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On the Limits of Life Stages in Ethnography: Toward a Theory of Vital Conjunctures

ABSTRACT   This article argues for a new anthropology of the life course, one founded in indeterminacy and innovation. The fact that vital life events are rarely coherent, clear in direction, or fixed in outcome dramatically limits the usefulness of the life cycle model. In its place, I propose a unit of social analysis based in aspiration rather than event. I call this the vital conjuncture—integrating the "vital" of demographic vital events with Bourdieu's conception of the conjuncture of structure and action. Vital conjunctures suggest a new way of aggregating life history experiences and thus working between the individual and the social, free from the stultifying assumption of *étapes de vie*. To illustrate the usefulness of the concept of "vital conjuncture," I focus on motherhood among young, educated Beti women in southern Cameroon. I demonstrate that rather than a clear threshold into female adulthood, here motherhood is a loosely bounded, fluid status. Contrary both to folk intuition and to the assumptions of a life cycle framework, Beti motherhood is not a stable status. Beti women who have borne children are not necessarily mothers, at least not all the time. Motherhood, instead, constitutes a temporary social status, an agent position that can be inhabited in specific forms of social action. The material offers perhaps an extreme example of what I argue is a more general phenomenon: "life stages" emerge only as the result of institutional projects; their coherence should be an object, rather than an assumption, of ethnographic inquiry. [Keywords: life course, Africa, demography, vital conjuncture]

I N SHAKESPEARE'S seven ages of man, the notion that human life consists of stages finds perhaps its most poetic expression. From the "mewling and puking" infant to the old man at the cusp of "second childishness and mere oblivion," the melancholy Jacques describes a perfect system of stasis and transitions, a synoptic illusion (Shakespeare 2000:2.7, 139–167). Indeed, in many times and places, social and economic institutions collaborate to construct exactly such stages, marked by moments of authorized transition. When a U.S. boy turns 18, for example, he becomes eligible for the draft and responsible for his own debts. He is newly authorized to vote and run for office. He typically graduates from high school and moves away from his parents' home for the first time. Although his transition to adulthood is neither complete nor uncontested, the coordinated interventions of school, bank, family, and state largely succeed in making this temporal coincidence of major life transitions feel intuitively natural. What we observe, or experience, is the partial accomplishment of a joint project of institutional structures (i.e., banks and schools, the state and its military). Although not total, the congruence of life transitions here is substantial compared with that experienced elsewhere. When

lives are not built in the interstices of formal institutions, "entry into adulthood" loses even this apparent coherence.

When anthropologists have studied the individual life course, its cultural construction, and its relationship to social organization, we have often focused on moments of institutionally authorized transformation, paralleling the experience of the young man above. From van Gennep (1909) to Grimes (2000), we have emphasized the totalizing transformations that move people from one named status to another. But liminal states between stable statuses are rare. Most vital events—such as marriage, motherhood, and migration—are instead negotiable and contested, fraught with uncertainty, innovation, and ambivalence. The "transition to adulthood" is not only "processual," as the term is used by Sally Falk Moore (1986:320–329), but also nonsynchronous. Adulthood is an articulated composite.

This article argues for a new anthropology of the life course, one that recognizes this indeterminacy and innovation. The fact that vital life events are rarely coherent, clear in direction, or fixed in outcome dramatically limits the usefulness of the life cycle model. In its place, I propose a unit of social analysis based in aspiration rather

than event. I call this the vital conjuncture—integrating the "vital" of demographic vital events with Bourdieu's conception of the conjuncture of structure and action. Vital conjunctures suggest a new way of aggregating life history experiences and thus working between the individual and the social, free from the stultifying assumption of *étapes de vie*. To illustrate the usefulness of the concept of "vital conjuncture," I focus on motherhood among young, educated Beti women in southern Cameroon. I demonstrate that rather than a clear threshold into female adulthood, here motherhood is a loosely bounded, fluid status. Contrary both to post-Shakespearean folk intuition and to the assumptions of a life cycle framework, Beti motherhood is not a stable status. Beti women who have borne children are not necessarily mothers, at least not all the time. Motherhood, instead, constitutes a temporary social status, an agent position that can be inhabited in specific forms of social action. The material offers perhaps an extreme example of what I argue is a more general phenomenon: "Life stages" emerge only as the result of institutional projects; their coherence should be an object, rather than an assumption, of ethnographic inquiry.

RITES DE PASSAGE AND THE LIFE CYCLE

In 1909, van Gennep published *Les Rites de Passage*, proposing a classification of ritual and analytic frame for its analysis. But the book also formulates an understanding of social lives as organized sequences of stages. Van Gennep writes:

> It is the very fact of living that necessitates the successive passage from one special society to another and from one social situation to another, such that the individual life consists of a succession of stages, of which the ends and beginnings constitute ensembles of the same order: birth, social puberty, marriage, parenthood, class progression, occupational specialization, death. [1909:4, my translation]

The model of life stages is parallel to Morgan's (1985) stages of society, fully consonant with concepts of social evolutionism in which developmental trajectories are inevitable, already contained in the body—or social body—at its first instantiation. But unlike Morgan's work, the idea of life stages was easily incorporated into post-Boasian anthropology. From Margaret Mead's (1936) argument that coming of age in Samoa differs from coming of age in Vienna to Meyer Fortes's (1974) claim that giving birth universally serves to transform girls into women, ethnographers have debated the content—but not the existence—of van Gennep's *étapes*. Fortes, for example, has argued that passage through life cycle events, such as marriage or the death of one's father, constitutes a scaffolding on which lives are made. "Stages in maturation over the individual life cycle," he writes, "are established by a cultural apparatus" (1984:101). Fortes's description of the life cycle as "maturation" is particularly telling. Seen through the model of stages, lives are not enacted but, rather, under-

gone. Like Piagetian stages of moral development, life stages inevitably and naturally happen to us.

In its strong form, as represented by Fortes, LeVine and LeVine (1966), Raum (1940), Read (1968), and others, the life cycle model makes three claims about its object. First, stages are universal: All members of society go through them, and all societies have them. Second, stages are strictly ordered: Everyone goes through them in the same sequence and never reverts to an earlier stage. Finally, stages are coherent: People in the same stage share a consistent and meaningful set of attributes, and transition events constitute changes across all different domains of life. By indebting its analyses to the proposition that individual lives conform to presumed general categories, a strong life stage model must thus explain variation as "exceptions" (cf. O'Rand and Krecker 1990:258).

This strong form of the life cycle model has been eloquently critiqued. However, it continues to be employed both within anthropology and outside, in media from textbooks to journal articles. In fact, the life cycle model may be one of anthropology's most successful exports, finding its way not only into half a dozen disciplines but also into popular thought (Borysenko 1996; Kotre 1997; Sheehy 1995). Recent scholarly publications employ the model in demography (Johnson and DaVanzo 1998), economics (Lehrer 1997; Main 1983; van der Klaauw 1996), history (Abbott 1996), political science (Cassel 1993; Clagget 1981), psychology (Aiken 1998; Arnett 2000; Cowan and Hetherington 1991; Keith and Schafer 1991; Owens 2000), religious studies (Bradshaw and Hoffman 1996; Geffen 1993; Holm and Bowker 1994; Orenstein 1994), and sociology (Alwin and Krosnick 1991; Hartnagal 1998; Irwin 1995; Mills 1999; Rytina 1989). This may look like just another example of anthropological ideas gaining currency in other disciplines at the very moment we are abandoning them; however, the life stage model in its strong form is still widely taught in anthropology, even if it is not necessarily believed. As long as we teach it to our undergraduate students, anthropologists are partly responsible for the widespread use of the life stage model.

