

International African Institute

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Source: *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (1994), pp. 252-271

Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of the International African Institute

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1160983>

Accessed: 13-11-2018 22:24 UTC

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FAMILY, MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE IN A HAUSA COMMUNITY: A SOCIOLOGICAL MODEL

Luigi M. Solivetti

INTRODUCTION: THE HAUSA MODEL

The aim of this article is to show how a 'traditional' society may produce a household system in which the structural tensions are no less intense than in the Western world. The data presented here were collected between 1979 and 1989 in the Niger valley of Sokoto State in northern Nigeria (Solivetti, 1989). The analysis based on these data, however, can, I believe, be substantially applied to the rural population of the whole of Muslim Hausaland, which covers a vast region that stretches well beyond the boundaries of contemporary northern Nigeria.

The communities studied here can be categorised as 'traditional'. They constitute, first of all, an agricultural society. The entire active adult population engages in farming, more particularly the cultivation of cereals, which constitute the staple produce. A relatively low average population density (22.6 people per square kilometre) allows everybody access to a fair quantity of land. Furthermore land belongs - in accordance with tradition - to the local community, which administers it on its members' behalf. Therefore, besides the land he receives from his own domestic unit, any member may get permission from the head of his local community to use extra land from the pool of undistributed common land. The availability of land makes it not so much a factor of production (in the formal sense of a marketable resource) as simply a necessary object of production (Marx, 1857-58: III, II, 375 ff.).

Given this availability of land, labour is logically used first of all to cultivate one's own land rather than sold on the market. Culturally, moreover, Hausa society has traditionally looked unfavourably on selling one's own labour (Shenton, 1986: 137). The labour used by the domestic unit in agricultural activities is therefore essentially that of its own members. To this input of energies should be added recourse - during the most strenuous operations such as land preparation, weeding, harvesting - to the traditional system of co-operation within the village community, called *gayya*. *Gayya* constitutes 21 per cent (at the median level) of the total input of labour used by the domestic units. Only about one-third of domestic units occasionally resort to hiring farmhands, who in these instances contributed only 15 per cent of the total input of labour used by these domestic units.¹

The central importance of the domestic unit's own labour is reinforced by the scarcity of machinery: the basic agricultural work is done by the traditional hoe. In only 16 per cent of the domestic units are ox-drawn ploughs used for land preparation, while in just 5 per cent of the domestic units use is made of tractors (usually hired from the local governments; maintenance is a crippling problem). Mechanical ploughing is limited by the fact that most farmwork, from weeding to harvesting, has to be done

manually, and this sets the pace of the whole agricultural cycle. So too with transporting produce, which relies on people and donkeys: carts are not used, and lorries are rare in this area. In short, agriculture depends on the physical energies of the adults of the domestic unit.

Other economic activities are similarly organised. The rearing of sheep, goats and cattle is widespread but, unlike agriculture, is carried out with a view to marketing the livestock and not for consumption: 92 per cent of the domestic units rear some stock, with 58 per cent owning one or more head of cattle. In about 44 per cent of the domestic units there are people who carry out economically significant activities other than agriculture and stock rearing. These include mat weavers, calabash carvers, barbers, blacksmiths, cloth weavers, leatherworkers, tailors, carpenters, builders, butchers, bakers, millers, and fishermen, as well as traders, who are present in as many as 16 per cent of domestic units. Though widespread, non-agricultural activities are of minor importance to the domestic budget. Livestock constitutes a mere 3 per cent of the total value of the domestic production (at the median level) and was not the main economic activity in any domestic unit. Artisanal and commercial activities constitute only some 15 per cent of the total value of domestic production (at the median level). In only 16 per cent of domestic units, moreover, does the value of these activities exceed 50 per cent of the value of agricultural production; in only 5 per cent does it amount to twice the value, or more, of the agricultural production. Agriculture is therefore not only the universal, predominant activity (its value amounting to 82 per cent of the total value of production at the median level) but the main activity of almost everyone. In comparison, other activities are merely complementary, and are carried out usually without the benefit of machinery (cf. Adamu, 1978: 11); instead there is an input of free labour, usually from family members in their spare time (and hence farm work is unaffected). Ultimately the reason why these other activities are so widely practised is not that they are important but that they are characteristic of limited investment and organisation.

The family group living in a compound (Hausa *gida*) is a unit organised in such a way as to achieve its fundamental economic and social goals. Hence there is a leader - the compound head (*mai gida*), usually the oldest man - responsible for organising the group, especially the domestic co-operative unit (*gandu*) that farms the land and consumes its produce. Tasks are standardly distributed: adult males are primarily responsible for feeding the entire familial group by cultivating the family's land. For them, livestock, craft work and trading are secondary, and carried out more individually. Women make only a limited contribution to basic farm work, which is not regarded as their responsibility. This is due not only to their being primarily involved in housework and childcare but also to increasing acceptance of the Islamic practice of *purdah* (*kulle*). This affects 30–70 per cent of the women, varying according to the settlement in question. Women, however, thresh and grind the cereals and are in sole charge of such household duties as cooking and the sweeping of the compound. Those who are not in *purdah* also gather firewood and fetch water. Women sometimes engage in craftwork and trading too, but usually on a modest scale; in particular, they traditionally prepare and sell cakes and other cooked food.²

The bulk of the unit's agricultural output is consumed by the domestic unit

TABLE 1. *Approximate percentage distribution of overall economic production (goods and services) according to the forms of utilisation (exchange or consumption) in the domestic units of median level (%)*

<i>Mode of production</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>
Agriculture (value 82%)	24	7	51
Stock farming (value 3.3%)	3	—	—
Other activities (value 14.7%, calculated as remainder)	15	—	—
Total (value 100%)	42	7	51

A Value of goods and services used for trade (monetary income).

B Value of goods distributed as charity.

C Value of goods directly consumed.

