

Culture



Gender Relations and Conjuality among the Baule (Ivory Coast)

Mona Étienne

Volume 1, Number 1, 1981

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1077269ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077269ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Étienne, M. (1981). Gender Relations and Conjuality among the Baule (Ivory Coast). *Culture*, 1(1), 21–30. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077269ar>

Article abstract

Reluctance to marry, urban migration and the pursuit of wealth on the part of contemporary Baule women are here examined in the light of historical and structural factors that play a decisive role in determining present goals and influencing behavior. Politically, economically and socially, women enjoyed high status in precolonial Baule society. Virilocal marriage restricted a woman's access to political office, but did not prevent her from establishing a personal constituency of dependents and participating in the entrepreneurial activities through which one achieved prosperity and prestige. These opportunities were, however, contingent on a definition of conjugal rights and obligations which gave women, as well as men, control over basic resources. Colonization, by transforming productive relations, has broken down the equilibrium of the conjugal relationship and undermined the economic position of women in general and wives in particular. Yet, it has not destroyed the models and values which motivate many Baule women to pursue economic and personal autonomy, and which sometimes influence men to respect and support these goals.

Gender Relations and Conjugality among the Baule (Ivory Coast)

Mona Étienne

École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales

Baule women of Ivory Coast are reputed for their independence and the ease with which they adapt to the urban environment. In the capital city of Abidjan, they represent an important fraction both of the female population and of the Baule population. This is not a recent phenomenon, but rather a long-established pattern.¹ Some of these women are, of course, wives, married either to Baule men or to men of other ethnic groups. Many, however, among the middle-aged and elderly, as well as among the young, are unmarried. Most of the older women who have remained in town—as opposed to those who ultimately returned to their villages—have, through hard work and careful investment, achieved prosperity and “success” within the limits of possibilities accessible to non-elite women—the only group with which I am concerned here. They are owners of their own compounds and a pole of attraction for various dependents, especially visitors and new migrants from their home villages. They also have sufficient income to sustain these dependents and to maintain important and complex social networks, both of which in turn contribute to their income by contributing to their productivity and to their opportunities for trade. They may have educated adult children or foster children in well-paid salaried positions, who supplement their income, ensure their well-being in old age, and will finance a prestigious funeral when they die—an important concern for all Baule. The younger women hope to follow in their footsteps. Some see marriage as

incompatible with this goal. Others consider it with ambivalence or as a means to an end: a “generous” husband may help them attain wealth and success. Very few envisage marriage as an end in itself.

This type of situation is not unusual in Africa, especially in West Africa, and has been the object of many studies. The earlier ones, often superficial, with undue emphasis on “prostitution” as a source of revenues and on “freedom from constraints” as a decisive factor in attracting women to towns. More recent studies have gone beyond this view, particularly in their attention to the complexities of women’s adaptive strategies in the urban environment.² Few, however, have studied, for women, the meaning of urban migration in relationship to the society of origin, that is the structural factors and concrete conditions which may facilitate or motivate it, as well as the profound reasons for resistance to marriage on the part of many non-elite urban women. Even more rare are references to historical factors which may have contributed to present attitudes and behaviors. It is the purpose of this text to examine some of the structural and historical factors which clarify the meaning of urban migration for Baule women, as well as their reluctance to marry. I will focus on the situation of women in precolonial Baule society and on the transformation of the relationship between women and men—and especially between wives and husbands—subsequent to colonization. I am here concerned with urbanization only as an end-product, so to speak, one

aspect among others of the socio-historical processes to be analyzed, and so will not go beyond the brief description of the urban scene given above, except for details that are relevant to this analysis.

The resistance to marriage observed in town is, in fact, not limited to the urban context. Rural women express similar attitudes. If many do not want to marry because they want to go to the city, others want to go to the city because they do not want to marry. Underlying this superficial expression of motivation, however, is deep concern with achieving economic autonomy and avoiding a situation in which it may be undermined. Today, as in the past, Baule society is characterized by great respect for personal autonomy and individual freedom of choice, for women as well as men. General social constraints are therefore not the issue. Pressure to marry is perhaps greater in the village than in town, but women can and do remain unmarried without migrating. Single life in the village is, however, more difficult than in town, if only because of limited economic opportunities. Opportunities to acquire wealth are now concentrated in the cities, for women even more than for men, or, at least, so it appears to village women. Men have their cash crops, often lucrative, and women's share in the profits is disproportionate to the considerable labor they contribute. Why this is so will be explained below. The important point, for the moment, is that women perceive marriage, at best, as a constraint that prevents them from realizing their full potential, economically and socially, and, at worst, as outright exploitation. Stated succinctly, the key questions evoked by this observation are: 1) Was this always so, that is, have Baule women always considered marriage a constraint, in this sense, or can their attitude be considered the result of colonial and postcolonial transformations of conjugal relations—and perhaps of relations between the sexes in general? 2) What is their frame of reference, that is, how and on what basis do they define their goals and, especially, to what extent do they refer to the contemporary context and the opportunities it presents or rather to a vision of themselves and their rights rooted in the history of their society? It is these questions I will attempt to answer. It is necessary first to present an overview of Baule society, with reference to those structural and historical aspects which appear relevant.

