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The Linking of Vital Conjunctures: Negotiations over Girls' Futures

Introduction

> We are living in a transitional phase of a changing society, since for a rural girl, once you are in town, they do not want to return to the village. So, this is always creating family conflict" (*Dans la mutation de societe, nous vivons dans une etappe transitoire, parce-que une fille de village, si vous etez en ville une fois, elles ne veulent pas retourner au village. Alors il se cre toujours un mal entent dans la famille* [February 3, 2016]).

This lament was made by Woru Salifou[1], a retired banker, when we talked about how he and his wife Nuria were living as a childless, social climbing urban couple in Cotonou, the economic centre of the Republic of Benin. Living an urban upper-middle-class lifestyle, both husband and wife were at the same time connected to their rural kin. This connection manifested in, among other things, the fact that they were hosting several relatives born in the same rural area in northern Benin in their large three-story house. One of these relatives was Nuria's niece Salimatou, a young woman of about twenty-six years old, and her young son. As is usual in Benin, and even more so for childless couples, Woru and Nuria had taken Salimatou into their household at a young age to have a helping girl.[2] Unsuccessful in school, Salimatou was doing an apprenticeship when her birth father asked Woru to send her back to the village to get married. The girl refused, as did the foster parents, but the girl's father put so much pressure on them that they felt forced to accept the young woman's marriage. However, after one year of an unhappy marriage in the countryside, Salimatou ran away with her newborn son. Woru and his wife accepted her back into their household and provided her with space in their house. When I visited, this is where she was living together with her eight-year-old son, earning a living as a hairdresser.

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1 All names in this text are anonymised.

2 The expression "help" is a translation of a local expression in Benin used to describe an arrangement in which rural girls who are not enrolled in schools are sent to urban households to do domestic labour. Talking about help instead of work circumscribes the fact that no salary is paid, but the household in which the girl is working is expected to "do something for her," as people call it. In fact, this means paying for an apprenticeship or contributing substantially to the dowry. Thus, in this context, "helping" could be translated as non-salaried work.

Woru's lament about inevitable family conflicts between urban and rural households resulting from negotiations over girls' life trajectories summarise the key empirical arguments in this chapter. First, Woru argues that the life course regimes of young women in Benin are changing, as are their life expectations, desires, and imagined futures. Second, these life course changes are due to broader societal change. The "transitional phase" Woru mentions is, I would argue, characterised by processes of class construction and the emerging differentiation of lifestyles and life expectancies. This becomes especially manifest in changing notions about the "right" life course for young women and in negotiations over who has the right to decide. In these processes, those in the urban middle classes are drawing new and different boundaries in their lifestyles than those of their rural (and almost always poorer) kin. At the same time, they accept some of their rural relatives' children into their households. This leads to changing and often conflicting norms concerning girls' education as well as to negotiations over girls' labour capacity and marriage arrangements. Third, the inevitable conflicts within extended kin networks are due to the fact that changes in the life courses of girls also affect the life courses as well as the expectations, moralities, and future-making processes of others. From a life course perspective, one could therefore argue that in moments of societal transformations that affect life course regimes, the entanglements of life trajectories – what Glen Elder has called "linked lives" (Elder 1994, 1998, Elder et al. 2003) – are becoming sources of personal and familial conflict.

The basic arguments of this chapter outlined above have already been raised in Salifou Woru's reflections. His argument of a transitional phase in Beninese society could be concretised as a process of ongoing urbanisation and the professionalisation of the urban labour sectors in Benin. This is related to the emergence of larger urban middle classes and accompanied by an increasing demand for formal education certificates as the starting point for social mobility. At the same time, large segments of the population are unable to attain this professional status, which results in an increasingly wide cleavage between urban and rural populations and also serves to diminish the economic expectations of those parts of the population excluded from access to social mobility. In the republic of Benin, as in many African countries, the rapid and ongoing process of differentiation is mitigated through deep interconnections, most often through kinship relationships. These connections are made manifest by, among other things, the circulation of children from poorer families to richer households, which leads to the building of "multi-class households" (Lentz and Noll 2021; Alber 2019). As a result, processes of unequal social mobility and related modes of exclusion lead not only to increas-

ing social inequality in the nation-state of Benin but also to a high degree of inequality within kin groups.[3]

