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**VITAL CONJUNCTURES REVISITED –
GENDER IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY**

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Vital Conjunctures Revisited –
Gender in Times of Uncertainty

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Vital Conjunctures Revisited – Gender in Times of Uncertainty

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Introduction: Vital Conjunctures Revisited – Gender in Times of Uncertainty

Nadine Sieveking

How do people anticipate the future and plan their lives when little is certain? How can we take account of the significance of demographic ‘vital events’ (such as marriage, childbirth or migration) when the horizon of a possible future within which these events acquire meaning becomes pluralized, fluid or contested? How do changing life-course patterns relate to social transformations on larger spatial and temporal scales? Which social and economic institutions construct and normalize life-stages and, *vice versa*, how do life-course patterns affect and transform institutions? Finally, how do these processes relate to the construction and practice of gender orders? These were the central questions debated during the workshop on ‘Vital Conjunctures – Gender in Times of Uncertainty’¹, where the papers by Jennifer Johnson-Hanks and Erdmute Alber compiled in this SPP 1448 Working Paper were presented, the first as keynote and the second as critical comment.

The workshop was inspired by Johnson-Hanks’ ‘vital conjunctures’, a well-received concept within African Studies. It proved to be fruitful in examining the collision of structure and agency in contexts of profound uncertainty, instability or crisis, where new opportunities open up even while insecurity reigns (De Bruijn 2014, Heitz Tokpa 2014). Moreover, it has provided new perspectives on generational dynamics by facilitating analysis of the ways in which social aspirations and imagined futures influence intentional action where transitions from youth to adulthood are being questioned and possibly reversed (Alber et al. 2008, Van Dijk et al. 2011). Nonetheless, its implications for the conceptualization of gender have not yet been thoroughly explored.

Gender norms are usually associated with a set of conceptually stable, culturally and chronologically determined categories of social status, such as childhood, puberty, marriage, parenthood, grandparenthood; together, these constitute a ‘normal’ sequence of life-stages. The notion of ‘vital conjunctures’ questions this model. Instead, it proposes an understanding of status based on the interplay between aspirations and institutions, shaping ‘the moments when seemingly established futures are called into question and when actors are called on to manage durations of radical uncertainty’ (Johnson-Hanks 2002: 878). Starting from these reflections, the workshop aimed at discussing how conditions of uncertainty challenge culturally sanctioned patterns of social reproduction, and, at the same time, sought to contribute to developing innovative approaches for the study of gendered hierarchies and inequalities.

1 Organized by the DFG Priority Programme (SPP) 1448: ‘Adaptation and Creativity in Africa’ and the DFG Research Training Group (GK) 1261: ‘Critical Junctions of Globalization’ in cooperation with the Centre for Area Studies and the Graduate School Global and Area Studies at the Research Academy Leipzig, the workshop took place in Leipzig, 6–7 March 2015.

Johnson-Hanks' revisit of her earlier conceptualization of 'vital conjunctures' reflects her ongoing concern with critiquing established models of demographic evolution in mainstream Western social science, where the assumption of "a stable, consistent sequence of stages, whether life stages or development stages" prevails. Trained in demography and cultural anthropology, she uses insights gained through qualitative methods for innovative collections and interpretations of quantitative data. Her approach strives towards a theory of social action that is equally applicable across cultural contexts, in Africa as much as in the US (Johnson-Hanks et.al. 2011). In her paper, she examines the modalities of action expressed in young urban women's attitudes regarding biographical turning points between completing education and starting a working or family career. Reflecting on the trajectories and future aspirations of four women in Yaoundé, Cameroon, and San Francisco, USA, Johnson-Hanks concludes, "flexibility and the suspension of planning have become the new normal". Thereby she challenges ethnocentric narratives of modernity by proposing a different kind of global convergence than presumed by the expected worldwide dispersion of the Western nuclear family model. Instead, she proposes, the new ideology of flexibility that has come to dominate post-industrial life-worlds, especially in the aftermath of the global crisis in 2008, seems to converge towards African models of dealing with uncertainty by accumulating "wealth in prospects".

Johnson-Hanks explicitly addresses the following questions: what happens when "the zone of possibility that emerges around specific periods of potential transformation in a life or lives" is enlarged and vital conjunctures are considered on an aggregated scale? What are the consequences if the 'duration of uncertainty and potential' where change may occur, expands in time? At what point is it no longer useful to speak of a conjuncture because 'the durations of radical uncertainty' have become so permanent that we should speak of a crisis? And how should we conceive of situations where the dilation of a vital conjuncture is experienced as normal? Referring to her examples, she shows the ambivalence of keeping options for a possible future open; the subjective experience of such a situation can oscillate between gaining 'flexibility' and being stuck in 'waithood'. Yet the gendered dimensions of these processes remain implicit. The male breadwinner used to be the basis for the nuclear family model, and its subversion through women's accumulation of wealth and alternative prospects can be interpreted as a particularly female aspiration towards more autonomy and thereby, towards changing gender hierarchies. However, power relations are not the focus of Johnson-Hanks' approach, which rather stresses the quantifiable indicators of changing modalities of individual intentional action.