The Baule are believed to have emerged as a cultural entity only in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, as a result of the conquest and/or assimilation of Mande-Dyula, Kru and Voltaic peoples by successive waves of Akan, notably from Denkyera and Ashanti. In spite of a history that might have led to state formation and notwithstanding attempts by the Akan groups to impose their hegemony, effective centralization of authority was limited in scope and short-lived; political formations

were subject to rapid change; and stratification was never clearly defined or rigidly established. Political organization remained kin-based and was rarely operative beyond the village unit. In correlation with their history, characterized by discontinuous migration and the merging of culturally different populations—some patrilineal, some matrilineal—the Baule developed a kinship system based on cognatic descent, although succession and inheritance were generally matrilineal.³ The cognatic principle, because it gave people potential membership in more than one kin group, favored competition between kin groups to retain or increase their constituency. Individuals enjoyed a high degree of mobility, both socially and spatially. The structural and historical factors determining mobility were compounded by economic factors, especially during the late precolonial period (the late nineteenth century), when gold-prospecting, trade and the acquisition of domestic slaves⁴ were pursued with renewed intensity.

In this context, individual autonomy was the counterpart of generalized competition for wealth and power. From the point of view of an elder, to increase one's wealth was to attract dependents and to attract dependents was to increase one's wealth. From the point of view of a junior person, because kin group membership was not rigidly ascribed, an elder whose prosperity offered opportunities for entrepreneurial undertakings, and whose generosity offered his dependents a share in the profits, was a pole of attraction. Gerontocracy—and autocracy in general—were incompatible with such a system. Although elders commanded respect and had some degree of authority founded in their oaths and in the powers of ancestors,⁵ the heavy-handed exercise of such authority could result in the departure of dependents, and even in the dying out of a kin group for lack of members.

The absence of relations of domination-subordination between husband and wife was one aspect of the generalized absence of such relations in Baule society. Before examining the position of Baule women as wives, however, it is necessary to examine their position in the society at large, an important distinction, notwithstanding the persistent tendency, where women are concerned, to extend the attributes of a specific role—especially that of wife—to gender identity as a whole.⁶

Early observers are unanimous in noting the high position of Baule women. As individual members of the village community, they participated freely in the decision-making process in affairs concerning the village. As members of the village-based society of all adult women, whose rituals could not be seen by men, they acted collectively to defend the interests of the community against outside threats, such as illness or warfare, or to defend the interests of women against men. The former function seems to have been the

more important and, in a sense, it implied the latter. Women's rituals were so vital to the survival of all that it was believed that men who went to war without their support would surely meet defeat and death. Men too were organized in a society which could be dangerous to women. Yet, beyond this ritual dichotomy, there does not seem to have been a high level of antagonism or even separation between the sexes, nor were gender attributes rigidly defined.⁷ The division of labor, assigning different tasks to women and men, was an organizing principle of production, but no more than that. It was not rigidly enforced by either supernatural or civil sanctions. Deviations were considered acceptable in case of convenience or necessity and were not ridiculed. At best they were admired; at worst they were pitied, but only insofar as the individual must be so isolated socially that he or she could not find a partner of the opposite sex—wife or husband, sister or brother—whose labor could be called upon. Only the few tasks that required a long apprenticeship, such as spinning for women and weaving for men, were not the object of at least occasional deviations from the norm. Most of the various types of healers or diviners could be either women or men.

These examples suggest that gender was not the primary focus of the principles which served to define social identity. This suggestion is supported by the position of women in the competition for political and economic power. As members of their kin group, women had equal rights of inheritance and succession to the position of elder or chief—on the level of the localized kin group, the village, or the confederation of villages. The importance of women chiefs during the precolonial period and at the time of colonization is well-documented, although, as we shall see, they were no doubt less numerous than men. Nor were women excluded from the entrepreneurial pursuit of wealth described above. They participated in trading and gold-prospecting expeditions and acquired domestic slaves in their own right. Junior women, like junior men, might trade and prospect for gold as delegates of an elder. The elder who mandated their expedition might well be a woman. The accounts of contemporary women are rich with anecdotes about enterprising grandmothers and great grandmothers who, perhaps mandated by their own mothers, sought and found fortune in the trading centers and gold-fields of southern Baule country toward the end of the nineteenth century. This, then, appears to answer one of the questions formulated above: Baule women's pursuit of wealth in the framework of contemporary urban migration is not simply a response to new and unprecedented opportunities; it is deeply rooted in history and in the traditional models that govern their sense of identity and their goals.