In this chapter, I question how these processes of increasing differentiation within kin groups are negotiated during conflicts over young women's life trajectories. Salimatou's case of involuntary return to the village, later followed by an escape back to the city, is one example among many I have followed during my research in Benin.[4] I have mainly described this case from her perspective and that of her foster parents, who jointly believed that her future was best served in the capital, where she could earn a living from her profession and ensure that her son had an urban future. Her foster parents did not regard her possible life trajectory as a married woman in the countryside – the future her father wished for her – as an appropriate path. At first glance, and in order not to contest to Salimatou's father's decision, they gave in to his demand that his daughter return to the village and marry. However, later on, they both diverged from her father's wishes and made different decisions: Salimatou made the decision to flee, and her foster parents accepted her back into their household. This gentler form of managing the situation – first accepting the father's decision and only later rejecting the marriage – nevertheless caused a family conflict, which was the reason Woru claimed that such conflicts among kin groups are practically inevitable today.

The case of Salimatou shows a confrontation between different visions of her future; the conflict between her father and her foster parents can also be understood as a clash over who has the right to decide her life trajectory. In an older and rural understanding of child fostering, as I have shown elsewhere (Alber 2003), foster parents have the right to make decisions concerning their foster children's future life path because they are the caregivers of the child. However, Salimatou's sojourn in Woru and Nuria's household could be interpreted in two different ways: it could be understood as either a foster arrangement or as an employment contract, which is also quite frequently used to structure rural girls' time in urban households. In the latter case, there is an agreement between birth parents and foster parents that the domestic labour of a rural girl living in an urban middle-

class household for some years is compensated by paying for an apprenticeship or financing the expenses of the young woman's trousseau when she marries. But it is the birth parents who retain the right to decide their child's future by arranging a marriage of their behalf.

Today, both types of placing and accepting a rural girl into the urban household of kin are commonly practised by families from northern Benin who send their children to live in middle class households in the urban south. While in conversations these types of placements are distinguishable, the persons involved do not always make a sharp distinction between them at the start of such arrangements. This ambiguity may be because in Baatonum, the local language, clear-cut distinctions between different child fostering arrangements for educational purposes or for labour are difficult to express. Additionally, norms of politeness and indirect speech as well as possible divergent expectations that are not articulated complicate such negotiations. As a result, conflicts frequently arise years later, when the future of the teenager who had been placed in an urban household as a child is discussed. Finally, sometimes interpretations of the initial agreement also change.

To theoretically position Woru's argument concerning inevitable family conflict resulting from the transitional historical moment, I will first take into consideration Glen Elder's (1994: 6) argument concerning the interdependency of lives, what he called "linked lives" (Elder 1994, 1998, Elder et al. 2003). Second, I combine this concept with Jennifer Johnson-Hanks's (2002, 2005) and others' explorations of vital conjunctures and turning points that shed light on the processual conflict dimensions of changing life trajectories and the fluidity of life stages. I will then apply my concept of interdependent vital conjunctures to a second case, the story of a rural girl named Gloria, who was, like Salimatou, first placed in an urban household but then was brought back to the village for an arranged marriage against her will. In my conclusion, I explain how these further layers of analysis relate to the dimension of time.

Linking Vital Conjunctures

Summarising different theoretical perspectives on the life course, psychologist and sociologist Glen Elder elaborated the concept of linked lives. He argued that "no principle of the life course is more central than the notion of interdependent lives" and explained the significance of the embeddedness of humans in social relationships with kin and friends across the life span. To elucidate its importance, he explained that "social regulation and support occur in part through these relationships" and ended with the important argument that the effects of linking lives

endure not only over the individual life span but in the process of generational succession. Thus, he regards the linking of lives as important for the reproduction of class positionality.

Elder's understanding of linked lives is based on his reconstruction of the importance of family ties in determining the later life trajectories of children in impoverished families during the Great Depression. In his study *Children of the Great Depression* (Elder 1974), Elder proved that despite the fact that all the children were similarly poor, a large majority managed to successfully earn a living later on. However, there were remarkable differences between those whose impoverished parents had a middle-class background and children from working-class families. Whereas working-class children suffered the consequences of the Depression for the rest of their lives, middle-class children often became successful, sometimes even more successful than other middle-class children whose families were not affected by the Depression. The findings of this path-breaking study resulted in Elder's awareness of the interplay between life trajectories and historical eras as well as the effects of early life constellations for later periods in the life course.

