

African Households: an Exploration of Census Data

Matching spouses in monogamous and polygamous households in Cameroon

Draft

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Censuses are powerful databases to study household structure, namely in Africa. Typologies of African households are now available and allow for comparisons between time periods or between countries (Wakam, 1998). Census data are also of great interest for studying specific topics that are related to household structure such as child fosterage.

Furthermore, a household approach enables to study other aspects of family life, such as children school achievement or family formation. Family formation is the topic of this paper. The characteristics of the unions (polygynous or not, homogamic or not) are studied here for themselves, although they could be usefully related to household structure or children school achievement in a further step of the research.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to show for an African country, Cameroon, the interactions between the joined characteristics of the spouses (age difference and education levels) and those of the unions (monogamous or not); an other important objective is to elucidate the evolution, if any, of these interactions among younger generations. As it is forbidden in Cameroon censuses to ask questions about ethnicity, no comparison can be done here even if the interest of this variable has been shown in studies on fertility in Cameroon (Yana, 1995).

1. Data

The basis file is a 10 per cent sample of the last population and habitat census of Cameroon (RGPH, 1987); the file has been pre-processed to reconstitute unions¹. The only sorting variable we can use to achieve this is the relationship with the household head. Outside of unions formed by household heads and their spouse(s), this variable doesn't allow to identify with certainty all other unions of the domestic group given the low number of possible modalities. (Indeed, the variable of relationship with the household head only includes six modalities that don't allow the identification of all unions in the same household: household head, spouse, son or daughter, father or mother, other parent, without tie of relationship.)

It was therefore necessary to restrict the research to the sub-population of wives of the household heads living with them. (To extend the study to the sub-population of household heads matched to their respective spouse(s) would have required a special treatment for cases of polygyny because the rank of the wife in the marital structure has not been recorded.) In this study, we therefore limit ourselves to the sole point of view of feminine generations and to the study of unions in which these women are involved. In the sample used, the sub-population of wives of the household heads living with them is 106 003 women. Coresidence of spouses seems very common in Cameroon, as suggested by the very low proportion of

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married woman who are head of a household where their spouse doesn't reside: 0.4 %. These few women are therefore probably “deuxièmes bureaux” and they can not be included in the analyses that follow since we don't know their husband characteristics.

The selection of cohorts that will be included in this study must be made with care because it is necessary that every (group of) generation(s) presents a maximal proportion of women in union. Indeed, the unions recorded at the time of the census and which imply married women belonging to a given cohort are not necessarily representative of unions formed by all the women of that generation. In particular with respect to age differences between partners, it is known that the first women who get married in their cohorts choose more frequently a significantly older partner (B. Colombo, 1955), while among older women, those who remain in union (without this union being terminated by the death of the husband) are those that are closer by the age to their partner, or even older than him (F. Bartiaux, 1991; pp.193-198). Otherwise, divorce is another reason of rupture of the union, and it seems to sometimes be caused by a lack of homogamy between partners, at least in western societies (J. Kellerhals et al., 1985, and F. Bartiaux et al., 2000). However, it is difficult to verify this slant here, without additional information on the rank of the union.

While only keeping the feminine cohorts in which the proportion of non-married women is lower than or near 20 %, and by maintaining under 10 % the proportion of married woman who are not the wife of the household head, one gets 17 generations that answer to these criteria. These generations 1946 to 1962 are 25 to 41 years old at the time of the 1987 census and they are distributed in four groups of unequal amplitude as shown below in Table 1. These age groups tend to overcome round age attraction. Table 1 indicates that the limitation of the number of cohorts that are taken here into account comes from the percentage of married women rather than from the 10% -threshold of wives of the household head.

