season is due to begin. The girls often leave for a year or more and fail to come back to take part in any collective labour. Moreover, young men hand in most of the profit they have made from migrating, whether cattle or money, to the economic official or *zuso*, thus contributing to the domestic economy. The profits girls make very seldom help to maintain the domestic group, as they come home bringing fine clothes and cooking things with them. They may give some money to their parents, but then in small amounts meant for petty personal expenses such as tobacco or soap (table 3).

### *c. A new status for girls?*

Increasing economic migration among women is not only dramatic, it may also bring into families and communities such elements as are bound to challenge the roles traditionally allotted to men and women.

Through migration women begin to explore a living environment in which control is much looser than it is at the village. In their eyes the urban world represents modernity and what lies “elsewhere”. Though the economic gains from their migration are often trifling (they are in jobs that are paid much less than men’s), they come back to the village endowed with the new knowledge – and new know-how – that they secured during their stay in town: they speak Bambara, the national language, they know the town, their “eyes have been opened”, and they “are cleanly”. They may point out to their future in-laws that the goods they bring back home from town (mostly cooking things and clothes) are part of their material and symbolic capital, as such a “trousseau” is traditionally offered to the young bride by her husband’s family at the time of the wedding.

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While migration for employment purposes among young men has expanded from the 1970s in close relation with the family economics prevailing at the village, the more recent expansion of migration among girls might entail a deeper challenge to the relationships both between the genders and the generations. Just like young men, girls now spend a large portion of their youth away from the village, away from family and community control, and are faced with different ways of life and cultural models. The knowledge they got while in town enables them to assert themselves in a more personal way when they are back in the village, and possibly to have more of a say in building their future life, particularly where their marital and reproductive life is concerned. Analysing first marriage patterns will afford insight into whether increasing migration moves among women have caused any change about the role of women in taking decisions about their marriage.



### III. CHANGES IN MARRIAGE TIMING AND MARRIAGE PROCESS

#### 1. Age at first marriage and spouse matching

Traditionally it is up to the lineage authorities, as previously stated, to run marriage procedures, at least those in which single women are concerned. Such prerogative also implies a duty: it is incumbent on the lineage officials to find a first wife for every one of their dependants within reasonable limits of time. Unless affected with some exceptionally serious handicap, in the population under study no man remains single for life. Unlike other societies in the region, among the Bwa family heads would very seldom take advantage of their position to secure young wives for themselves, at the expense of younger men of the family who would then remain single for a longer period of time. It is unthinkable that a man should marry a young woman who could be his own son's wife. As a matter of fact, Bwa men marry at rather young ages, not very later than women – among the oldest generations, those born before 1945, the mean age of men at first marriage was 22.6, with a difference of 4.7 years from that of women (table 4), whereas in most Sahel countries, the mean age is about 27, with over 8 years differences between the ages of man and wife (Hertrich, 2001b).

Table 4

**Mean age at first marriage and percentage of first marriages with a husband/wife who was never married**

	Generations				
	< 1945	1945-59	1960-69	1970-74	1975-79
Mean age at first marriage:					
Men	22,6	21,7	21,5	22,9	23,5
Women	17,9	17,6	17,6	18,6	19,2
Difference in years	4,7	4,1	3,9	4,4	4,3
Percentage of individuals who contracted their first marriage with a person who was single:					
Men	72	77	88	85*	84*
Women	63	69	67	80	81*
<i>Numbers</i>					
<i>Men</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>97</i>	<i>98</i>	<i>84</i>	<i>98</i>
<i>Women</i>	<i>115</i>	<i>114</i>	<i>126</i>	<i>85</i>	<i>113</i>
* Provisional result: over 20 percent of the persons interviewed were still single at the time of the survey. Source: biographical survey, individuals interviewed as residents at either visit (1987-89, 1995 or 2000).					

However, this first marriage pattern has grown still more flexible up to the generations born in the 1960s. The mean age of men at first marriage was brought down by about 1 year, and the difference of ages between a man and his bride has gone down to 3.9 years, with women's age at first marriage varying only slightly. Such evolution might have meant that men were increasingly marrying the more accessible categories of women, i.e. divorced women<sup>7</sup>, who incur little social control over their remarriage, or widows. Actually, far from

<sup>7</sup> Bwa marriages are often disrupted by divorce, which entails no negotiations to get bridewealth back, nor implies any formal procedure. 20 percent of first marriages among women are currently disrupted within the first 4 years of married life, and 30 percent within the first 10 years. Initiative for the divorce usually comes from wives who find their married life unsatisfactory and go and try their luck elsewhere. Divorce and remarriage are closely linked: all along her reproductive life, it is next to impossible for a woman to remain single. In 95 percent of divorce cases, women get married again within the next 3 years, and in 40 percent of cases, divorce and

increasing in frequency, marriages of bachelors to ever-married women have become rarer. Whereas among the older generations, 28 percent of men started in married life with an ever-married woman, among the 1960-69 ones only 12 percent do the same (table 4). The same tendency is to be observed, though skipping a group of generations, among women. In the vast majority of cases nowadays, both man and wife are entering married life “in step”.

This couple-matching pattern, just like the difference between ages of man and wife at first marriage, is still to be observed among the younger generations. However, the time for first marriage has substantially changed among both sexes, as people get married at a later age. The median age at first marriage increased about 2 years for males, and 1.6 years for females between the 1960-69 and the 1975-79 generations. This trend can hardly be attributed to tightened family control over marriage, as marriages between never-married persons have continued to expand. It occurred simultaneously with intensified migration among women, to which it is probably closely linked. However, it seems that both facts should be viewed, not as linked by any cause to effect relation (with either migration causing people to remain single for a longer period of time, or marriage postponement making room for migration), but rather as resulting from one and the same type of change: more flexible family control over young people, and a new place acknowledged to girls, so that the latter can both migrate away from their initial environment and enter the sphere of marriage and reproduction at a later age.

Analysing the matrimonial procedures prior to any marriages between single persons affords full discussion of how the control of families over young people's marriages has weakened.