Widely used social and cultural anthropology textbooks, as well as crossover books by anthropologists published with university presses for a semipopular audience (e.g., Santino 1996:121), continue to assert strong life cycle claims, as this example from a popular anthropology textbook illustrates:

> Many of the social statuses that we acquire follow one another in a definite sequence from birth to death, known as the life cycle, and are commonly recognized in cultures throughout the world. It is particularly common to publicly celebrate status changes: to proclaim the addition of a new member of the human community shortly after birth, to announce the passage from childhood to adulthood around the time of puberty, to move from an unmarried to married status, and to adjust to the loss of a member of the community at death. [Crapo 1996:84]

Another textbook example asserts:

A person's life cycle consists of the culturally defined age categories through which he or she passes between birth and death. It includes stages such as birth, childhood, sexual maturation (puberty), marriage, adulthood, old age, and death. Each stage in the life cycle carries certain cultural expectations; as individuals move through these stages, their overall role in society changes. [Peoples and Baily 1997:311]

These kinds of uses of strong life stage assumptions have been appropriately and eloquently critiqued by a number of anthropologists. For example, Ester Goody (1982) argues that parenthood is not a coherent status but, rather, a bundle of related statuses, usually attained over time. Similarly, developing arguments that she has made in a series of articles, Caroline Bledsoe (2002) argues for a more nuanced understanding of biography in context, using the idea of the "contingent life course." Similarly, in her analysis of customary law in Kilimanjaro, Sally Falk Moore (1986: esp. 298) proposes a model of life trajectory as process, in which stages are never fully attained but always in the making. These critiques and correctives have significantly revised the life stage concept, making an opening for variation in the tempo and pacing of life events (see also Cohen 1998; Lock 1993). My analysis in this article is, I believe, largely consonant with those of Moore, Goody, and Bledsoe, although my emphasis differs. I begin with the observation that vital life events are variable not only in timing and pacing but also—and importantly—in order and synchronization. Because of their extreme variability, I suggest that we move away from thinking about transition events as the things that organize socially made lives. Instead, I propose a focus on institutions and aspirations, recognizing that these aspirations are multiple, changeable, and apply over a variety of temporal frames.

Given the work of Moore, Goody, and Bledsoe, it may seem that the life stage model in anthropology would now be moribund, no longer taken seriously enough to warrant serious critique. Yet life cycle stages persist. Often, they are used unreflectively, not as the point of an analysis but as its assumed frame. The model of stages has become routinized, normal, and invisible. Thus, some of the most sophisticated recent ethnographies presuppose cohesive life stages, even as they argue for the social construction of ethnicity, identity, or kinship. For example, in *Nuer Dilemmas*, Hutchinson (1996) equates female adulthood with childbearing. Contrasting it to elaborate male rituals, Hutchinson notes that "the initiation of a young girl into adulthood was, as it were, left to nature. For only after a girl had experienced childbirth did she become a woman" (1996:190). This quote constructs childhood and adulthood as stable and discrete stages separated by initiation. For males, this initiation is the ritual of scarification; for females, it is childbearing. A parallel statement could, on the face of it, be made for the Beti; however, the claim would obscure more than it reveals, as the next section shows. The appeal of life stages is strong enough that anthropologists sometimes invent them. For example, in his

discussion of sexual practice among the Na, Hua (2001: 182, 206, 220, passim) constructs two classifications of postpuberty stages, each with a different number of stages. Similarly unmindful uses are found in the otherwise thoughtful works of Hockings (1999), Hunt (2000:70–75), Levitt (2001: ch. 3), and Setel (1999:94–96).

THE BETI OF SOUTHERN CAMEROON

The term *Beti* classically referred to a social status rather than an ethnic affiliation, but for a century censuses and surveys have used it as an ethnic label, and it is increasingly understood as an ethnonym by those so-called. The Beti are "nobles." The word is the plural of *Nti*, "Lord," as in *Nti Zamba*, "Lord God." At the time of first contact with missionaries, beti stood in opposition to slaves *(bóló)*. The concept of "being Beti" was and remains a prototype—the ideal case is a powerful, successful man who manages his own affairs and the affairs of others—even as it is employed in government documents to refer to all people who speak languages classified as Beti (Eton, Ewondo, Manguissa, etc.) or are born into traditionally Beti lineages. Children are born Beti as an ethnic designation, but they must demonstrate their claim to being Beti as a social status tied to specific forms of social action. As such, the status "Beti" is much like the status "adult," socially contingent and under constant revision.

The 20th-century history of the Beti is one of increasingly institutionalized economic inequality and significant ideological change. Within four generations, the Beti went from swidden horticulture to incipient e-commerce, from acephalous segmentary lineages to multiparty elections, from having no writing system to having upward of 70 percent of the population literate in French. In the 1890s, the absence of any form of institutionalized political domination, such as chieftaincy or kingship, meant that "wealth-in-people," relations of marriage, parenthood, and patronage, was the only means of accumulation (Guyer 1984; Laburthe-Tolra 1977:880; Lembezat 1954:54; cf. Berry 1993; Bledsoe 1980). The authority of the *nkukuma*, or man of wealth of a village, its leader and usually its founder, lay in the loyalty his kin gave him. His wealth was in the people who made up his lineage or *mvog*. Following colonization in 1894, German colonials instituted sedentary, centralized communities through taxation, physical violence, and the establishment of local political hierarchies (Mveng 1963; Ngongo 1987). At the same time, Roman Catholic missions and mission schools brought about one of the most rapid and complete conversions known in Africa (Laburthe-Tolra 1981:42). Following World War I, southern Cameroon was administered by France under a mandate from the League of Nations. Increased production for the cash economy reconfigured patterns of kinship and residence in this period, as rural men sought wives to work on their cocoa plantations. So strong was the demand for women's labor that some men took wives who had not yet reached puberty (Guyer

1985). The profits from these enterprises were sometimes invested in formal education for children, who entered state employment. Thus, the institutions of state, church, and school together came to define a newly emergent Beti elite (Bayart 1989).

Independence in 1960 brought both legal and economic changes.[1] In the 1970s and early 1980s, the Cameroonian economy was strong, benefiting Beti communities with falling unemployment, new buildings, and extensive European imports. But in 1987, the value of Cameroonian exports collapsed, falling by nearly half within a year (Asuagbor 1994:41).[2] This began *la crise*, a disintegration of socioeconomic order that persisted for the next decade. Civil service salaries were cut twice, and the currency was devalued by 50 percent in 1992. In the 1990s, everyday life was extremely uncertain: salaries were paid late if at all; even in the capital, water, electricity, and telephones functioned erratically; medical facilities were understaffed with few supplies. Widespread economic hardship, combined with equally widespread corruption, left many people distressed about the present and fearful for the future (see also Mbembe and Roitman 1995).

The dramatic social, political, and economic transformations of the last century occurred in constant interaction with Beti notions of personhood and claims to status. The current structure of Beti personhood has a long history—it has been altered, but not replaced, with the changing political economy. As the social system of autonomous, polygynous household compounds has dissolved, what it means to be Beti has, in part, shifted. For at least a century, Beti have valued individual expression and character, anticipating extreme variation in the experiences that individuals will have (see Tessman 1913). Beti adulthood requires forging one's own path, defying preset categories, and demonstrating innovative abilities. Guyer (1993, 1996) has called this attribute of Beti society "wealth-in-knowledge," which she analyzes in conjunction with the "wealth-in-people" system well known throughout sub-Saharan Africa. In Beti society, Guyer proposes, the value of individuals lies in the tension between singularity and comparability. Although a skill or kind of knowledge must be comparable with others in order to be recognized, its value—and the value of the person who has it—arises from its uniqueness. In Ewondo, the proverb says "Mekyie, mekyie   " or "There are all kinds of all kinds. In contemporary Camfrançais,[3] this is expressed with the adage "C'est tout un chacqu'un," literally, "It's all one each" or, more liberally, "Every one is its own." A Beti sociologist explains as follows:

> Everything happens here as if education consisted of one single recommendation: "become who you are." . . Among the Beti, the central principle that presides over education is stated in this way: *Owog o na enyin, ve menken*, which can be translated as follows: "To live is to employ oneself in the acquisition of the means to enliven oneself; it is to renew oneself, to change." [Mbala Owono 1982: 122, my translation]

The Beti infant, like those in a number of societies, only "gradually and slowly comes to earn his personal claim to full human status" (Sheper-Hughes 1992:415). Particularly, Beti children slowly come to demonstrate that they have the human (in contrast to spirit) attribute of "good sense" (*mfefeg*). Mfefeg, context dependant and as easily lost as it is gained, constitutes the basis on which claims to individual identity, as well as adulthood, may be made (Laburthe-Tolra 1977:881; Mviena 1970; for a parallel discussion among the neighboring Fang, see Fernandez 1982:176–180). The motion from "infancy" through "childhood" to "adulthood" is, therefore, not a single moment or even a single trajectory. Children develop as sensible along several discrete trajectories, simultaneous and nonsynchronous.