Nevertheless, she concedes that more can be done in analysing social inequalities around the distribution of vital conjunctures. Hence, she calls for further research to study "the variation in the types of people who find themselves confronting different kinds of structured zones of uncertainty" and the differing access to resources necessary to make use of opportunities. Johnson-Hanks' interest in variations that become manifest on aggregated scales hints at the effects of social inequalities that can be analysed horizontally at large scale, comparing, for example, options for dealing with unintended pregnancy among youth in Cameroon, the US, and Germany.

Other aspects of social inequalities are brought to the fore by adopting a micro-perspective, as in Erdmute Alber's paper on 'Vital conjunctures and the negotiation of future: rural girls between urban middle class households and early marriage'. Her critical appraisal of Johnson-Hanks' concept focuses more on relational qualities of gendered structures and the vertical dimensions of power than on a horizontal comparison. Her paper is substantiated by her long-term research on intergenerational relations and the negotiation of girls' futures in Benin. Her case study exemplifies a recurrent type of conflict concerning moral obligations and prospected

gains resulting from adults' investments in children's futures. Alber especially points to the effects of rising socioeconomic inequalities that become manifest even between close relatives, and "go hand in hand with deep differences in the life-style, the future aspirations and the normative ideas about the life trajectories" among members of families and kinship networks. Thereby she indicates the economic and political power relations that are always woven into social relations. She convincingly argues that vital events, such as motherhood or a marriage, never concern the individual alone but rather constitute "an entanglement of vital conjunctures in the life course of different persons". Thereby, she implicitly stresses the relational quality of gender, since with the marriage of a girl not only her own life-course and social status as an adult woman are at stake but also those of a number of related persons, such as her husband, her parents and other relatives.

Whilst Alber refrains from focusing explicitly on the gendered dimensions of "the whole bundle of social relations that are involved in any vital conjuncture", she is not afraid of complicating the notion of vital conjunctures. In fact, she argues, if the concepts becomes increasingly "messy" it might become, at the same time, more apt to cover the complexities of gender and intergenerational relations in times of uncertainty, rapidly changing family structures and far reaching social transformations. By way of conclusion, Alber affirms the theoretical as well as heuristic value of the concept of vital conjunctures, allowing as it does the precarious, negotiated, and contested nature of social status to be studied while taking into account that "even such a seemingly unambiguous category as motherhood can be reversible".

This conclusion was discussed and confirmed during the workshop while other stimulating contributions opened up additional dimensions of analysis, such as the paper by Gudrun Lachenmann on 'Changing Gender Ordering in Times of Uncertainty'. She widened the scope of the debate considerably and raised further-reaching questions by discussing specific, historically situated examples of collective action. Referring to women's organisations and social movements in West Africa, she addressed the problem of whether vital conjunctures as a notion is also applicable to analysing collective actors' room for manoeuvre. How have gender orders been affected by socioeconomic transformations such as the ecological crisis following the droughts of the 1970s, the structural adjustment programmes, the destabilization of the cooperative sector, or the democratization and decentralization initiated in the following decades? What were their effects on women's economy and their collective agency?

Lachenmann identified various dimensions of analysis that come into play when zones of uncertainty are expanded, and particularly underlined the relevance of middle range theories, namely those concerning institutions. In this way, she followed the implicit suggestion of Johnson-Hanks' argument that vital conjunctures can be studied in order to better understand the role of institutions because life stages only exist where and when they are institutionally produced. Such a perspective illustrates the heuristic value of the concept of vital conjunctures for analysing the institutional production and regulation of gender orders.

This was evident in Petra Dannecker's paper on the influence of religious institutions and moral discourses on concepts of gendered life courses in Southeast Asia. Referring to male and female labour migration between Bangladesh and Malaysia, she analysed the effects of multiple uncertainties on individual life courses. The transnational migrants in her research not only have to deal with economic uncertainties, but also with changing moral orders which accompany (partly diverging) Islamization in both countries. Dannecker examined how translocality and travelling through space interacts with changes in social status, giving particular attention to the way migration is changing the institution of marriage. She thus used the concept of

vital conjunctures to examine the systematic link between two vital events—migration and marriage—and explored how this interconnection is contributing to institutional transformation. Similar to Lachenmann, Dannecker highlighted the overlaps and intersections between processes on different scales. By studying how individual life courses are embedded in moral orders, she further underlined the relational meaning of gender: the prestige and honour of a husband depends on the behaviour of his wife. In this vein, her arguments confirm Erdmute Alber's concern that we should pay attention to the ways in which vital conjunctures are intertwined.