## **2. Family control over couple formation: matrimonial processes**

In its usual form, a woman's first marriage takes place within a codified process with several stages. The procedure is formally initiated by the consent of the girl's family, requested by the young man's lineage and transmitted by means of a mediator. From then on instalments of bridewealth, including farm labour, grain and – nowadays - cash, are due to the girl's family. The period of engagement ends with a symbolic kidnapping (“abduction”); then the girl is entrusted (“deposited”) to a family on allied or friendly terms with her husband's family, up to the day of the wedding. In this celebration, the union is sanctioned and the bride honoured in her husband's village. It is then that man and wife begin to live together.

The traditional Bwa marriage is, above all, a collective undertaking in which the betrothed are passive. It is a "family affair," as the marriage is arranged and managed by the lineage: brides are sought for the men, and girls are given in marriage. Marriage is also a "social affair" in that the community is involved as well. Community participation includes the brokerage of inter-lineage relations by a male member of a caste; farming brideservice rendered by village youths; the hosting of the future spouse by a related or friendly family; and the officialization of the union and integration of the spouse achieved through the village ceremony.

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remarriage are simultaneous, with women leaving their husbands to go and live with the new one (Hertrich, 1996).

The analysis of these processes will focus on marriages between never-married partners. To study changes over time, we should confine our analysis to those generations that are through with the first marriage period. This requirement is met by almost all the men born before 1970 (among the 1960-69 generations interviewed in the last visit, only 7 percent were single) and the women born before 1975 (among the 1975-79 generations, only 3 percent were single). However, the results on the 1970-74 generations, among which 20 percent are single, will also be presented, as it is from then on that the trends in first marriages have shifted. The data will then have to be handled with care: by definition, among the men on whom the analysis is based, first marriage occurred earlier than among the rest of the same generations<sup>8</sup>. The men of those generations who are still single are also likely to have different pre-marital schedules. But it is impossible to presume the direction of the bias: later marriage may be due either to less frequent matrimonial procedures or, just as likely, to more complex premarital processes.

The same kind of problem arises concerning the young generations of women, though unlike men, almost all of them are married already. But the women who leave the village at the time when they get married move out of the field of study, and the characteristics of their marriage are not captured (though they were taken into account to calculate nuptiality timetable). Yet, part of those women live in town with their husband, and their matrimonial behaviours are likely to differ, from various points of view, from those of the women studied at the village. For example, one characteristic of the latter (on whom is based the analysis of matrimonial processes) is that they get into a first marriage at an earlier age than their generations as a whole. One has also to be cautious concerning the women of the older generations, but for a different reason. Dual collection results show that the matrimonial processes they describe often differ from those described by men – they seem shorter and less complex. The difference probably results from the fact that women were not so well informed on the process established for their own marriage. Thus, trends based on women's statements may reflect the growing involvement of women in the marriage process, i.e. the greater knowledge of the process by the younger generations. (Hertrich, 1998).

For those various reasons, it proves difficult to analyse the trends in the characteristics of women's first marriages, and more generally of their premarital itineraries (which are studied in part IV). As a result, the analysis will focus on the data collected from men; these, however, yield plenty information on the changes that have affected women too. The indicators based on women's first marriages are given in the appendix.

#### ***a. Is marriage getting to be a private matter?***

The decline of family authorities in couple formation is obvious from the statistics describing how the two lineages are involved in deciding on the marriage – how the bridegroom's family is involved by taking the initiative, and the bride's by giving the agreement launching the matrimonial process (table 5).

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<sup>8</sup> Median age at first marriage among the sub-group under study is lower than that of the general population, starting from the generations born in 1960 for men and those born in 1970 for women. The difference is inverted among the older generations. Median ages at first marriage are given in table 4 concerning the overall population; those of the sub-group whose matrimonial process is studied are given in table 9.

Table 5  
**Marriage decision-making: initiative and mode of access to a wife**  
 First marriages of men with a never-married woman

Indicators	Generations			
	< 1945	1945-59	1960-69	1970-74
<b>Initiative of union</b> (kinship between the initiative-taker and the husband-to-be)				
Oneself	34	44	56	52
Close relatives (father, mother, brother, father's father)	35	35	29	36
Other	31	21	15	12
	100	100	100	100
<b>Mode of access to the wife</b>				
Consent of the girl's family	90	83	71	63
Abduction (with no previous agreement)	10	17	29	37
	100	100	100	100
<b>Percentage of partner-initiated marriages with a procedure involving the initial consent of the girl's family</b>	80	73	64	65
<i>Number of persons interviewed</i>	30	35	41	35
Source : biographical survey, ever-married men interviewed as residents during either visit (1987-89, 1995 or 2000)				

Young people increasingly interfere to suggest a wife of their own choice: in the generations born after 1960, half the marriages result from an individual initiative, as against one third only among the men born before 1945. Such assertion of the individual occurred at the expense of the extended family. However, the interference of those next of kin, including the father, mother, brother and grandfather, has remained stable, with about one third of marriages resulting from their initiative, in all the generations. It thus appears that initiative for marriages has narrowed down to the young man's close relatives, as is the case for 9 marriages out of 10 among the younger generations. Individual initiative, however, does not mean shunning family circles; young men usually tell their family about their plans; the family then takes over, launching the traditional procedure. Still, that move is not considered as inevitable as it used to be: among the younger generations, one third of the marriages resulting from individual initiative were concluded without any formal procedure, as against only one fifth among the older generations.

How young people are increasingly participating in their own matrimonial plans is also revealed on analysis of the modes of access to a wife (table 5). Marriages resulting from abduction without any previous consent from the girl's family had increased threefold between the old and the generations. This does not necessarily mean that the family has opposed the marriage: negotiations and conciliation are usually started just after the abduction, and a couple will seldom settle down unless an agreement has finally been reached. However, using that method, which usually results from an agreement between the partners, means that the family is presented with a *fait accompli* that they will have to endorse.

#### ***b. A renewed bridewealth system***

Bridewealth is one important component of the matrimonial process, not so much because of its economic value, which is small compared with other populations in the region, as because it contributes to mark it in time. Provision of farming labour or cereal presents

after the harvest is a sign that the engagement for matrimony is progressing and gives it a concrete dimension.