The answer to our other question, as to whether marriage traditionally imposed constraints on the

freedom women otherwise enjoyed is less categorical and more complex. Baule marriage is the locus of a contradiction. On the one hand, the mutual rights and obligations of spouses are defined in such a way as to make it appear an egalitarian relationship, and to a great extent this seems to have been the case. On the other hand, in a society where residence was a crucial determinant of status, and, on its most basic level, authority was vested in the elder of the localized kin group, the principle of virilocality that governed marriage necessarily imposed constraints on wives. Whereas spouses as such owed one another mutual respect, a wife, not because she was a wife, but because she was a resident of her husband's compound, owed him special deference, as did other persons residing with him. Although the effects of simple deference behavior were minimal, the political implications were not. Virilocal residence was incompatible with a woman's effective access to political office, whether as elder of her localized kin group or on a higher level, and an obstacle to her inheritance of the sacred treasure corresponding to these positions, which materialized the identity of the group and could under no circumstances be moved from their place of residence. This contradiction was sometimes resolved by hypogamy combined with uxorilocal residence, by divorce, or by separation.⁸ But, uxorilocal or duolocal residence were exceptions, probably more so than divorce. While the early stages of marriage were marked by long periods of duolocality, when the wife continued to reside with her kin, a marriage normally was not complete until the wife had definitively taken up residence with her husband. For this reason, it is said that "noble" (*agwa*) women, that is women belonging to families who traditionally held high political office, "did not marry". Even today, although traditional political office does not have the same importance it had in precolonial Baule society, one encounters cases of women who refuse marriage—or whose families oppose their marriage—because they are presumptive heirs. Such cases must nevertheless be less frequent than in the past, if only because the colonial and postcolonial administrations have consistently prevented or discouraged the holding of traditional political positions by women.

It is clear, then, that, in the political domain, marriage represented a constraint, and that, in the past as today, ambitious women were not anxious to marry, or, if they did so, to remain married. Their choice was—and still is—facilitated by the fact that women retain economic rights in their own kin group, including rights to the labor of a brother or other kinsman, with whom they could establish an economic partnership on the same model as that which prevailed between spouses, and which will be described below. Dissolution of marriage was further simplified by the absence of bridewealth properly

speaking and because individuals had considerable freedom in their choice of marriage partners.⁹ The elders, therefore, even though their consent was required, generally had no vested interest in maintaining a marriage. This was especially true of the woman's kin, who, in case of divorce, were likely to acquire any children born of the union. As for the man's kin, they might well lose the children even if the marriage remained intact, since, under pressure from their mother or on their own initiative, the children might at any time decide to take up residence among their maternal kin.

By restricting her access to political office, virilocal marriage inevitably affected a woman's economic opportunities. Elders and chiefs were in the most favorable position to command dependents, and prosperity was, to a great extent, a function of the number of dependents who contributed to one's revenues. However, as suggested above, neither elders nor chiefs could entirely coopt the labor or the revenue of their dependents (except perhaps those of a newly acquired slave, as opposed to the slave-born, who also had rights). What they did receive for the most part served to increase the sacred treasure. But, much wealth circulated outside this sphere, as personal property of those who had acquired it by their labor or their enterprise, and also in the form of estates transmitted matrilineally among individuals who were not in line for succession to office. Further, relationships of dependency were relative and flexible, based more on active and immediate ties between a senior and a junior person than on hierarchical allegiance to a kin group elder or chief. This gave all adults, as they grew older, the possibility of building a constituency of personal dependents. Thus, for example, a son who remained with his father's kin group had the status of "child of a male" (*yaswa ba*) and normally could not inherit there, nor could his children (unless the marriage were more or less endogamous and his wife belonged to the same kin group). An heir had to be the "child of a female" (*bla ba*). For this reason, a man might eventually rejoin his maternal kin, especially after the death of his father. He could, however, build his own personal constituency of uterine kin, not only by retaining sisters and sisters' children, but also by attracting maternal kin other than siblings and therefore unrelated to the father, such as mother's sisters' children. These individuals would owe only minimal allegiance to the elder of the wider kin group. Their primary allegiance went to their uterine kinsman, with whom they would form a quasi-autonomous unit, contributing their labor to his enterprises and at the same time receiving some benefit for themselves.¹⁰

A woman residing virilocally enjoyed similar opportunities. She shared with her husband rights in the labor of her children and, of course, especially benefited by the contribution of her unmarried or

returned daughters. But she could also have dependents unrelated to her husband—her own domestic slaves and junior members of her own kin group. Fosterage and adoption were vital institutional mechanisms for providing a married woman with her own dependents (cf. M. Etienne, 1979a, 1979b). It was, in fact, an established custom that, when a woman took up residence with her husband, she should be accompanied by a child, usually a girl, given in adoption, most often a younger sister or a sister's child, or perhaps a slave child given by her mother or her maternal uncle. In the course of her lifetime, a woman could receive other adoptees and, if she had a reputation for wealth and generosity, could also attract junior dependents who would join her on their own initiative. A woman's constituency of dependents owed respect, but no real allegiance, to her husband. At the same time that they guaranteed her economic and personal autonomy, they maintained and consolidated her relationship to her own kin group by reinforcing the personal ties which are essential to kin group status in this system.¹¹

The ability to attract and maintain personal dependents was, however, contingent on a woman's economic status and on a definition of the conjugal relationship which made it possible for her to control the products of her own labor, and, especially, the surplus production which was at the origin of new wealth. In spite of the formal deference a woman might owe her husband, marriage was perceived as the association of a woman and a man for purposes of reproduction and production, with shared rights in both children and products. The working out of rights in children was complex and cannot be described in detail here, but, as suggested above, mothers tended to have the advantage over fathers. In exchange for procreation and nurturing, children owed labor and allegiance to fathers as well as mothers, but this tie was individual and circumstantial, whereas rights of—and in—maternal kin were inalienable and generally determined a greater ascendancy of the mother over her children.