The nonsynchrony of development across domains of "good sense" is visible in the case of Yvette, a 14-year-old girl living in Yaoundé. On the cusp of adulthood, Yvette played on her ambiguous status as schoolgirl. After she passed her tenth grade exams, two high schools were under consideration for her upper secondary education. Yvette preferred Collège Vogt, and her parents preferred Collège de la Retraite. Instead of stating preference, Yvette enacted it. La Retraite is significantly farther away from the compound where Yvette lived, and she set out to make it clear to everyone that she did not "have sense" in the domain of crosstown travel; although la Retraite itself might be safe, getting all the way across town would not be. She proved herself inept getting home from a church concert; she complained of harassment from older men when she left their *quartier*; she even managed to miss dinner one evening because she took the wrong taxi. Finally, "convinced" that their otherwise talented daughter simply did not yet have sense in things directional, Yvette's parents enrolled her at Collège Vogt. Perhaps they were not actually fooled, but either way it is critical to note that what was at issue was Yvette's "sense" (mfefeg) in one specific domain. Her sense for school, or for other domains, was not in question.

As growing up Beti requires demonstrating good sense in a variety of domains, not everyone grows up Beti in the same way. Rather than a clear trajectory toward adulthood, there are multiple, variable, and often hidden paths. Each person must forge his or her own. It is possible to have mfefeg in one domain but not in another: the pace of trajectories varies not only between people but also within an individual. These piecemeal trajectories imply that people consist of multiple, partially independent parts—that the person is not unified but, rather, internally complex. Indeed, Fardon has claimed that personhood in most West African societies is always multiple and fragmented. He writes that the "West African person [is] an internally organized composition, but each element of the composition [is] unlike any of the others and derived from a source initially external to the person" (1996:19). "Personhood" is, therefore, both more and less than the person—it extends beyond bodies and is divided within bodies (cf. Reisman

1992). Different elements of this human composition may thus follow different trajectories at different paces. Growing up is not a unitary process. Different skills, habits, attitudes, and modes of reasoning may follow distinct paths that diverge and intersect.

Instead of rearing children in a uniform way to conform to standardized notions of adulthood, Beti parents attend to the unique talents of their children in order to recognize and foster them. As a result of this attention to individual skills, "children are not thought about only in terms of quantities and categories (numbers and sexes), but also as unique composites of capacities" (Guyer 1996:11). Thus, the Beti material directly opposes the central tenets of the classic socialization literature, as children will never become predetermined kinds of adults (cf. Whiting and Edwards 1988; Wilson 1951). While la crise partially transformed what capacities are valued, it did not create the cultural emphasis on innovation and individuality: the specific *varieties* of contemporary life courses are perhaps uniquely postcolonial, but the *variation* of life courses is not.

The extreme variability of life trajectories among contemporary Beti invites a series of comparative questions. Is a model of life stages not appropriate in other societies or even among the Beti of the past? My intent is not to deny the existence, and even the salience, of coordinated life transitions in many societies. Instead, I seek to draw attention to the processes of coordination that underlie this phenomenon. Insofar as transitions in different domains of life are synchronized, irreversible, or (locally) universal, it is as the result of an institutional project. As Moore notes, "The project should not be misrecognized for its secure accomplishment" (2001:6). The project itself and its degree and forms of accomplishment should constitute ethnographic objects. For example, when U.S. men were drafted to an international conflict that many opposed and few were old enough to vote for, the political pressure to change the voting age mounted; here the aim of synchronization was explicit. Often it is not. Relatively coherent life stages exist when and where social institutions construct them. Everywhere and always, however, the relative synchrony of specific transitions, their potential for reversal, and their distribution across social groups will constitute productive research questions.

A social system in which adulthood is not a single status but, rather, multiple distinct ones has quantitative implications. Thus, among contemporary Beti, the key transitions that might be seen as aspects of adulthood do not occur at the same time or in the same order; their occurrences are not highly correlated, and many of them are reversible. Figure 1 shows data from a demographic life history survey I conducted in 1998. The full data set includes temporal and contextual data on several dozen life history events for 184 women. This graph shows only the age at which four events occurred in the lives of 25 women, cases selected at random from the corpus of women who had completed at least these four events. Using the whole

data set, the same (lack of) pattern is visible, but the graph is even harder to read. The horizontal axis shows a woman's age when she bore her first child. Each vertical line links the events in the life of a single woman, showing the age at which she was married with bride-wealth, left school definitively, and started her first paid employment. Thus, the lowest event on the graph occurred first and the highest one, most recently. The jagged, horizontal lines indicate the ages at which different women (ordered, remember, by the age when they first gave birth) experienced the same event, as shown in the legend on the right. If the age at first birth were systematically related to the age at any of these other events, the corresponding line would demonstrate some trend. None does, as detectable visually here and demonstrated quantitatively with OLS regression using the whole data set. If these women experienced life as a series of stages marked by moments of transition, we would expect substantial clustering in women's ages at these events; in the absence of clustering, we might at least expect to see some systematic ordering of events. In fact, neither of these occurs either.

Figure 1 demonstrates three important things for an argument against the life cycle. First, the ages at which Cameroonian women experience certain life events are widely varying: there is no narrow age range in which the different elements that might be thought to make up "the transition to adulthood" occur, even within this subsample of women who had, at least, experienced these events. Second, not only the timing but also the order and pacing of marriage, childbearing, and the move from schoolgirl to employee are variable. All of the events occur first in some lives and last in others. Finally, as noted above, there is no discernible correlation between the timing of different events: bearing a child early does not predict early marriage, early employment, or even early school leaving. A processual approach to life stages would allow that adolescence might extend over years; on the basis of these data, it would need to extend from age 15 to age 30 to account for 80 percent of the distribution. If life stages are coherent, universal, and ordered, then they do not exist among the Beti.

Despite the wealth of evidence for the innovative, nonstandardized, and multifaceted character of Beti women's life courses, much of the Beti ethnography relies on a model of stages, in which a woman's relationship to fertility constitutes the solitary measure of her maturation. The absence of female initiation rites was interpreted by ethnographers of the 20th century as evidence that Beti women's life stages are defined by reproduction, rather than as evidence that women's lives are organized in ways not bound to stages.[4] Committed to a life stage model, Alexandre and Binet collected a suitably elaborate vocabulary of female life stages in the early 1950s. They (1958:73) propose that the adolescent Beti girl *(ngon)* becomes a true woman *(nya ngal)* by losing her virginity, normally in a licit, although premarital, relationship. But the distinction is fragile: *ngal* and *ngon* are as likely Eton and Ewondo versions of
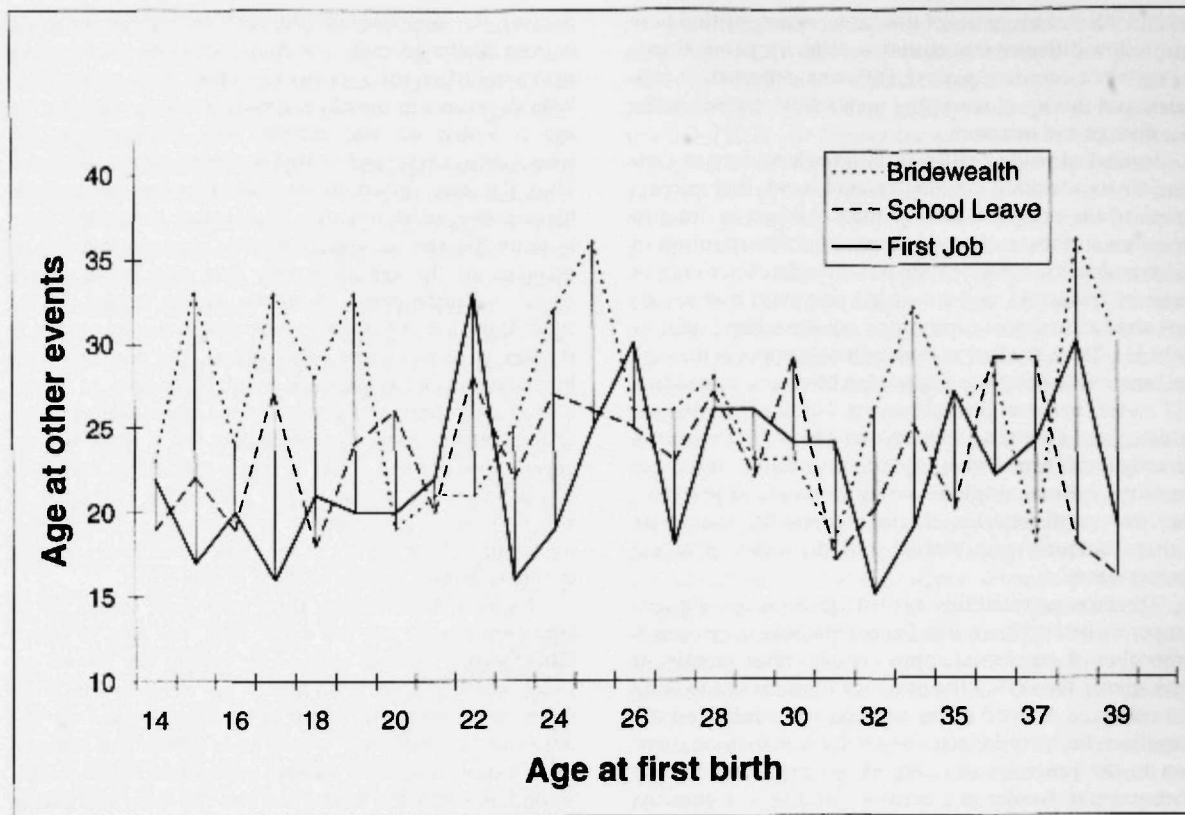
FIGURE 1. Shows data from a demographic life history survey I conducted in 1998.