Other questions raised during the workshop remained open, such as the concrete methodological question of how to identify and determine a vital conjuncture empirically. What is the evidence for a vital conjuncture and what makes a particular conjuncture 'vital'? More generally, it became clear that while we cannot dissolve the basic tension between qualitative and quantitative approaches, sufficiently flexible, even 'messy' categories could render this tension productive. Hence, if we want to study the gender dimensions of social change on multiple scales, revisiting the concept of vital conjunctures still has a lot to offer.

Vital Conjunctions Revisited

Jennifer Johnson-Hanks

Given in Leipzig on March 6, 2015

Revisits are a rather strange endeavor—and all the more so when one is revisiting an idea, rather than a field site. Revisits can veer to the nostalgic, and they can potentially be embarrassing for all involved; however, they can also allow productive revisions and new thinking. I hope that the latter will be the case in this brief reflection. As I re-read my piece on vital conjunctions, two things struck me: first, how far my thinking about that idea has changed—incrementally and without my noticing the change; and second, how strongly the original problem continues to press on me. That is, I remain preoccupied with the fact that so much of the social science literature in the rich north assumes a stable, consistent sequences of stages, whether life stages or developmental stages. In many ways, the common argument that African families and life-ways will someday converge on the model of the rich north is exactly the life stages argument all over again.

I organize this revisit into three parts. First, I briefly describe the concept of vital conjunctions. Second, I think about what happens when conjunctions dilate—expand—either in scale and scope or in time. I propose that quite different things happen with dilations in scale and dilations in time. And third, I return to the idea of *inevitable sequences*, and bring into conversation the idea of conjunction with the idea of convergence—the common, and I think very dangerous, representation of social change in which all the world is imagined to be getting more and more like the rich north. I argue instead that starting with the idea of the vital conjunction, we should not assume that family life and coming of age in Africa will converge on an American or German or French model—certainly not soon, and perhaps not ever. Instead, however, there are a few signs that some aspects of youth in the United States are coming increasingly to converge on an African model, in which uncertainty is the norm and the cultivation of multiple options is the only viable strategy.

Vital Conjunctions

Much of the time, people go through their daily lives with a sense of the future, and a feeling of trajectory. Young people are in school in order to get degrees and jobs; young adults are working to save money for a car or a house or a wedding. We often have the feeling that we know “where we are going” and what the future will be like. Now, this feeling is often completely illusory, but it is nonetheless useful in organizing daily life and helping people make sense of their place in the world.

But sometimes, this illusory clarity breaks down. Something happens that calls that clear road into question, and the future becomes wildly uncertain. Now, the trajectory ahead is murky, with multiple paths appearing possible. Each path may suggest a radically different—even incommensurable—future. In the duration when these multiple potential futures are open, multiple domains of life that—in the ordinary times—could continue along partially independent of

each other, all become mutually intertwined. This duration – when multiple potential futures are in play – is the vital conjunction.

A young woman nears the end of her schooling and is applying for jobs in a variety of cities. The young man she has been dating isn't sure if he wants to move. Will he follow her, and maybe even marry her? Or maybe it's time to break up? Where will she live? What job will she have? All at once, all these questions are on the table. Her choice of work becomes entwined with her choice of partner; her potential futures multiply, and for some time, her present is dominated by these multiple futures.

Or, a young woman finds herself unexpectedly pregnant. Or she fails her exams and her parents refuse to pay the tuition for her to repeat. Each of these might open up a vital conjunction, and the conjunction would stay open until she regains that sense – illusory or not – of knowing the trajectory of her future.

A vital conjunction is the 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. Vital conjunctions are particularly critical moments when more than usual is in play, and the futures at stake are significant.

In 2002, I thought about the structure of conjunctions mostly through their horizons – that is, the social aspirations and values through which the individual actors construe them. Marie, the exemplar in the original paper, works through the conjunction of her unintended pregnancy with the horizon of honorable Christian mother as her central “point de repère.” Both going to live with the family of the father of her son, and leaving her son with them to return to her own family and church are oriented to variants of this same horizon.

The horizons of the conjunction are certainly important for how it is navigated – they provide the meaning and motivation, as Katharina Heitz-Tokpa (2014) shows in her paper on young men dealing with risks and opportunities in the context of the Ivorian armed conflict since 2002. But there are two other important kinds of structure that I did not focus on then, that are at least as important.

The first of these concerns the tools, or resources, or means at hand. In studying abortion among schoolgirls, one of the most striking things is how uneven access to abortion is in many contexts. In southern Cameroon, where abortion is illegal, safe abortions are available – but at a high cost, and only if one comes with references. Doctors who perform them after hours will only do so for someone they are confident will not report them. Who you are, what you have, and who you know can dramatically recast your range of possible futures, and therefore the structure of the conjunction.

