

Factors of marital disruption in Burkina Faso

Introduction

While several studies have examined the determinants of divorce in the western countries, to date, very few studies have examined the topic in the sub-Saharan African context. The lack of suitable data can partly explain this situation. For example, the censuses collect information on the marital status of the individuals, and Demographic and Health Surveys collect data mainly on last unions. These data on (mostly) current marital status are inadequate for reconstructing people's matrimonial histories and following unions over time. The study of the dynamics of unions requires a longitudinal approach and data. Few data collection efforts provide such information, with the exception of several projects focusing on urban areas (e.g., the IRD-led family life surveys; see Antoine et Bocquier, 1999; Antoine, 2002; Antoine et Dial, 2003; and Marcoux, 1997 for example) or on particular populations (e.g., Hertrich, 1996). Nevertheless, the few studies that exist on divorce in sub-Saharan Africa indicate that it is increasing over time (Hertrich et Locoh, 1999), and that socio-demographic factors seem to have a greater effect on the likelihood of divorce, compared to economic factors (Clarke et Berrington, 1999).

Most previous studies of divorce use individual-level data and the risk of divorce is studied as a function of individual and at times couple characteristics. These studies have found that a young age at first marriage, sterility (or sub fecundity) and polygamy are associated with a greater instability of unions (Olusanya, 1970; Bumpass et al., 1991; White, 1990; Thariat, 1998; Clarke et Berrington, 1999). These studies have not, however, addressed the following types of questions: How does the timing and duration of sterility affect the risk of divorce, and are the effects of sub fecundity as serious as full sterility? Does the arrival of a new wife have the same effect on a likelihood of divorce for the first wife and others wives? What characteristics of the local community appear to affect the stability of unions, after controlling for the characteristics of individuals and families?

This paper examines factors affecting the risk of divorce and separation in the context of Burkina Faso. The first objective of our study is to evaluate the levels and trends in divorce in this country. Second, we seek to analyse how certain individual characteristics of women and their spouse affect the risk of divorce, giving special attention to the impact of numbers of surviving children already born and the practice of polygamy. Finally, we seek to assess the effects of community variables on the stability of the unions, an issue little studied in research to date.

Data and methods

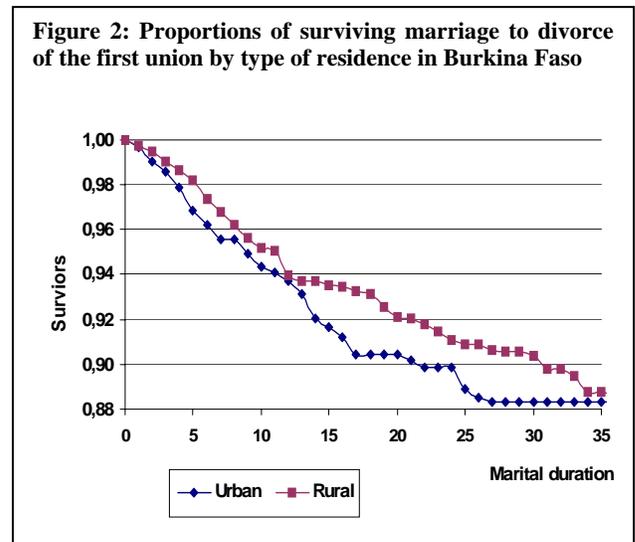
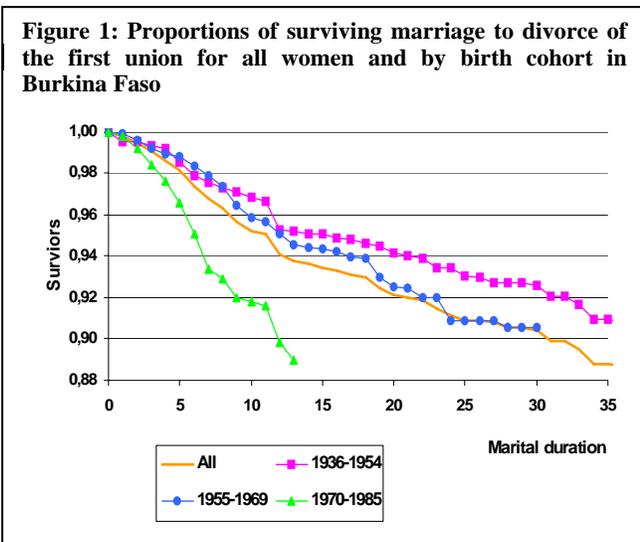
Data for this study come from the multilevel national family life-type survey, "*Migrations, Insertion Urbaine et Environnement au Burkina Faso*" (EMUEB, 2000). This survey used the event history calendar method to collect information on a series of major events in people's lives, including their marital history, economic activities and the birth histories for women (including the survival of offspring). In addition, certain data exist on spouses (ethnic group, economic activity, matrimonial situation at the beginning of the union). For broken unions, the dates of break of union and the reason for the rupture (separation, divorce and widowhood) were also collected. In all, the data contain data on 8,647 individuals including 4,685 women.