Figures in columns A–C approximate.

of production itself (some 60 per cent of total production, mainly sorghum and millet). Within the domestic unit, all members have a share in the common harvest. A portion is also distributed as charity, following the Islamic rule of *zakat*, which requires everyone not in need to give one-tenth of their harvest to those who are. What remains (apart from the under 2 per cent of grain kept for seed) is made up mainly of such cash crops as rice and groundnuts, and is marketed; the proceeds go to meet the monetary cost of production (about 11 per cent) and the other expenses incurred by the domestic unit.³

The centrality of domestic consumption does not alter if we consider the total value of the production of goods and services, including livestock, craft and commercial activities (Table 1). From these data we can draw a series of conclusions. First, the organisational and economic system is oriented towards subsistence. The subsistence index exceeds 50 per cent, and if we add in the value of goods distributed as charity it is closer to 60 per cent. Furthermore the portion of production channelled towards the market is used mainly to meet either the consumption expenses of the domestic unit itself (further food, clothes, etc.) or its social expenses (ceremonial costs, gifts, etc). Only to a very limited degree is it used to generate economically productive investment (in livestock and trade). Second, the way production is used clearly reflects the way production is organised. Production is channelled first towards the domestic unit - which has the primary responsibility for production - and secondly towards the village community - from which mutual assistance in agriculture, land rights and, as will be seen more clearly below, the domestic unit's reproductive chances are all derived. Production is therefore directed towards the two structures, namely the domestic unit and the village community, which between them organise and control the factors of production.

We have underlined the general priority, within this system, of the domestic unit of production and of its inherent organisational model. But data gathered in 1985 on a sample of 216 compounds can provide some statistical information to make the model more specific.

First, the larger domestic units (usually extended families) are able to avoid a serious imbalance between the number of adult males (i.e. the *hands* of the

TABLE 2. *Percentage distribution of the ratio of mouths to hands^a in the nuclear and extended family units^b (%)*

<i>Classes (mouths per pair of hands)</i>	<i>Nuclear family unit</i>	<i>Extended family unit</i>
1·0-2·0	5·6	0
2·1-3·0	30·5	23·0
3·1-4·0	19·4	19·2
4·1-5·0	13·9	50·0
5·1-6·0	13·8	7·6
6·1-7·0	5·9	0
7·1-8·0	5·5	0
8·1-9·0	5·2	0

a Hands are defined as males aged 15-64.

b One-person and conjugal family units excluded.

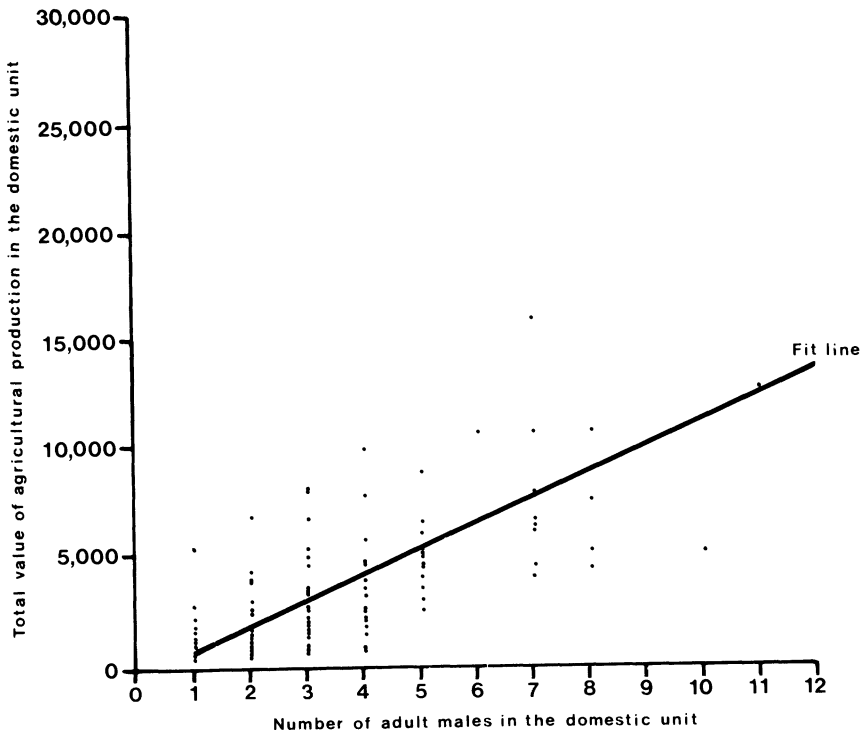


FIG. 1. *Distribution of the value of total agricultural output in the different domestic units in relation to the number of adult males belonging to them. Note: one case, that of the domestic unit with the highest number of adult males (seventeen), characterised by hyperproductivity, is excluded.*

domestic unit) and the total number of members (i.e. the *mouths* of the domestic unit) (Table 2). This is particularly important where the ratio between the economically independent and the economically dependent (equivalent to 1.0) is already very unfavourable - indeed, subsistence is precarious for at least 40 per cent of the domestic units.

Second, the productive capability of the domestic unit is correlated with its size. The value of agricultural production, as well as of the total production of goods and services, increases with the increasing number of its members and in an even more remarkable way, with the number of adult males (Fig. 1). Such an increase, moreover, is more than proportional: the regression between the independent variable represented by the number of hands and the dependent variable represented by the values of production per adult male shows that any increase of the former is matched by a significant mean increase of the latter (Solivetti, 1989: 49 ff.). The same, though in a more limited way, occurs when the number of members increases.

Ultimately, these data show, in our opinion, not just the pivotal role of the domestic unit of production, but in particular the greater opportunities inherent in an organisational pattern in which larger-size domestic units are better able to manage the primary factor, namely human physical energy.