Interestingly, when elaborating the importance of linked lives, Elder mentions "social regulation and support" (1994: 6), principally positively attributed activities summarised as care or education typically associated with the domestic sphere and often with kinship.[5] Conflicts, disparities, or tensions are, in his conceptual notes on the life course, not associated with linked lives but with what he calls the "timing of lives," i.e., with the ways individual life trajectories and related decisions refer to "the incidence, duration, and sequence of roles, and to relevant expectations and beliefs based on age" (Elder 1994: 6). Here, he mentions "ill-timed" events such as early pregnancy and the resultant tasks of scheduling trajectories and the work of decision making for all persons conceptualised as agents in decision making at any given moment of the life course (Elder 1994: 5).

Another field and cause of tension and conflict is the interference of historical time and events and the individual life course. For example, Elder mentions that the loss of income in the Depression led to changing family economies that resulted in more productive work for children and greater burdens for mothers (1994: 11). Arguing that relationships within families were "altered" (1994: 11) and families were "demoralized," Elder nevertheless does not question how these conflicts might affect the linking of lives.

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5 A critical analysis of the association of "positive" or "warm" care with kinship, often set in contrast to the "cold" activities of the state can be found in Thelen, Thiemann, and Roth (2018). See also Thelen and Alber (2022).

Elder's important model of the life course was characterised by four important themes: (a) the linking of lives and historical time; (b) the interplay of human lives and historical period; (c) the timing of lives, linked or interdependent; and (d) human agency in decision-making, and it was a conceptual milestone in the scholarship on life course. The fact that he did not associate conflict with linked lives might be partially due to the methodology of his research, which largely relied on survey and panel studies, thus requiring him to retrospectively reconstruct the effects of changing historical formations on life trajectories.

In contrast, ethnographic methods of participant observation provided the methodological background of Jennifer Johnson-Hanks's (2002, 2005) study on young middle-class Beti women in Cameroon navigating[6] childhood and youth in the context of complex normative expectations concerning the honour of young women. Johnson-Hanks does not retrospectively reconstruct the life courses of her subjects but analyses her research interlocutors' present struggles and future aspirations and doubts by following ongoing conflicts. Here, she introduces the concept of *vital conjuncture* as an alternative to the older and widely criticised, but nevertheless still frequently used, concept of *life stage.*[7] In Johnson-Hanks's study, the young women's main goal is to become honourable adults by fulfilling the normative expectations of their society, which is to successfully finish their proper schooling. Due to their society's expectations, this decision often leads them to postpone motherhood since early motherhood is widely seen as shameful for educated girls. Johnson-Hanks argues convincingly that this postponement of mothering and, consequently, the full achievement of adult status does not require the women to abstain from sexuality but rather to make decisions in case of pregnancy. Girls have the option to carry the pregnancy to term and give up the child to foster parents after delivery so they may "return" to the status of schoolgirl. Or they might decide to terminate the pregnancy by seeking an abortion. A third option is to raise the baby and, thus, to become a mother and possibly a wife. Following this conflict-filled navigation of different options for the future, she argues for a more fluid conceptualisation of specific positions in the life course, such as motherhood:

> Rather than a clear threshold into female adulthood, here motherhood is a loosely bounded, fluid status. . . . Beti women who have borne children are not necessarily mothers, at least not

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6 Concerning the terminology and concept of navigation, see Christiansen et al. 2006.