A second component of this survey occurred in 2002, when detailed retrospective information was collected on the local communities in which these people lived (including communities in which several individuals in the survey had lived during their lives, even if these localities were not part of the original set of survey clusters). These data include information on the administrative history of the locality, the presence of schools and medical services, agricultural activities, land availability, the local transportation network, etc.

Some preliminary results

In this paper we use event-history methods (Kaplan Meir and Cox proportional hazard regressions) to analyze the effects of possible determinants of marital dissolution (Cleves et al., 2004; Allison, 1984). The results show that marital disruption has become more frequent over time in this country. Approximately a woman on 10 breaks her first union by divorce during the 30 years following her marriage (Figure 1). Divorce is more frequent in urban area than in rural area; for example, in the two large cities in the country (Ouagadougou and Bobo Dioulasso), roughly one couple out of ten divorces within a 20 year period (figure 2).

Trends in the likelihood of divorce can be observed by examining marital histories of women from different birth cohorts. Divorce occurs more quickly in the young people: approximately 10 % of unions are broken after ten years of marriage for the youngest group in our data, compared to about 4 % for the oldest cohort. Divorce behaviors for the two oldest cohorts are nearly identical during the first 15 years of marriage, after which marital dissolution becomes relatively less frequent oldest group (Figure 1).



Results from the proportional hazard model show that several variables are significantly associated with a higher risk of divorce. These variables include early marriage (young age of women at the time of the union), sterility, urban residence, improvements to the local transportation system that makes the area less isolated, women's schooling and her participation in work activities. The practice of polygamy also has a significant negative influence on the stability of unions. The arrival of a new wife into a household is an important factor of divorce,

especially for first wives. (Clearly some of these estimated effects require careful interpretation in terms of cause and effect – for example, it might be the case that a second marriage occurs due to the man being dissatisfied with his first union.) Significant differences are also found for several variables reflecting religion, ethnicity and the context in which the woman was raised as a child (e.g., rural residence). Surprisingly, these results also show that cross-ethnic marriages are not less stable than unions between partners of the same ethnicity.

The results also show that marital disruption has become more frequent for women living in relatively less isolated communities. Thus, the women who reside in a village with easy access and comparatively good local infrastructures (electricity, telephone, water, markets...) are found to have a risk of higher divorce compared to others. On the other hand, the presence a school and health clinics in the community do not have a significant effect on marital disruption. Therefore, it appears that the possibility of easy communication and exchange with other localities, which increase the risk of marital dissolution. This makes sense in the cultural context of Burkina Faso, where for most ethnic groups; a divorced woman cannot remarry with a man of the same family (kin) or allied family of her previous husband. (Each social group is mutually supporting of the marital alliances of its members; the social cohesion of the village depends on it.) Consequently, the remarriage of the woman is almost always accompanied by her moving to live in another village. The prospect of being able to remarry after a divorce thus increases with the availability of good local road and communication (telephone) infrastructures, and also the presence of local markets that are excellent places of meeting a new spouse.

Conclusion

Our preliminary analyses indicate that the changes in matrimonial behaviours (e.g., rising ages at first union, increased say in partner choice by the young couple, etc.) documented by other studies on sub-Saharan Africa should also include a progressive rise in marital instability. The variables that capture the effects of “modernization”, the urbanization and the economic recession of the last decades appear to render unions less stable. The results also confirm the fundamental importance of procreation in the stability of the unions. In most African contexts, the primary objective of marriages is family building and fertility; consequently, a union without children has a limited life expectancy. Finally, both individuals and communities factors are found to influence marital disruption.

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