The second important form of structure that I previously ignored is the distribution of conjunctions themselves. Again, as with the resources at hand for their resolution, this is not at all equal. There is considerable variation in the types of people who find themselves confronting different kinds of structured zones of uncertainty. Unintended pregnancy is again a good example. If we were to do a study of unintended pregnancy among youth in Cameroon, the US, and Germany, the most striking thing might not be the different horizons of possibility that women in these three contexts imagine, but rather their very different probabilities of facing that conjunction itself: Twice as high in the US as in Germany, and more than twice as high again in Cameroon.

These questions of inequality and distribution are an important area that I ignored in the past, but are of great interest to me going forward.

I noted above that vital conjunctions are outside of normal time – they are “extraordinary times” in Ann Swidler's (2001) language – and that normal time entails the expectation of

a particular trajectory: the feeling that the present leads into the future in some reasonably ordered way. But that is not always the case. In some contexts, uncertainty becomes so pervasive that the suspension of taken-for-granted futures that defines a vital conjuncture becomes, instead, the normal condition. It is to that possibility that we now turn.

The Dilation of Conjunctures

In this section, I discuss what happens when vital conjunctures get bigger. The cases I have considered tend to be both individual—in the sense that they happen to one or a small number of people—and temporary, in the sense that these durations in which multiple futures are in play are relatively short: they have discernible ends, and then “normal life” resumes. But of course conjunctures can dilate over both these dimensions. They can scale up, so that the household or neighborhood or community or country is in a conjuncture; and they can extend in time, so that the suspension of the readily imagined future becomes not a state of exception, but the normal background against which fleeting sensations of certainty may be measured.

The first kind of dilation—in scale—requires relatively little revision of the basic ideas of conjuncture. As long as the group of people over whom the conjuncture is distributed shares some sense of the future, and in some real sense participates together in a frame of construal, and therefore the imagining of horizons, the dilation in scale changes little conceptually. I explore that idea in a paper on infertility and *in vitro* fertilization, in which my co-author and I try to think about the conjuncture opened up by a set of changes in the 1960s, and the transformation set off by the birth of the first IVF baby, Louise Brown (Johnson-Hanks and King, 2011).

The one important difference between individual vital conjunctures and conjunctures at larger social scales concerns the role of intention and intentional action. With an individual vital conjuncture, it is easy to imagine the resolution of the conjuncture as coming about as a result of a choice or decision of the individual at the center of the conjuncture. Marie chose to leave the household of the father of her son, and it was her choice, her intentional action, that resolved the conjuncture. But at an aggregate scale, it is rarely the case that the resolution of the conjuncture comes about as a clear effect of the intentional action of a specific person or persons. More common are unintended consequences, cascading effects, and unexpected collective resolutions. William Sewell on the French Revolution (Sewell 1996); Marshall Sahlins on the Apotheosis of Captain Cook (Sahlins 1982); Pierre Bourdieu on the process of marriage among the Kabyle and in the French Pyrenees (Bourdieu 1958): in all of these cases, conjunctures are resolved partially outside of the intentional projects of the actors participating in them.

But I believe that this is a reason to think more, not less, about larger-scale conjunctures. Sometimes, at the individual level, we can read intention and strategy where it is not really there, or at least not there in the way we assume. Similarly, we can attribute to intention what came about by chance or structural forces. Focusing on larger scales makes these analytic errors harder to make.

That said, the idea of conjuncture is not fundamentally changed when the conjuncture dilates in scale: an individual, a family, a neighborhood, a community, a newspaper-reading public, conjunctures work in very similar ways across all of these scales.

But something quite different happens when we think about dilation in time. A number of authors have described contemporary life in Africa as marked by a sense that everything is temporary and provisional; the dissolution of long-term stability or coherent long-term trajec-

tories as an option; the delay of “full adulthood;” the ongoing curation of multiple possible futures; “wealth in prospects” replacing the “wealth in people” that classically defined African social aspirations. That is, when conjunctions dilate in time, the state of exception becomes normal, producing a potentially different modality of action. This modality can be described as waiting in a state of suspended action, of interstitial pause, of persistent temporariness.

This is actually quite unusual. If people are in a state of constant conjunction, where a vision of a future trajectory is permanently withdrawn, then the concept of vital conjunction, I think, becomes far less useful. If vital conjunctions become permanent, I am not sure that they are conjunctions any more.

For example, when young people finish school with no plans or prospects for the future and simply wait, they are in a kind of suspension—is this a conjunction? I am not sure. How do young people make a living and make a meaningful life under these conditions? In the last section of this paper, I will argue for a kind of convergence here: the activities, constraints, and even aspirations of young, college-educated, American women have come to resemble those of the Cameroonian elite of a decade ago. But first I want to ask a simpler question: How long can a conjunction last? I don’t know, but I do think that a conjunction has to have an end.