7 Elder, for instance, uses the concept of life stages to illustrate his argument about the timing of lives, explaining that life course events such as marriage or childbirth do not always fit well with professional trajectories, and that children were differently affected by the Great Depression than were persons in later stages of the life course (1994: 6).

all the time. Motherhood, instead, constitutes a temporary social status, an agent position that can be inhabited in specific forms of social action. . . . "Life stages" emerge only as the result of institutional projects; their coherence should be an object, rather than an assumption, of ethnographic inquiry. (Johnson-Hanks 2002: 866)

Johnson-Hanks' rejection of clear-cut life stages is that these might be the "result of institutional projects" – here I would add that they often serve as normative ideas about the correct life course – but they are not a lived reality. Rather, they are shaped by constant struggles and processes of decision-making which then might endorse or reject motherhood. In the process of struggling over and navigating towards a future, seemingly well-defined and stable stages of the life course such as motherhood become fluid. Whereas Johnson-Hanks referred to some anthropological literature (Goody 1982; Bledsoe 1980) that had already challenged the idea of motherhood as unambiguous, feminist scholarship had also argued in favour of the fluidity and negotiability of motherhood, reconceptualising it as "mothering" in order to express the constant work of motherhood (Ruddick 1989). Similar to Ruddick's processual approach but different with regard to the normative orientation of the study, Johnson-Hanks's conceptual approach not only focuses on constant struggle but also considers intense conflicts that might lead to mothering as well as processes of *undoing motherhood* (my terminology).

Further work on the fluidity of motherhood is Mette Line Ringstedt's (2007) article on the collision of the life courses of female teenagers in Tanzania with those of their children's grandmothers (maternal and paternal). She describes a variety of strategies the young women use to include grandmothers in childcare. Some of these older women reject these demands, arguing that they are still too young to become grandmothers. Some of the teenagers also argue that they are still too young to take responsibility for their children, which indicates the normative expectations concerning the timing of life courses. Other teenage mothers succeed in getting their mothers to become the mothers of their children. And finally, some simply neglect their children by leaving them at home when they go out to bars and clubs at night. As a result, these teenagers cross back over the imaginary boundary between adulthood and youth and become, once again, childless youths. With this ethnographic example, Ringstedt demonstrates that by negotiating responsibility for children and, thus, mothering, not only are teenagers traversing fluid boundaries in their life course but so too are their mothers, who also traverse the fluid border between adulthood and eldership by accepting their status as grandmothers. Altogether, mothering appears as fluid and processual as well as reversible and intensively entangled with other processes such as grandmothering or spousing. This conclusion resonates with the work of Notermans (2004), who ar-

gued that the decision to accept responsibility for caring for a grandchild could be understood as a negotiation over the fluid border between adult and elder.

By taking up Johnson-Hanks's argument about the fluidity of achieved positions in the life course, Ringstedt as well as Notermans have adopted Elder's argument for linked lives without citing him. Not limiting themselves to the issues of support and education as modalities for linking lives, they present negotiations over linked lives as arenas for conflict and negotiation over life trajectories and imagined futures. Among other things, they radicalise the argument for fluidity in life course positions by claiming the reversibility of achieved positions. This argument not only holds for mothering but also for other phases in the life course, for example, old age, as Tabea Häberlein (2015) convincingly demonstrated with respect to the fluidity of old age in northern Togo. Therefore, somewhat different from Johnson-Hanks's focus on the struggles of individuals to manage their life trajectories, conceptual work is required to grasp the interpersonal and often intergenerational entanglements of life trajectories. Anthropological scholarship thus confirms Elder's claim that a life course perspective should not focus solely on the life trajectories of individuals and their relationship to historical and societal change but also on the entanglements of an individual's life course with those of others. At the same time, the question of conflict in the linking of lives is raised.

An important dimension of Johnson-Hank's concept of *vital conjunctures* is that it covers not a single moment but a longer, open-ended time span. It bears a resemblance to the concept of *turning points* (Hareven and Masaoka 1988: 274 ff; Abbott 2001) as it grasps moments of transitions or "radical shifts" (Abbott 2001: 343) in the life course by stressing that these take time. While some scholarship (Voigt 2021: 103) argues that turning points or vital conjunctures always accompany a change in status (for instance, from childhood to adulthood), Johnson-Hanks defines it as "a socially structured zone of possibility that emerges around specific periods of potential transformation in a life or lives. It is a temporary configuration of possible change, a duration of uncertainty and potential" (2002: 871). Therefore, by stressing the uncertainty and potential of an unknown future, vital conjunctures might just as likely lead to a change in status as to a confirmation of the prior status. In any case, emphasis on timing in the life course highlights a relatively simple, albeit often neglected aspect, namely that decision-making is done on the basis of knowledge and experience related to the past and in relation to an envisaged but contingent future. In the case of Salimatou, this involved both the question of how she imagined her own future and her hopes for her son.

