

Consensual Unions in Burkina Faso: Trends and Determinants

Thomas K. LeGrand

Département de démographie
Université de Montréal (Canada)
CP 6128, succ. Centre-ville,
Montréal, Qc. H3C 3J7 Canada
tk.legrand@umontreal.ca

Zourkaleini Younoussi

Institut supérieur des sciences de la population
Université de Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso)

Abstract

This paper examines entry into consensual unions versus marriages in Burkina Faso, a topic that has received little attention to date in sub-Saharan Africa. Changes in marriage behaviors may entail or reflect profound changes in family organization, gender relations and fertility and, to the extent that consensual unions are relatively transitory and lead to more sexual partners, they may be associated with greater sexual risks including HIV. The determinants of new unions being consensual are estimated from national family-life type survey data that provide information on the timing of different types of marriages and the start of cohabitation. While consensual unions are not new to the country, they appear to be changing in nature and have been growing more common over time especially in urban areas. They are also more popular among men and women with greater schooling or who began cohabiting while living outside the country, and for women who have previously lived in union.

Key Words: *Consensual unions, common-law unions, mutual consent unions, cohabitation, marriage, union type, polygamy, family, Burkina Faso, Sahel, sub-Saharan Africa, Africa.*

Résumé

Cet article compare les entrées en unions libres avec et les mariages au Burkina Faso, un sujet ayant reçu peu d'attention en Afrique sub-saharienne jusqu'à présent. Les changements de comportements reliés au mariage peuvent impliquer ou refléter de profondes modifications dans l'organisation des familles, dans les relations entre les sexes et dans la fécondité. Si les unions libres sont en général plus transitoires que le mariage et entraînent un plus grand nombre de partenaires sexuels, elles peuvent être associées à une hausse de pratiques sexuelles à risque pouvant mener aux infections du VIH. Les déterminants de type d'union (libre ou mariage) ont été estimés en utilisant les données d'une enquête nationale de type biographique à l'aide d'information sur la chronologie des différents types de mariage et les débuts de cohabitation. Bien que les unions libres ne soient pas un nouveau phénomène au Burkina Faso, il semble que leur nature s'évolue sur le temps et qu'elle s soient de plus en plus courantes, particulièrement en ville. Elles sont aussi plus répandues chez les hommes et les femmes ayant un niveau d'éducation plus élevé ou ayant commencé leur union alors qu'ils résidaient hors du pays, ainsi que chez les femmes ayant déjà vécu en union.

Mot clés: unions libres, unions consensuelles, cohabitation, mariage, type d'union, polygamie, famille Burkina Faso, Sahel, Afrique sub-saharienne, Afrique.

Introduction

This paper uses detailed retrospective data from Burkina Faso to examine entry into consensual unions (also called mutual consent or common-law unions) versus marriages, a topic that has received little attention to date in sub-Saharan Africa. The analysis aims to document patterns of change over time and to assess the effects of possible determinants on the likelihood of a new union being consensual – in particular, the influence of “modernization” variables such as schooling attainment or urban residence on union type.

Context and Literature Review

Compared to much of Eastern and Southern Africa, Burkina Faso and the other Sahelian countries of West Africa are characterized by earlier women's ages at first marriage, low rates of permanent celibacy, high levels of fertility within marriage and relatively few consensual unions. Families in the Sahel continue to play important roles in guiding the marriage behaviors of young men and women, especially for first unions. In Burkina Faso, several different types of marriages and wedding ceremonies coexist and overlap. By far the least common are civil marriages performed by an officer of the state, and the laws governing marriage are little known or respected in either rural or urban areas.¹ Two other types of marriage prevail: religious marriages sanctified by a celebration in a mosque or church, and traditional marriages in which a woman joins her future husband once a certain number of ritual ceremonies have been conducted among her relatives. Each of these types of marriage constitutes the starting point for a new family and, often for the young woman, the beginning of socially accepted sexual relations (Kaufmann and Meekers, 1988; Antoine, 2000a; Marcoux et al., 1995). None of them can be formally ruptured without community acknowledgement.

Consensual unions, which we define as cohabitating unions in the absence of a wedding ceremony, are not new to Burkina Faso. A 1969 survey of several urban and rural areas in the country showed that consensual unions accounted from five to ten percent of ongoing unions at that time (Pool, 1977). Premarital sexual relations that sometimes take the form of consensual unions were common in the traditions of several of the smaller ethnic groups in the country. For example, the Samo and Goin had matrimonial systems are characterized by "double unions": premarital liaisons occurring first between lovers, followed by a marriage arranged by the two families; lover and spouse oftentimes being distinct (Lallemand, 1981; de Rouville, 1987; Dacher, 1993; Fiéloux, 1993; Thiriat, 1999). Along the same lines, young Dagara and Lobi women were expected to prove their fertility through childbirth prior to marriage, and cohabitation with their prospective spouse was permitted, as were sexual liaisons with other lovers up until the time of first childbirth (e.g., de Rouville, 1987). These practices are thought to be disappearing and premarital sexual relationships have become less socially acceptable, although possibly more frequent, in modern times.

A sort of eloping (called *enlèvement* in French) is also well known in past and present-day Burkina Faso.² This happens when a young couple seeks to get married against the wishes of the woman's family: typically, the woman runs away to be hidden by the man's relatives where she remains until they are able to convince her parents to agree to compensation and acknowledge their union. In general, the woman's family is most amenable to accepting their union (and thereafter allow a wedding to occur) once the young couple starts having

children. When they refuse, the couple may choose to continue living together rather than separate. Lastly, today as in the past, older men and women have much more freedom to establish subsequent unions on their own, and extensive celebrations and the payment of bride wealth are less common for them (Antoine and Nanitelamio, 1991; see also Pool, 1977). Generally speaking, these unions are socially accepted even in the absence of a wedding.