HAUSA MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

Marriage

How far do the social and cultural features of the Hausa family as an institution reflect this organisational and economic framework? The first remarkable feature, from this perspective, is the way marriage is characteristically both early and obligatory. There are no institutionalised single-person roles, such as bachelor or nun (cf. Goody, 1976: 56-61); people reluctant to marry, especially women, are at fault and socially penalised. Women's fertility is, of course, constrained, first, by the limits set by menarche and menopause and, second, by the reproductively dormant periods of pregnancy and prolonged breast-feeding, any reduction of which imperils children's survival. Logically, then, any postponement of marriage by women is perceived as a threat to the organisational and economic balance of the domestic unit. The social response to this is graphically shown by Fig. 2. The pressure exerted on women to enter the marriage market is concerned not just with establishing their initial status as married women but also with ensuring they stay married. Widows or divorcees who are still fertile have a duty to get married again as soon as possible; if they do not, they are regarded as prostitutes.

Men too are pushed into marriage, though they are not expected to get married at such an early age as women; indeed, for them, to marry early has no reproductively significant advantages. Hence the timing of their marriage reflects only their social potential. Nonetheless there are no social or economic alternatives to marriage; unmarried men of mature years are very rare, and in folk tales such men are despised (Tremearne, 1913). Table 3 summarises the data for both men and women.

Marriage is arranged by agreement between the 'elders' (of both sexes) of the two family groups, but in particular between the fathers or guardians

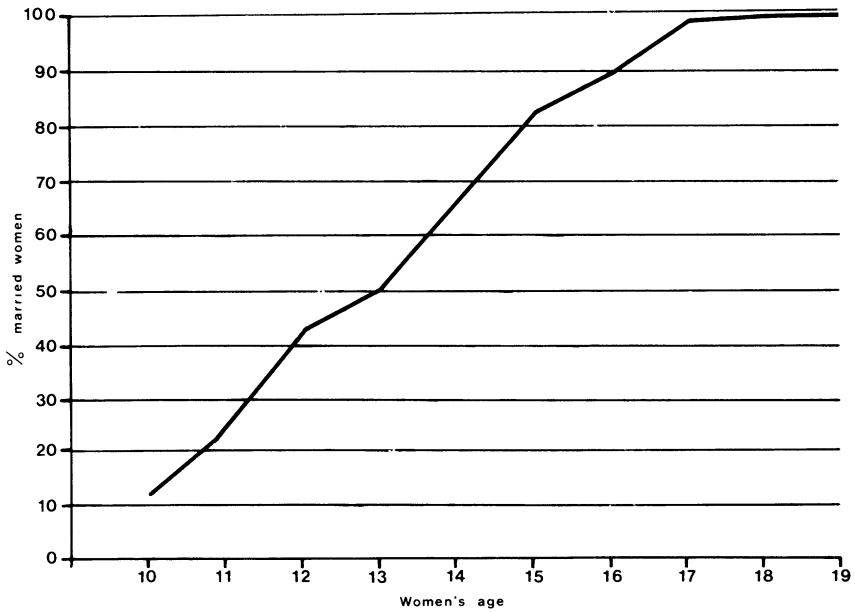


FIG. 2. Percentage of women married in the 9–19 age group. (N = 550; demographic data collected by personal interview in 1979.)

TABLE 3. Marital status of the population (%)

Sex	State	Age band							Total population of marriageable age ^a
		10–14	15–19	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60–	
Male	Married	9	21	84	91	91	90	91	77
	Single	91	79	13	5	3	–	–	19
	Divorced	–	–	3	4	6	10	9	4
	Widowed	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
	Subtotal	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Female	Married	31	93	100	97	75	51	41	81
	Single	69	7	–	–	–	–	–	10
	Divorced	–	–	–	3	10	–	–	2
	Widowed	–	–	–	–	15	49	59	6
	Subtotal	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Male & Female	Married	18	66	93	94	84	82	68	79
	Single	82	34	6	2	2	–	–	14
Female	Divorced	–	–	1	4	7	9	5	3
	Widowed	–	–	–	–	7	9	27	4
Total		100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

^a Marriageable age: males over 15 years, females over 10 years.

(*wali*) of the future couple. Where extended families are involved, it may be the compound head rather than the father who handles matters. Only if the compound head were himself marrying would an individual negotiate his own marriage. Therefore men expect to find a wife by the support of their own family and community. In short, marriage is a public, family matter, not something personal, individual: it involves the domestic units of the future husband and wife and more generally the entire village. Hence the basic element of the marriage agreement is the offer of bridewealth by the husband's family and its acceptance by the wife's family. Bridewealth consists of a sum of money, variable in amount but always substantial by comparison with the monetary income of the domestic units. Besides the bridewealth, the husband-to-be is expected to be able to afford a whole series of marriage expenses (cf. M. F. Smith, 1954: chapter 5; M. G. Smith, 1955: 53 ff.; Hill, 1972: 293–4). But the formal bridewealth is essential: without it no union would be regarded as acceptable (Madauci, 1968: 13 ff.).

The family management of marriage is almost inescapable. Traditionally, to abduct a girl even with her consent is a serious offence. The Penal Code, reflecting cultural attitudes, prescribes imprisonment for up to ten years for abducting a girl under 16 years of age. Since most young women have already been given in marriage before they reach this age, the woman's consent to a *de facto* union is scarcely meaningful. Secondly, Islamic marriage rules greatly restrict a woman's chances of making her own matrimonial choice: the father has the exclusive right to choose a husband for a daughter who has yet to reach the age of puberty (Madauci, 1968: 19). Hausa tradition goes further and gives the father authority over his daughter's first marriage, whatever her age; he does not even have to consult her. The essential social fact is clear: marriage is a manifestation of the families' will, not of the will of the couple getting married.