These traditional forms of bridewealth are still widely used: in all the generations, 6 to 7 marriages out of 10 had involved provision of farming labour or grain (table 6). However, the payments are definitely not so large as they used to be. Gifts of grain tend to slow down, and farming services that extend over several years have grown rare. Nowadays nobody provides farm labour for 3 or more years, whereas 30 percent of marriages among the old generations involved that much; farming services are now usually paid only over a period of one year.

Table 6  
**Old and new forms of bridewealth**  
First marriages of men with a never-married woman

Indicators	Generations			
	< 1945	1945-59	1960-69	1970-74
<b>Traditional forms of bridewealth</b>				
Distribution (%) of marriages by years of farm labour :				
0	43	32	39	50
1	7	40	44	35
2	20	11	10	15
3 and more	30	17	7	0
	100	100	100	100
Average number of farming labour years	1.9	1.2	0.9	0.6
Proportion (%) of marriages involving gifts of grain	53	66	44	38
Proportion (%) of marriages involving either gifts of grain or farm labour	63	80	63	63
<b>New forms of bridewealth</b>				
Proportion (%) of marriages involving direct cash present	10	54	51	65
Proportion (%) of marriages involving purchase of millet beer	11	21	15	12
Proportion (%) of marriages involving either	13	57	51	65
Source: biographical survey. Ever-married men interviewed as residents during either visit (1987-89, 1995 or 2000)				

Concurrently with those old forms of bridewealth, money has been introduced into the Bwa matrimonial payment system. It circulates in two ways: direct cash presents and the purchase of large quantities of millet beer from the girl's family. Those monetary benefits were involved already in over half the marriages among the 1945-59 generations. However, the amounts paid are small<sup>9</sup>: in half the cases, the total amount of money offered is under 10.000 CFAF. Unlike the situation in other African populations, monetary payments then prove to be not so unaffordable as to keep young men from marrying. Nor can they be interpreted as demands by means of which family authority is reasserted in the realm of matrimony. This is corroborated by the fact that those new forms of payment are usually meant to benefit the bride (in 3 cases out of 4, according to the data gathered from women).

On the whole, it turns out that the components in the payment system that have declined are those that benefited family officials, providing them with both economic (farming duties) and symbolic profit (as they ran the matrimonial process over a long period of time). On the

<sup>9</sup> They are far below the bridewealth recorded among other African populations - which sometimes amounts to several hundred thousand CFA francs. See for example Enel et al., 1994; Guigou, 1992; Isiugo-Abanihe, 1994 ; Locoh, 1994 ; Nagashima, 1987

other hand, the new forms of payment tend to benefit the prospective couple, especially the bride.

***c. Is the formal recognition of marriages being challenged?***

Analysing the events that mark the end of the process and give it public recognition provides another means of appraisal of how social control over matrimony, in its most concrete dimension, is weakening.

In table 7 is provided measurement of the occurrence of 3 events – deposits, wedding celebrations and register office weddings. The proportion of marriages for which the relations between the lineages (on the occasion either of the request for an agreement or of the post-abduction conciliation) were established through traditional mediators – caste men, either blacksmiths or griots – is also mentioned in the table. It seems that this type of mediation is not being challenged, as it was involved in 6 marriages out of 10.

On the other hand, the formal ceremonies that mark the end of the matrimonial procedure have significantly changed.

As a rule, even when the traditional process was implemented, the girl was abducted, as a ritual sign that the period of engagement was at an end. She was then “deposited” with a trustworthy family for about a month, while the families hold their last meetings and organise the “fiancée’s celebration”, through which the change about her status will be made public. Those two stages were gone through in virtually all women’s first marriages (9 out of 10), even when a girl was abducted without any previous agreement from her family, up to the generations born in the late 1950s. But they have been in rapid decline since then: 30 percent of the marriages of the men born in 1970-74 involved no deposit and 40 percent were not celebrated. A substantial proportion of individuals now starts in married life without any public ceremony sanctioning their marriage.

Table 7  
**Mediation and social sanction for the marriage**  
First marriages of men with a never-married woman

Indicators	Generations			
	< 1945	1945-59	1960-69	1970-74
<b>Proportion (%) of marriages mediated by a caste man</b>	57	55	56	74
<b>Proportion (%) of marriages involving entrustment</b>	93	91	85	71
<b>Proportion (%) of marriages involving a celebration</b>	93	94	73	56
<b>Proportion (%) of marriages involving a register office wedding</b>	31	29	18	29
<i>Numbers</i>	<i>30</i>	<i>35</i>	<i>41</i>	<i>35</i>

Source: biographical survey. Ever-married men interviewed as residents at either visit (1987-89, 1995 or 2000)

Decline of wedding celebrations at the village has not entailed any increased use of public institutions. Only a minority of couples have civil weddings, and then often several years after cohabitation.

The recent but dramatic decline of formally sanctioned marriages is probably revealing of deep changes in the marriage institution. The latter has long been subject to tensions due to redistribution of responsibilities in the realm of matrimony, as shown in the changes affecting most of the components in the processes. Nevertheless, as a rule, marriages were still formally celebrated: though family officials have agreed to young people increasingly interfering in the choice of their own spouse, and to bringing their own demands for benefits down to lower levels, they have managed to preserve the formal structure of the procedures and continue to run them themselves (Hertrich. 1996. 1997b). Recent changes suggest that even the management of that formal aspect of marriage procedures is slipping out of their hands.

#### *d. A steadily shortening process*

One last illustration of how control over matrimony is getting looser can be observed through the change about the length of the marriage process (table 8). Processes that extend over 3 years and more, which used to be the majority, are now exceptional (10 percent as against over 60 percent formerly): 2 men out of 3 in the 1970-74 generations, married a single without any matrimonial procedure being launched at all, or using a process lasting less than one year. Waiting time for access to a wife is being reduced, as can be observed at every scale: whether marriages involving only a formal procedure are considered, or all the first marriages contracted with a single woman, or whether first marriages with a widowed or divorced woman are included (these were more common among the older generations and the duration of the process is nil by definition), the average time invested in the first marriage procedure is three times as short among the youngest generations as it was among the oldest ones.