Changes in marital behaviors may entail or reflect profound changes in family organization, gender relations and fertility. Marriage patterns vary enormously across sub-Saharan Africa (van de Walle and Lardoux, 2005; van de Walle and Baker, 2004; Hertrich, 2001; NRC, 2005) and there is evidence of important changes in union behaviors from a variety of contexts. These include a growing prevalence of consensual unions, greater power for young men and women to choose their partners, rising ages at first marriage especially for women, and, in some parts of the region, increasing proportions of men and women who remain celibate – never married nor lived in union (NRC, 2005, ch. 7; Mensch et al., 2005; Hertrich, 2001; van de Walle and Baker, 2004; Meekers, 1992; Antoine and Nanitelamio, 1991). The HIV/AIDS pandemic has further heightened the policy importance of issues related to sexual relations in Africa in recent years. Consensual unions, to extent that they may be more transitory and lead to greater numbers of sexual partners, can potentially facilitate spread of sexually transmitted diseases, and this has served to increase interest in the topic.

In much of Africa, consensual unions are thought to occur mostly in cities, where new behaviors are being experimented with, the processes of individualism are more pronounced, and the effects of the economic recession have been felt most acutely (Meekers, 1992; Adepoju, 1997; Thiriat, 1999; van de Walle and Baker, 2004; van de Walle and Lardoux, 2005; Pool, 1977; Coulibaly and Pool, 1975; Pool, 1968). Cities are characterized by higher levels of schooling, a mix of ethnic groups with different norms and traditions, and a greater influence of foreign ideas through the media. Young urban adults should generally be less constrained by social controls; this is particularly true for those who migrated to cities for jobs or schooling, leaving their families behind (Mondain 2004; van de Walle and Baker 2004). In addition, a severe economic crisis has affected the region since the 1970s. Research on urban Burkina Faso, Bamako and Dakar has shown that growth in men's age at marriage is associated with their increased difficulty to obtain acceptable jobs and move out of the family home, often prerequisites for marriage and starting a family (Calvès, 2007; Calvès et al., 2007; Antoine and Djiré, 1998; Antoine et al., 1995; Marcoux and Piché, 1998).

The often high costs of marriage ceremonies and bride wealth have increasingly become the responsibility of young men rather than their families. In this situation, the costly marriage rituals and celebrations may be delayed or spaced out (Calvès et al., 2007; Marcoux et al., 1995; see also Attané, 2003;

Cooper, 1995; Locoh, 2000; Boye et al., 1991). There may also be a growing tolerance to cohabitation as a prelude to, or even as a substitute for, marriage (NRC, 2005, ch. 7; see also Meekers, 1992). Some women may view consensual unions as alternatives to marriage that offer more independence: a greater say in partner choice, more control over their subsequent lives, and better protection of their rights over children.³ Marriage in Burkina Faso usually confers to the husband paternity rights over children, including sometimes those already born to the mother (Dacher, 1992; de Rouville, 1987; see van de Walle and Lardoux, 2005 for nearby Mali, and Pool, 1968 for Ghana). Elsewhere in Africa, some young educated women have been observed to prefer the freedom of being an "outside wife", living in a consensual union in a separate residence from the "inside" married wife (Wa Karanja, 1994; Thiriat, 1999; see also Antoine and Nanitelamio, 1990; Calvès and Meekers, 1999).

Data

Data are from the 2000 *Survey on migration, urban integration and environment in Burkina Faso* (SMUIE/BF).⁴ This is a family life-type survey providing detailed nationally representative retrospective data on 4,075 men and 4,570 women aged 15-64 at the time of the survey, living in 3,517 households; see Poirier et al. (2001) for details. Urban residents and respondents aged 25-64 were over-sampled to ensure their adequate representation in the data. For this study, consensual unions are defined as cohabiting unions in the absence of any traditional, religious or civil marriage ceremony.

Measurement issues concerning marriage and consensual unions

Marriage is not simple to measure in sub-Saharan Africa, as it often involves a long process that differs across ethnic groups and religions, rather than a single event occurring at point in time (van de Walle, 1993; Bledsoe and Pison, 1994; Thiriat, 1998, ch. 5; Antoine, 2000b; van de Walle and Lardoux, 2005). As a result, the usual survey and census questions that ask men and women for their marital status can give rise to subjective answers that can vary over time and across societies (van de Walle, 1993). Inaccuracies should be more pronounced for retrospective reports of past behaviors than for current status, in part because people may *ex post* reassess their lives. For instance, unions that succeed may be reported as having been marriages early on in the process, while shorter-lived unions that did not come to fruition may not be declared at all. Too, as cohabitation in the absence of marriage is often considered shameful in the Sahel, some respondents may choose to misrepresent their situation in order to appear more respectable: stating that they are married when they are not.

Underreporting of consensual unions may be especially severe for polygynous men when surveys and census questions focus on their marital status rather than on the nature of the relationship with each of their partners. For example, some men may be both married to one woman and in a non-marital union with another – the “outside wife”. Given typical questionnaire design, they would probably report being married with two spouses, and we would not know that one of their unions is consensual. This is not a problem for women, who are usually in at most one union at a time.

For a retrospective survey, the SMUIE/BF is well designed for the study of union behaviors. In contrast to most other surveys, it used the event history calendar method to collect data from both men and women on a series of major events occurring in their lives, including the month and year of the main religious, civil and traditional wedding ceremonies (if any), and also the start of cohabitation, for each of their unions. The event history calendar method is known to be relatively accurate for collecting data on the timing and especially sequences of past events such as cohabitation and wedding ceremonies – data central to our study (Freedman et al., 1988; Panel Study of Income Dynamics, 2005). Unlike marital status, wedding ceremonies are usually well-recognized events that are less subject to interpretation. Christian and civil weddings and their celebrations are expensive events that take place toward the end of the marriage process. Muslim marriages may entail more stages and ceremonies, although in general we expect that their weddings will also be declared at the end of the process when a major marriage ceremony takes place.⁵ Traditional marriages are harder to characterize and some ethnic groups have several ceremonies that occur over time. For these, we believe it likely that most respondents will report the date when the man’s family first sent a delegation to the woman’s home to formally propose a marriage alliance.