As for the productive relationship, it was founded on principles of reciprocity and complementarity, with an intricately defined balance of rights and obligations giving women control over certain products and men control over others. This worked out in such a way that, of the two products most essential to subsistence in precolonial Baule society, yams and cloth, men controlled the former and women the latter, although the division of labor was such that both women and men substantially contributed to the production of both yams and cloth.

The underlying principle that determined control of surplus, once family needs were met, was that "ownership" of a product was vested in the person who had taken initial and primary responsibility for

production. The labor of the other, even if it was indispensable and quantitatively important, was a service rendered, for which he or she might receive a share of the surplus, more or less at the discretion of the primary producer, who otherwise disposed of it to his or her own ends. A man prepared at least one yam plot "for" a wife, at least as many separate plots as he had wives—and perhaps others for sisters and other kinswomen residing with him. Although each plot was assigned to a specific adult woman, the man, because he cleared the ground and initiated production, as well as taking responsibility for other vital tasks such as the building of mounds and fences, controlled distribution of surplus. The woman had usufructuary rights in the plot, using it for intercropping and secondary crops, such as cotton, condiments and cassava. These "belonged" to her. Particularly important is the case of cotton, which eventually became cloth. Because the raw material belonged to the woman, the end-product also belonged to her, even though weaving, a man's task, was an essential phase of the production process (cf. M. Etienne, 1980). An industrious weaver, in exchange for his services to his wife, certainly received a fair share of the finished cloth; and there was a form of semi-specialization which made it possible for men to control cloth they wove outside the sphere of strictly domestic relations of production. But, the definition of "ownership" on the level of domestic cloth production, that is, within the family unit, was a key factor in permitting women to acquire personal wealth, as was their control of food products such as cassava. Cloth was the principal product used to acquire trade goods, and so could also finance gold-prospecting expeditions, which were often combined with trade. In the last years of the nineteenth century, in the war-ravaged regions of northern Ivory Coast, cassava and other food products could purchase domestic slaves.

For both women and men, control over surplus production was largely a function of control over the labor of dependents—domestic slaves, but also children and junior kinspersons. The number and size of yam plots allotted to a woman by her husband would be determined both by her capacity to exploit them and by her needs. These in turn were determined by the number of children and junior women (or domestic slaves) under her dependency. These dependents worked alongside their elder and contributed to her productivity. Young adults would receive a share of the surplus they produced, but it would partially benefit the elder. Thus, the more a woman could produce, the more dependents she could maintain, and, the more productive dependents she could maintain, the more she could produce. Her productive capacity was, to some extent, contingent on her husband's capacity to furnish male labor for the men's tasks, both his own labor and that of his dependents.

She did, however, have other options. If her kin resided in the same or a nearby village, she could ask a brother or other kinsman to work a yam plot for her. A male domestic slave, even though adult and married, could be expected to work for his mistress, as well as for his own family. Although land belonged to the village and was generally allotted to individuals through their kin group elder, its availability was not generally a problem. Therefore, even an outsider, perhaps a wife's junior kinsman adopted in childhood, who had remained in the village but had no other ties with it than through his kinswoman, could be given land which he might work with her as a partner. An enterprising woman, even though married, could thus expand her productive capacity, both within the conjugal relationship and through other relationships, and use her surplus production as a basis for participation in the broader economic sphere of long-distance trade and gold-prospecting.

I have so far used the past tense in order to give an integral picture of things as they were in precolonial Baule society, without indicating at each step what has changed and what has not. In fact, the representations and fundamental principles defining relations between the sexes, as well as the rules governing marriage, remain for the most part intact or have only begun to change. What have been transformed radically are the material conditions which made these rules and principles effective, guaranteeing the autonomy of women in spite of the constraints which marked their position as wives. This transformation corresponds to the insertion of Baule society in the world capitalist economy and the resulting impact on production relations, affecting all women, but reflected with special clarity in the conjugal relationship.

At the core of changed production relations are cash crops, introduced in the earliest days of colonization, both by outright force and by persuasion—the latter in the form of new needs for cash, at first to pay taxes and then to acquire goods no longer available by any other means. This process was self-perpetuating in that cash crop production mobilized time and labor formerly used to produce goods which then had to be replaced by imported products purchased with cash. The effects on indigenous cloth production and especially on women's control of the product were particularly devastating (cf. M. Etienne, 1980). Cotton as a cash crop was an early focus of the colonial administration and coincided with the wide-scale introduction of factory-made thread, making men's weaving independent of women's cotton. Subsequently, factory-made cloth progressively replaced indigenous cloth for everyday use, completing the breakdown of pre-existing production relations. Women still control intercropped cotton on the yam plots, but, whether they sell it at the market place or give it to husbands to weave, this cotton is quantitatively and economically

of little importance. Produced as a cash crop requiring monetary investment (e.g. for insecticides) and the surveillance of male-oriented technical experts, cotton has become the province of men, as have other cash crops, such as coffee.