Table 1. Women domestic status by cohorts group (%) - 1946-62 female cohorts; Cameroonian census of 1987 -

Female cohorts groups	Woman status				Unmarried	N
	Married to a monogamous man		Married to a polygamous man			
	Spouse of the household head	Other relationship	Spouse of the household head	Other relationship		
1946-49	37.5	5.6	31.4	3.9	21.6	14 490
1950-54	42.4	5.8	31.2	3.5	17.0	17 243
1955-59	45.2	6.7	27.4	2.8	17.9	25 935
1960-62	45.5	7.9	22.7	2.4	21.5	18 110
Total	43.2	6.6	27.9	3.1	19.3	75 778

2. Type of union entered into by young women

As previously shown by table 1, married women have a different risk to be found in a monogamous union according to their age at the census time: 63% of the youngest (25 to 27 years old) women are married with a (still) monogamous man, a situation shared by 55% of the married women who are around 40 years old (38 to 41 precisely). However, women's level of education plays a much more significant role, as table 2 indicates: if we only consider householder's wives, women without diploma nearly have as much chance to be found as brides to a monogamous man as to a polygynist man. To every supplementary diploma considered in our typology, women decrease their «risk» to be involved in a polygynous union of about 10 % : for example, for graduates of the primary school this proportion is 28.6%, and it is only 7.1% for graduates.

Table 2. Type of union by wife's level of education
- 1946-62 female cohorts; wives of the household head only; Cameroonian census of 1987 -

Level of education of the woman	Married to a monogamous man			Married to a polygynist			N
	Hypogamous union	Homogamous union	Hypergamous union	Hypogamous union	Homogamous union	Hypergamous union	
No diploma	-	39.1	12.6	-	38.8	9.5	30 181
Primary lower	10.4	12.7	38.2	11.5	7.8	19.3	5 808
Primary superior	11.4	35.8	24.2	9.7	11.8	7.0	12 215
Secondary lower	20.6	33.8	30.0	6.1	6.1	3.6	3 716
Sec. Sup. and +	16.8	76.1	-	3.1	3.9	-	1 605
Together	5.7	36.3	18.9	4.0	26.0	9.3	53 525

Furthermore, the female level of instruction is closely related to the diploma held by the spouse, as also shown by table 2. If in total, more than six Cameroonian householder's wives out of ten (born in 1946-62) have the same diploma as their husband, or the same absence of diploma as him, homogamy is most important (close to 80%) for women without diploma and for those who have at least completed the secondary school. However, as said earlier, no educated wives are as often found in unions that are homogamic and (still) monogamous as as co-wives of a non-educated polygynist man, which is absolutely not true for the most educated wives. The minimum (20%) level of homogamy is observed for women who frequented at least the first years of the primary school.

These same women are on the other hand proportionally the most numerous (57.5%) to be entered into a hypergamic union (that is to be married with a more educated husband than themselves), which is still monogamous in 6 cases out of ten. By contrast, only 22.1% of the non-educated wives are found in a hypergamic union, their husband being already polygamous in one third of these situations.

Women with at least some years of schooling have about the same chance (around 22%) to be more educated than their husband (hypogamic union) but they are less often in a polygynous union as their level of education raises: 53% for women with a few years of primary schooling, 16% for those who have at least completed the secondary school.

When controlling by age, most of these results hold true, as demonstrated in table 3: the wife's level of education always plays a more important role than age does when comparing the risks for a woman to be in a monogamous union rather than in a polygynous one.

Table 3 also suggests that hypergamic unions are more often monogamous ones: for the selected cohorts, it has been calculated that two thirds of hypergamic unions are involving a monogamous husband.