From our knowledge of present-day Burkina society, regular cohabitation before any of the weddings described above would not be socially accepted nor approved by families, at least for first unions. In other words, given the reporting of wedding ceremonies in our data, it is unlikely that many of the unions we define as “consensual” are, in fact, socially recognized marriages captured early on in the regular marriage process. When consensual unions are afterwards formalized by a wedding, it is probable that a decision was made to proceed onto marriage: the couple decided to formalize their union, the man succeeded in drawing together the funds to pay for the bridewealth and wedding costs, or the family begrudgingly accepted a marriage rather than tolerate an ongoing consensual union.

Table 1 shows the prevalence of consensual unions in Burkina Faso at the time of data collection measured by recent national surveys and the 1996 Census. According to the arguments presented above, SMUIE/BF data should provide more accurate estimates of the frequency of consensual unions, especially for men. With the exception of women interviewed by the 2003

Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), the SMUIE/BF does appear to capture many more consensual unions than the other data sources, with differences being larger for men. Interestingly, DHS data show a substantial increase in the prevalence of consensual unions between 1998-99 and 2003, including for women for whom the relevant survey questions were largely unchanged (this was not the case for men), suggesting that this type of union has become more common in recent years.

Research Goals and Hypotheses

Given the general lack of solid statistical studies on consensual unions in sub-Saharan Africa, a first objective of this study is to document patterns of type of union and change over time. In addition, the multivariate analysis is guided by the following hypotheses:

- Observed increases in the incidence of new consensual unions over time should be concentrated in urban areas.
- Consensual unions should be more common among people who are relatively “modern”: those with higher schooling attainment or living in urban areas, where the context is more conducive to the establishment of consensual unions.
- Unions that are more likely to have occurred without family approval should be more often consensual: those begun abroad or with partners from different ethnic groups.
- Second and higher-order unions should be more often consensual, given the greater freedom accorded to men and women who were previously married.

Method

Logit regressions are used to assess the determinants of a newly formed cohabiting union (including both first and subsequent unions) being consensual rather than a marriage over roughly the 1960 to 2000 period. Because some consensual unions may be transitory, others may occur as part of a marriage strategy and a few may conceivably be marriages captured early on in the marriage process (prior to the reported wedding), we examine union type at the start of cohabitation both for the set of all unions observed in the data and also for the subset of “longer-lasting unions”. Longer-lasting unions are those known

Table 1. Percentage of Cohabiting Unions defined as Consensual at the time of Data Collection for Burkina Faso: 1996, 1998-1999, 2000, 2003 and 2005

Data Source	Year	% Consensual Unions		Sample
		Women	Men	
Census	1996	0.5	0.5	Women and men aged 12 and above
DHS	1998-1999	6.3	2.6	Women aged 15-49; Men aged 15-59
SMUIE/BF	2000	10.8	9.6	Women aged 15-49; Men aged 15-59
DHS	2003	11.4	5.7	Women aged 15-49; Men aged 15-59
World Bank LSMS	2005	1.2	1.4	Women aged 15-49; Men aged 15-59

Notes: Statistics from Census and DHS data are from published reports and those from the SMUIE/BF and World Bank LSMS were calculated from microdata using the DHS age ranges. World Bank LSMS and Census questions on marital status were the least detailed (i.e., *What is X's marital status?*).

For ages 12 and above, the World Bank LSMS percentages are 0.95% for women and 1.2% for men.

to last for at least three years; for them, consensual unions that were transformed into marriages by a wedding over the three-year period following the start of cohabitation are redefined as marriages, and consensual unions and marriages that end over the interval are omitted from the analysis. Compared to the full set of unions captured at the start of cohabitation, the subset of longer-lasting unions should better reflect long-term lifestyle choices. It may also be the case that respondents underreport short-lived unions occurring in the past, of which many may be consensual. If true, this would act to bias estimates of time trends, leading to an overestimation of the extent of increases in consensual unions over time (see the discussions in van de Walle, 1993 and Thiriart, 1998). An assessment of trends based on unions lasting at least three years should be less sensitive to this type of measurement error.

The regressions are estimated using sample weights to study the likelihood of a cohabitating union being consensual, measured at the start of cohabitation both for all new unions and for longer-lasting unions. As the questionnaire measured time in one-month increments, new unions are counted as marriages if a wedding ceremony was declared to occur prior to or during the same month as the start of cohabitation. Separate regressions are estimated for men and women, whose marital strategies and behaviors are known to differ.⁶ Cluster controls provided by Stata are used to handle cases of multiple unions occurring to individuals (polygamous unions for men, and subsequent unions after separation, divorce or widowhood for both men and women) and robust significance levels are shown in the tables. All covariates are measured retrospectively, reflecting the situation that existed at the time of first cohabitation for each union. They are: time period, place of residence, the person's age group, level of schooling, ethnic group, religion, whether the union is their first union, whether a child was born before the start of the union (data available only for women) and, for partners, marital status at the start of the union and whether they belong to a different ethnic group.