the same word as they are separate words.[5] The next stage in Alexandre and Binet's constructed life course is that of the married woman, *nya minga*. *Miniga* is indeed used to mean "adult woman,"[6] in contrast to *ngon* (girl). But even these most apparently life stage terms in fact refer to statuses, rather than stages. Although they may be roughly sequenced over a life, this sequence is an artifact of a more basic social evaluation: that of claims to autonomy, knowledge, and respect.

There is no contradiction to being called "ngon" in one context and "miniga" in another. One of my assistants emphasized that she was an adult in the eyes of the Church because she had mastered the catechism and been accepted for confirmation: "They baptize you when you are a baby. You are not conscious then. When you take communion, you are already adult. When you do confirmation, then you are already adult" (conversation with the author, April 26, 1998). The equation here among consciousness, autonomy, and adulthood within a specific domain is explicit: first communion and confirmation require individual conviction and autonomous action (Tonye 1986:107, 115), but these forms of conviction and action are not transferable to another domain. Honorable family formation, for example, demands mastery of very differ-

ent spheres. Although secondary school students have, for the most, completed first communion and confirmation, they are not adults in reference to reproduction. As one informant explained, aborting a pregnancy to avert mistimed motherhood is justified when one is still a child oneself in that domain: "When you are still in secondary [school] you can say that you abort because you are afraid of losing your studies. You are not adult. But not [when you are] already at university, and you have men who come and ask to marry you" (conversation with the author, May 13, 1998). Bearing a child honorably is predicated on being adult—but only in certain domains.

What establishes someone's status as a girl or a woman is not having achieved a set of life history transitions but, rather, the role that she inhabits in a given social interaction. Being miniga is always relative to a particular social frame. Among the contemporary Beti, there are not ubiquitous, ordered, and coherent life stages but, rather, statuses that can be differentially occupied by people with certain resources or skills. The teacher admired as an elder for her wisdom, knowledge, and travel to the capital is treated as a child in lineage matters because she is unmarried and has no children. A number of ethnographers of Africa have noted that seniority titles are used

metaphorically as terms of deference or flattery. But when Beti call an unmarried and childless anthropologist "miniga, it is not a trope. In specific contexts, it is literally true.

The distinction between ngon and miniga is both more and less than a life course description. It is more because it relies on a nuanced set of situation-specific social evaluations, and it is less because of its radical simplicity. A binary classification is just too thin to do the work of describing a life. Some elaboration is possible in Eton and Ewondo through compound words, the most common of which is *ngon-miniga* (girl-woman), a term sometimes used to refer to unmarried mothers. Note also that there is no term meaning "elderly woman." It can of course be expressed in Camfrançais with *vielle femme*, but the alternatives in Eton—*ékomba* and *mfan miniga*—refer to rare kinds of social achievement and privileged claims to respect. Alexandre and Binet propose *ésila* to mean "elderly woman" (1958:73), but again this definition seems more grounded in a prior commitment to named life stages than in a description of Beti social order. My informants insisted that *ésila* was an insult, and Laburthe-Tolra translates it as "une femme accessible   concubine virtuelle déjà experte" [an accessible woman   already expert virtual concubine] (1981:216).

Alexandre and Binet's focus on reproduction in defining the female life course is in keeping with academic tradition. Africanists across the continent have treated the first birth as the sine qua non of the transition to female adulthood. In his review of social organization in sub-Saharan Africa, Lesthaeghe argues that "the reproductive function itself is so crucial to both the individual woman and to the two kinship groups concerned that the status of adulthood for women is almost completely contingent on motherhood" (1989:38). Female adulthood remains oddly excluded from the contemporary move to recast human experience as cultural construction: Even works that emphasize the myriad ways in which male adulthood is culturally made contrast the male experience with an essentially reproductively centered female life course (see again Hunt 2000; Hutchinson 1996). Insofar as the Beti case can be generalized, this equation of motherhood with female adulthood is doubly wrong. First, it assumes stable stages, and, second, it biologizes them. Beti *mingon* (girls) rarely undergo a coherent transformation of their status to *biniga* (women) across different domains.[7] Instead, life changes are partial and piecemeal; marital or schooling status may undermine, rather than reinforce, a woman's status as adult based on her childbearing. Entry into adulthood is not a single moment or even a single trajectory in contemporary southern Cameroon but, rather, a status that social actors may inhabit in specific interactive relationships.

THE VITAL CONJUNCTURE AND ITS HORIZONS

A model of life stages that would be empirically accurate to the Beti data would have to be so underspecified as to offer no analytic advantage. Yet, among the Beti, the social timing of events such as school leaving, marriage, and childbearing is systematic—the system is simply not one of stages. Rather than the inevitable and universal stage, the relevant frame is the contingent and anticipated future. The social consequences of life events lie in the kinds of potential futures that they can be mobilized to authorize. Giving birth for the first time is not a standardized transition into female adulthood but, rather, a nexus of potential social futures: a vital conjuncture. The analytic concept of the vital conjuncture refers to a socially structured zone of possibility that emerges around specific periods of potential transformation in a life or lives. It is a temporary configuration of possible change, a duration of uncertainty and potential. Although most social life may be thought of as conjunctural, in the sense that action is conjoined to a particular, temporary manifestation of social structure, vital conjunctures are particularly critical durations when more than usual is in play, when the futures at stake are significant.

Although for my purposes the prototypical vital conjunctures are those surrounding marriage and childbearing, all major life events—including migration, illness, and career change—can be construed as vital conjunctures. A familiar example is the duration around the completion of an academic degree, when career, residence, and professional identity are all at stake. Will I find a job? Where will I live? What will the future hold? This experience of future orientation, extreme uncertainty, and the potential—but not guarantee—of radical transformation brings life domains that normally appear distinct into close association. The joint evaluation of career, residence, reproduction, and consumption defines degree completion as a vital conjuncture; young Cameroonian women face the same combination of experiences in the vital conjunctures of first pregnancy and motherhood.

Both the words *vital* and *conjuncture* are borrowed from the literature, although from different domains. *Conjuncture* in this sense comes from Bourdieu (1977), who employs the term to express the relatively short-term conditions that manifest social structure and serve as the matrix for social action. He writes:

> Practices can be accounted for only by relating the objective structure defining the social conditions of the production of the habitus which engendered them to the conditions in which this habitus is operating, that is, to the *conjuncture* which, short of a radical transformation, represents a particular state of this structure. [1977:78]

For Bourdieu, then, the conjuncture is the effective context of action; it is the site in which habitus is made and its consequences are enacted. This usage is similar to that of Sahlins (1985),[8] who sees conjunctures as intermediate between social structure and individual events. What he calls the "structure of the conjuncture" is described as "the practical realization of the cultural categories in a specific historical context, as expressed in the interested action of the historical agents" (1985:xiv). Although the

ideas are related, Sahlins's usage seems to imply that the conjuncture is more heavily overdetermined, that the range of possible action is narrower. My own usage emphasizes the intersection of structured expectations with uncertain futures. I use the word *conjuncture* to emphasize the dual character of vital conjunctures: at once manifestations of recurring systematicness and contexts of unique possibility and future orientation.