Convergence

In 2002, I organized my original paper on conjunctions around a critique of the model of life stages, in which individuals are understood to go through a set of universal, strictly ordered, and irreversible stages, such as from child to adolescent to married person to parent to senior (Johnson-Hanks 2002). I argue that these stages only exist where and when they are institutionally produced; that they have to be managed and made, and that the coordination of life domains into something like stages is a difficult social undertaking, not a universal fact that we can take for granted. The basic assumption of the life stages framework—that of a single, coherent set of stages—also organizes thinking about social convergence.

Most grand narratives of modernity assume an eventual global convergence: people from diverse backgrounds and cultures will over time lead lives that are increasingly similar to those of the rich north in structure, content, and experience. In demography, the convergence is expected to come in terms of family size and composition: two-child, nuclear families all around the world. In American sociology, most interest has focused on the apparent increase in cross-national similarity of educational systems, cultural norms, and political organization. Even as anthropologists have rejected the kind of cross-national comparison on which claims of convergence are generally made, stressing instead detailed cases studies founded on the idea that there are “multiple modernities,” we have often tacitly assumed their inevitability. Recall the large number of anthropological studies of global media, transnational migration, multiple citizenships, and global neoliberalism.

If we think of convergence as when modes of life or modes of action in diverse locales become increasingly similar over time, then, in at least some domains and for some classes of people, important global convergences are taking place. But I want to suggest in this last section that the convergences we are seeing are not mostly in the form of African families coming to look more Western, but rather in the form of some categories of people in the rich north taking on life ways and modes of action that have long characterized life in Africa. In particular, I would like to draw attention to the lives of young, college-educated American women during the worst economic downturn we have experienced since the great depression.

To do this, I turn now to four vignettes: those of Sandrine and Adele in Yaoundé, and Sarah and Kelsey in San Francisco. The names are, of course, pseudonyms. Sarah graduated from UC Berkeley in anthropology in 2010. She excelled as a student, collaborating with senior professors and winning prizes for her undergraduate research. From a conservative Asian-American family, Sarah had to defend her decision to study anthropology to her parents, who wanted her to do something practical. Her parents were even more distraught when graduation day approached and Sarah had not started to think about finding a job. “Something will come along,” she insisted to them, explaining that the worst job market in 50 years meant that there was little point in setting one’s sights on something specific. Instead, it was important to keep one’s eyes and ears open, and wait for the right opportunity to present itself. She had planned to go to graduate school eventually, but not right away, and wanted to get some real-world experience first. After graduation, through a friend of a friend, she was offered a contract position with Apple. The work is exciting, demanding, and decidedly short-term. Her contract is for 15 months, and from the beginning it has been clear that it would not be extended. Nor would she want it to be, as 15 months seems like a pretty long time to her. What will she do next? She doesn’t know. Graduate school is still an option, but so is further contract work. She likes, she explained, the flexibility. Note that here we have a vital conjuncture, but only partially, because there is so sense of potential closure. Sarah seems willing to leave the conjuncture open indefinitely.

Kelsey also graduated from UC Berkeley in 2010, and continues to work part-time in the record store that had employed her as a student. When I spoke with her in 2012, she was looking for something more permanent, or at least more hours, since she is now spending more money than she earns, and her parents are not willing to subsidize her over the long term. She was thinking of taking some evening classes to get a sense of what she might want to do next, but hesitates to spend even more money, and so for now is in what she describes as “kind-of a holding pattern.” She has a lot of time that she doesn’t know what to do with, she explained. She “hangs out” with friends from school, but none of them have the money to do many of the things that they would like to. Her job search takes only a couple of hours a week, since there are not many jobs to apply for. Overall, she describes herself as “pretty smart, but lacking focus,” that is, direction or a sense of what to do. She came to see me to inquire about graduate school, but hesitated when I noted that an MA degree takes two years. “That’s too long,” she said. “I need more flexibility.”

Two things about Kelsey’s self-description are particularly important for our purposes. First is the metaphor of a holding pattern—that is, the way an airplane circles above an airport before it is cleared to land. The metaphor is both apt and inapt. Apt, because it stresses her boredom and feeling that she is just waiting, with no control over her future and no sense of the timeline on which things might change. But airplanes that come in to land *complete* something, whereas whatever it is that Kelsey is waiting for is not a completion but a start. The second interesting thing about Kelsey’s narrative is the importance she places on flexibility, which seems here to mean not being tied up with a specific commitment for too long. That is, “flexibility” is mostly about the management of time and of one’s own relationship to time. In its dictionary definition, “flexible” refers first to things that can be bent or changed easily and without harm—a rubber band, say. But here, the term “flexible” means not so much something that can be changed easily, but rather time that is open, not fully accounted for, and therefore adaptable in a variety of directions. It is a term that Sarah uses, too, in a very similar way. This understanding of flexibility stands in contrast with an older view of strategic action, in which one foregoes short-term benefits in exchange for greater long-term gains. Instead, Sarah

and Kelsey emphasize the importance of keeping options open, of not foreclosing alternative possible futures too quickly. In a similar vein, a recent article in the New York Times had the title: “A Major in Engineering, with a Minor in ‘Keeping an Open Mind’” (Tamir 2010).