Empirical Results

The status of unions three years after the start of cohabitation is shown in Table 2, based on the subset of unions that began at least three years prior to the survey. About two-thirds of consensual unions in this subset were ongoing and still consensual 36 months later; these are the "longer-lasting" consensual unions used in the regressions, below. Marriage was by far the main cause for the disappearance of roughly one-third of consensual unions: between 24%-40% of men's and 23%-30% of women's consensual unions were followed by a wedding ceremony over the three year interval. This drop in their number was concentrated in the first 12-18 months; Kaplan Meier survival curves show that

Table 2: Status of Consensual Unions and Marriages Three Years after Initial Cohabitation by Sex (Weighted Percentages) in Burkina Faso, Africa: <1980, 1980-1989, and 1990-1997

Union Status	Men			Women		
	<1980	1980-1989	1990-1997	<1980	1980-1989	1990-1997
Consensual Unions						
Ongoing Consensual Union	67.1	56.9	65.3	67.2	73.2	59.7
Marriage (ongoing union)	29.9	40.5	31.8	30.1	23.1	32.1
Union ended	3.0	2.6	2.9	2.8	3.8	8.3
Total observations (sample)	146	186	217	217	244	295
Marriages						
Ongoing marriage	98.1	95.9	96.2	97.0	97.4	97.6
Union ended	1.9	4.1	3.8	3.0	2.6	2.4
Total observations (sample)	910	961	982	1381	1064	873

the subsequent decline was much more moderate and slowly tended to level off.⁷

Anecdotal evidence suggests that, at least in the cities where unemployment and school are acting to delay marriages, consensual unions are often formalized after the first child is born, a year or two after their establishment. However, there is no clear evidence in the data of an upward trend in consensual unions being transformed into marriages over time. Such a trend might occur, for example, if consensual unions were increasingly motivated by young men's need for more time to amass the resources in recent years, required to pay the heavy costs for wedding ceremonies and bridewealth; the lack of resources impeding weddings but not necessarily cohabitation for a willing couple. While it is surely the case that some young people's decisions to enter consensual unions are motivated by the high costs of marriage, it does not appear that such unions are afterwards being disproportionately transformed into marriages – at least not more now than in the past.

Ruptures are uncommon for both consensual unions and marriages.⁸ For men, only 2% to 4% of reported consensual unions and marriages ended within three years, depending on the time period under consideration. (This does not include consensual unions that were transformed into marriages, which is not union dissolution *per se*.) For women, consensual unions that started before 1990 were also almost as stable as marriages; this seems to have changed somewhat in the most recent time period under study (1990-97), when 8% of their newly begun consensual unions ended within 36 months.

The finding that consensual unions are nearly as stable as marriages surprised us. Insofar as consensual unions entail a couple living together without community acknowledgement, they should be less binding: the couple is primarily responsible for its future, facilitating separations in the event of disaccord. Marriages, which usually involve negotiations between families, the payment of bridewealth and expensive celebrations, should be harder to dissolve. Some unions are consensual simply because they go against the desires of one or both families, making it difficult to obtain family approval for marriage. In such cases, continued family pressures may be exerted to try to force a separation. For all of these reasons, we had expected consensual unions to be less stable than marriages.

The high level of stability of consensual unions in the data suggests that they are not a serious problem in terms of risky sexual behaviors, which would have occurred if breakups were frequent, leading to a succession of sexual partners that could facilitate the spread of HIV and other STIs. It should be emphasized, however, that very short-lived unions are probably underreported by both men and women in the data, and the survey did not collect information on sexual relationships occurring without cohabitation – relationships that may entail higher reproductive health risks.

Time Trends and Place of Residence

Table 3 shows summary statistics for the variables used in the analysis and Table 4 presents the logit regression results for the probability of a new union being consensual for men and women, and for both all new cohabitating unions and the subset of longer-lasting unions. Two regression models are estimated for each group: the first one limited to the time period and place of residence variables, and the second one with the full set of covariates. As SMUIE/BF data were collected from a sample of people aged 15-64 in 2000 and who were, thus, at most 35 years old in 1970, the estimated time trends are driven in large part by changes in the behaviors of relatively younger men and women about whom we have more information in the past. This should not greatly affect our findings, as most marriages in Burkina Faso occur fairly early in adult life. In the data, women's median age at the start of a first cohabitating union was 17 years; for men it was 25.

The results confirm that consensual unions are not a recent phenomenon in Burkina Faso: roughly 16% of all new unions and 9% of new longer-lasting unions that began before 1980 were reported as consensual at the start of initial cohabitation (Table 3). The likelihood of a new union being consensual rose over the following two decades for both men and women. This trend is equally visible for all new unions and also for longer-lasting unions, indicating that the observed growing importance of consensual unions is not due to an underreporting of transitory consensual unions occurring in the past – a problem that should not much affect the statistics on longer-lasting unions. In the 1990s, about 22% of women's new unions and 19% of those for men were estimated to be consensual; for unions that lasted at least three years, about 14% of new unions were declared as consensual by both sexes. The growing importance of consensual unions is also clear in the odds ratios in Table 4, including those estimated from the model 2 regressions that control for the socioeconomic and demographic covariates.

Among men and women living in Burkina Faso at the time of union formation, consensual unions appear to be most popular in Ouagadougou, with the one exception being women's longer-lasting unions, for whom consensual unions were more common in the other urban areas. For the most part, the estimated urban/rural differences are statistically insignificant.