Vital is taken from the demographic term *vital event*, which refers to any occurrence related to "an individual's entrance into or departure from life, together with changes in civil status" (International Union for the Scientific Study of Population 1982:211), such as birth, death, marriage, and change of residence. Indeed, vital conjunctures are an alternate way of conceptualizing the life history elements described by demographers through the lens of vital events: incipient or recent births, deaths, and marriages often evoke precisely these durations of uncertainty and potential creation. When viewed from within a life history, the birth of a child or dismissal from school does not constitute a discrete event but, rather, is an element in a subtly structured conjuncture. The differences are dramatic. Whereas classic demographic events happen to individuals, conjunctures are distributed over social groups. Whereas events are discrete and conceptually instantaneous, conjunctures have duration. Whereas events are outcomes in themselves, conjunctures have multiple outcomes over different time frames. It is significant that the contributing elements of a vital conjuncture are not necessarily in themselves "vital," in the sense of having life-and-death importance. Religious conversion, change of residence, or the clandestine promises of a lover may not appear vital, but when conjoined, they are the ground of vital events.

Vital conjunctures are experiential knots during which potential futures are under debate and up for grabs. The contested future is not only the stream of future events but also the future person, the range of identities that could potentially be claimed: Will I be a good wife? an honorable mother? a gifted student? a devout communicant? These potential futures, these structured possibilities, orient and motivate the forms of action that we observe or ask about in surveys. I call these imagined futures "the horizons of the conjuncture." Horizons are specific to a time: what looks like a hopeful prospect now may be closed down without warning tomorrow, and another potential future may open up. They are also specific to a perspective or agent position. Not only do different social actors have access to different kinds of knowledge about a situation, but they also interpret that knowledge differently.

The analysis of vital conjunctures rests on an understanding of what horizons, what futures, are imagined, hoped for, or feared. By thinking about life histories in terms of vital conjunctures, rather than canonical stages, we can ask whole new sets of questions: When and how do life domains cohere? Which elements of the life course

are cumulative, periodic, or waxing and waning? How are specific events, such as bridewealth, navigated, and how are their implications for other arenas of life interpreted? These questions turn the life cycle model on its head, implying that the cohesion of life domains must be the subject, rather than the assumption, of biographical analysis. When life transitions coalesce, as in the case of the young American man at the start of this article, it is the result of the intervention of powerful social institutions, which should themselves be the object of ethnographic inquiry.

Although analytically vital conjunctures may be clear, their empirical identification is subjective and sometimes difficult. They are remembered and recounted as durations of uncertainty, promise, or fear, as paths not taken, as alternatives since closed. As such, they are identifiable neither in standard survey data oriented toward events nor in the elicitation of normative experience. They can sometimes be collected retrospectively through life histories and, more easily, concurrently through participant-observation. The aggregation of vital events from individual stories into an analysis of social systems is possible through their horizons and the institutions that frame them. The possible futures, which social actors either hope for and try to bring about or fear and seek to avert, in the course of a conjuncture may not yet be tangible, but they are social facts, and they have social consequences. Thus, the social analysis of a set of vital conjunctures rests on the systematic comparison of the kinds of futures the actors imagine when confronted with specific challenges. Under what circumstances does a young woman evaluate her current conjuncture in light of her hoped-for future as an honorable mother? How systematically are marriage and motherhood jointly considered? Which factors are never relevant in the decision to leave school? These kinds of questions make it possible to move from individual recountings of vital conjunctures to their social analysis, and it is this form of analysis that must underlie any analytic discussion of even a single conjuncture. We turn now to such an example of a vital conjuncture and its horizons. Marie, the young woman who is the subject of the conjuncture, recounted the story to me in a series of conversations over several months in 1998.[9] This case shows both the contingency of Beti motherhood and how hoped-for futures serve to organize social action.

INTRODUCING MARIE

Marie, the eldest of eight children in a devout Catholic family, was born in 1978 in Yaoundé. Her father was a high-level civil servant, and her mother stayed home with the children. Marie was bright, but she struggled in school because of a recurrent illness.[10] She repeated several grades and attended four different Catholic schools before the ninth grade. When her parents' marriage grew rocky, Marie's mother returned to her natal village, leaving the children with their father in the city. Suddenly, Marie was the senior woman in the household, and her labor at
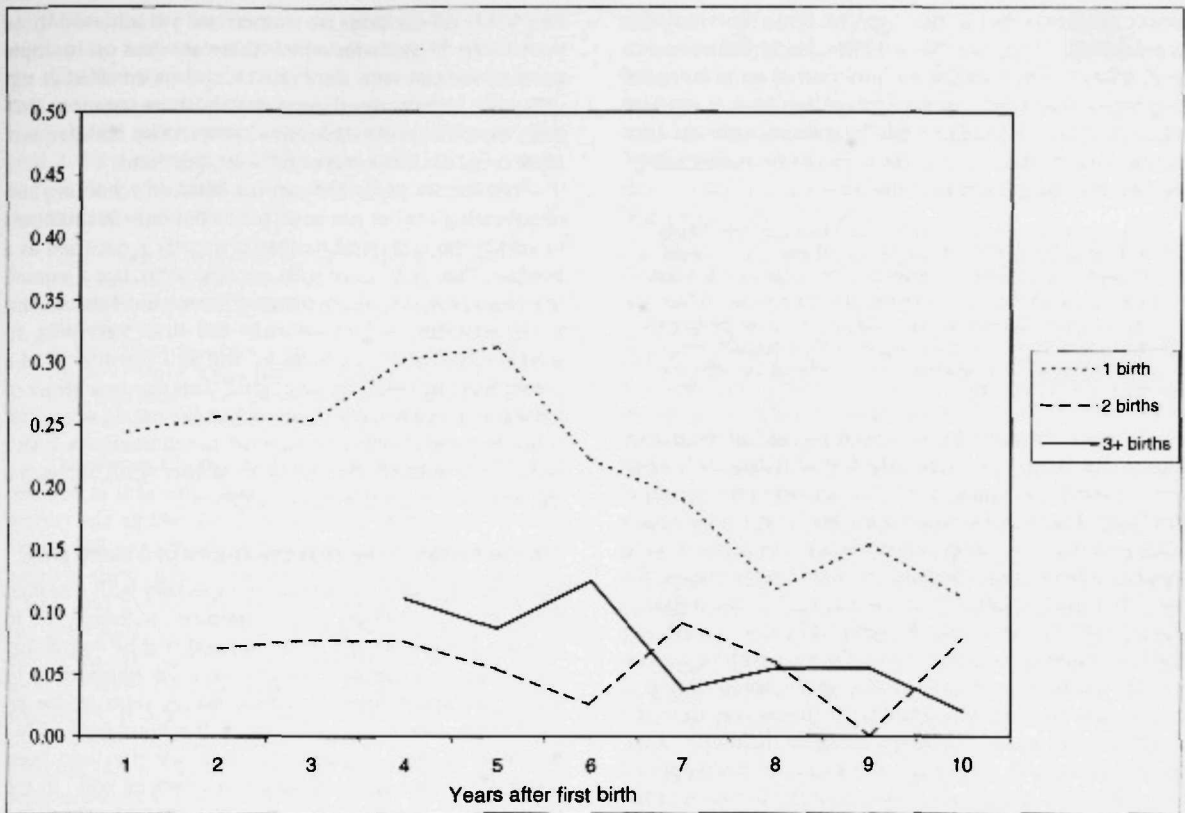
FIGURE 2. Shows the proportion of women at each parity enrolled in school in each of the ten years following a first birth.

home seemed more important than continuing in school—particularly given her poor grades. She explained: "In ninth grade I couldn't succeed. So my father took me out of school. At home there had been problems. Dad and mom didn't get along anymore. He chased her out. Mom left during the year. We stayed alone with dad, and I was the oldest." This might have meant the definitive end of her formal education, but Marie returned to school after a year of keeping house. Such intermittent schooling, whereby young women alternate between the classroom, the workforce, and the home, is quite common in southern Cameroon: leaving school is not a definitive transition.

When Marie returned to school, she began in a public lycée. Although public schools do charge fees, these fees are lower than those in Catholic schools, and the classes are larger. In part because of this, many women educated in Catholic schools in southern Cameroon consider public school students disorderly and even corrupt. Marie recounted the following:

> At the public high school, I am there in class, and the others are outside, and I didn't understand. It was a new thing for me. And so with adolescence and puberty, I started to do like the others. When you arrive in the public school, you have friends who already know too much. They tell you, "No, you can't stay like that! You need to, you need

to." I went with the first boy who came along. Unfortunately, I fell pregnant.