Table 8  
**Length of the marriage process**  
First marriages of men with a never-married woman

	Generations			
	< 1945	1945-59	1960-69	1970-74
<b>Distribution (%) of marriages with respect to length of the process</b>				
- no process at all, but with initial agreement from the girl's family	10	17	29	37
- under 1 year	10	9	15	26
- 1 year	3	14	22	17
- 2 years	13	23	10	9
- 3 years and more	64	37	24	11
	100	100	100	100
<b>Mean duration on :</b>				
- the processes launched with the agreement from the girl's family	3.7	2.8	2.1	1.3
- all marriages contracted with a never-married woman	3.3	2.4	1.5	0.9
- all marriages contracted with a woman, whatever her marital status	2.1	1.6	1.3	0.7

Source: biographical survey. Ever-married men interviewed as residents at either visit (1987-89, 1995 or 2000)

However, the question is whether shorter time devoted to formal organisation of young people's first marriages really means that families are moving out of the matrimony sphere. Are first marriage processes less frequent, less codified and shorter because family officials are more inclined to let young people develop their own matrimonial plans, or is it because they are growing less efficient in carrying out the plans they have initiated themselves?

One way of discussing this is to examine not only the first marriage procedure but all the procedures launched, whether they have successfully resulted in marriage or were interrupted before the marriage was concluded.

### **3. The pre-marital dynamics of matrimony**

Men may have diverse and complex experiences before their first marriage. Some may start in married life without having undertaken any engagement procedure, by marrying a widowed or divorced woman, or by abducting a single woman. Others may implement several different processes (with different women) simultaneously. Moreover a man's first marriage does not necessarily imply the end of his marriage processes. Matrimony plans initiated in bachelorhood may end (in a break-off or a polygamous marriage) only after the first marriage, and new ones may be launched. Given those various parameters, many different scenarios may be played out.

Various indicators on such "pre-marital matrimonial life" are given in table 9. The indicators on the more recent generations should be taken with caution, as all the members were not married yet at the time of the survey.

The results confirm that families have increasingly renounced to organise their members' marriages. The number of formal matrimonial procedures initiated by families to secure a first wife for their members has gone down by 25 percent between the generations born before 1960 and the next ones. The proportion of men who have experienced no procedure at all with an unmarried woman has almost doubled from the older generations (17 percent) to the younger ones (31 percent). The change is all the more spectacular as it occurred simultaneously with an increase in the proportion of single women among men's first wives: the marriage-market, on which control was once strictest, is now widely open.

Weaker interference of the family in couple formation has mainly entailed that men's first marriage procedures are now simplified. Among the old generations, families frequently (in 25 percent of cases) initiated several procedures (whether simultaneously or successively) to secure an never-married first wife for their members; this very seldom happens among the young generations (10 percent of the men). On the other hand, the proportion of men on behalf of whom one procedure only was launched has remained stable (about 60 percent). Though there has been no obvious increase about the risk for the procedure to be disrupted (the failure rate is about 1/3), the fact that fewer men have been through several procedures results in break-off getting to be a less common experience among the young generations (1/4 of the men born from 1960 are affected as against 40 percent of the older ones).



Table 9  
**Pre-marital experience in matrimony:  
procedures launched, disrupted procedures and premarital itineraries**

**MEN**

	<b>Generations</b>			
	< 1945	1945-59	1960-69	1970-74
<b>Distribution (%) of men, by number of procedures (whatever the result)</b>				
- 0	17	17	23	31
- 1	60	57	64	59
- 2 and more	23	26	13	10
	100	100	100	100
<b>Distribution (%) of men, by number of disrupted procedures</b>				
- 0	66	53	74	74
- 1	28	36	26	26
- 2 and more	6	12	0	0
	100	100	100	100
<b>Distribution (%) of men, by number of procedures that resulted in marriage</b>				
- 0	36	42	36	48
- 1	58	58	64	52
- 2	6	0	0	0
	100	100	100	100
<b>Mean number of procedures:</b>				
- whatever the results	1.1	1.2	0.9	0.8
- resulting in marriage	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.5
- disrupted	0.4	0.6	0.3	0.3
Proportion (%) of procedures that resulted in a break-up	37	52	29	33
<b>Types of premarital itineraries</b>				
- the first procedure resulted in a first marriage	43	38	49	40
- the first procedure did not result in the first marriage, which resulted from a later procedure	17	19	13	12
- the first procedure did not result in the first marriage, which did not result from any procedure	23	26	15	17
- no procedure was launched before the first marriage	17	17	23	31
	100	100	100	100
<b>Median age:</b>				
- at the beginning of the first process (or if none, at first marriage)	18.4	18.9	18.6	20.9
- at the beginning of the first process related to the first marriage (or, if none, at first marriage)	22.4	21.6	18.8	21.9
- at first marriage	23.1	22.4	21.0	22.7
<i>Numbers</i>	47	53	47	42
* Procedures that started before the man's first marriage and were launched after the girl's family had given their agreement. Source : biographical survey, ever-married men interviewed as residents at either visit (1987-89, 1995 or 2000)				

# WOMEN

	Generations			
	< 1945	1945-59	1960-69	1970-74
<b>Distribution (%) of women, by number of procedures (whatever the results)</b>				
- 0	19	24	20	32
- 1	72	60	72	65
- 2 and more	9	16	8	3
	100	100	100	100
<b>Proportion of women who had at least :</b>				
- one disrupted procedure	20	25	23	21
- one procedure that resulted in marriage	67	65	66	50
<b>Mean number of procedures:</b>				
- whatever the results	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.7
- that resulted in marriage	0.7	0.6	0.7	0.5
- disrupted	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.2
Proportion (%) of procedures that resulted in breaking-up	28	30	26	29
<b>Types of pre-marital itineraries</b>				
- the first procedure resulted in a first marriage	61	54	57	47
- the first procedure failed, the first marriage results from a later procedure	5	11	8	3
- the first procedure failed, the first marriage did not result from any procedure	15	11	15	18
- no procedure was initiated	19	24	20	32
	100	100	100	100
<b>Median age:</b>				
- at the beginning of the first process (or if none, at first marriage)	15.4	15.8	15.2	15.8
- at the beginning of the first process related to the first marriage (or if none, at first marriage)	16.3	16.6	16.6	16.3
- at first marriage	18.0	18.0	17.8	17.5
<i>Numbers</i>	54	57	61	34
* Procedures the launching of which was signified by the agreement from the girl's family. Source : biographical survey, ever-married women interviewed as residents at either visit (1987-89, 1995 or 2000)				