The rules of cooperative labor between spouses continue to prevail, but are played out more and more to the disadvantage of women. They contribute their labor to the cash crops of husbands and receive remuneration when the crop is sold, but their share in the profits is arbitrary and generally disproportionate to their contribution. They maintain usufructuary rights in yam plots, at least for intercropping and often for secondary crops, but the land on which they can exercise these rights tends to be restricted to what is necessary for strict subsistence needs—unless yams too are cultivated for sale. (Then, if the woman sells them at the market place, she will receive a share of the profits, but, if they are sold wholesale, she is likely to receive nothing.) In either case, the opportunity a woman has to grow her own products is diminished by the time devoted to cash crops, as is the availability of male labor that she may use to her own ends. Insofar as cash crops are more lucrative than condiments, cassava, and other women's products, it is in the overall interest of the family that more labor time be devoted to them. It is therefore not only a sense of conjugal obligation, but also sound economic logic, that motivate women to sacrifice their own production to men's cash crops. The result, however, is that the equitable exchange of labor which previously characterized the wife-husband productive relationship has become a form of unequal exchange. Above all, whatever may be their actual income, because they depend on a husband's "generosity" rather than on their own industry and control of distribution, women do not enjoy the economic autonomy they had in the past. In especially prosperous regions, some women may have sufficient revenues to regain their autonomy by employing laborers — or husbands may sometimes pay laborers to work for their wives.¹² But these exceptions are all the more rare that the opportunity for a woman to grow her own crops also depends on the availability of land, and cash crops have often made land, as well as labor, less available.

Concurrently with loss of control over production, women are losing control over dependents. As I have shown, the two are indissociable, and change in either direction tends to be self-perpetuating. Just as a woman could in the past increase her productivity by attracting dependents and attract dependents by increasing her productivity, her diminished productivity—in the realm of products she controls—diminishes her ability to attract dependents, and fewer dependents further diminish her productive capacity. This loss is compounded by urban migration, now considered the only means to acquire real

wealth, especially for women. The city drains the countryside of the young women—and the children—who might otherwise choose to work alongside their elder kinswoman or be given her in adoption. While the custom of giving a married woman a child who will accompany her when she goes to reside with her husband has not disappeared, a candidate may not be available. Further, although in principle one gives children out of generosity and in the interest of the recipient, the child's interests—and indirectly the parents'—are taken into account. The gift of a child is generally made with an eye to future prosperity, whatever the present situation may be. Even a schoolgirl, because her future is promising, may be given a younger sister or sister's child, while her older uneducated sister must go unaccompanied to her husband's home.¹³

Other children are given by their parents in adoption or fosterage to urban kinswomen, or even strangers, who, although uneducated, are believed to offer them opportunities for prosperity, perhaps because they themselves have prospered, perhaps simply because they are in the city. The hopes of such parents are more and more likely to be illusions, but they remain for the moment a decisive factor in transforming both Baule society and the condition of rural married women.

Another tendency is for men to play a more important part in adoption relations than they did in the past. Although adoption has never been restricted to females—as donors, recipients or adoptees—they were, and no doubt still are, in majority in all three roles. Because child-rearing is a woman's task, a very young child—and adoptees, as opposed to foster children, are given as babies—would not normally be given to a man. This would mean that the child would be raised by the man's wife, with whom the donor might have no relationship. If she did, she would give the child to the wife herself.¹⁴ But, because children go where the wealth is, and it is most often with men, and also because prosperous urban men are considered to have control over their wives—and their children—such men may today receive even infants. As for the recipient, she—or he—may prefer to receive a child from a kinsman rather than a kinswoman, because the parent who is the active donor (the other giving only consent to the transaction) is primarily responsible for maintaining the adoptive relationship, eventually persuading a reluctant child to remain with the foster parent. And, once again, men are now considered to have more influence than women over their children, perhaps directly, perhaps through the influence they have over their wives. In receiving a child from a woman, one runs the risk that the father, even though he consents, may not really desire the transaction. In this case, he will not use his authority to maintain it. As for the adoptees them-

selves, where schooling rather than the apprenticeship of gender-specialized tasks is the reason for giving children to urban kin, they are more frequently boys. This is not because of any stereotype concerning differential aptitudes of girls and boys, but because schooling is an important investment. Parents and foster parents see that, in a male-dominated society, boys are more likely to benefit from their education by attaining well-paid positions and be able to make the investment profitable by future contributions to the well-being of their elders.¹⁵

These changes that affect the participation of females and males in adoption relations, besides having a direct incidence on the position of women, reflect broader changes in the relations between the sexes. They also suggest why marriage is hardly more attractive to urban women than it is to their rural sisters. Some non-elite women, especially among the middle-aged and elderly, appear to have maintained both durable marriages and their economic autonomy. They have substantial revenue from trade and other sources, and their own constituency of dependents, both living with them and supported by them, in the village and elsewhere. They may, for example, own coffee farms worked by junior dependents. Although they reside in their husband's house, they may themselves own urban real estate which provides them with both revenues and a place to go if their marriage should break up. They usually have built a house in their home village, where they may eventually return, no matter how long they have lived in town.