This does not mean, of course, that families necessarily impose their own choices against the couple's will. Fathers and children tend to reach agreement through the mediation of mothers. Sons have rather more scope in the matter, in part because sons get married later and have greater social maturity. But even with daughters there is usually some agreement between them and their parents, or at least an element of persuasion is involved. Ultimately, however, the daughter has to obey; any alternative solution is regarded as deviant. A girl resisting a forced marriage has three options: to commit suicide, often threatened but rarely put into practice (cf. M. G. Smith, 1955: 55); to desert the husband's house soon after the wedding and live independently outside marriage as a prostitute or courtesan (brothels, found in all the larger settlements, are commonly supposed to house women fleeing a forced marriage); or, lastly (a less deviant and most common solution), to get a divorce from her husband.

Early marriage, then, is the traditional solution to potential conflict between fathers and daughters in the selection of a husband. It is better, people say, for girls to get married *before* they reach the age at which more personal, unconventional or hasty choices are made—before, in short, the age of discretion.

Polygamy can also be examined from the perspective of the domestic unit's organisational and economic functions. After the first marriage, men usually

TABLE 4. *Polygamy according to age: percentage values for men currently married (%)*

<i>Age</i>	<i>-30</i>	<i>30-39</i>	<i>40-49</i>	<i>50-59</i>	<i>60+</i>	<i>All ages</i>
One wife	82	76	67	56	59	73
Two wives	18	24	28	38	35	25
Three to four wives	-	-	5	6	6	2

take a second wife once they are of mature years. This is made possible by the difference in age between men and women at the time of the first marriage, which creates a surplus of women on the marriage market.⁴ Local culture openly favours the redistribution of this surplus, since it regards polygamy as definitely positive: the number of wives is a measure of the compound head's prosperity and prestige (Burnham, 1987: 46-7). Not only will there be more children, but the wives contribute to the unit's activities. Furthermore polygamy sidesteps the limits imposed on reproduction by pregnancy and breast-feeding. Admittedly, the additional marriage expenses are a considerable burden but the fact that such expenditure is oriented towards polygamy - rather than, say, towards membership of a men-only club, as occurs in other social contexts - is an indication of the pressures exerted in this direction.

The power of such pressures can be evaluated - in an indirect way - through the percentage of married men who have more than one wife (Table 4). This percentage is very high.⁵

The aspects of family organisation which we have just examined - early and obligatory marriage, family control over marriage, the extent of polygamy - should be reflected in a reproduction policy consistent with these social premises. A survey conducted in the field permitted the collection of raw data which, interpreted by means of stable models of population,⁶ showed a very high birth rate (61.7 per 1,000 population).⁷ This rate is in itself remarkable internationally, since it is higher than the mean rates registered elsewhere in West Africa (which are already among the highest in the world).⁸ Such a high rate further draws attention to the needs inherent in the production system. We should not regard the birth rate as due simply to the lack of contraceptive methods; it is clearly linked with people abiding by the principle that a large family is a necessity, and this in turn is a cultural by-product of the importance of reproduction and the need to expand the pool of human labour on which the socio-economic organisation is based. Similar linkages are found in western Europe, where drastic changes in the socio-economic framework ushered in an equally drastic fall of the birth rate, and where the latter is now around 11 per 1,000 and demographic growth tends to zero (United Nations, 1988).⁹

All the elements of this system are reflected in the remarkable size of the domestic units, as a response to the implicit requirements of this model of organisation. More than two-thirds of the population (68 per cent) belong to compounds comprising extended families, with sixteen members on average; the remainder belong to nuclear families with 5-9 members; the general mean is as high as 10.4 members. Significantly, the rare one-person families are represented by elderly people (mostly women), who were left alone as a result of the disintegration of their domestic unit.

To this series of characteristics, all of which point to a distinct model of familism in which the domestic unit of production is prominent, should be added other characteristics regarding the relationships between men and women. First, attitudes towards the sexual and affective involvement of young people are negative. The idea of falling in love, as an individual experience, beyond (or, even worse, against) one's family's will is associated with images of danger and antisocial selfishness. For instance, in the folk tales of Hausa culture the individual event of falling in love scarcely has any place and is not held up as in any way meritorious. On the contrary, folk tales describe how young people, once caught in love's trap, flout their family's will, only to discover too late what an awful tragedy their individualism has caused.¹⁰

Pre-marital affairs are specifically regarded in an unambiguously negative light. Any pre-marital affair by a girl is taken as an act of defiance against her family's authority, and a warning of how she may behave after marriage. Adulterous affairs on the part of women are equally strictly forbidden; responsibility, however, is extended to the male partner. Social disapproval of adultery is powerful and, quite apart from the provisions of the Penal Code, the wrath of the community against adulterers is fierce: the man is usually beaten up by the village and the woman forced to leave the community.

This community reaction suggests that adultery is regarded not merely as a betrayal of affections (as it tends to appear in 'advanced' societies) but as real antisocial behaviour. This minimising of individual affection as a general principle also applies to the relationship between husband and wife. They are expected to treat each other with reserve and to avoid any form of intimacy in front of others. In particular, a wife is not allowed to call her husband by name; their daily interaction is limited and, significantly, she is never allowed to eat with her husband. In short, although a public contract and domestic fidelity and co-operation bind husband and wife, their life together is structured by a rule of separation. Their relationship is characterised by complementariness and co-operation rather than by togetherness. Indeed, local people characterise the behaviour of the European couples they have seen as ridiculous and 'unnatural': 'they were always together!'

It might be assumed that the very high value attached to the functions carried out by the domestic unit would be matched by correspondingly great warmth within the conjugal relationship, if only to reproduce that domestic unit. However, marital coolness is crucial in reducing potential antagonism, between the nuclear conjugal family and the extended family. Though the conjugal family is indispensable, on the economic and social plane it is of lesser importance than the extended family. The affective relationship between husband and wife is subordinate to the whole network of relations on which the organisation of the extended family - the primary co-ordinating and productive structure - hinges. Moreover, within the nuclear conjugal family, this coolness helps to emphasise the priority of economic and social interests over more individual interests of an affective kind.