Flexibility and the withdrawal of a potential future also show up clearly in the stories of the Cameroonian women Sandrine and Adele, both of whom I knew reasonably well when they were students in 1998. I visited both of them again in the summer of 2001, and asked what they had been doing in the meantime. With Sandrine, the conversation went as follows:

FJH: When you left school, then what did you do?

ST: Nothing.

FJH: Nothing?

ST: Really nothing. I just stayed at home all the time.

FJH: Didn't you work at home?

ST: No, no. I just cooked manioc and things like that. I didn't even do anything. At home, there is nothing to do. Not even a market. Nothing. So I did nothing.

Of course, she didn't do “nothing.” She had full days of heavy labor: weeding fields, pounding manioc, hauling water, and washing clothes. But nothing she did had an intrinsic implied trajectory; nothing had a built-in future orientation. The labor each day was much like the labor of every other day, with no prospect for improvement or even change. The framing is important here. “Nothing” in Sandrine's accounting means “nothing with a narrative”, nothing that constitutes a life project. This “nothing,” therefore, only makes sense in the context of narrative alternatives, other ways of spending time that *do* imply trajectories, *do* have implicit futures. School is the most obvious and compelling of these, but many forms of paid work, too, are activities that suggest transit, change, and most of all, improvement. In some contexts, a life of washing clothes, feeding babies, and weeding manioc would have been called just “life”, not nothing. It only becomes “nothing” in contrast to a hypothetical something that is more than its own present. We can think productively about Sandrine's nothing through Jane Guyer's reflections on the “evacuation of the temporal frame of the ‘near future’” in millennial Christianity. She describes this near future as “the reach of thought and imagination, of planning and hoping, of tracing out mutual influences, of engaging in struggles for specific goals, in short, of the process of implicating oneself in the ongoing life of the social and material world.” (Guyer 2007:409). Sandrine sees her life as lacking this “near future,” making her activities worth nothing.

Sandrine's domestic labor in her parents' compound is more productive than is Kelsey's part-time work at the music store. Although neither was paying her own way in the cash economy, Sandrine is a hard worker, who almost certainly pulled more than her own weight at home. And both (although not in these passages) talked about their status as one of waiting. Waiting for some unspecified future, waiting for something to open up for them to do, waiting for things to begin. Talk of waiting was also central to Adele's self-description in 1998:

FJH: What do you want to do after the bac (high school diploma)?

AR: We'll see. Perhaps we'll see after the bac.

FJH: You don't have some general ideas?

AR: I do not yet have a precise idea, you see. I am waiting. If I succeed, if the exams come out in success, then tomorrow I will tell you what's what.

FJH: But in order to decide tomorrow, don't you have to have some ideas today?

AR: Your vocation is not like that. It comes from the Holy Spirit.

JJH: Yes, yes. I understand that, but don't you like something?

AR: Today, is it necessary to like something? Whatever presents itself in front of you, you do.

However, three years later, Adele had indeed found something presented in front of her. She began her studies in communication at a private college in Yaoundé. It was expensive, and meant searching every semester for help with the fees, but this was better in her view than the public university because of the resources that were available. Why communication? Well, for the flexibility, she explained. "This way, even though I don't know where the opportunities are going to open up for me, with this, I will be sure to have something, because everything is about communication nowadays." This last phrase is particularly evocative. Not only is it good to study communication as a major because communication is implicated in everything (thus maintaining flexibility), but also because the fact that everything is about communication means that flexibility is more important than ever. Communication, after all, is deeply concerned with adaptability and the potential for change. Adele was living in a small room in a cement block building with other students, and we talked at the somewhat makeshift café at the nearby intersection. She was excited about the enormous new possibilities brought by the Internet, by global exchange, and laughed about how she would like to meet me at a café in Berkeley one day, and to talk in English. Flexibility here means maintaining open options so that the most promising aren't overlooked. It is, in a certain sense, the hypervaluation of the possible over the feasible.