As hypothesized, the highest proportions of consensual new unions are observed to occur to those residing outside of Burkina Faso at the start of the union and who returned to the country by the time of the survey – often labor migrants to Cote d'Ivoire (Cordell et al., 1998; Beauchemin et al., 2007; see also Courel and Pool, 1975). There are a number of possible reasons for this finding. First, while abroad, young men and women should generally enjoy greater social freedom due to their distance from their families, and interactions

Table 3. Summary Statistics for Variables used in the Regressions, Burkina Faso: Before 1980, 1980-1989 and 1990-2000

Characteristics at Start of Union	Percentage of Unions that are Consensual						Sample Size			
	Men			Women			Men		Women	
	All Unions	Durable U	All Unions	All Unions	Durable U	All Unions	All Unions	Durable U	All Unions	Durable U
Time Period										
Before 1980	16.2	9.6	15.9	8.7	1023	1598	1551			
1980-1989	16.7	9.6	20.7	14.7	1100	1308	1269			
1990-2000 (1997)	18.9	13.7	21.8	14.2	1217	1529	1116			
Place of Residence										
Ouagadougou	22.5	13.5	26.7	13.3	631	903	773			
Other Urban	13.7	9.2	19.7	17.0	434	589	499			
Rural	17.0	10.6	18.1	10.9	2015	2634	2375			
Abroad	25.7	16.0	31.4	23.7	260	309	289			
Age										
< 25	17.0	12.8	15.8	10.0	1199	3086	2819			
25 - 34	18.6	9.9	25.4	15.6	1524	1130	958			
≥ 35	16.7	10.9	46.7	33.1	617	219	159			
Schooling										
None	17.2	11.1	17.8	11.3	2403	3546	3208			
Islamic (Madresa)	5.0	2.5	16.6	6.4	255	84	72			
Primary	24.5	15.3	34.8	24.4	362	474	388			
Secondary & Above	32.8	18.2	41.1	21.4	320	331	268			
First Union?										
Yes	17.3	10.8	15.7	9.5	2266	3874	3487			
No: Prev. Lived in Union	18.1	11.6	44.4	32.2	1074	561	449			
Partner's Marital Status										
Single	15.5	9.3	18.2	12.0	2955	2845	2548			
Married (Polygynous)	--	--	20.6	12.7	--	1323	1167			
Separated, Divorced	30.5	22.2	26.7	11.4	385	267	221			

Table 3. (Continued)

Characteristics at Start of Union	Percentage of Unions that are Consensual				Sample Size			
	Men		Women		Men		Women	
	All Unions	Durable U	All Unions	Durable U	All Unions	Durable U	All Unions	Durable U
Already a Mother?								
Yes	--	--	23.9	14.7	--	--	881	748
No	--	--	18.6	11.7	--	--	3554	3188
Religion								
Animist	25.9	17.1	27.7	17.3	735	645	820	745
Muslim	11.0	6.4	13.0	7.8	2452	2039	2685	2365
Catholic	27.7	17.2	27.3	17.9	640	543	771	680
Protestant	18.2	9.4	15.9	8.5	131	113	159	146
Ethnicity of Individual								
Mossi	14.3	9.1	14.2	9.5	1545	1285	1776	1557
Bobo	34.8	20.4	34.0	23.3	225	206	240	215
Peul	6.3	5.5	9.2	6.8	465	387	473	414
Dagara	48.6	9.8	57.2	12.6	109	95	123	113
Senoufo	13.5	8.1	12.2	9.4	329	274	332	295
Gourounsi	27.6	18.6	30.8	19.7	153	129	166	154
Gourmantche	10.8	6.9	9.3	5.1	405	352	387	352
Lobi	66.4	55.5	66.6	53.5	104	88	147	129
Gouin	25.4	10.3	38.2	12.8	76	67	99	87
Samo	30.6	21.7	30.3	23.1	178	151	203	178
Other Ethnic Groups	5.2	2.2	13.1	5.2	371	306	489	442
Partner's Ethnic Group								
Same Ethnic Group	17.6	11.2	18.9	11.8	3046	2590	3396	3030
Other Ethnic Group	17.9	10.7	23.3	14.8	914	750	1039	906
TOTAL	17.6	11.1	19.5	12.2	3960	3340	4435	3936

Note: Covariates are defined at the time of union formation. Longer-lasting unions are those observed to last at least three years, and are thus restricted to unions that began by 1997, three years prior to the survey. Survey sample weights are used in calculating percentages, and the sample size numbers are unweighted counts.

Table 4. Logit Regression Results (odds ratios) for the Probability of a New Cohabiting Union being Consensual, Burkina Faso: Before 1980, 1980-1989 and 1990-2000

Characteristics at Time of Cohabitation	Men				Women			
	All Unions		Durable Unions		All Unions		Durable Unions	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Time Period								
Before 1980	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
1980-1989	1.028	1.067	0.999	1.078	1.367 *	1.214	1.796 **	1.583 *
1990-2000	1.287	1.502 *	1.568 *	1.740 *	1.505 **	1.281	1.727 **	1.437 ~
Place of Residence								
(Rural)	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Ouagadougou	0.517 *	1.199	0.593	1.326	0.637	1.344	1.243	1.032
Other Urban	0.729 *	0.702	0.795	0.727	0.653 ~	1.071	0.838	1.567
Abroad	1.275	1.576 ~	1.340	1.412	1.347	1.572 *	2.172 *	1.864 *
Age: Men								
< 25	1.000	1.000		1.000		1.000		1.000
25 - 34	1.189	1.189		0.709		0.827		0.845
≥ 35	1.002	1.002		0.669		1.385		1.293
Age: Women								
< 20								
20 - 29								
≥ 30								
Education								
(None)	1.000	1.000		1.000		1.000		1.000
Madresa	0.401 *			0.357		1.034		0.717
Primary	1.295			1.418		2.556 **		2.522 **
Secondary & above	2.309 **			2.062 *		3.733 **		2.122 *
Union Rank								
(First Union)	1.000	1.000		1.000		1.000		1.000
2nd or above	0.902			1.039		4.852 **		5.083 **
Partner's Marital Status								
(Single)	1.000	1.000		1.000		1.000		1.000
Married						0.920		0.810
Separated, Divorced, and Widowed	2.670 **			3.480 **		1.185		0.553

Table 4. (Continued)