To sum up, Elder's concept of linked lives could be enlarged – with view to the cited literature – to a concept of linked vital conjunctures in which diverging imaginations of life trajectories are negotiated, quite often through conflict. Societal

change and related shifting notions and expectations of an appropriate life course are not the only reasons conflict emerges in these processes; another important reason is the entanglement of individuals in webs of kinship, inter-generational relations, and even the different but related vital conjunctures of entwined lifetimes. A single person cannot make herself a married woman or a mother. Rather, she is related to others such as parents, siblings, or in-laws, whose life trajectories are also affected by these transitions and whose behaviour contributes to the making of a mother or wife, the return to adolescence, or, as in the case of Salimatou, the ability to live as a single mother in the city. I will now explain this entanglement further through a second case study: the story of Gloria and the linked lives of others concerned with her life course.

Negotiating Gloria's Future

Having broadly contextualised the story of Salimatou from her perspective and that of her urban-based supporters, I will now trace the interdependencies of turning points or vital conjunctures in greater depth by including the perspectives of rural relatives involved in a family conflict over the future of Gloria. When I firstly heard somebody talking about Gloria, she was still a young, unmarried woman. It was Kora, a peasant in the village of Tebo in northern Benin, who eagerly told me in 2010 that he had, some years before, engaged a girl from a neighbouring village for his foster son MamMam.[8] Although his son reached marriage age, and because Kora felt obliged to fulfil the parental duty of arranging a wife for his son, he was told by the future in-laws that the girl had been sent to live in an urban household in Cotonou to "help" there. He should, thus, wait a little longer. But Kora was worried about whether the wedding would still take place. Since he had already invested in the engagement by paying the bride price and sending regular gifts to the in-laws, and due to the pressure he felt to give his foster son a wife, he was extremely concerned that the marriage would fall through. The issue was even more serious from Kora's perspective because MamMam – with the financial help of his birth mother – had already taken another wife on his own, with whom he had already been living for several months. It would be a source of shame for Kora and would endanger his relationship with his foster son if, after the long period of time Mam-

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[8] Child fostering is a very widespread pattern in rural northern Benin (Alber 2003, 2018). Among other obligations, foster parents have the obligation to organise their foster children's marriages because they are regarded as the proper parents of the child.

Mam had lived in Kora's household and daily worked with him in agriculture, Kora would not be able to give MamMam a wife more quickly.

For his part, MamMam made similar arguments, telling me that he had already been impatiently waiting for the wife his (foster) father had promised him to arrive to the household. A year later, in 2011, I managed to get into contact with Gunu, the man who had taken the girl into his household in Cotonou. Once he understood that I had not been sent by the rural relatives to take the girl back to the village, he invited me into the house where he was living with his wife, two small children, and Gloria.

Gunu was a professional soldier who had left the village – and with it, a lifestyle, as he candidly told us. He had relatively little formal education but did have strong resolve to become an urban citizen, a member of the middle class. Therefore, he had envisaged climbing the social ladder in the army.[9] He never regretted this choice. When I met him in Cotonou, he was just back from an engagement in the UN peace-keeping forces in Ivory Coast. He immediately started talking about Gloria because this matter upset him, as he told me. For weeks he was regularly called by the villagers who demanded he send her back, but he did not plan to do so. He had taken her to Cotonou to pay for her apprenticeship after she worked some years in his household and did not want to let enter a marriage with a villager. I asked him to explain how and why he took her to Cotonou. Gunu answered that because he was often absent and his wife was also employed, he had been looking for somebody who could take care of the couple's children. First, he had wanted to bring his youngest sister, who was still living with their peasant parents, to live in his household in the city. His idea was to enrol her in school together with his child. However, his parents refused and so he began to look for another girl who had never attended school. He wanted the girl to care for the children and then planned to pay for an apprenticeship for her.[10] He asked his brother to send him such a girl, and his sibling suggested Gloria. She was a relative from Gunu's own village, the daughter of divorced parents who had grown up with an aunt who had previously sent Gloria to work for a family. The aunt had agreed to Gloria living in Gunu's household, but now his and Gloria's relatives repeatedly called Gunu to ask that he send the girl back to the village for an arranged marriage. He thought this was a stupid idea. Gloria did not want to return to the village, and she had already learned French. Why should he send her back to live

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9 In contemporary Benin, the army as well as the police create the potential for social mobility among those persons lacking significant schooling.