Younger women, on the other hand, appear to be more dependent on husbands. This could be simply a phase in early marriage, but case histories show that successful older women began their economic undertakings very young, and some of these younger women have been married for ten years or more with no perspective of establishing their economic autonomy. What they have, they receive from husbands, their only personal income being small amounts—"pin money", so to speak—from petty trade. Junior dependents residing in their home tend to be the husband's kin rather than theirs. If these dependents are schoolboys or unemployed young men, as is frequently the case, they represent a burden rather than a productive contribution. The woman's own small income is likely to be absorbed by household needs, since it is ultimately her responsibility to feed everyone, whatever the amount she receives from her husband. It is difficult to determine how much this difference between older and younger married women is due to changes in attitudes and values among younger non-elite couples and how much it is due to the broader economic context. Both these factors appear to operate in such a way as to reinforce each other.

The husbands of all these women are for the most part salaried workers, illiterate or barely literate, or with just enough education to hold positions as lower-level civil servants and clerks (if they obtained these positions before there were so many educated men available).¹⁶ Although the older men seem to respect a wife's right to economic autonomy, the younger ones tend more to perceive the role of wife in terms of the European model, expecting her to be constantly attentive to the husband's needs, serving him, his children and frequent visitors to the home. Such a husband may also be oriented toward the model of the nuclear family, perhaps conceding to tradition and his own long-term interests by maintaining one or two children of his own kin, but unwilling to maintain a wife's junior kin. The couple's own children may all be in school, depriving the wife of their help precisely at an age when children become useful. In these marriages, the relative isolation of the young wife has both short-term and long-term consequences. Working alone, she cannot both take care of her family and engage in economic enterprises on her own account. She is therefore economically dependent on her husband. But, by confining herself to the conjugal relationship, she also becomes socially dependent. As we have seen, the ability to maintain personal dependents reinforces a woman's social networks, especially through ties with her own kin. Conversely, reliance on the nuclear family weakens these networks. This process may in time make a woman a prisoner of her marriage. Kin ties are rarely so weak that she would have no place to go; but, in her village or among urban relatives, her status as a returned kinswoman might be somewhat that of a "poor relative", if she had not built up her status as "mother" or "sister" by nurturing and supporting junior kin or giving in adoption or fosterage her own children. As for the latter, although they would always owe their mother some support, they might find it in their interest to remain with the father and/or invest more heavily in their allegiance to him. Even small children are remarkably sensitive to their prospects for a prosperous future and, on the occasion of a divorce, may elect to remain with the father because "he can pay for their schooling." (They also enjoy enough autonomy to be able to make a choice). Under these circumstances, a woman is more likely than she would be otherwise to maintain an unsatisfactory marriage.

But, changes in attitudes and values are, at best, a partial explanation. The process whereby wives become dependent on husbands is promoted by the urban economy, even more than by the economy of the village. Among the non-elite, salaried positions are almost entirely the prerogative of men.¹⁷ Even if their income is not supplemented by other sources, such as coffee farms worked by kinsmen, it is regular, and life in town requires regular income to meet daily

cash expenses and more important periodic expenses such as the payment of rent. With progressive replacement of old 'spontaneous' housing by rental units, this need has become more pressing and widespread than ever, giving non-elite men a substantial advantage over non-elite women. The new housing itself, by offering cramped and unexpandable living quarters, tends both to curtail many of the home-based and space-consuming economic activities of women and to support the nuclear family model by making room unavailable for dependents. Women might perhaps better defend their interests—and some do—by demanding the opportunity to pursue their own economic activities, perhaps even receiving seed money from husbands, but they are in a bad bargaining position. In town, where all needs are mediated by cash, a wife is not as indispensable as she is in the countryside. Besides, 'there are too many women in Abidjan', as goes the refrain of a popular song (Vidal, 1977). A man can easily replace a refractory wife, either by paying for the services she provides or by contracting a temporary union with one of the many available women.

Major developments in the broader economic context further contribute to the growing dependence of wives on husbands. The deterioration of the world economy in the past ten years has profoundly affected the third world, and Ivory Coast is no exception, although its economic situation may be better than that of other countries. In Abidjan, precisely because the opportunities there are better than elsewhere, the effects of inflation and recession are compounded by migration from other parts of West Africa, as well as from rural Ivory Coast. At the same time, advances in education disadvantage the non-elite by making it possible for employers to demand qualifications which exclude them from jobs or from promotions which were accessible to them ten or twenty years ago. By and large, whatever the relative advantages and disadvantages of women and men, the economic crunch makes money generally less available in this sector of the population. Where a man's salary barely covers the expenses necessary to support his family, he is unlikely to make concessions to his wife's need to establish her economic autonomy, and she cannot demand it. Although a tight budget may sometimes favor a wife's economic participation, such as preparation of food for sale and petty trade, it is almost certain that her income will in this case be absorbed by day to day family needs, especially since other tight budgets limit her profits...