Her unintended pregnancy opened a vital conjuncture. At this point, Marie was required to reconsider her possible futures, to reevaluate her aspirations. Although her story is unique, the horizons that she invoked in navigating it indicate common orientations and expectations of educated Beti women. I will trace both the unfolding of the conjuncture and its projected horizons.

Schoolgirl Pregnancy: Fear of a Future of Shame

When Marie told her father about the pregnancy, he insisted that she go to live with the genitor's natal family in a small town about an hour outside of Yaoundé: "The pregnancy didn't please my father, and . . . he was right, because first of all I was the oldest. I had to look after my little brothers, and then I was like the mother of the house. So he couldn't bear it." Although she had not planned to marry this young man and did not want to live with his family, Marie obeyed. This choice is difficult to understand except in terms of her fear of future shame. Beti social organization relies on a system of honor, which resembles the classic Mediterranean systems,[11] although it differs from them in its emphasis on the individual and its

lack of emphasis on female virginity. From the viewpoint of a Beti schoolgirl, the risk of irremediable shame constitutes a key horizon in the conjuncture of an unintended pregnancy. Girls who get pregnant without marital or other prospects are called sexual vagabonds and are confronted with disrespect and the threat of permanent dropout. As one young woman explained:

> You see, when you are a student and you conceive, when your friends leave for school you are ashamed. You are obligated to hide yourself. Even when you give birth, you even go to the village. You go to give birth in the village so your friends don't see you because you are so ashamed when you are young and you give birth, especially with a schoolboy, since schoolboys flee. [conversation with the author, April 9, 1998]

It is not premarital sex or even premarital pregnancy that elicits shame but, rather, the fact of giving birth when one is young and unprepared. By comparing the pregnant girl to her friends who "leave for school,' my interlocutor suggested that pregnancy draws a sharp line between a girl and her school friends because they are continuing on the path that she has left. When the genitor of the pregnancy is a schoolboy, she noted, the girl will be abandoned. The double shame comes from the failure to achieve a class-specific model of motherhood tied to the social timing of births. Educated women distinguish themselves from the uneducated in a variety of ways, centrally including "discipline." Schoolgirl pregnancy is treated as undisciplined and, therefore, indistinguishable from the behavior of the uneducated. A girl who quits school without formal employment and without marrying well is thought by her former classmates to reduce herself to the base level of the uneducated (cf. Mann 1985). As Marie weighed her options and assented to join the genitor's household as her father requested, she did so in reference to the fear-inducing horizon of an unplanned, disorderly, and, therefore, shameful entry into motherhood.

The shame of schoolgirl childbearing gains its force in part through the local assumption that a child will prevent the new mother from staying in school. But the child rarely does. In a sample of 184 women who had attended some secondary school, the vast majority of first-time new mothers continued on the schooling paths that they were following prior to pregnancy: those who were out of school stayed out, and those who were in school either continued or returned. Over 70 percent of the women who were in formal secondary school at the time they became pregnant completed at least one more entire year of formal education at some point after the birth.[12] In this way, first births differ significantly from second and higher-order births. Whereas Beti women can effectively postpone socially recognized motherhood after a first child, women with two or more children are almost inevitably classified as mothers. Figure 2 shows the proportion of women at each parity enrolled in school in each of the ten years following a first birth. Data on school enrollment for women with two or more births are missing for the first

couple of years because no women had yet achieved those parities. In all years for which there are data on multiple parities, women with only one child were enrolled at significantly higher rates than women with two or more children were, while the difference between two children and three or more children is much less significant.

The locally perceived conflict between schooling and childbearing applies not to all births but only in situations in which the biological mother is socially recognized as a mother. This may occur with her first birth, but a woman may also postpone entry into this status until the second birth, returning to school after the first. Returning to school serves both as a measure and as a constituent of a young woman's identity as a "girl." This nonsynchrony of roles is one reason why a model of life stages must fail. Schooling and childbearing are neither mutually exclusive nor strictly ordered; the one-time mother again becomes a girl when she dons the school uniform.

Marital Fertility: The Possible Future of a Good Wife

Many Beti consider cohabitation, especially with a mutual child, as a step toward formal marriage. In asking her to join the genitor, Marie's father implied that he viewed her pregnancy as a decision for marriage, an implication to which she apparently consented. But as soon as she arrived there, Marie was unhappy in the household of her potential in-laws. Although no marriage rites had been celebrated, Marie spoke of herself as a "young wife" in the compound.[13] She explained that the hardship she faced was, in part, inherent to the role of young wife and daughter-in-law: "It was hard. Because they are Manguissa. A Manguissa man, he can love you, but his mother can never accept. Even if your husband loves you, his mother cannot. You cannot talk anymore. She makes decisions in the place of your husband. And because [my parents] didn't teach me to revolt, I was obligated to keep quiet." Keeping quiet was harder because her potential in-laws were members of a radical Protestant sect, whose practices bore little resemblance to her own.

In her mother-in-law's house, Marie had nothing of her own: not a pen, not a pocketknife, not her own space, not her own voice, and—eventually—not even her own faith: "But as I was in a house where I had to submit myself to the people who were there, they made me do their lessons at their school. It was twelve days.   They teach you that what is in the Bible, you must see it in a different manner. Finally, I joined them [the sect].' Marie here emphasized how she allowed her potential in-laws' intrusions in the attempt to conform to her role as a young wife: she submitted herself to their school and converted to their religion. Marie thus suggested that she intended to spend the rest of her life as a wife in this family and was trying to conform to that role. The "good wife" makes her peace in the household of her husband. Marie was making a concerted effort to become a good wife, as that identity was central among the possible futures she could envision.

Although the significant majority of educated Beti women are not married by any definition of marriage at the time that they bear a first child, there is a strong belief that marriage and childbearing belong together, that marriage should follow pregnancy closely or, better yet, precede it. Most nulliparous Beti women assert that they want to wait to begin childbearing until they are married. As one student explained:

> I don't want to have children before marriage because I don't want my children to suffer. Because experience has shown that children who grow up with a couple who isn't married, who is perhaps separated, those are children with too many problems. If you are not married yet, and you don't arrive at marriage and you already have children, look what that can cause. That will cause too many problems. [conversation with the author, August 4, 1998]

The contrast between stated intentions and common practice is dramatic: Fewer than half of first births are within any of the forms of marriage recognized by Beti. When Beti women assert that they intend to wait to bear children until they are married, six events might be referenced, and the distinction is not always clearly made: (1) the presentation of the man to the woman's parents, (2) the formal engagement, (3) cohabitation, (4) the bridewealth, (5) the civil marriage, and (6) the nuptial Mass. A significant proportion of Beti women never complete some of these marital elements, particularly the Mass. The puzzling fact is that marriage and childbearing, culturally represented as a coherent whole, in fact occur separately more often than together. Figure 3 shows women's marital statuses at the time of their first births.

In Figure 3, each column indicates a specific marital transition. The gray bands show the percentage of women who completed that transition prior to, or in the year of, the birth. This graph demonstrates two things of significance. First, the majority of first births occur outside all forms of marriage. The categories "completed in the year of birth" and "completed prior to year of birth" together do not account for more than 45 percent of first births for any form of marriage. Second, there is significant variation in the proportion of women having completed the different transitions by the time of their first birth. Comparing, for example, cohabitation and the civil ceremony—the two most common transitions—the differences are striking: First-time mothers are far more likely to be cohabiting with their partners than to have performed civil marriage with them. As we see in Marie's case, cohabitation without bridewealth or civil marriage may constitute a period of "trial marriage" in which potential spouses learn whether they are compatible; cohabitation is regularly viewed as a precursor to more formal marital rites.

Among those women who do eventually marry, marriage is most likely to occur around the time of the first birth. The pattern is strong enough that we might call the first birth a window of opportunity for marriage. In the vital conjuncture surrounding a woman's first birth, it would appear that not only her reproductive future but

also her marital future is in part at stake. This pattern is not new: Alexandre and Binet (1958:144) suggest that bridal pregnancy was preferred among the Beti in the 1950s because it combined the benefits of assuring the fecundity of the bride and assuring the paternal rights of the father. Looking only at presentation, bridewealth, and civil marriage we see a temporal relationship between each of these and a woman's first birth.

