Resisting reforms. A Resource-based perspective of collective action in the distribution of agricultural input and primary health services in the Couffo region, Benin
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Annexe D – Marriage institutions

The traditional marriage is an institution which symbolic feature is fully expressed through the dowry or bride wealth, consisting of a gift of money or, in some cases, money, goods, and services, from the husband to his new wife’s family (McCall 1995). The Aja people in Benin are characterised by both the substantial amount of the gift and its compulsory nature. As it could be understood, various sanctions and incentives are accordingly devised in order to compel individual behaviour. In addition, socially devised control mechanisms are also in place.

Most of the requirements for such a social control are borne by women in general. They are usually requested to keep away from men until their family-in-law complies with the local norms in terms of dowry. In case of non-compliance, for example, if the dowry has not been accepted, the woman loses her rights as family member if she impudently defies custom. This situation is increasingly witnessed in most rural areas, due to the contacts with the outside world. The resulting couples often elope to other villages in order to avoid social pressure (cf. McCall 1995, p. 178). Apparently, the defiance of social norms has no immediate effect on the couple. However, in case of dispute between the two partners or between the woman and her family-in-law, she usually cannot rely on her family for support. Nor is she allowed to return back to her family house to seek assistance or protection. It should be recalled that a husband-wife life cannot be assumed as a permanent harmony; disputes do occur, especially within the polygynous families found in Africa.

In case that both partners preserve harmony during their life time, conflicts arise when the female partner dies. For example, the woman’s family would not co-operate with that of the husband for her burial ceremonies. Once again, it should be stressed that a persistent African belief acknowledges some characteristic rituals to purify the memory of the dead person (cf. Vodouhê 1996, Agbo 1991). The woman’s family can take advantage of such a social requirement to put into focus the dowry matter. In the worse situation, homicide can be claimed on the death, and the man’s family can hence be discredited. The rationale is for the offended family to deny any present and future ties between the two families. As it could be derived, it is of no interest to either side that the social breach gets too wide. This explains the respect people pay to their culture and why a marriage often involves a period of betrothal.

Economic meaning of the rules and norms governing the marriage institution

The marriage institution described above is rooted in the African social structure with its corollaries in terms of resource control and access. The economic meaning of such an institution could be looked at following different social levels or components of social organisation.

Most African social organisations elicit inheritance rules at the household level, although property is held by a corporate group claiming descent from the same ancestor (cf. F. and K. von Benda-Beckmann 1994, p. 16). In some communities, this descent group is traced through the male line, as it is with the Aja in the Couffo region. The male children inherit resources from their parents, while women get most of their resources from their family-in-law. The nature and breadth of those resources are accordingly different and commensurate with the future responsibilities to be borne by each member.

The male children get family resources in order to ensure the livelihood of the future descent, keep the resources within the community group, and pass these on to the heirs. In addition, they have to comply with the requirement of offering a substantial bride wealth before getting married. This constitutes the first test most male children face, before any traditional right over resource control and access.

With respect to a larger or nested level of social organisation, the village community, for instance, the design of such an inheritance rule is meant to achieve a continuous control over
family resources and the way in which these contribute to social security. Therefore, inheritance rules ensure that resources remain within the community, and they discriminate against women, who are supposed to leave their family in order to enrich others. Two main corollaries could subsequently be derived. The first one refers to the heirs, who have the duty to preserve family resources whatever the hardship. As has been mentioned earlier, the increasingly larger amount of gift needed for dowry also helps to monitor the extent of resource control and access that a male child could achieve. In any case, resources of the land type must not be given away for dowry purpose.

The second corollary refers to the open-ended alliance and family ties that could result from such a marriage institution (cf. McCall 1995, and also Vel 1994, cited in F. and K. von Benda-Beckmann 1994, p. 21). With regard to the local marriage institution, the rural people have tight alliance and family ties with other ethnic groups, and vice versa.

**Household vulnerability within the existing social construct**

The above characteristic features of the marriage institutions and the inheritance rules could serve as explanatory factors for the way in which rural people react to intervention or, more importantly, take action in a situation of risk or uncertainty. The head of the household, very often the elder male member of the household, neither takes risks that could jeopardise the livelihood of the household members; nor is he going to initiate any venture that could leave him destitute.

Land resources, for instance, are thought of in terms of property rights from the government intervention point of view. Most of the time, property rights reflect rights which should be allocated by a formal system, and no reference is made to the community type of property rights. As McCall (1995, p. 180) rightly put it, properly defined property rights are likely to challenge the present state of ownership in most rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa. In these countries, the resources involved at the household level, such as land, houses, family labour, etc., are not considered to belong to the users. These properties are owned by a corporate group, the community. For this reason, class differentiation is not as acute as elsewhere in the Latino-American countries, for instance (Biaou 1994, 1995a, 1995b, 1996). It is also obviously true that objective investigations of land-ownership in the Third World have not been a feasible venture (Bagch 1981, Lee 1981). Therefore, changing the traditional form of ownership is likely to impede the structuring of the economic relations as well as disenfranchise the large majority of rural people, leaving them landless and dependent on seeking jobs outside agriculture. If taking such steps has been advocated elsewhere to boost the agricultural sector, this does not seem relevant in Africa, given the scant opportunities for alternatives outside agriculture.

The female partner in the household barely takes any risks without the consent of the head of the household. Even in the situation of an urban-based male household-head, a provision is made to supplement the intra-household power relations through a decision-making system which guarantees women neutrality. The rationale stems from the awareness that agricultural yields are uncertain under the prevailing technological and natural conditions.

As has been argued earlier, a number of conditions can put the household livelihood at risks. Of greater significance is household destitution with respect to both resource control and access. Consequently, risk-avoidance aspects of people's response to intervention have bearings on the rural development process and, more importantly, on the performance of formal organisations set up accordingly.