Table 3. Type of union by wife's cohort and level of education
- 1946-62 female cohorts; wives of the household head only; Cameroonian census of 1987 -

Level of education of the woman	Married to a monogamous man			Married to a polygynist			N
	Hypogamous union	Homogamous union	Hypergamous union	Hypogamous union	Homogamous union	Hypergamous union	
<u>1946-49</u>							
Without diploma	-	38.3	12.1	-	39.3	10.4	7627
Primary lower	10.9	14.0	37.1	9.7	8.9	19.3	822
Primary superior	12.8	33.8	21.4	11.4	12.0	8.6	1033
Secondary lower	20.4	28.6	27.5	11.5	(7.4)	(4.5)	269
Sec. Sup. and +	(13.4)	78.9	-	(4.2)	(3.5)	-	142
<u>1950-54</u>							
Without diploma	-	36.1	13.3	-	40.0	10.7	7335
Primary lower	10.1	12.8	37.0	11.1	8.0	21.0	1468
Primary superior	12.8	32.7	23.2	9.8	13.3	8.2	2730
Secondary lower	18.4	33.0	29.8	6.1	7.8	4.9	752
Sec. Sup. and +	16.6	73.4	-	(4.1)	(6.0)	-	319
<u>1955-59</u>							
Without diploma	-	40.0	12.1	-	39.2	8.7	9475
Primary lower	9.7	12.4	38.0	12.4	7.9	19.7	2120
Primary superior	11.2	35.6	24.9	9.7	11.8	6.7	4993
Secondary lower	19.6	33.0	31.8	5.6	6.1	3.8	1465
Sec. Sup. and +	15.3	78.0	-	(3.1)	(3.7)	-	681
<u>1960-62</u>							
Without diploma	-	42.7	13.5	-	35.8	8.0	5744
Primary lower	11.5	12.4	40.3	11.7	6.9	17.1	1398
Primary superior	10.1	39.2	24.8	9.1	10.7	6.0	3459
Secondary lower	23.2	36.3	28.4	5.4	4.6	(2.2)	1230
Sec. Sup. and +	20.3	74.5	-	(2.2)	(3.0)	-	463

Figures in parentheses refer to a number <30 in the sample.

3. A comparison of types of union by cohorts

Table 4 below shows that several changes in mate selection and type of union may be observed despite the relatively small number of cohorts that could be taken into account in this study. The part of polygynous unions where the husband is more educated than his wife remains more or less constant (around 23%). The proportion of homogamic unions, albeit in majority, slowly declines to the profit of a very weak increase of monogamous unions where the husband is more educated than his wife, and of a clearer growth of unions where the woman is the most educated, her husband being monogamous or not. Let's recall that the level of departure of this union type was very weak (a few 5% for unions concluded by women born in 1946-49). As these unions where the woman is more educated than her husband especially increase in the two most recent generation groups, one should not exclude an effect of selection, according to which the divorce would preferably break hypogamic unions some years after their constitution. (J. Kellerhals *et al.* (1985) found some evidence of this phenomenon for Switzerland.)

Table 4. Percentage of homogamy by type of union and women's cohorts
- 1946-62 female cohorts; wives of the household head only; Cameroonian census of 1987 -

Type of union and women's cohorts	Husband has a lower education than wife (Hypogamy)	Husband has same education as wife (Homogamy)	Husband has a higher education than wife (Hypergamy)	N
<i>Monogamous unions</i>				
1946-49	5.5	66.3	28.2	5 387
1950-54	9.5	57.9	32.6	7 270
1955-59	9.9	58.7	31.4	11 661
1960-62	10.8	58.2	31.0	8 210
Total	9.3	59.7	31.0	32 528
<i>Polygynous unions</i>				
1946-49	5.2	71.4	23.4	4 506
1950-54	9.2	65.5	25.3	5 334
1955-59	12.0	64.8	23.1	7 073
1960-62	13.6	63.5	22.8	4 084
Total	10.1	66.2	23.7	20 997
Total	9.6	62.2	28.2	53 525

Table 5 gives some insights to understand this evolution. Homogamy slow reduction appears to be explained by the fast reduction of women without diploma who are the most numerous in homogamic unions: in the feminine generations of 1946-49, 77.1% of these women don't have a diploma, while they only represent 46.7% of the feminine generations of 1960-62. Among the co-wives of polygynists, this fast reduction is associated in addition for the more recent cohorts with a light decline of the proportion of women without diploma who get married with a man who is also non educated.