The juridical and cultural system supports this, in particular through the rule of impartiality - the husband must be impartial towards his wives, economically, socially, sexually. The rule underlines the fact that the aim

of marriage is not the forging of a privileged affective - and essentially exclusive - relationship between man and woman but rather the development of the socio-economic organisation of the domestic unit and its reproduction. Both aims are favoured by the practice of polygamy.

Moreover the emotional and social detachment between man and wife is also the consequence of the different position of women within the social and familial frame. Briefly, women spend all their lives as social minors and dependants. In childhood and early adolescence they are marginal, being subject to authority within their own family; on marriage, they come under the authority of their husband within the nuclear family, where they collaborate with others at the socio-economic level. But they never really become members of their husband's extended family, which includes all the descendants of both sexes, and therefore the wives' children but not the wives themselves - a fact which serves only to emphasise their subordination.

Women's subordination in the domestic context is reflected in their role within the local community. Women effectively play no public role within the community. Public roles are 'automatically' reserved only for those who are recognised as full adults from the economic and social point of view - the (male) heads of domestic units. Furthermore women's presence at public events is limited. Women are excluded, for instance, from communal prayer - a fundamental occasion of socio-cultural aggregation - for fear that their presence might disturb male believers. They do not accompany their husbands to public meetings or attend ceremonial occasions. Add to this the increased observance of *purdah*, and the pressure on women to focus their energies, as subordinates, on reproduction, child care and domestic activities is obvious.

Divorce

In this context the existence of divorce would seem to be a contradiction. In a society which hinges on the economic and social functionality of the domestic unit and on marriage policy as a means of reproducing and perpetuating that same familial structure, divorce clearly conflicts with the universal, absolute imperative of establishing a familial unit. Yet divorce does exist, and its importance cannot be minimised by treating it as a secondary phenomenon. Far from it. Indeed, it is a distinctive feature of Hausa society. Table 3, giving the percentage of people currently divorced, reveals just the tip of the iceberg, since married status is normal, polygamy widespread and new marriages are rapidly contracted. A more reliable indicator of the frequency of divorce is the number of cases of divorce recorded at the Area Courts (Table 5).

While the frequency of divorce is an obvious, even astonishing fact, the actual incidence of divorce in people's lives is not so easily ascertained. One measure is the mean number of divorces in the life of a person, with its implications for such matters as family organisation, social relations between man and wife, and the social position of women. In this study only women's experience of divorce was considered. Polygamy clearly alters the meaning of divorce for men. Yet collecting data through interviews with women, given the delicacy of the issue, proved unreliable. To overcome this, other methods were tried and ultimately the statistical procedure shown in Table 6 was followed. It is based on more reliable data, i.e. the number of

TABLE 5. *Index of divorce cases per 1,000 population recorded at the area courts, 1 January–31 December 1979*

Index	Area Courts						
	Dakin Gari	Bagudo	Illo	Kaoje	Zaga	Koko	Yelwa
Per 1,000 population	16.8	19.9	14.4	14.0	11.0	13.6	15.8
Mean deviation	+1.1	+4.2	-1.3	-1.7	-4.7	+2.9	+0.1

Mean index = 15.7 per 1,000 population; mean square deviation = 2.7.

divorce cases recorded by the Area Courts and demographic data collected in the field.

Divorce emerges from the data as a disconcertingly widespread phenomenon. For comparison, even in 'advanced' societies where a 'crisis of the family' is most acutely felt, the maximum indices of divorce per annum vary from 2.0 per 1,000 in France, 3.2 in England and Wales, up to 5.3 per 1,000 in the United States (United Nations, 1981, 1988). Among Arab Islamic societies, Egypt (thought to be the most divorce-oriented of countries in the Arab world) reached a peak of 3.6 cases per year per 1,000 population (1944); the figure has now dropped to about 2.0. Libya has about the same rate (United Nations, 1981: 461; 1988: 470). With sub-Saharan societies comparisons are not easily drawn, since the relevant data are almost always incomplete and imprecise. However, there are societies where divorce certainly seems widespread: among the Ashanti of Ghana, for instance, two-thirds of men under the age of 60 have divorced, while among the Tallensi (whose marriages are regarded as particularly unstable) all males over 30 years seem to have divorced, though there the rate has been inflated by unlegalised unions being counted as marriages (Mair, 1953: 145; Fortes, 1949: 84–5). In other (non-northern) areas of Nigeria, both rural and urban, apparently remarkable indices of divorce have been found: however, the divorce cases concerned a mere 20 per cent of the families (Marris, 1961: 50–2) and 30 per cent of the married women (Forde, 1941: 75). In urban areas the apparently high indices are usually attributed to the influence of 'modern' socio-cultural factors (cf. Iro, 1976: 179) which authors invariably associate with increasing divorce - while forgetting about local traditional rates (cf. Omideyi, 1986: 116).