10 Such an arrangement is frequently used to compensate for a girl's labour. In these cases, either the girls are hosted in the household of their master or remain with their foster family, which covers the costs for the apprenticeship. See Houngbedji 2021.

with backward peasants? When he told the girl he wanted to send her home, she began to cry.

Our next conversation took place in his home. Gunu was in the sitting room together with one of his children and Gloria, a girl around fifteen years old. I asked him if I could talk with her alone, and he agreed. Our conversation was difficult since she was very shy. She told me that she left the village three years ago without knowing a word of French but had now learned it in Cotonou. Gunu's family was good to her; the work was not too hard; and her future plan was to do an apprenticeship. However, that plan did not depend on her wishes alone, she told me. In any case, she did not want to return to the village. The conversation was short, and then Gunu came back and asked her to buy drinks for all of us. When she returned and we (including Gloria) were having drinks together – a fact that made clear that her status in the household was more the position of kin than of a domestic worker – she lost a bit of her timidity. Together with the son of the family, we looked at a family photo album in which there were some pictures of Gloria in the very same clothes as Gunu's birth children. This, again, demonstrates that she was seen at least partly as a member of the family and not an outsider brought in to perform labour.

One week later, I talked with Kora back in northern Benin. He again expressed that he was impatiently waiting for her return from Cotonou because he wanted to organize the marriage.[11] Then I went to Gloria's village where I first met Gunu's brother, who told me, to my astonishment, that Gloria had already been sent back from Cotonou. Indeed, he told us that Gunu had wanted to keep her in Cotonou, but because Gloria's family had insisted he send her back, he had to comply. After that, I went to the household where she was living. The brother of Gloria's aunt was the head of the compound. He told me he had sent Gloria to Cotonou, and now that she was back, he was very satisfied because the dowry she had taken from Cotonou was much larger than the normal dowries of village girls when they were sent into marriage by their families. He frankly told me that even if somebody had wanted to keep Gloria in Cotonou, this was never the plan her family had for her future life course. Finally, I had another short meeting with a very shy (again) Gloria. It was difficult to get her uncle's permission to talk with her. She only stated that she did not know why Gunu sent her back. Maybe,

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11 Marriage is seen as the end of childhood, which often means the end of the fostering relation. The parents of both the bride and the groom are obliged to organise the wedding for their child, which includes a big party with several ceremonial elements. At the centre of these ceremonies is the transfer of the bride and her belongings from her household to that of her husband. On changing notions of marriage in the region, see Alber 2019.

she said, he was not satisfied with her work? I asked if she would now marry in the village. "What could I do?" she answered.

That same evening, I met Kora again. I was astonished to find some visitors in his compound: Gloria's household head together with some other men from her village. Immediately after my visit, they departed the village and walked the direct footpath to Tebo and arrived before me since my journey took longer because I had travelled the bad road by car. They were shouting and arguing. I understood from their many accusations that my arrival in their compound was interpreted as part of a plan to disrupt the wedding of MamMam and Gloria. Kora tried to explain that I was just an anthropologist studying kinship and assured them that the wedding would take place. In fact, the marriage was solemnised within a few days, and only a year later, I met Gloria, who was married, pregnant, and living in MamMam's newly built house together with him and his other wife. However, some years later, like Salimatou, Gloria had left her husband, though she left her small child in his household. She returned to the city, where she began an apprenticeship as a hairdresser with Gunu's help.