The weak growth (albeit irregular) of unions where the husband is more educated than her wife – a growth that is only observable among wives of monogamous men – can also be

explained by the conjugation of two factors: a light increase of the woman proportion in this type of union among the women who succeed the primary school or the secondary lower level, as well as by a growth of women numbers corresponding to these levels of instruction.

To explain the growth of hypogamic unions that is observed among the wives of monogamous, a similar multiplier effect appears (growth of numbers of graduates of the lower secondary school and increase of the women proportion in this type of hypogamic union). The more marked growth of hypogamic unions among co-wives of polygynous men seems especially attributable to the increase of women having finished with success the primary school.

Table 5. Percentage of married women by type of union, women's cohorts and level of education
- 1946-62 female cohorts; wives of the household head only; Cameroonian census of 1987 -

Women's cohorts and level of education	Married to a monogamous man	Married to a polygynous man	N
<u>1946-49</u>			
Without diploma	71.2	84.1	7645
Primary lower	9.5	6.9	824
Primary superior	13.0	7.3	1035
Secondary lower	3.8	1.4	270
Sec. Sup. and +	2.5	0.3	142
Total	100.0	100.0	9916
<u>1950-54</u>			
Without diploma	49.8	69.7	7349
Primary lower	12.1	11.1	1474
Primary superior	25.8	16.0	2734
Secondary lower	8.4	2.6	754
Sec. Sup. and +	3.9	0.6	319
Total	100.0	100.0	12630
<u>1955-59</u>			
Without diploma	42.3	64.1	9487
Primary lower	10.9	11.9	2122
Primary superior	30.7	20.0	5010
Secondary lower	10.6	3.3	1470
Sec. Sup. and +	5.5	0.7	684
Total	100.0	100.0	18773
<u>1960-62</u>			
Without diploma	39.3	61.5	5747
Primary lower	10.9	12.2	1399
Primary superior	31.3	22.0	3470
Secondary lower	13.2	3.6	1230
Sec. Sup. and +	5.3	0.7	464
Total	100.0	100.0	12310

Figures in parentheses refer to a number <30 in the sample.

This evolution is reflected by marked changes in the composition of each union type by level of education. As shown by table 6, homogamous and still monogamous unions are much less populated by illiterate women among the youngest cohorts than they used to be for cohorts that are older by a dozen years only. The same trend appears for polygynous and homogamous unions, although the evolution is much slower here. Hypergamous unions display a parallel evolution and in monogamous unions, the growth is spectacular for the middle educated women (diploma either from the primary school or from the lower level of the secondary school). Unions that are both hypogamous and polygynous display a rather stable composition by level of wife's education, while for their monogamous counterparts, results suggest a same evolution toward a higher mean level of education. On the whole, this trend appears with more strength in all monogamous unions, which therefore seem to be affected by more changes than polygynous unions.

Table 6. Composition by level of education according to type of union and wife's cohort group
- 1946-62 female cohorts; wives of the household head only; Cameroonian census of 1987 -