TABLE 6. *Mean number of divorces in a woman's life*

$$a = \frac{\text{Divorces per year}}{\text{population}} = \text{divorce index per head per year} = 0.0157$$

$$b = \frac{\text{Divorces per year}}{\text{Married or previously married women}} = \text{divorce index per married or previously married women per year} = 0.051$$

$$c = \text{life expectation for a woman at the mean age of marriage} = 42.9 \text{ years}$$

$$d = b \times c = \text{mean number of divorces in a woman's entire life} = 2.19$$

* Calculated on the basis of Coale and Demeny (1966) and Ayeni (1979)

Though divorce is certainly common in sub-Saharan societies, the divorce rates registered in Muslim Hausa society are extremely high (cf. Murdock, 1950: 195 ff.; Mair, 1953; Lesthaeghe, 1989). This is all the more surprising since it contradicts a common assumption about societies with patrilineal kinship and high bridewealth, namely that they have low levels of divorce (Gluckman, 1950; Goody and Goody, 1967). The importance of divorce in Hausa society is indirectly shown by the formality of its procedures, in contrast to a general tendency to settle tensions and conflicts informally. Given the different social position of husband and wife, procedures differ, depending on which spouse is seeking divorce. A man seeking divorce makes the fact known to his wife through a written statement; there is no need for him to reach an agreement with her or to get an authorisation from the court. However, the wife is expected to register her husband's written statement with the court, thus making the divorce formally a matter of common knowledge. When it is the wife who is seeking divorce, the procedure is more complicated. The wife has first of all to go to court and show reasons for her petition. The reasons traditionally regarded as valid grounds for divorce concern husbands' faults such as severe physical ill treatment inflicted on the wife (beyond what is allowed in exercising the marital right of discipline), refusal of companionship, deliberate sexual desertion, prolonged absence, failure to maintain the wife. To these reasons are added objective facts regarded as acceptable grounds for dissolving the marriage: the husband's irreligiosity, leprosy, impotence or madness (cf. M. G. Smith 1955: 48; Elias, 1963, 1963: 298–9; Anderson 1978: 204).

Who instigates the divorce, and the reasons for it, do not affect custody of the children. This remains the prerogative of the father's family as soon as the children can do without their mother's care, thus further emphasising the way marriage and offspring are a crucial part of the domestic organisation of production. The possible refund of bridewealth may, however, depend on the reasons for divorce and who is seeking divorce. If it is the woman, and she can present no valid reason for her petition, her husband can apply for a refund of the bridewealth. Applications for a refund are particularly frequent in cases where the marriage has been short-lived and childless. Nonetheless, however inadequate the grounds, courts will eventually grant a divorce if the wife persists.

The reasons for divorce and who is the petitioner are of great significance in my view, and have therefore been examined in depth through a field survey of the written proceedings kept at the local area courts (Table 7). In general, it does not seem that the high divorce rate here can be explained by the same factors that seem to favour divorce in Western societies. In the latter, divorce appears to be primarily a by-product of the values of individualism in a technological urban society characterised by advanced division of labour, high social and cultural mobility, the alienation of the individual from family structures and the reduction of the bonds of marriage to fragile means of reciprocal affective and psychological support—all factors that go to make the relationship between husband and wife precarious.

It seems more useful to interpret the phenomenon of divorce in traditional Hausa society on the basis of its very different character, especially its economic and social organisation. We need to examine the particular

TABLE 7. *Divorce cases: sample of 733 divorce cases completed at the local area courts. 1984 (%)*. The local area courts were those of Illo, Bagudo and Yelwa.

<i>Spouse seeking divorce</i>	
Husband	13.9
Wife	86.0
<i>Reasons adduced for divorce on the husband's decision</i>	
No reason given	53.9
Lack of obedience by wife	21.6
Lack of Love	8.8
Lack of sexual interest by wife	2.9
Desertion by wife	2.9
Calling names by wife	2.8
Other reasons ^a	6.8
<i>Reasons adduced for divorce at the wife's request</i>	
Lack of love	24.7
Refusal or failure by husband to look after her	20.6
Lack of food	15.1
Mistreatment by husband	11.4
Desertion by husband	7.6
Husband's desire to get rid of her	6.6
Lack of sexual interest by husband	3.0
Sterility by husband or his impotence	0.9
Other reasons ^b	5.4
Unclear reasons	4.3

^a Sexual discord, the wife stealing money, the wife's madness, the wife's quarrelling.

^b Oppressive behaviour by the husband, quarrelling, being insulted by the husband, the wife's lack of consent to the marriage, the husband's irreligiousness, madness, leprosy (or other contagious disease), the husband's drinking alcohol.

pressures to establish and maintain a specific domestic structure, on one hand, and, on the other, the tensions within marriage that emerge as the social costs (but ultimately also as personal costs) of society's organisational solutions. The necessary adjustments are not always painless.

A primary source of tension lies in the way wives belong to a nuclear conjugal family that is in turn part of an extended family. There is a tendency - as has already been pointed out - to subordinate the particular interests of the nuclear conjugal family to those of the extended family, since the latter has greater productive and organisational value. By subordinating the conjugal nucleus to the extended group and, specifically, the wife to her husband's family, more personalised forms of conflict may arise. In moving from her own to her husband's family, the wife assumes a lower position *vis-à-vis* other members (in particular older women) and at the same time experiences pressure from her husband's family to ensure that she subordinates her interests to those of the extended group. This occurs without any affective link between husband and wife powerful enough to

counterbalance the sources of tension. Hence the conflict between mother and daughter-in-law is magnified by the size and intrusiveness of the husband's family group, so much so that in Hausa society a wife has to deal not just with one mother-in-law but metaphorically with several, and they are formidable.

Divorce thus can counterbalance a situation of conflict where any acceptable compromise is excluded, and so allow the woman to reconstitute a legal relationship elsewhere, while at the same time maintaining, at least partially, the fundamental family structure as an institution. Divorce has a counterbalancing role too *vis-à-vis* tensions inherent in forced marriages. The practice of imposing a marriage partner on girls so young that they can neither make any reasonable personal evaluation nor oppose their family's will causes conflicts that may be simply conflicts of personality but more generally can also be seen to derive from tensions implicit in the woman's social position. Second marriages provide room for more independent choice. Divorce, therefore, makes it possible for women to reach a compromise solution *vis-à-vis* tensions arising from marriage practices that are in turn an integral part of a specific model of economic and social organisation.

Men are under similar structural pressure to set up a family of their own as a basic economic and social unit. Once they have achieved this fundamental aim, and have firmly established the unit through the birth of children, the problem of internal conflicts - previously kept in the background - can assume greater importance, with increasing pressure to replace the wife. Again, tension within marriage is due precisely to the rigid demands generated by the necessity to set up one's own domestic structure.