Adele, Sandrine, and others like them were foremost in my mind as I developed the idea of "judicious opportunism" (Johnson-Hanks 2006): a mode of action "in the subjunctive mood" (after Wagner-Pacifici 2000) that stands in contrast to conventional means-ends rational action. It is focused on keeping options open, maintaining possibilities, keeping flexible, and then being ready to pounce when a promising chance comes along: "wealth in prospects." Again and again during my fieldwork in Cameroon, people emphasized how their present condition made any kind of planning impossible. They could not imagine any particular future or make any specific plans. Uncertainty was so normal that many people found assertions about certain futures absurd. Knowing that I was interested in young women's marital-, fertility- and professional intentions, people sometimes asked me these same questions. How many children would I like to have? What job would I like to do? What would I do if my husband took a second wife? These conversations came to have a familiar rhythm. I'd say I wanted two children, and my interlocutor would ask what I would do if I had five instead. I'd say that I wouldn't have five; I'll stop when I have two. Then my interlocutor and any by-standers would laugh uproariously, and tell me that it is God who gives children, and "One cannot refuse!" Similarly, if I said that I wanted to be a professor, I would be asked what I would do if I had to work in the fields instead. When I would assert that it was impossible that I would be forced to work in the fields in the United States, my conversation partner would laugh and remind me that no one can know the future, and that anything is possible in this world. As I, along with many others, have argued, in many poor countries people are habituated into a kind of agnosticism about the future: life is so uncertain that plans are always tenuous, partial, more hope than conviction.

What is important in the stories of Kelsey and Sarah is the degree to which they, too, describe their present modes of action "in the subjunctive mood" (Wagner-Pacifici 2000), stressing the importance of maintaining flexibility, of seeing where promising options open up, and of waiting. Flexibility is therefore a regime of temporality, in which the dominant mode is waiting. The waiting can have more positive (as for Adele and Sarah) or more negative (for Sandrine and Kelsey) valences, but either way it stands in dramatic contrast to the view of means-ends ration-

ality taken for granted since Weber. Whereas means-ends rationality posits action in which the actor selects a specific desired end and then uses the available means as efficiently as possible to achieve it, this judicious opportunism is a mode of action in which no specific ends can be formulated, only – perhaps – vague notions of what constitutes a good life or what would be a promising chance, and in which the primary activity is apparent inaction. Time loses its sense of before and after, because intentional projects are impossible.

I want to pause here for a moment to think about these four cases as vital conjunctions, dwelling still with the question of how long a vital conjunction can last, and when a duration of structured possibility, in which the future is suspended, ceases to be a vital conjunction and becomes something else. Adele, who found herself in the private college studying communication, was clearly in a vital conjunction that resolved. But it is not clear whether the same can be said about Kelsey or Sandrine. Here, the suspension of normal time and the sense of undetermined futures seems to stretch so far that we need to think about it as something different from a vital conjunction.

But let us return to the idea of convergence. I propose that to some degree, these young American women have taken on life ways and expectations that have been classically associated with Africa. The parallel economic crises certainly play a role here.

In both countries, economic crisis was severe – in Cameroon, a decline in global commodity prices led to the value of exports falling by half, setting off an extended and painful period of economic stagnation. People often called it “la crise morale,” because of the significant social consequences of the economic downturn. No, insisted others, this is rather “la crise totale.” But whatever its name, the Cameroonian economic crisis is now echoed in the US. Kelsey and Sarah were graduating from college during the worst economic downturn in the United States since the 1930s: the overall unemployment rate was 9.5% and not coming down, institutions from households to the US government were deeply in debt, and uncertainty was ubiquitous. At some level, Kelsey and Sarah’s agnosticism toward the future and unwillingness to make specific plans is an inevitable retreat into the subjunctive mood appropriate to an economic crisis.

Robert Reich (2010) has argued that over decades of stagnating wages, the lifestyle of the American middle class – and with it, American optimism about the future – were maintained through the sequential deployment of women’s increased labor force participation, then longer work hours for both spouses, and finally borrowing against the inflated prices of homes. But people can only work so many hours and borrow so much. When the last available trick ran out, economic crisis was inevitable. Indeed, it had been inevitable for decades, merely postponed. From an economic perspective, surely Reich is right. But experientially, the Great Recession has meant something radically different, in the sense that people may have known that they were working longer or borrowing more, but they didn’t see it as a systemic problem beyond themselves. It’s one thing to be nervous about one’s own ability to fulfill the American dream, but the Great Recession made clear to people that the dream itself – not their own place in relation to it – was in disarray. Conjoined with the threat of terrorism since November 2001, the doomsday financial news since 2007 in the US represents a significant historical rupture.

When I say rupture, what I mean is that the direction of change has reversed. For decades, as a rule, life in most domains in the United States was getting more stable and more predictable. Life expectancy rose, and the range of ages at death shrank. Contraception became more available, increasing certainty over fertility numbers and timing. Due to actions of the Federal Reserve, the business cycle flattened out, and recessions became shallower. Residential mobility led to increasingly homogenous neighborhoods, and within them, educational and political

homogamy increased. Credit markets were stabilized, making liquidity constraints less severe. And so on. And perhaps most importantly, people came to assume that predictability was good, and even that it was natural. But no more. The change has come in two major ways: first, uncertainties large and small have grown in important domains of life, and second—perhaps paradoxically—people have come to put much greater positive value on spontaneity and flexibility. When Kelsey and Sarah reject professional or educational commitments that would limit their flexibility, it is not only as a negative reaction to the contemporary American economic and social crises, but also out of a positive value placed on flexibility, a positive value that relates to the crisis in complicated ways.