Characteristics at Time of Cohabitation	Men				Women			
	All Unions		Durable Unions		All Unions		Durable Unions	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Already a Mother?								
(Yes)						1.000		1.000
No						0.871		0.994
Religion								
Animist		1.385		2.278 *		1.405		1.846 *
(Muslim)		1.000		1.000		1.000		1.000
Catholic		2.164 **		2.453 **		1.635 *		2.085 **
Protestant		0.865		0.769		1.119		1.041
Ethnic Group								
(Mossi)		1.000		1.000		1.000		1.000
Bobo		2.973 **		2.007 ~		2.913 **		2.171 **
Peul		0.514		0.759		0.678		1.003
Dagara		5.257 **		0.609		9.714 **		1.139
Senoufo		0.997		0.837		0.887		1.031
Gourounsi		2.270 *		2.521 *		2.277 *		2.019
Gourmantche		0.674		0.588		0.611		0.464*
Lobi		10.541 **		7.537 **		12.589 **		9.222 **
Gouin		1.626		0.977		1.932		0.675
Samo		1.649		1.889		1.695		1.410
Other Ethnic Groups		0.271 **		0.224 **		0.791		0.390 **
Partner's Ethnic Group								
(Same Group)		1.000		1.000		1.000		1.000
Different Group		1.152		0.956		1.384		1.663 ~
Number: Unions	3960	3960	3341	3341	4435	4435	3937	3937
Consensus Unions	714	714	345	345	847	847	435	435
Individuals	2636	2636	2213	2213	3874	3874	3491	3491

Note: Omitted reference categories are shown in parenthesis. Significance levels are <1% **, <5% * and <10% ~. For longer-lasting unions, the last time period ends three years prior to the survey in 1997. Numbers at the bottom show unweighted sample counts. Model 1 controls only for time period and residence, and model 2 has the full set of covariates.

marriage behaviors. Statistics from the DHS are consistent with this argument, showing consensual unions to be considerably more popular in Cote d'Ivoire than in Burkina Faso: over 22% of women's ongoing cohabiting unions enumerated by the 1998/99 survey were reported as consensual, a level roughly double that found for Burkina Faso in 2003 ((DHS StatCompiler, 2008; see also Table 1).

Along the same lines, it is plausible that, the longer the time spent living away from one's family, the greater the influence of these factors. Along these lines, Beauchemin et al. (2007) found that, as the period a migrant spends outside Burkina Faso lengthens, the likelihood that they will resettle in their home village after their return declines, suggesting that the influence of close family and kin lessens over time. In our data, some of the longer-term return migrants had permanently settled in Cote d'Ivoire, only to be forced to return to Burkina Faso in the 1990s due to the worsening political context. To the extent that these people had pulled up roots when they first emigrated, the influence of new attitudes and behaviors should be especially strong for them. To explore this idea, the model 2 regressions were re-estimated in which an additional migration variable was added to distinguish between short and longer-term (>3 year) stays abroad. The results support these arguments: as time spent outside the country increased so did the probability of a new union being consensual, with differences being large and statistically significant for women, and fairly small and insignificant for men.

Two other reasons may underlie the relation between return migrant status and consensual unions. First, migrant selectivity may cause those who are relatively more open to new experiences and ideas both to be more likely to migrate and also to engage in a consensual first union. Second, it is possible that, for some couples, planned weddings were postponed until the next trip home, meaning that their unions should be considered more as marriages with delayed wedding ceremonies rather than as consensual unions. This last reason is unlikely to be an important part of the explanation, as the same result is observed for marriages and consensual unions in our set of longer-lasting unions.

The time trends and spatial differences shown in Tables 3 and 4 may potentially reflect averages of quite different trends occurring in the urban and rural areas. To investigate this possibility, additional regressions were run with the time period and place of residence variables replaced by a full set of time by area interactions (for example, Ouagadougou before 1980) which allows for divergent trends in each area. The results show that, among those living in Burkina Faso at the time of union formation, change occurred most rapidly in urban areas. Prior to 1980, new unions were considerably more likely to be consensual in rural areas than towns for both men and women – differences that are statistically significant compared to Ouagadougou for men, and compared to the other urban areas for women. Since then, consensual unions have grown

more common in all areas, a change that is especially pronounced in towns and cities. For men, the odds of a new union being consensual grew tenfold⁹ in Ouagadougou while, in the rural and other urban areas of the country, the increase was always under 1.6 times and statistically insignificant. For women, the relative frequency of consensual unions also grew more rapidly in urban areas, although for them the estimated changes were largest in the other urban areas.¹⁰ By the 1990s, new unions were more likely to be consensual in urban than rural areas, although areal differences were not significant.

Demographic and Socioeconomic Factors

The results show that *school attainment* affects type of union, as hypothesized. Women who attended regular schools at both the primary and secondary and above levels are significantly more likely to enter into a consensual union, compared to those with no schooling. Men who attended these schools are also more likely to enter into consensual unions, although for them the estimated effects are smaller and, for primary schooling, statistically insignificant.

Women's past union experiences have a very pronounced impact on the likelihood of a union occurring without the community sanction of a wedding ceremony, according to the Table 4 results. Marriages predominate women's first unions, while consensual unions are much more common in subsequent unions. For divorced, separated or widowed women, the odds of a new union being consensual is roughly five times that of women entering into their first unions for both the set of all new unions and for longer-lasting unions. This finding makes sense in the social context of Burkina Faso, where parents and the wider family continue to play important roles in overseeing children's first marriages. Women who had previously lived in union - mostly marriages - have much greater leeway in establishing subsequent unions on their own, and they may choose to forego the costly wedding celebrations. Interestingly, after controlling for women's prior union experience and other variables, the estimated effects of age, whether they had previously given birth, and the marital status of their partner at the start of their union are all insignificant.