Low salaries and high prices have in turn affected the 'informal sector' and the revenues an urban woman can hope to obtain through her labor. This sector is important in sustaining the urban economy precisely because it can survive pressures that would bankrupt a formal business. Having no other choice,

women devote more and more time and effort to undertakings which bring them lower and lower profits. With their income and the savings it represents—if they do manage to accumulate savings—being further eroded by a rapid rate of inflation, the disappearance of the prosperous and successful non-elite woman may be just a question of time. She will nevertheless remain a model for future generations, both among the uneducated and among the young women who hope to enhance their opportunities for future success by obtaining a formal education. Schooled and unschooled, married and unmarried, Baule women are unlikely to forget their great grandmothers, grandmothers and mothers, who, from pre-colonial times to the present, from the southern gold-fields and trading posts to the newly created cities, established durable reputations as enterprising and prosperous women.

Marriage itself can follow models other than those described above. Many young women, especially if they have received some schooling, are less reluctant to marry, if the husband agrees to finance the continuance of their education, and such commitments are not infrequent. In such cases, it is the understanding of both partners that the wife will thus be equipped to pursue her own career. In this and other ways, many Baule men demonstrate their continued respect for a woman's right to personal and economic autonomy. They do so in response to the demands of women, but also because they themselves have not rejected traditional models. Both the struggle of women to assert their rights and the persistence of values that legitimize their goals are forces that must be taken into consideration. They are likely to modify the direction of transformations which, examined too abstractly, suggest the inevitable breakdown of the social and economic power women had in precolonial Baule society.

NOTES

* I am grateful to the Ivory Coast government and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, who made possible the research on which this chapter is based. The source of my data is fieldwork in 1962-63 among rural Baule of the Bouaké region, sponsored by the Ivory Coast Ministère du Plan, and in 1974-75 among urban Baule of Abidjan (neighborhood of Port-Bouet), supported by grant No. 3067 from the Wenner-Gren Foundation and authorized by the Ivory Coast Ministère de la Recherche scientifique and the University of Abidjan Institut d'Ethnologie.

I also thank my field assistants, Kouamé Kodjoun Christine and Kouassi Affoué Yvonne, for their tireless collaboration, my many Baule informants for their patient and intelligent responses to endless questions, and Chantal Collard, Christine Gaily and Betty Potash for their comments and suggestions.

1. According to a 1965 study, the Baule population of Abidjan was 55% female. This corresponds to an exceptional inversion of the overall ratio of 45% females to 55% males for the total African population of Abidjan, among whom the Baule represent approximately 11.5%. (Côte d'Ivoire 1965a; Cf. also Côte d'Ivoire 1965b).

2. For examples of the former, cf. Little, 1973, and many of the works cited in his bibliography. For examples of the latter, with reference to Abidjan, cf. Lewis, 1976 and 1977. Dinan (1977) presents an excellent overview and critique of views on African women with reference to urbanization and modernization.

3. Dole (1972) makes a convincing argument for the correlation between cognatic kinship and the historical traits described here. For further information on the Baule kinship system, and especially on the nomenclature, which is "Hawaiian" or "generational", cf. P. and M. Etienne, 1967.

4. Domestic slaves did not constitute a separate caste or class and, through intermarriage, they were eventually assimilated. They nevertheless made an important contribution to the wealth of their masters—and mistresses—especially in the first generation. They could own property, but did not control it, particularly where inheritance was concerned. Their property reverted to their owner. Rights in slaves, as in other forms of wealth, were transmitted matrilineally. Cf. M. Etienne 1976 for the importance of slaves to the status of women.

5. It was considered that the rancœur of a parent could cause the death of a child. The power of the ancestors was operative mainly in the matriline, but the ghost of a father was powerful, and connections with various spiritual forces were transmitted patrilineally.

6. Marriage is by no means a permanent condition of all adult women. Nor does the position of "wife" entirely determine a woman's social identity in the many African societies where they retain their status as "sisters", as Sacks points out in a recent study (1979).

7. It is interesting that, among the Baule, menstrual taboos are not defined strictly in terms of gender identity. Contact between a man and a menstruating woman is dangerous—directly to the man and indirectly to the woman—only because of the collective and individual spiritual (*amwen*) forces he serves and which protect him. Most men have some such association with a spiritual force; some have many. A few miserable individuals may have none, at least where the village men's society has disappeared. A menstruating woman would risk nothing by touching such a man, nor would he be in danger. Further, some women have an association with a spiritual force which prohibits *them* from having contact with a menstruating woman. This is most frequently the case for post-menopausal women, but may also occur in the case of women who have not themselves passed the menopause.

8. For a comparable case, cf. Goody (1962) on the Gonja, where women may dissolve their marriage in order to take office and "terminal separation" is a generalized practice for older women. It is less systematic among the Baule, but nevertheless frequent.

9. Child betrothal existed, along with other forms of marriage, but, even in this case, the marriage could not be concluded without the girl's consent. Women could—and did—refuse to conclude the marriage because they "did not love the man." One exception to the general rule was a patrilineal form of marriage with bridewealth, but it was

practiced only by some wealthy and noble families and disappeared even before colonization.