Level of education of the woman	Married to a monogamous man			Married to a polygynist			N
	Hypogamous union	Homogamous union	Hypergamous union	Hypogamous union	Homogamous union	Hypergamous union	
<u>1946-49</u>							
Without diploma	-	81.7	60.5	-	93.1	75.3	7627
Primary lower	30.4	3.2	20.1	34.0	2.3	15.1	822
Primary superior	44.6	9.8	14.5	50.2	3.9	8.5	1033
Secondary lower	18.6	2.2	4.9	13.2	(0.6)	(1.1)	269
Sec. Sup. and +	(6.4)	3.1	-	(2.6)	(0.2)	-	142
<u>1950-54</u>							
Without diploma	-	62.9	41.0	-	84.1	57.9	7335
Primary lower	21.6	4.5	22.9	33.3	3.3	22.8	1468
Primary superior	50.7	21.2	26.7	54.7	10.4	16.6	2730
Secondary lower	20.0	5.9	9.4	9.4	1.7	2.7	752
Sec. Sup. and +	7.7	5.6	-	(2.7)	(0.5)	-	319
<u>1955-59</u>							
Without diploma	-	55.4	31.2	-	81.0	50.5	9475
Primary lower	17.8	3.8	22.0	30.8	3.6	25.5	2120
Primary superior	48.3	26.0	34.0	57.1	12.9	20.6	4993
Secondary lower	24.9	7.1	12.7	9.6	2.0	3.4	1465
Sec. Sup. and +	9.0	7.8	-	(2.5)	(0.5)	-	681
<u>1960-62</u>							
Without diploma	-	51.4	30.4	-	79.3	49.1	5744
Primary lower	18.1	3.6	22.1	29.5	3.7	25.6	1398
Primary superior	39.2	28.4	33.7	56.8	14.3	22.4	3459
Secondary lower	32.1	9.4	13.7	11.9	2.2	(2.9)	1230
Sec. Sup. and +	10.6	7.2	-	(1.8)	(0.5)	-	463

4. Homogamy, polygyny and age difference between spouses

As seen up to here, the characteristics of the union, homogamic or not, and its extension or not to polygyny are closely related together and with the wife's education level. We now add an additional feature of the union: the age difference between spouses. It is no surprise that this variable is strongly associated with the wife's education level (table 7) and with the other characteristics of the union (table 8).

On average, Cameroonian wives born between 1946 and 1962 are 12.3 years younger than their husband: 10.1 if they are in a monogamous union, 15.8 in a polygynous one. This difference remains rather constant between means obtained for monogamous and polygynous unions at the various levels of education. However, a higher level of education is associated with a lower age difference between spouses: the most educated wives are 5.4 years younger than their husband when he is monogamous (table 7).

Table 7. Age gap between spouses according to the most elevated diploma of the woman and the type of union - 1946-62 female cohorts; wives of the household head only; Cameroonian census of 1987 -

Level of education of the woman	Monogamous union	Polygynous union	N
Without diploma	12.6	16.8	30 228
Primary lower	9.3	14.5	5 819
Primary superior	8.1	13.3	12 249
Secondary lower	6.6	10.5	3 724
Sec. sup. and +	5.4	9.7	1 609
Total	10.1	15.8	53 629

If the mean age gap averages 12.3 years, lower mean age differences are found for the wives whose union is both monogamous and hypergamous (7.4 years) (figures are reported in table 8). The hypergamic character of the union tend to be associated with a lower age difference between spouses, even if the spouses belong to a polygynous union: 10.7 years of difference between spouses against an age gap ranging from 17 to 19.5 years for other polygynous unions. Other monogamous unions come in the next places with an age difference between spouses averaging 11 years. Other polygynous unions are quite distant, as we just note it. It is worth underlying that in polygynous unions that are characterised by the wife's 'superiority' in diploma (hypogamic unions), the largest age difference between spouses that is observed (19.5 years on average) seems to offer a 'compensation' to the husband.

Table 8 also reveals that the mean age gap between spouses tend to grow in polygynous unions whereas the pattern is unclear for monogamous unions. It should be noted however that despite our limitation to rather young cohorts, a selection effect may (partly?) cause this apparent growth of the age difference between spouses in polygynous unions: widowhood is more probable for older wives especially if the age difference between spouses is large. With this possibility in mind, results reported in table 9 suggest that the age difference between spouses is increasing both in monogamous unions where the wife has at least a few years of schooling and in polygynous unions. On the whole, the age gap in

monogamous unions displays a mixed pattern of evolution because of the changing composition by women level of education.

