

“Living with a man”: Cohabitation in Africa.

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The Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) have accumulated a great deal of information on nuptiality in Africa. Their first priority is the collection of information on the proximate determinants of fertility, and their second priority the collection of data on the factors affecting the health of women and children, including some correlates of HIV/AIDS. In this context (and regrettably) the distinction between full marriage and cohabitation has not been perceived as important. African DHS surveys generally distinguish between the two forms of union through a question that distinguishes “being married” from “living with a man.” Only to the extent that nuptiality involves factors affecting exposure to intercourse has it directly entered the purchase of DHS. Moreover, for a survey that boasts a comparative perspective, its questionnaire phrases the questions on marriage in a bewildering variety of ways for various countries, and even in successive rounds for the same country. On the other hand, and more specifically in order to investigate HIV, recent surveys have included a multiplicity of question on sexual partners and sexual intercourse. The purpose of our research is to use these questions to investigate different types of unions (including cohabitation and visiting unions). Among the questions we ask is what differentiates these types, and the consequences of the distinction for demographic variables (e.g. fertility or mortality of children), but also more generally on the status of women, and in the case of children, who has paternity rights and obligations over them and to whose kinship they belong.

This is an extensive research agenda, and this paper concentrates mostly on two topics. First, we examine the DHS definitions and questions pertaining to types of union, and we discuss the extent to which changes in the phrasing of the questionnaire may have affected apparent trends in nuptiality. Second, we use a few countries as case studies to investigate what light qualitative research may cast on the differences between types of union documented in the DHS. We attempt to use research on traditional bridewealth customs and on the rules regulating the attribution of paternity rights to account for the diversity of proportions of unions of various types in selected DHS.

The distinction between marriage and cohabitation is not easy to make. In the DHS, the answer is left to the respondent, and no criterion is provided to distinguish these modalities of unions. The words “marriage” and “co-habitation” are themselves most ambiguous, since most marriages imply co-residence of the spouses. This ambiguity is highlighted by the sequence of questions in several of the DHS.

For example, in the 1999 survey of Nigeria, the phrasing is as follows:

Are you currently living with a man?

[If the answer is no] Do you currently have a regular sexual partner, **an** and occasional sexual partner, multiple sexual partners [sic], or no sexual partner at all?

[If the answer is yes] Is your husband/partner living with you now or is he staying elsewhere?

The sequence suggests (a) that the word “partner” applies even to casual relationships and (b) that “living with a man” may involve a man that is now not living with the respondent.

It would seem that three types of union can be defined in virtue of the criteria of co-residence (used here by preference to co-habitation, which appears to have become the official substitute for “consensual union”), regular sexual relations and various rituals or ceremonies marking community approval.

	Co-residence	Regular sexual relations	Marriage ceremony
Visiting union		*	
Consensual union	*	*	
Marriage		*	*

In most instances, the distinction between marriage and consensual union is made either on the basis of a ceremony (religious or civil) or of payment of bridewealth, the latter being by far the most important. However, in Muslim populations of the region marriage must be accompanied by a religious ceremony. Earlier rounds of the survey, in Islamic countries of the Sahel, omitted the part on “living with a man” and tried to ascertain instead whether the marriage had been consummated. This reflected customs where religious marriage is arranged by the parents at a very early age of the woman, and a couple may be married without living together. For example in rural Mali, at least part of the bridewealth may be paid before the Imam at the time of the Islamic marriage, but consummation of the marriage may occur only at the time of the wedding feast that serves as the customary ceremony, when the woman moves to her husband’s home. Islamic marriage commonly occurs before--often several years before—cohabitation, in particular when the bride has not reached puberty. Between the religious ceremony and the start of co-residence, sexual intercourse may start at her parents’ home, and the husband is reputed to “borrow his wife”. Under these circumstances, marriage is early and universal; there is little “cohabitation” in the sense of consensual unions.

At the other extreme are countries where, for practical purposes, the distinction between marriage and living together is devoid of meaning. The traditional ceremonies of marriage have fallen into disuse there, and legal or religious forms either do not have great numerical importance, or take place long after life together has started. Many societies in West Africa appear to have reached this stage.

Cohabitation as a distinctive form of union appears to be a feature of many eastern and southern African groups, where traditional marriage is concluded by the transfer of bridewealth. For example in Botswana, the absence of bridewealth does not prevent unions, but they are inferior types of union, which do not transfer paternal rights to the man, nor guaranty stability or durable access to the land (e.g. if widowed) to the woman. If she joins her partner's home, the union lasts for several years, and the man participates in the cost of raising the children, a consensual union may be said to exist. It may be a transitional stage, before bridewealth is paid and the cost of wedding feast has been saved, or it is a lifetime arrangement. Mokomane, analyzing the results of the Botswana DHS in conjunction with her own qualitative surveys, concludes that out of four women in their childbearing years one may be married, one lives in a stable co-resident union, and two are in visiting union. Eighty-five percent of first children are born before marriage, and in a large majority of cases the father disappears without contributing to their upkeep. The mother's family takes them mostly in charge. In the census of Botswana, 40 percent of the children under 15 are enumerated as grandchildren of the head of household.

The paper will limit itself to three countries in very different cultural zones of Africa. At this point, we plan to concentrate on Mali (where Lardoux has conducted extensive qualitative fieldwork), on Malawi where Penn has conducted a variety of survey research, and on one eastern African country to be determined (Kenya or Tanzania).