In contrast to women, *men's prior union experiences* - their marital status at the start of the union - do not significantly affect the likelihood of a new union being consensual. It needs to be stressed, however, that union rank has a very different meaning for men and women in Burkina Faso, where polygyny is common. A large majority of men's second and subsequent unions in the data were polygynous and roughly three-fourths of men's second or higher-rank spouses were single up until the time of that union. In the local context, the families of these yet-unmarried women would almost invariably have insisted on formal marriages. In contrast, all of women's second and higher order unions could only have occurred after widowhood, separation or divorce. These women

tended to be somewhat older and about two-thirds of their new partners were currently or had previously been married. The effect of women's union status prior to the start of cohabitation is again evident in the men's regressions: the odds of a man entering a consensual union is roughly three times higher when their new partners had previously lived in union, compared to those at their first union. As was the case for women, men's age has no significant effect on type of union after controlling for the effects of the other variables.

Religion and ethnicity Unlike ethnographic studies of union behaviors that examine the behaviors of particular groups in specific contexts, this study aims to assess the wider social determinants of union behaviors and change across the country, focusing on the hypotheses listed earlier. For that reason, the variables representing religion and ethnicity are not central to our analysis and are included mainly as control variables. These variables may nonetheless have important effects on type of union (e.g., Pool, 1977), as religions can vary in their degree of disapproval of consensual unions, and ethnicities can differ in terms of social norms, the degree of social control exerted by the older generation over young people's behaviors, the traditional marriage process, the importance placed on specific ceremonies, and perhaps even people's willingness to report short-lived consensual unions in their past.

The results show that religion affects union type, especially for longer-lasting unions. For both men and women, Catholics and animists are more likely to enter into consensual unions than Muslims and Protestants. Muslim men who only attended a *madersa* (traditional Islamic school) are especially unlikely to enter a consensual union, although the estimated effect of this variable is significant in only one regression. Differences between the Catholics and Protestants may be due in part to the Catholic Church's opposition to divorce and remarriage, which could explain the recourse to consensual unions for subsequent unions by members of that religion.

The Bobo, Gourounsi and especially Lobi ethnic groups appear to be comparatively open to consensual unions. The small Dagara group stands out in the sense that both men and women of this group have high odds of entering into a consensual union in the "all unions" regressions, and roughly average odds in the "longer-lasting unions" regressions, indicating that they have a higher occurrence of transitory consensual unions than other ethnic groups. About two-thirds of Dagara "consensual" unions captured in the data were followed by a wedding in the next three years, compared to somewhat over one-fourth for all other ethnic groups combined. The Lobi and Dagara ethnicities are atypical for Burkina Faso, and aspects of their cultures may underlie these results. Concentrated in the south of the country, their societies are matrilineal or both matrilineal and patrilineal, unlike most other ethnic groups, and they are viewed as being broadly similar (Goody, 1969: 169, 202). In their traditions, women are often expected to prove their fertility by childbirth before marriage; occasional premarital cohabitation with the prospective spouses is permitted, as are sexual

liaisons with other lovers prior to the first birth (de Rouville, 1987). For both of these groups, the degree of social control exercised by the family over the sexual behaviors of youth is much weaker than that of most other ethnic groups in the country, including the dominant Mossi.

Summary and Discussion

We use detailed retrospective data to examine the determinants and changes over time of the relative frequency of consensual unions versus marriages in Burkina Faso. For the most part, the results support our initial hypotheses. New cohabitating unions are more likely to be consensual in situations where the influence of different norms and attitudes are comparatively greater and the importance of traditional social controls weaker – when partners are relatively better educated or when cohabitation began when they were living abroad. In addition, there is clear evidence of an increasing popularity of consensual unions over time, a finding that is significantly more pronounced in urban areas, as hypothesized. Unions made up of partners from different ethnic groups are, however, not significantly more apt to enter into a consensual union, against our expectations.

A woman's prior marital experience appears to be a very important determinant of union type. Consensual unions are rare for women's first unions, and much more common among those who previously lived in union and were since divorced, separated or widowed. In sharp contrast, men's prior union experiences have no significant effect on the likelihood of a newly formed union being consensual. This is not an altogether surprising result in the social context of Burkina Faso, where polygynous marriages are common. For the men in our data, most of their earlier contracted relationships are still ongoing, and their new partners were single up until the time of entry into the union under study. In such a situation, it is likely that the women's family would insist on formal marriage, perhaps in part to guarantee her equal status with co-wives.

Our findings also point to a considerable degree of continuity over time marriage/union traditions and behaviors. In the 1960s and 1970s, consensual unions at the start of cohabitation were more common in rural areas. While consensual unions have become more common in recent years, a change that is considerably stronger in cities, the overall degree of the increase has been moderate. As a result, among the set of ongoing unions observed at the time of the survey in 2000 (many of which had been in existence for several years), consensual unions remained somewhat more common in rural areas, although geographic differences were statistically insignificant.¹¹ Should time trends continue, consensual unions however should gradually become increasingly concentrated in urban areas. In a study of nearby Togo, Thiriat (1998, ch. 9) similarly documented a higher prevalence of consensual unions in rural areas in

the past and a faster growth of consensual unions in towns and cities over time, showing that this pattern is not unique to Burkina Faso.

By comparing our results with those of earlier studies by Pool and colleagues on Burkina Faso and Ghana (Coulibaly and Pool, 1975; Pool, 1977; Pool, 1968), based on data from the 1960s, we find further evidence of inertia in the pace of change of marriage/union behaviors. For example, both our study and these earlier ones did not reveal important effects of men's and women's ages on the likelihood of unions being consensual in Burkina Faso. This pattern is in sharp contrast with the situation they documented for Ghana 45 years ago, where consensual unions were heavily concentrated in urban areas and among men and women aged under 25 – groups often thought to be especially open to consensual unions.¹² Similarly, both this analysis and Pool (1977) found that unions in Burkina Faso are relatively quite stable (unlikely to end in separation or divorce), although we do see evidence of a somewhat higher probability of rupture for women's consensual unions in the 1990s.