Divorce can act too as a safety valve for polygamy. Though polygamy is a response to organisational requirements at this level of economic development, it remains a potential cause of internal conflicts, despite apparent acceptance of it as an institution.¹¹ Not only does the entry of another member into a small social group such as the family cause personal trouble, but the husband cannot always adequately maintain the Islamic rule of impartiality.

The institution of divorce threatens the family structure only partially. Divorce removes the wife from the domestic unit, but not the children. The children's chances of socialisation and integration are not jeopardised, since children continue to receive the socialising influence of the other adult members of the family group (cf. Ogburn and Minkoff, 1964: 495). Indeed, the arrangements over children's custody make the effects of divorce less serious than they may seem theoretically.

Establishing empirically the relationship between situations of domestic tension and the incidence of divorce would require more data: for example, data on the relation between divorce and the degree of autonomy a person enjoyed in choosing a spouse; age at marriage; previous marriages, etc. It was not possible to collect systematic data of the required quality on these matters. From the interviews, however, the common view emerged that the probability of divorce increased with the presence in the family of co-wives and a large number of members of the husband's family - as is usual in the extended family - and in particular when they try to dominate the newly married wife. Lack of children was also recognised as increasing the probability

of divorce.¹² However, it seems a mistake to treat sterility or at least the absence of children as in itself a significant cause of divorce. The fact that divorce is so common and that birth rates are so extremely high makes such a sweeping generalisation untenable. Table 7 shows that sterility or impotence does not constitute common grounds for divorce; indeed, it seems more reasonable to conclude that childlessness acts as a complementary rather than the main factor in divorce.

Other data throw light on situations of tension. For example, the very low percentage of divorces initiated by the husband - despite divorce being for him a simple procedure - suggests that women are significantly more affected by situations of tension than are men, as indeed would be expected, given women's position in society.

When the husband initiates divorce, no reason is usually given publicly, since he is not required to provide one. But when a reason is given, the most common is the wife's lack of obedience. Again, this reflects demands stemming from the underlying organisational structure of the domestic unit. The reasons given when divorce is sought by the wife are necessarily more varied. A substantial number of the cases plead lack of proper care and support on the part of the husband, i.e. the violation of a duty that is implicit in this type of family organisation, and which is regarded in some sense as a recompense for the husband's rights *in uxorem* and *in genitricem*. ('Care' may refer here to accommodation and clothing; 'lack of food' is another matter.) Not infrequently the husband is charged with favouring another wife, and thus breaking the basic Islamic rule of equality of treatment in polygyny. Worth noting too is the incidence of physical mistreatment by the husband, and the way it parallels the husband's charge of wifely 'disobedience' mentioned earlier.

The underlying organisation of the domestic unit of production emerges also in the reason most commonly adduced - that is, 'lack of love'. It is clearly being used generically (cf. Anderson, 1978: 212). The very lack of definition points to something else, however: the practice of families arranging marriages leaves too little room for an independent choice of spouse, above all for women. In some cases involving 'lack of love' it is made explicit that the woman did not consent to the marriage, in others it is left implicit that there was no real consent. In general, it is striking that the grounds for complaint brought to the courts by women agree with what the Shaikh Uthman dan Fodio pointed out in a poem at the end of the eighteenth century (Boyd, 1989: 5):

they [men] fail to dress, house and feed their wives adequately, they show favouritism between one wife and another... They revile their wives... and beat them excessively... They are hard by nature...

CONCLUSIONS

We can now better appraise the role played by divorce in Hausa society. Divorce leads to unfavourable consequences for the domestic socio-economic organisation, but these consequences are more limited than may appear at first sight. Divorce makes it possible to counterbalance - not

without some loss - situations of tension connected with features of the familial system such as early marriage, polygamy and the extended family, which otherwise make an essential contribution to the functioning of society.¹³

We should not emphasise, however, the counterbalancing role of divorce as if we were taking a pan-functionalist view that considered the existence of tension and conflicts only where there is a possibility of overcoming them and restoring equilibrium. On the contrary, phenomena such as the striking frequency of divorce deserve attention precisely because they reveal the existence of fundamental social tensions, whose significance must not be regarded as diminished by the existence of some 'solution'. In this sense the incidence of divorce in Hausa society points primarily to the fact that the structural pressure towards early arranged marriages, polygamy and the extended family, together with a centripetal domestic organisation, has led to excessively exacting demands for personal interest to be subordinated, especially on the part of women. In particular, a permanent source of tension lies in the contradiction between the centrality of the woman's role, as instrumental in the policy of reproducing and extending the domestic economic organisation, and the marginality (and subordination) of her direct participation in the economic process - a consequence of channelling her energies towards reproduction and the care of children.

In this analysis some commonly accepted notions are shown to be groundless. One such notion is that traditional socio-economic organisation of itself necessarily produced matrimonial stability. If we ignore Western presuppositions about 'integration in traditional society', we can see that traditional society inexorably drives its members towards setting up their own family, but not necessarily towards perpetuating their bonds of marriage with a specific person. The interests underlying the establishment of a family can in any case be protected by substituting one marital partner for another.

It is now possible to see how in this traditional society divorce allows the bonds of marriage to be rescinded and replaced, should they cause excessive tension and prove dysfunctional with regard to the primary need of maintaining the efficiency of the domestic economic and social unit. Therefore, contrary to what is commonly held - especially in those countries where the technological revolution has been accompanied by a crisis of the family as a social institution - the presumed stability of a marriage founded on the 'bedrock' of a family structure that is at the same time the pivotal unit of economic and social organisation seems illusory. Such a setting may, on the contrary, reinforce the fragility of the bonds of marriage.