The complexity of first marriage procedures was certainly an important dimension of the control of families over matrimony: considering the formal turn given to procedures, but also the uncertainty over the issue of a procedure after it has been launched, it was next to impossible for a young man to get access to a young woman without getting his family involved. The management of matrimony matters was too complex and specialised a field of competence for young men to seize it, so that they kept away from it, "playing out their youth" to keep their minds away from marriage, leaving it to their fathers to seek a young wife for them, or if none turned up soon enough, trying their luck with married women who might be willing to divorce to marry them. The simplification of matrimonial practices, as shown both by the evolution of formal procedures, simplified pre-marital experiences and first wives being increasingly secured from the group of never-married women, then proves not only to be a sign, but also one major cause, of the families' weakening authority. If young people no longer need to call on their families' competence, then it loses its usefulness and becomes irrelevant.

The evolution of the pre-marital schedule provides another illustration of how the practical details for a first marriage are growing simpler and more efficient. The duration of pre-marital life, as measured through the difference between the median age at launching of the first procedure (or at first marriage if there was no procedure) and the median age at first marriage, has steadily decreased: from 4.7 years formerly down to 1.8 years nowadays. At first the difference was reduced because men were having their first marriage at a younger age, then among the generations born in 1970-74, because fewer first procedures were launched. The shortened pre-marital period is also marked by the time devoted to the first marriage process taking more importance: it was about 15 percent for the generations born before 1945, and over 40 percent for the 1970-74 ones.

Lastly the simplification about the pre-marital period also suggests that a new way of “securing a wife”, with more personal involvement about it, is developing. In that case, the relations within the couple are very likely to incur deep changes too.

For women the pre-marital period is structured in a way that is less complex than men's: multiple procedures and disrupted processes are not as common. The difference is not surprising in itself. Just as in the mechanism of polygamy, men choose their wives from a number of generations younger than their own, so that they can initiate processes with several women at once, whereas each woman is bound to one man only. The rather stable trend observed among women however seems more questionable. As previously stated in the discussion of first marriage processes, the women from the old generations (it is among them that differences from the indicators resulting from men's statements are widest, whereas they narrow down among the recent generations) seem to provide a more partial view of their marital life. Such a situation might result, as suggested by the results of a dual collection (Hertrich, 1996, 1998), from the fact that they were less involved in matrimony practices, so that they knew less about the processes through which they were promised. Consequently they understated the disrupted processes and underestimated both the length and the various components of the procedures leading up to marriage. The younger generations, who were better involved in preparing their first marriage, then seem to have made better quality statements. If the assumption proves correct, then the first procedures were likely to have been launched earlier among the old generations than suggested by our data. Consequently a decline of pre-marital schedules is also likely to have occurred up to the generations of women born before 1970, due to shortened duration of pre-marital life and stability of age at first marriage. Such evolution would be coherent with the trend observed among men. It would also be in conformity with the evolution of family control which, as has been discussed, is now leaving more room for the young people to express their own wishes: this trend may account for engagements being held off until a girl is old enough to participate in the decision-making...

#### IV. YOUTH EXPERIENCE PATTERNS

With the stages of the process leading to first marriages getting simpler and migration expanding, the experience of youth has substantially changed from one generation to another. So as to get an overall view of how modes of transition into adulthood have changed, we have related the schedules of various events between themselves – the first migration move for employment purposes, the different stages in the first marriage process (the first process, the process related to the first marriage, and the first marriage), as well as the birth of the first child. In figure 4 are drawn the survival curves related to these different events. Table 10 provides the mean duration of the period before each of these events was experienced, from among the 13 years of life extending from the year of the 12<sup>th</sup> to that of the 24<sup>th</sup> birthday included. In figure 5 is shown at what point the different stages of the process into adulthood (in relation to that table) occur relatively to the first marriage.

Among men, these indicators clearly show how the period of “idleness” in youth has declined, as a result of expanding migration for employment purposes. In the older generations, the first event was the launching of the first marriage process and over half the 13 years of youth under study (13-24) were “idle”. Among the younger generations only 4 years of that period (or one third of its total length) elapse before they experience the first event – migrating for a job. Meanwhile, the length of the youth period devoted to matrimonial matters went down from an average 3.7 years to 1.7 years. The time for the launching of the first procedure has gradually come closer to that for the first marriage process and the first marriage itself. Among the recent generations all 3 schedules are very much alike, and completely unrelated to that of the first migration move. A man achieves a married man status, undoubtedly the most important attribute of adulthood, approximately 3 years before the end of the 13 years under consideration. Access to fatherhood is reached 1 to 1.5 years later.

Among women it also appears very clearly that migration for employment purposes is one important factor in restructuring experience patterns. However, it is only among the 1975-79 generations that it proves to be the first event in the period of youth. Women’s pre-marital period will not be examined in depth, because the changes that affected it cannot be so easily identified, due to the uncertainty about the data. However, it should be noted that though men’s and women’s experience patterns, especially where migration is concerned, are growing more alike, women’s period of youth before first marriage is still much shorter than men’s. Much more than men, women are still bound by reproduction imperatives. Women live through half the 13 years of their lives (from age 12 to 24) as wives and over one third of them as mothers, whereas these figures are only 30 percent and 10 percent respectively among men.