10. Among these uterine kin might be the eventual heir of the *yaswa ba*, whose wealth could not be inherited by his paternal kin any more than he could inherit theirs. If the group maintained its residence and expanded, it would in time become a new kin group, considered *yaswa ba* in relationship to the founder of the village, as was its founder, but completely autonomous vis-à-vis his paternal kin.

11. She might also, with the consent of her husband—who would hesitate to refuse, if he wanted to maintain good relations with his affines—give her own children in adoption or fosterage. In this case, she would sacrifice her short-term economic interest to long-term social and economic advantages. Besides the general advantage of reinforcing her social networks, if, as a widow or a divorcee, she returned among her kin, she would benefit by having children of her own definitively integrated in her own kin group. Again, Goody (1962) presents comparable data for the Gonja. For a more detailed account of Baule adoption and fosterage, cf. M. Etienne, 1979a and 1979b.

12. If they themselves pay laborers, they may be returned migrants who prospered in the city but tired of city life. Some enterprising townwomen maintain laborers in their home village, thus supplying their own trade in food products and perhaps contributing to the support of village kin. They may eventually return, and even marry in the village, without losing all their economic advantages.

13. The child will be raised by its mother or grandmother until her adoptive mother is grown and sends for the adoptee, but is considered hers from the day the promise is made.

14. Just as a child is given by one parent, although the consent of the other is required, it is always given to one person, never to a couple. A child *can* be given to an affine, if the personal relationship is a good one and the marriage appears solid, but, considering the general precarity of marriage, the donor would normally not want to give an affine rights in a child given to a kinperson.

15. Parents also hesitate to invest in the education of girls either because pregnancy may result in their being expelled from school, or because avoidance of pregnancy may deprive them of descendants. This inequality is to some extent mitigated by customary law: the boy responsible for the pregnancy, or his parents, must refund the amount of the investment, or he must marry the girl and finance her continued schooling after childbirth. The effectiveness of this law depends on social pressure and on circumstances. In practice it does not always work.

16. I am referring here to cases studied in low income rental and spontaneous housing in the Port-Bouet neighborhood. My data, besides excluding the elite, does not include non-elite women married to elite men. I have left aside some cases of unemployed men largely supported by their wives, these among the older couples. Younger unemployed men, even when married, were generally dependents of elders.

17. The case of the Gonfreville textile factory, in the city of Bouaké, which employs many Baule women, is, I believe, still an exception. I know of no comparable cases in Abidjan, where even positions as salaried domestic servants for Europeans and well-to-do Africans are almost entirely monopolized by men.

REFERENCES

CÔTE D'IVOIRE (République de)

1965a Étude socio-économique de la zone urbaine d'Abidjan, Rapport No.3, État de la population d'Abidjan en 1965, Tome I - tableaux statistiques, Abidjan, Société d'économie et de mathématiques appliquées.

1965b Étude régionale de Bouaké, 1962-62, Tome I - Le Peuplement, Abidjan, Ministère du Plan.

DINAN, Carmel

1977 Pragmatist or Feminist? The Professional Single Women in Accra, Ghana, Cahiers d'Études Africaines 17 (1): 155-76.

DOLE, Gertrude

1972 Developmental Sequences of Kinship Patterns, In Priscilla Reining (ed.), Kinship Studies in the Morgan Centennial Year, Washington, D.C., Anthropological Society of Washington: 134-66.

ÉTIENNE, Mona

1976 Women and Slaves: Stratification in an African Society (The Baule, Ivory Coast), Paper presented at the 75th annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Washington, D.C.

1979a The Case for Social Maternity: Adoption of Children by Urban Baule Women, Dialectical Anthropology 4 (3): 237-41.

1979b Maternité sociale, rapports d'adoption et pouvoir des femmes chez les Baoulé (Côte d'Ivoire), L'Homme 19 (3-4): 63-107.

1980 Women and Men, Cloth and Colonisation: The

Transformation of Production-Distribution Relations among the Baule, In M. Étienne et E. Leacock (eds.), Women and Colonization: Anthropological Perspectives, New York: J.F. Bergin/Praeger: 214-238.

ÉTIENNE, Pierre et ÉTIENNE, Mona

1967 Terminologie de la parenté et de l'alliance chez les Baoulé, L'Homme 7 (4): 50-76.

GOODY, Esther N.

1962 Conjugal Separation and Divorce among the Gonja of Northern Ghana, In M. Fortes (ed.), Marriage in Tribal Societies, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 14-54.

LEWIS, Barbara

1976 The Limitations of Group Action among Entrepreneurs: The Market Woman of Abidjan, Ivory Coast, In N.J. Hafkin et E.G. Bay (eds.), Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change, Stanford, Stanford University Press: 135-56.

1977 Economic Activity and Marriage among Ivoirian Urban Women, In A. Schlegel (ed.) Sexual Stratification: A Cross-cultural View, New York, Columbia University Press.

LITTLE, Kenneth

1973 African Women in Towns: An Aspect of Africa's Social Revolution, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

SACKS, Karen

1979 Sisters and Wives: the Past and Future of Sexual Equality, Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press.

VIDAL, Claudine

1977 Guerres des sexes à Abidjan. Masculin, féminin, CFA, Cahiers d'Études Africaines 17 (1): 121-53