Figure 4 shows when the educated Beti women in my demographic survey reported completing the martial transitions of the presentation to parents, bridewealth, and civil marriage in reference to when they reported bearing a first child. Three things stand out as significant for our purposes here. First, note that the basic shape of the three curves is the same. All three types of marriage have a parallel temporal tie to childbearing. Second, the peak of each marital transition occurs at a different point. The presentation occurs most often in the three years prior to the birth, the bridewealth occurs most often in the same year as the birth, and the civil marriage occurs most often in the three years following the birth. This finding reiterates the fact that different aspects of marriage are navigated differently and serve different purposes in a relationship. Whereas the presentation constitutes only the intention to marry, bridewealth and the civil marriage are socially and legally binding, respectively. They are most often practiced once the woman has become pregnant or given birth. The belief that childbearing should lead to marriage constitutes a strong moral horizon for many educated Beti women; here we see the demographic consequences of that horizon as women navigate vital conjunctures. Finally, the overall levels of participation in these forms of marriage are low. Although the presentation, bridewealth, and civil marriage are considered the common and necessary parts of a legitimate Beti marriage, less than 60 percent of women complete them within six years of the birth of a first child. This, too, argues for a model of conjunctures, in which we can ask when and how marriage and childbearing cohere, instead of assuming their coherence.

Motherhood Postponed: Aspirations of Return and Continuation

As time went on, Marie's submission to her potential in-laws and particularly to their religion proved unsustainable. She wanted to go back to school and eventually to university. She missed her family and her identity. The parish priest sought her out and talked with her over several months. Marie returned to the Catholic Church and then to her natal home as well. She equated these two homes—the house of her divine Father and that of her human father—to explain how her reconversion led her to return to her family. She described the solace she found in praying the prayers she knew from childhood, which reminded her of herself, of her past, and led her to return to her natal home:
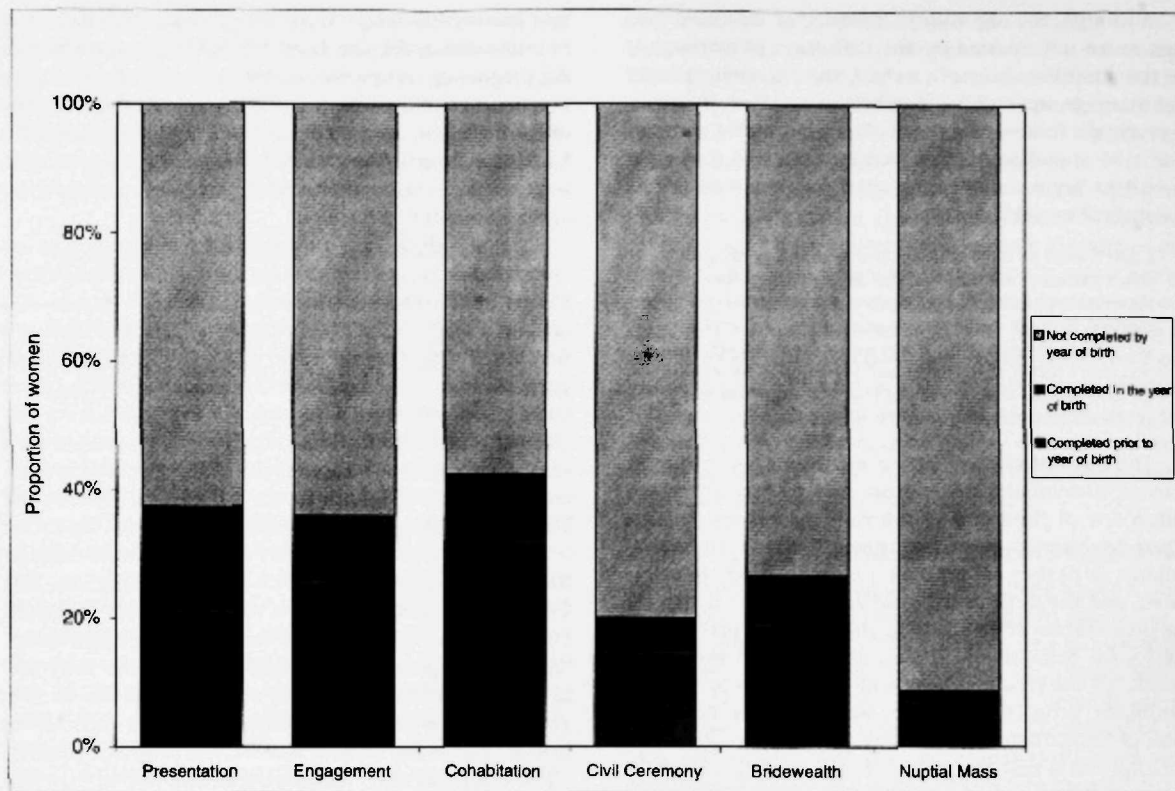
FIGURE 3. Shows women's marital statuses at the time of their first births.

It was much later that the parish priest . . . opened my eyes. When he opened my eyes, I said "No. That voice there was not the best. Better that I return to the house of my father." I went back. I began to pray the Hail Mary and the rosary. I saw that I was better, because I wasn't so tormented any more. Better that I stay in the house of my father than to set off, to go looking elsewhere. After a certain time there, I saw that I couldn't stand [it]. I had to leave them.

Seven months after joining the household of the genitor of her pregnancy, Marie returned to her father in Yaoundé, leaving her infant son with his father's family. Leaving the child would have long-term social effects and is quite uncommon. Bridewealth is the common basis of lineage affiliation, and lineage is the most usual basis of child residence. While children of Beti couples married with bridewealth, such as Marie herself, usually stay with their fathers in the case of parental separation, the vast majority of children of unmarried couples remain with the mother or with her family. By leaving her son with the genitor and his family, Marie abdicated her rights to claim him as her child. In the intervening years, she saw that child rarely and was rarely identified as his mother. She returned to the Catholic Church, to her family, and to school and planned a career in medicine.

At the end of the conjuncture, Marie was left with a hopeful horizon: the promise for future schooling, a potential career, and a new start at family formation sometime later in her life. Despite having given birth, Marie had not made a once-and-for-all transition either to motherhood or to adulthood. Her rejection of the path of marriage and motherhood at this conjuncture meant that she continued on her prior trajectory, rather than moving into a new one. In some sense, the resolution of the story of Marie's trial marriage is an erasure; it is as if the birth and the trial marriage had not happened. Her childbearing career will begin when she bears another child, with a man she intends to marry, at some later point in her educational and professional trajectory. She has been effectively relieved of any stigma from, or even connection to, her premarital birth, regularly referring to herself as an adolescent girl (ngon). On one occasion, she asked for my advice about a problem she was having in school because, she said, I am a woman and she, an adolescent girl. When I pointed out that she has a child and I do not, she asked rhetorically what her infant son could know about schooling, implying that having borne a child does not impart adulthood in the domain of school.