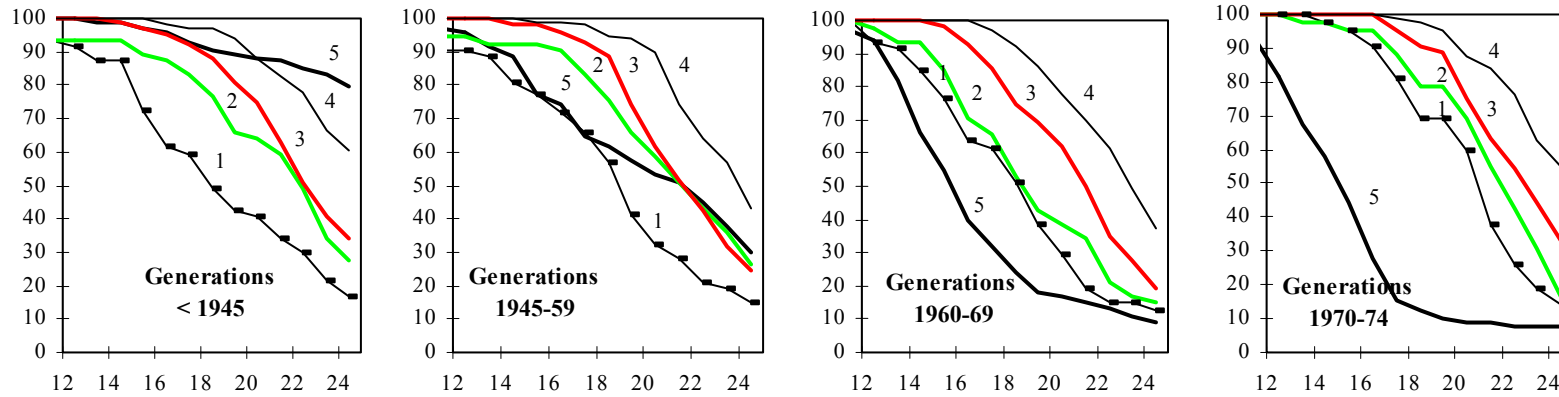
Figure 4

**Experiencing the various stages of transition into adulthood:**

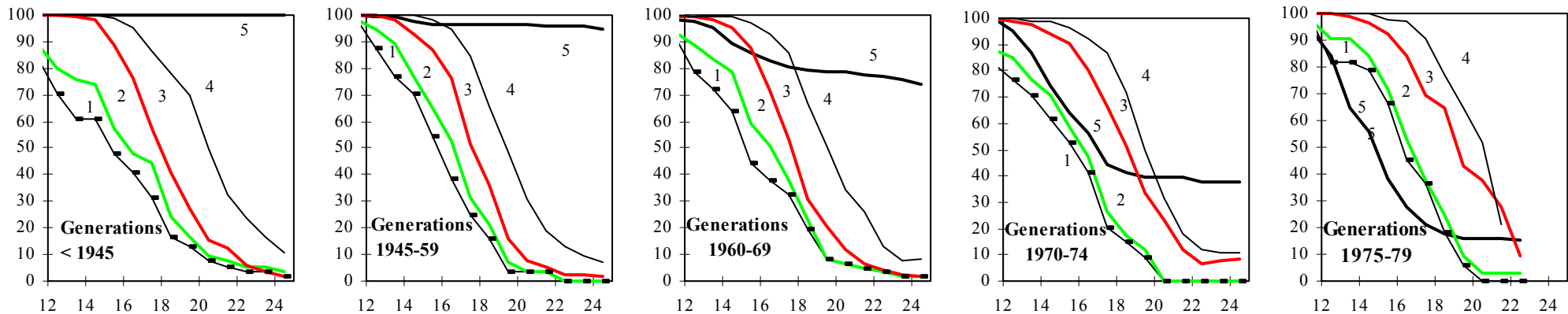
**The first migration for employment purposes, the first process, the process related to the first marriage, the first marriage and the birth of the first child**

Proportion (%) of individuals who have not experienced the event at given ages  
(timetable data)

**Men**



**Women**



1: First matrimonial process (or if none, marriage); 2: Process related to first marriage (or if none, first marriage); 3: First marriage;