I understand the conflict and its specific dynamics as an entanglement of vital conjunctures in linked lives. First, it was a vital conjuncture in the life of Gloria, during which a central decision about her future was made. Should she continue to live in town, take up an apprenticeship, hopefully marry an urban young man, and become a mother relatively late? In Benin, similar to the case of Cameroonian girls described by Johnson-Hanks, remaining in school or receiving another form of formal education means the prolongation of childhood and youth and relatively late motherhood. Or should Gloria return to the village to marry a peasant and have children relatively early? Unlike the case studies presented by Johnson-Hanks, in Gloria's case, the decision was not made by her but by others: her foster mother, her uncle, and by Gunu, the cousin who hosted her in his household in Cotonou. In other similar cases, the decision about the life trajectory of a girl – even if she has her own hopes and plans and expresses them – are also commonly made by relatives.

However, the inclusion of others' decisions alone would not fully explain the dynamics in this particular conflict. A central driving force in the clash was Kora and his foster son MamMam, who reclaimed the girl and the marriage based on having already paid the bride price. And here comes my second point: the conflict over Gloria's future could be interpreted as a turning point in MamMam's life trajectory as well as that of his father Kora. Finally, the conflict emerged at a critical moment in the life trajectory of Gloria's uncle, who had accepted her engagement by taking the bride price from Kora. For him, too, allowing her to continue to live in Cotonou would have disturbed his position in the web of relations in his village. The intensity of the conflict is only explicable if these different perspectives are

considered. To fully understand the meaning of this struggle, one has to examine the life course expectations for a rural youngster like MamMam.

As mentioned above, I am using life stage as a normative concept that explains how a society sees and values different stages in the lives of men and women. According to local norms, MamMam was at the right age to become an adult, and in the local context, this meant that it was time for him to take a wife that his father had selected or accepted on his behalf by paying the necessary bride price and exchanging gifts with his future in-laws. Since MamMam had spent his entire childhood as Kora's foster son, he had the right to a proper marriage arranged by Kora. Not providing his foster son with this rite of passage would be a source of shame for Kora. There was even more social pressure related to this matter because MamMam had already taken the initiative to become an adult with the help of his birth mother: he married a girl of his own choosing and, thus, began to transition into full adulthood. With this act, MamMam's birth mother challenged Kora's fostering or, at least, challenged his reputation as a good father. And there was another pressure on his foster father: as MamMam had been one of the few children of Kora who was never sent to school, and, therewith, not a single cent had been spent on his formal education, the pressure for a proper marriage was even higher.

Consequently, Kora felt even more pressure to give his foster son the wife in whom he had already invested. Both had no idea that their plan could go awry and that there was a chance that the girl would stay in Cotonou. But when I talked to them the first time, I noticed that both were nervous because they knew very well that societal change, evidenced by the new pattern that some girls working in cities would remain there, could upset the arrangement.

The entanglement of multiple vital conjunctures created the dynamics of the conflict described above. On the one hand, MamMam entered adulthood in accordance with local norms, which was related to his foster father's obligation to provide his foster son with the requisite rites of passage. On the other hand, there was the vital conjuncture of Gloria' entry into adulthood and the question of whether that should happen according to new urban norms of late marriage after having first learned a profession or to the rural norms of early marriage and motherhood. Additionally, Kora's recognition as a good father was challenged, as was the reputation of Gloria's uncle as a reliable in-law. Furthermore, the conflict became a confrontation because of different, competing conceptualisations of the future: for Gloria and MamMam, but also for Gunu and Kora. If Gunu had refused his rural relatives' calls to send the girl back, he would have risked ruining his relationship with them, something that almost all urban Baatombu I know try to avoid.

Conclusion

In light of the case studies of Gloria and Salimatou, I have shown that a combination of Elder's linking of lives with the concept of vital conjunctures that negotiate futures – often in the modality of family conflicts – is useful for gaining a better understanding of the multiple ways people become involved in these conflicts. The concept of linked vital conjunctures may help us understand how societal change not only influences individual life trajectories but also affects the linking of lives by often generating family conflicts in which new normative understandings of life stages are negotiated.

Methodologically, my analysis has shown that these processes of social change may be analysed by looking more closely at kinship conflicts. However, as my case studies have also demonstrated, analysing kinship is always a bit messy as people are simultaneously husbands, fathers, uncles, and maybe grandfathers or sons, and are entangled in the life trajectories of their wives, daughters, siblings, and parents. Therefore, looking at these relationships through the lens of entangled vital conjunctures, I fear, would not minimise the degree of messiness in kinship research; rather, scholarship would become as messy as real life.

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