When planning her reproductive career, Marie did not count her son among the children she wanted, for he is
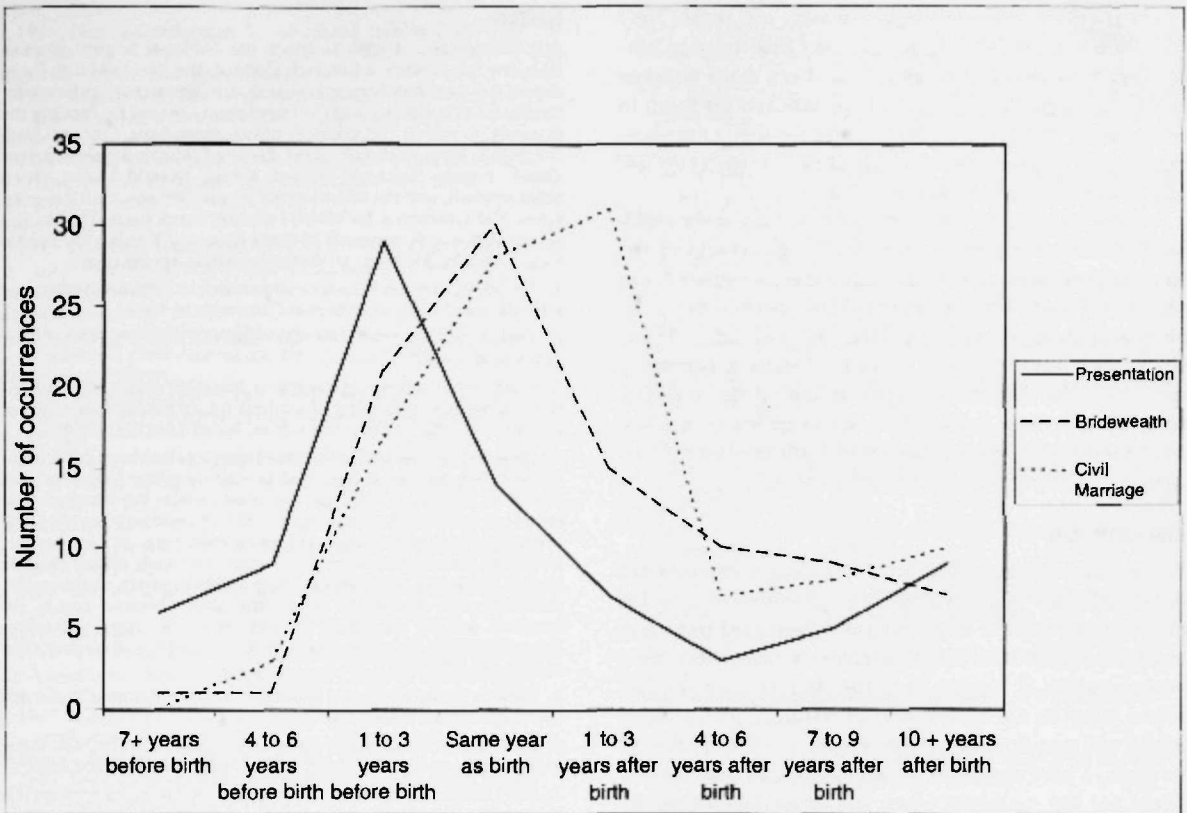
FIGURE 4. Shows when the educated Beti women in my demographic survey reported completing the martial transitions of the presentation to parents, bridewealth, and civil marriage in reference to when they reported bearing a first child.

with his father's family and not socially counted as one of her children. When I asked if she wanted more children, Marie laughed and answered: "Oh no! Not right away. I have to work first. Marriage, that's after. I have to work before having children. Even before I have children, I have to have a house. I have to perhaps have saved a certain sum. My child must not lack anything."

Three things are noteworthy about this quote for our purposes here. First, Marie conflated childbearing and marriage, answering my question about her childbearing intentions with a statement about her marital intentions. Second, she erased her first son entirely: I asked about her intentions to bear more children, but she answered with her intentions to bear any children at all. Third, Marie related the appropriate timing of childbearing to achievements in an educational and professional trajectory. For many educated Beti women, honorable childbearing depends centrally on the mother's financial independence. Marie's aspiration was not only to enact this future but also to be the kind of honorable woman who does so.

The idea that the first birth should come in the context of marriage is widely held, if rarely practiced. In fact, women often talk about childbearing and marriage as if they were the same, as Marie did above. Both should follow the establishment of a career, as we can see in the following quote from one of my neighbors: "If I marry, that doesn't mean that marriage is the most important thing. Marriage can come later, in last place. After I already have everything, everything that I want. After I have a job, a furnished house, and everything. It is there that I can start to think about marriage, about children, and all that."

This speaker viewed economic welfare as her own responsibility, rather than the responsibility of her future spouse. She implied that marriage and childbearing are the prerogatives of a successful woman, of the woman who already "has everything," rather than being the basis of female adulthood, as is so often implied in the literature. Another woman focused on the moral requirement to be able to take care of the child one bears. Establishing an economic career before beginning a childbearing career is not about having "everything that you want," but, rather, about fulfilling basic parental obligations: "You have to educate your child well. You can't give birth now, even though you have nothing for putting that child in the world with. That's being cruel; that's calling the child to suffer. Before giving birth, even before getting married,

you first need a job" (conversation with the author, July 30, 1998). Or similarly: "It is necessary first [prior to having children] that I am stable. You don't make children just to make them. You don't make children for them to come suffer, or for you not to be there for their education. You make children when you are already ready" (conversation with the author, May 10, 1998).

For this woman, the key aspect of honorable childbearing is its disciplined timing: only by postponing the first child until one is economically able to support it can one ensure one's status as an honorable mother. As the vital conjuncture of Marie's unintended pregnancy closed, she looked forward to the horizon of starting her recognized reproductive life over again at some point in the future. Thus, perhaps ironically, it was by giving up her first son to the family of his genitor that Marie created the possibility of a future as an honorable mother.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the lives of Beti women are not organized into stages—neither empirically, as the life events that would be implicated in a presumed transition to adulthood are nonsynchronous, nor in terms of cultural representation. I suggest that the Beti are not unique. When taken as the assumption of research, the life stage model will almost always obscure more than it clarifies. In its place, I have suggested a model of vital conjunctures. These are the moments when seemingly established futures are called into question and when actors are called on to manage durations of radical uncertainty. Conjunctures are navigated in reference to their horizons—the imaginable futures that are hoped for or feared. Although the conjunctures and their horizons are variable, actors' orientations to them are often systematic; imagined futures may be idiosyncratic, but the forms of imagination belong to the social field.

Let us return now to our young man looking toward college and adult life. Instead of a liminal moment between clear and coherent stages, I suggest that his situation is a vital conjuncture. His future is largely open—up for grabs—and the alternatives that he imagines matter. The temporal coordination that he faces is the partially realized project of the social institutions that frame his alternatives, which make certain aspirations plausible, possible, or almost unthinkable. The dual focus on institutions and aspirations allows us to examine how and why certain life events cohere in given social systems and what happens when they do not. Variations in life experience that are anathema to or ignored by a life stage model become expected, and even the object of analysis, as we move from a model of events to a model of aspiration.

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NOTES

1. French Cameroon became independent in 1960 and was united with the southern part of British Cameroon in 1961.

2. Their value fell from over 800 billion CFA in 1986 to just over 500 billion in 1987.

3. *Camfrançais* refers to a variety of linguistic codes, more or less French, used as something of a lingua franca throughout much of Cameroon. It varies widely by region, social class, and context.

4. Some would argue that the ritual *mevungu* had been a rite of initiation, but it is not categorized as such by either Laburthe-Tolra (1985) or Vincent (1976), the two scholars who have looked most closely at it. Laburthe-Tolra argues that, in counterpoint to *so,* the initiation that served to make boys into men of the lineage, mevungu served at once to bind women to their affinal families and to recognize and harness their ambivalent status there. The mevungu was performed when the game became scarce, for women's fertility paralleled the fertility of the forest (Laburthe-Tolra 1985:234; for a discussion of the etymology of *mevungu,* see also Guyer 1984:16).

5. Neither Tsala (1982) nor Laburthe-Tolra (1977) identifies a distinction between them.

6. Both the spellings *minga* and *miniga* are used, but *miniga* is the more common. *Nya,* like *mfan,* means "real, true, well actualized."

7. Eton forms plurals in two ways: The singular noun *ngon* (girl) is prefaced by the plural marker /mi-/ to make the plural form *mingon* (girls). The first syllable of the singular form *miniga* (woman) is changed to /bi-/ to form the plural *biniga* (women).

8. Sahlins cites Braudel (1980) and Firth (1959), and not Bourdieu, in reference to his concept of "conjuncture."

9. The quotes come from two occasions on which I tape-recorded our conversations; the rest of the text incorporates transcripts from my notes, journal entries, and other sources.

10. She suffered from *mal aux nerfs,* an illness characterized by terrible headaches brought on by stress and by the heat. People who suffer from it are often unable to attend classes or work in the afternoon in the dry season. It is particularly common among young women and recent brides and is essentially unknown among men.

11. For an elegant discussion of one such system, see Campbell 1974. For a critique of the concept of a "classic" honor system, see Herzfeld 1980.

12. Of 139 mothers, 58 were in school at the time of their first pregnancies. Of these, 33 dropped out of school in the year of the birth. Yet 17 of these dropouts later returned to school. Twenty-five new mothers remained in school for at least one additional year following the birth. Of the 81 women who were not in school at their first birth, 50 had not returned to school by the time of the survey.

13. Beti frequently use assumed future titles to refer to individuals in the present. Seminary students are called *Abbé,* and I was regularly called *Docteur* or *Madame Hanks.* Marie's reference to members of the household as *affines* does not signify that she was actually married but, rather, that she perceived herself to be moving toward marriage.

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