Taken together, the findings of this study support the notion that the social significance of consensual unions has been gradually evolving from a phenomenon that was probably grounded in large part in the cultures and customs of the various ethnic groups, and somewhat more common in the less Europeanized rural areas than in the cities, to one that is slowly but increasingly becoming concentrated in urban areas and among those asserting more “modern” attitudes and behaviors. Care, however, should be taken in making this assertion, given the contrasted nature of Burkinabè society and recognizing that our results reflect broad tendencies across heterogeneous subgroups of the population. In-depth cross-setting qualitative research on the social dynamics of union formation and dissolution, examining for instance the perceptions of young men and women on the importance of changing attitudes to marriage versus economic constraints affecting marriage strategies and behaviors, would be a valuable complement to this analysis.

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End Notes

1. See articles 231, 234 and 238 of Burkina Faso (1990) for the laws governing civil marriages. At the time of the survey in 2000, less than 4% of ongoing unions were civil marriages and most of these had also been sanctified by religious or traditional wedding ceremonies. Religious wedding ceremonies had occurred for 47% of unions, and traditional ceremonies for almost 60% (many had both). Roughly 10% of ongoing unions were consensual, existing in the absence of any type of marriage ceremony.
2. See de Rouville (1987: 207-211) for a description of eloping in traditional Lobi society, Pillon (1994) for nearby northern Togo, and Geismar (1933, cited by Antoine 2007) for the Diolas of Senegal.
3. Ian Pool (personal communication) recalls a common phrase used by Ghanaian women in consensual unions in the mid-1960s, revealing their sense of autonomy: "I drive myself".
4. In French, the *Enquête Migration, insertion urbaine et environnement au Burkina Faso*. This survey was conducted by the Université de Ouagadougou, the Université de Montréal and the Centre d'Études et de Recherche sur la Population pour le Développement (CERPOD), and was funded by CIDA (Canada) and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.
5. Van de Walle and Baker (2004) report that Muslim weddings in Senegal and Mali were often declared early in the process, although we doubt that this would be the case in the socio-cultural context of Burkina.
6. The SMUIE/BF interviewed 100% of men and women aged 25-64, and 50% of those aged 15-25, who were living in the selected households. Many of the ongoing unions at the time of the survey reported by men and women were one and the same – the cases of husbands and wives in the sample; this is generally not the case for past unions. There are also a fair number of ongoing unions reported by just one of the partners. The most important cause of this relates to Sahelian women's tendency to marry at younger ages than men, leading to large age gaps between spouses. Married women were not infrequently under age 25 and half of those were not selected for interviews. This was less often the case for men, as most of those aged 15-25 were single and thus not included in our analysis. In any case, to the extent that men's and women's behaviors differ, the effects of covariates estimated in the regressions will also to differ even for the same set of unions.
7. Kaplan-Meier survival curves for consensual unions, in which marriage is treated as a terminal change in status and union rupture as censored data, show that nearly half of marriages occur during the first year following the start of cohabitation.

8. Using the same data set, Gnoumou Thiombiano et al. (2007) document a substantial increase in the risk of union dissolution across generations (birth cohorts) in the country, in a study of all cohabiting unions (marriages and consensual unions combined).

Pool (1977) also reports evidence of a high degree of union stability across areas and ethnic groups in Burkina Faso compared to Ghana, using data from a 1969 non-representative random sample of diverse areas of Burkina Faso and a 1965-66 nationally representative sample of Ghana (Pool, 1968). The most stable unions in Burkina Faso appear to be those that were hardest to break: civil unions and Christian marriages (then mostly Catholic). Second unions of these types were rare (Table 2.5). Second or higher order unions were more often consensual unions, Muslim marriages or traditional marriages, with no clear difference between these three in terms of their implied level of stability. Caution should be taken in interpreting these statistics, as union type may change over time for given individuals (for example, a woman's first union can be Muslim and her second one consensual), meaning that the frequency of second-order unions of a certain type may not simply reflect differences in union stability.

9. Relative to the pre-1980 period, the odds ratios of a new union being consensual in 1990+ was 9.9 for all new unions, and 10.4 for longer lasting unions – both significant at the 1% level.
10. In the other urban areas, comparing 1990+ to the pre-1980 period, the estimated odds ratio for women was 4.4 for all unions and 8.2 for longer-lasting unions, both of which were significant at the 5% level. Equivalent odds ratios for the other areas were consistently small (≤ 1.4) and insignificant.
11. 10.0% of men's ongoing unions were consensual in rural areas, versus 8.3% in Ouagadougou and 7.8% in other urban areas. For women, the corresponding statistics were 11.3%, 10.0% and 8.6%, respectively. While consensual unions at the start of cohabitation were more common in urban areas in our data, statistics on ongoing unions are also affected by the likelihood that a union will last up until the time of data collection. Consensual unions are somewhat less stable than marriages, and some of them were formalized by a wedding in the years leading up to 2000.
12. Pool (1968) reports that between 22% and 24% of ongoing unions of urban women aged below 25 in 1965-66 were consensual, versus about 10% of unions of older urban women. A strong age gradient is also shown for rural areas, where consensual unions were much less common – depending on their age group, only between 1-7% of their unions were consensual.

Pool (1977) also found that the percentage of ongoing unions that were consensual in Burkina Faso ranged from 5-10% by area, versus roughly 10% in our data. Unfortunately, unlike the SMUIE/BF, their data are not nationally

representative, making it impossible to draw strong conclusions from the small size of this difference.

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