In other respects, the frequency of divorce in Hausa society draws attention to some theoretical aspects that are useful for understanding the mechanisms of balance and social control. First, it shows that the balances even in deeply traditional societies do not provide contradiction-free adjustment within a framework characterised by compulsory integration. On the contrary, the balances that are achieved appear to be rather situations of compromise, in which social and cultural adjustment to fundamental organisational needs - such as those regarding the functioning of the domestic unit of production - leads to side effects in terms of tensions, which in turn lead to mechanisms of internal counterbalancing (such as divorce),

whose dynamics largely hinder the process of integration. Second, the phenomenon of divorce draws attention to the fact that tensions and conflicts experienced by a traditional society are not necessarily the product of destructive external factors or of anomalous forms of deviance. Such tensions and conflicts may also be the result of social and cultural modes closely linked with aspects of the economic and social organisation upon which the entire system hinges. Third, the existence of counterbalancing mechanisms - in this case, divorce - does not mean that the sources of tension are overcome. The 'solution' arrived at is, rather, a social compromise, which achieves a form of coexistence between conflicting interests, though without eliminating the underlying contradictions. More generally, the presence of fundamental problems, the necessary but partial 'solutions' to them, the negative effects due to these partial mechanisms of counterbalancing, and the interaction between all these phenomena, make it possible for alternative solutions to be gradually constructed: that is, for the social system to evolve towards a different balance. All this contrasts with the standard perception of traditional societies which necessarily regards them as characterised by stability and no alternatives.

NOTES

¹ In these units the input constituted by *gayya* and internal labour respectively amount to 18 per cent and 67 per cent of the total input. Cf. Norman *et al.* (1976: 42 ff.).

² These activities seem, in this rural area, to be economically less important than has been pointed out as regards less remote areas of Hausaland (Hill, 1971; Schildkrout, 1983). On the other hand, M. G. Smith (1962: 325) has estimated the monetary income of married women in the Zaria area at less than one-fifth of men's income.

³ The 'traditionality' of this situation seems to be confirmed by the fact that surveys conducted in the 1930s in Hausaland discovered percentages close to the present ones (Forde and Scott, 1946: 129-54).

⁴ In demographic terms such a surplus is non-existent, since women constitute 50.4 per cent of the population.

⁵ For a comparison see Goode (1963: chapters 3-4), Mair (1953), Ware (1979) Welch and Glick (1981), United Nations, (1990: 82 ff.). It should be noticed that even in Africa polygamy seems to decline in connection with the spread of mechanised agriculture, paid labour and white-collar employment.

⁶ The models are those elaborated by Coale and Demeny (1966) (Model North, Level 9). The degree of fit between computed and observed values was checked by the r^2 index:

$$r^2 = 1 - \frac{\Sigma(O - T)^2}{\Sigma(O - \Omega)^2}$$

(O = observed values; T = computed values; Ω = mean observed values), which came to 0.96, regarded as a satisfactory value.

⁷ The other demographic indices are: crude death rate, 26.7 per 1,000; infant mortality rate, 170.8 per 1,000; mean age, 18.9 years; life expectation at birth, 38.5 years.

⁸ For the whole of West Africa, the mean birth rate is 49 per 1,000, and very few countries, even among those characterised by the most traditional forms of agriculture, go beyond 52 per 1,000 (United Nations, 1982).

⁹ As regards demographic change in the history of Europe, notwithstanding the dispute still going on, the positive relation between economic advantages of offspring and high birth rate seems clearly to emerge (Tilly *et al.*, 1976; Caldwell, 1982; Lehning, 1984; Kertzer and Hogan, 1989).

¹⁰ Cf. Tremearne (1913), in particular 'The wicked girl and her punishment' and 'The determined girl and the wicked parents'; on the presence in West Africa of the rule of accepting

the spouse chosen by one's own parents, see Radin (1984) - for instance, 'Perché una ragazza dovrebbe sposare colui al quale è offerta in moglie'.

¹¹ In this regard, Ware (1979: 188–90) points out that the reality of these conflicts is not missed even by women who declare themselves in favour of polygamy. Jealousy in polygamous marriage is also stressed in tales widespread throughout West Africa - for instance, Berry and Spears (1991), in particular 'The jealous wife'.

¹² Surveys in other societies with at least similar characteristics support this view: cf. Stenning (1959: 182) on the Fulbe of Bornu and Cohen (1971: 134 ff.) on the Kanuri.

¹³ This article looks at the reproduction of human physical energies much more than women's direct participation in the main economic activities: therefore the present findings do not support the thesis of Boserup (1970).

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to show how a 'traditional' society may produce a household system in which the structural tensions are no less intense than in the Western world. Muslim Hausa society (in northern Nigeria) has one of the highest rates of divorce (and remarriage) in the world. An explanation is sought here in terms of the economic and organisational requirements of a subsistence farming system that is always potentially short of labour. Divorce is a solution to otherwise unacceptable pressures, particularly on young women, in a society that requires them to be subordinate and marginal within the extended family. The data presented here were collected between 1979 and 1989 in the Niger valley of Sokoto State in northern Nigeria.

RÉSUMÉ

L'objectif de cet article est de montrer comment une société traditionnelle peut produire un système familial dans lequel les tensions structurelles ne sont pas moins intenses que dans le monde occidental. La société musulmane Hausa (au nord du Nigéria) a un taux de divorce (et de remariage) parmi les plus élevés du monde. Une explication est recherchée ici en termes des exigences économiques et organisationnelles d'un système agricole de subsistance qui manque toujours partiellement de main d'oeuvre. Le divorce est une solution aux pressions autrement inacceptables, en particulier sur les jeunes femmes, dans une société qui exige d'elles qu'elles soient subordonnées et marginales au sein de la famille étendue. Les données qui sont présentées ici ont été recueillies entre 1979 et 1989 dans la vallée du Niger dans l'Etat de Sokoto au nord du Nigéria.