4: First live birth; 5: First labour migration

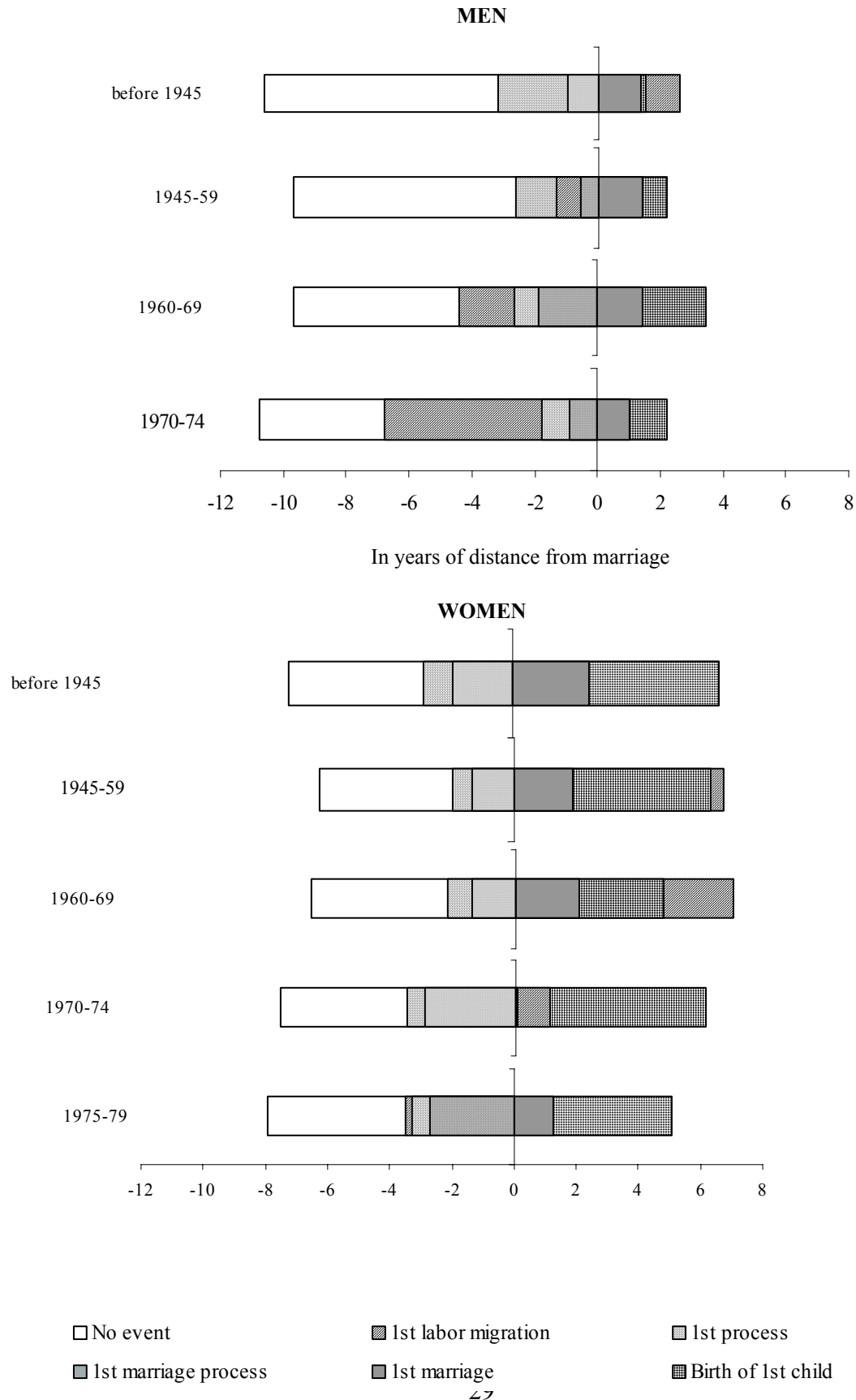
Distribution of the 13 years extending from the year of the 12<sup>th</sup> to that of the 24<sup>th</sup> birthday, according the occurrence of those different events.

	Generations			
	< 1945	1945-59	1960-69	1970-74
<b>Men</b>				
<b>Number of years spent before the event, from among the 13 years of life extending from the year of the 12th to that of the 24th birthday</b>				
- 1 <sup>st</sup> migration for employment purposes	12.0	8.6	5.2	4.0
- 1 <sup>st</sup> process (or if none, 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage)	7.3	7.3	7.0	9.0
- process related to first marriage	9.5	9.4	7.7	9.9
- 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage (a) all generations	10.5	10.0	9.5	10.8
(b) ever-married men whose processes were recorded	11.0	10.4	9.1	10.7
- birth of the 1 <sup>st</sup> child	11.8	11.4	11.0	11.8
Difference:				
- 1 <sup>st</sup> process – 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage (b)	3.7	3.1	2.1	1.7
- process of 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage – 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage (b)	1.5	1.0	1.4	0.8
- 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage (a) – birth of 1 <sup>st</sup> child	1.3	1.4	1.5	1.0
<b>In % of the 13 years of life</b>				
- 1 <sup>st</sup> migration for employment purposes	92	66	40	31
- 1 <sup>st</sup> process (or if none, 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage)	56	56	54	69
- process related to 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage	73	72	59	76
- 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage (a) all the generations	81	77	73	83
(b) ever-married men whose processes were recorded	85	80	70	82
- birth of the 1 <sup>st</sup> child	91	88	85	91
Difference:				
- 1 <sup>st</sup> process – 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage	28	24	16	13
- process of 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage – 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage	12	8	11	6
- 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage – birth of 1 <sup>st</sup> child	10	11	11	8
<b>Women</b>				
<b>Number of years spent before the event, from among the 13 years of life extending from the year of the 12th to that of the 24th birthday</b>				
- 1 <sup>st</sup> migration for employment purposes	13.0	12.6	10.8	7.3
- 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage process (or if none, 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage)	4.1	4.3	4.2	3.9
- process related to first marriage	4.9	4.9	4.9	4.4
- 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage (a) all generations	6.8	6.3	6.3	7.2
(b) ever-married women whose proc. Were recorded	6.8	6.8	6.4	6.2
- birth of the first child	9.1	8.2	8.3	8.2
Difference :				
- 1 <sup>st</sup> process – 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage (b)	2.7	2.1	2.0	1.8
- process of 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage – 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage (b)	1.8	1.4	1.3	1.3
- 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage (a) – birth of 1 <sup>st</sup> child	2.3	1.9	1.9	1.0
<b>In % of the 13 years of life</b>				
- 1 <sup>st</sup> migration for employment purposes	100	97	83	56
- 1 <sup>st</sup> process (or if none, 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage)	31	33	32	30
- process related to 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage	38	38	38	34
- 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage (a) all the generations	52	48	49	55
(b) ever-married women whose proc. were recorded	52	49	48	44
- birth of the 1 <sup>st</sup> child	70	63	64	63
Difference:				
- 1 <sup>st</sup> process – 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage (b)	21	16	15	14
- process of 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage – 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage (b)	14	11	10	10
- 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage (a) – birth of 1 <sup>st</sup> child	18	15	15	8

Figure 5

**The different stages of the transition into adulthood:  
1<sup>st</sup> migration for employment purposes, 1<sup>st</sup> marriage process, process related to 1<sup>st</sup> marriage  
and birth of 1<sup>st</sup> child.**

Distribution of the 13 years lying between the year of the 12<sup>th</sup> and of the 24<sup>th</sup> birthday based on the occurrence of the different events. The events are situated in relation with the 1<sup>st</sup> marriage



## TO CONCLUDE...

Among the old generations, the period of youth was a time of leisure, free of any responsibilities, and it was spent at the village. Meanwhile, however, family officials were busy preparing young people's future marital life. Young people left the job to them, and even if they had wanted to take part, they would have found it difficult to do so. The procedures were complex and not so easy to carry out; it was then virtually impossible to marry any young woman without calling on the elders' competence.