Table 8. Mean age gap between spouses by feminine generations' group and type of union - 1946-62 female cohorts; wives of the household head only; Cameroonian census of 1987 -

Type of union and women's cohorts	Husband has a lower education than wife (Hypogamy)	Husband has same education as wife (Homogamy)	Husband has a higher education than wife (Hypergamay)	N
<i>Monogamous unions</i>				
1946-49	10.4	12.9	7.2	5 387
1950-54	11.3	10.9	7.0	7 270
1955-59	11.9	11.3	7.6	11 661
1960-62	11.2	10.4	7.7	8 210
Total	11.4	11.3	7.4	32 528
<i>Polygynous unions</i>				
1946-49	15.1	15.9	9.7	4 506
1950-54	17.6	16.3	10.1	5 334
1955-59	20.1	17.9	11.3	7 073
1960-62	22.0	17.8	11.6	4 084
Total	19.5	17.0	10.7	20 997
Total	14.7	13.7	8.5	53 525

5. Conclusion

African censuses are not only useful to study household structure and systems of residence, they also allow detailed analyses on marriage. An attempt is made here to study the matching of spouses in monogamous and polygynous households in Cameroon, using one 10% sample drawn from the 1987 census. Although the sample is large, some limitations due to small numbers did appear in this research, a problem that excludes the use of survey data (such as DHS) to address the same research objectives.

This study has shown that in Cameroon, the majority of unions concluded by women born between 1946 and 1962 join spouses who are closed by their level of instruction (or by their common absence of diploma) but distant by their age: in average, husbands are 12 years older than their wife(s). The opposition, or the complementarities, between differences of age (variable but often high) and of instruction (a clear majority of homogamous unions) are especially visible in unions formed by polygynists who are less educated than their wife: these men seem to make up for this inferiority by a difference of ages in their favour close to 20 years. On the other hand, homogamous unions formed by the most educated women and their monogamous husband feature the weakest (5.4 years) middle age gap. Thus, the "correct" distance between spouses, which is expressed by a high age gap and probably also by the passage to polygyny, seem to be larger when husbands and wives have less cultural capital.

In a further step of this research the men's point of view should be analysed, namely in order to clarify the selection effects due to age and the cohorts effects that indicate social changes (Ryder, 1964). A comparison of the co-wives characteristics should also be added.

Table 9. Mean age gap between spouses by feminine level of education, generations' group and type of union - 1946-62 female cohorts; wives of the household head only; Cameroonian census of 1987 -

Level of education of the woman	Monogamous union		Polygynous union		Total
Without diploma					
1946-49	12.8	3847	15.2	3798	14.0
1950-54	12.0	3622	16.3	3727	14.1
1955-59	13.3	4940	18.1	4547	15.6
1960-62	11.9	3230	17.7	2517	14.5
Primary lower					
1946-49	8.3	511	10.8	313	9.2
1950-54	8.9	882	13.1	592	10.6
1955-59	9.9	1275	15.4	847	12.1
1960-62	9.4	898	17.1	501	12.2
Primary superior					
1946-49	6.9	704	10.3	331	8.0
1950-54	7.6	1878	11.1	856	8.7
1955-59	8.2	3589	13.9	1421	9.8
1960-62	8.7	2571	15.7	899	10.5
Secondary lower					
1946-49	5.9	207	8.5	63	6.5
1950-54	6.4	610	9.2	144	6.9
1955-59	6.6	1241	10.8	229	7.3
1960-62	6.8	1081	12.2	149	7.5
Sec. sup. and +					
1946-49	4.6	131	(3.7)	11	4.5
1950-54	4.2	287	9.5	32	4.8
1955-59	5.6	637	10.4	47	5.9
1960-62	6.0	439	(11.0)	25	6.3
All levels of education					
1946-49	11.1	5400	14.4	4516	12.6
1950-54	9.7	7279	14.8	5351	11.9
1955-59	10.2	11682	16.7	7091	12.7
1960-62	9.7	8219	16.9	4091	12.1
Ensemble		10.1		15.8	53 629

Figures in parentheses refer to a number <30 in the sample.

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