The way the period of youth is run has completely changed within the last fifty years. Young people now spend only part of their life at the village, and migration for employment purposes is now an inevitable element in the transition into adulthood. Virtually all the members of the young generations have lived part of their adolescence in town, where they were faced with social and cultural environments as well as ways of life different from those in their original environment. The way first marriages are organised has also been through substantial change. Family officials are still in charge of organising marriages, but no longer as a rule, and matrimonial procedures are now much more flexible. The elders' interference is not as compulsory as it used to be: young men now may expect to secure a young wife for themselves without calling on the competence of the "old ones", by bypassing the regular procedures for access to wives. As a matter of fact, more and more young men are now starting in married life with a woman who was also single.

There were two phases in the evolution, with the turn occurring in the late 1980s (generations 1960-69).

The first period is characterised by expansion of migration for employment purposes among young men, with no significant change among women. Simultaneously control of families over young people's first marriages went looser: matrimonial processes have grown shorter, traditional bridewealth payments smaller, and initiative for marriages was increasingly taken by young men or their close relatives. As the process grew more flexible, men's age at first marriage has also gone down. However, there has been no challenging of the formal organisation of first marriages: matrimonial procedures are still codified and implemented by family officials. Gender and generation relations are not basically brought into question.

The change seems to have occurred in much greater depth since the 1990s. The period is characterised by expansion of migration for employment purposes among girls, but also by families definitely loosening their grip on marriage management. The evolution about the components of matrimonial procedures, which had started in the previous period, still continues, but the interference of families in their formal implementation is challenged. An increasing number of marriages are now contracted disregarding the order of the procedures, and about half the persons interviewed from the young generations started in married life without their marriage receiving social sanction through a public ceremony. Looser control over matrimony has also entailed simplified and shortened pre-marital matrimonial life: less procedures are launched by families to secure a wife for their members, complex patterns are falling out of use and fewer people are experiencing the breaking up process. Lastly, both sexes get into a first marriage at increasingly later ages.



The impression is definitely that families are withdrawing from their traditional field of competence – couple formation. In the eyes of young people, the past generations no longer appear as necessary referees to start in married life. Also, the village community is no longer the only venue for the period of youth to be played out; it is now spent in diversified contexts, in which young people are confronted with ways of life different from those in their original environment.

Do those changes imply growing similarity between young men and women in terms of experience and status? Could they cause changes to occur in gender relations within married couples?

In its form, the expansion of migration among women looks very much like a later reproduction of the development of migration among men. Migration is likely to have caused both sexes to live through similar experiences, so that they could build a common “youth culture”, though they did not experience it together, unlike the youth experienced at the village. Yet, those migration experiences widely differ from one gender to the other, both from the point of view of the characteristics (place, type of activities) and of the relations with the family. Men’s migration, though basically resulting from individual initiative, is still rather well integrated in the existing family order. Whether young men migrate to work as herdsmen among the Fulani, or to town, they benefit the domestic economy by diversifying its sources of income. The family organisation is not basically challenged, nor are the relations between the generations. Women’s migration could be of a more subversive effect. Girls, much more often than boys, migrate without the family official’s agreement (this is known as “stealthy migration”), clearly for reasons of individual expectations, and the profit they make, however small, is never handed in for the family welfare. Institutional officials in Mali argue, based on press reports, that girls’ migration is a social issue, due to abuse from their employers and the risks related to pre-marital pregnancy and unprotected sex. As a matter of fact the fear is that control over girls’ sexuality should be lost. But while in town, girls also build up a material and symbolic capital through which they will be better valued when they are back at the village, not only by their peers but also by young men. From then on they are in a position to assert themselves in a more personal way. Lastly, experiencing relations with others without the codified limits imposed at the village may equip them with such competence and critical judgement as will be useful in their future married life.

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## APPENDIX

### Characteristics of matrimonial procedures: First marriages of women with a never-married man

	Generations			
	< 1945	1945-59	1960-69	1970-74
<b>Methods of access to a wife</b>				
- Agreement from the girl's family	69	64	74	58
- Abduction (with no previous agreement)	31	36	26	42
	100	100	100	100
<b>Distribution (%) of marriages based on the mediator's identity:</b>				
- a caste man	59	57	64	56
- a member of the bridegroom's lineage on his father's side	20	24	24	41
- other	21	19	12	3
	100	100	100	100
<b>Traditional forms of payment</b>				
Distribution (%) of marriages. based on the number of years of farming labour offered:				
- 0	51	48	45	44
- 1	14	25	33	36
- 2	6	25	19	16
- 3 and more	29	2	3	4
	100	100	100	100
Mean number of years of farm labour	1.3	0.8	0.8	0.8
Proportion (%) of marriages involving gift of cereal	57	52	50	35
Proportion (%) of marriages involving either farm labour or gift of cereal	60	68	69	62
<b>New forms of payment</b>				
Proportion (%) of marriages involving cash	9	23	53	54
Proportion (%) of marriages involving buying millet beer	0	24	20	4
Proportion (%) of marriages involving either	9	30	56	54
<b>Proportion (%) of marriages involving deposit of the fiancée</b>	82	88	86	81
<b>Proportion (%) of marriages involving a celebration ceremony</b>	89	93	69	58
<b>Proportion (%) of marriages involving a register office wedding</b>	11	40	25	8
<b>Distribution (%) of marriages, according the length of the process</b>				
- no process with an initial agreement from the girl's family	31	36	26	42
- under 1 year	3	9	8	15
- 1 year	3	9	22	12
- 2 years	14	25	19	8
- 3 years and more	49	21	25	23
	100	100	100	100
<b>Mean length on:</b>				
- the processes launched with an agreement from the girl's family	3.6	2.0	2.0	2.4
- all the marriages contracted with a never-married man	2.4	1.4	1.6	1.3
- all the marriages contracted with a man. whether never-married or not	2.3	1.3	1.4	1.3
<i>Numbers</i>	35	44	36	26

Source : biographical survey. Ever-married women interviewed as residents at either visit (1987-89, 1995 or 2000)