To think about the positive value placed on flexibility in relationship to the crises, we first turn to a series of articles that appeared in the *New York Times* over the past year that explored the changing nature of work in the US. In these articles, the most often cited change is the rise of “flexible” or “contingent” labor—that is, short-term contracts, often without benefits. Here again, we see the term “flexible” used in specific relationship to temporality. “Flexible” labor is contracted over brief time horizons, without long-term commitment on the part of the employer. This is the category of work that Sarah is doing. It is work that is hard to quantify, and most of the evidence of its considerable increase over the last three years is anecdotal. Still, the *Times* notes:

In just one snapshot of what is going on, the number of people who describe themselves as self-employed but working less than 35 hours a week because they cannot find full-time work has more than doubled since the recession began, reaching 1.2 million in December 2009, according to the [US] Bureau of Labor Statistics.... Many people are apparently looking at multiple temporary jobs as the equivalent of a diversified investment portfolio (Luo 2010, emphasis added).

This phrase “diversified investment portfolio” is particularly interesting for us here. It is almost identical to the phrase that Caroline Bledsoe (2002) uses to talk about the strategy of high fertility in West Africa (a “diversified child portfolio”) and closely resembles a common image used by many of my interlocutors in Cameroon to talk about why one should have multiple boyfriends (in case of a problem with one, it is good to have “various businesses”). Indeed, the value of diversification in the face of uncertainty is one of the key reasons that action in the subjunctive mood has many of the characteristics that it has. Still, the idea that contingent work is somehow safer than the kind of long-term, stable employment on which middle class lives depended for decades does seem rather ironic. But that is the sense of the times. The same article included an interview from a man who explained that “he actually prefers his life as an independent contractor—constantly being laid off and rehired, sometimes juggling multiple jobs—to his old corporate position. ‘I think it’s far less risky than being in a full-time job somewhere and cut at will and left with nothing’” (Luo 2010).

The celebration of flexibility and spontaneity evident in the changing shape of American work echoes a far more exuberant celebration of the kinds of flexibility and spontaneity in non-work life made possible by technological innovation over the past couple of decades. We can think both about cell-phones and the mobile web, as well as the computation-intensive matching algorithms behind programs like Pandora, Match.com, and even Amazon’s recommendations. Over several generations, major US corporations offered the consumer reliability, predictability, security, and uniformity (think GE, Ma Bell, Ford, or McDonalds). The “it” companies of the new economy, however, offer almost the inverse: individuation, flexibility, and autonomy—freedom

from the predictable, individuality from the crowd. They market a limited kind of uncertainty. Some college-educated young people in the US have come to consider detachment, dwelling in uncertainty, and withdrawal from concrete plans about the future as positive markers of identity. Giving up flexibility would be naïve; working for one company your whole life would be grim. Keeping options open means being part of the network, in the moment, aware of the times. For young people like Sarah and Kelsey, uncertainty, flexibility, and the suspension of planning have become the new normal.

The life stages model assumes that everyone follows the same stages in the same order. The social convergence model assumes that everyone develops the kind of lifeways of the rich North. But neither are good empirical descriptions. What convergence is happening in the lives of young people is happening as much on the African model as on the model of the rich west.

Conclusion

I conclude by circling back to four things. First, vital conjunctions have a lot more social structure than I had previously implied — there is much more room for analyzing social inequality and access. Second, we can usefully think about conjunctions at multiple scales, and in some ways, the larger scales offer analytic purchase that individual scales may not. Third, dilation in time is a much larger challenge to the conceptual framework of conjunctions than is dilation in scale — as the uncertain present and suspended future expand indefinitely, eventually it ceases to be useful to call that duration a conjunction. And finally, exactly this kind of dilation is happening in the lives of some college-educated American youth — whereas social scientists have long predicted the convergence of African lifeways to those of the rich north, the opposite seems to be happening. Just as there is nothing inevitable about life stages, there is nothing inevitable about large-scale social change: reversals, skips, and dissynchronies are the norm. In place of Whig history, we need conjunctural models of social change.

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Vital conjunctures and the negotiation of future: rural girls between urban middle class households and early marriage

Erdmute Alber

1 Introduction

This paper connects my reflections on the concept of vital conjunctures, which has accompanied my research for a while, with the interpretation of empirical material from Benin, West Africa, collected in the framework of a larger collaborative research project on “African middle classes on the rise”.¹ My research focus within this framework is to investigate processes of social differentiation within kin-groups in the republic of Benin, and the impact of these differentiations on the future perspectives of the actors. The general argument and finding is that in the actual situation of rising socioeconomic differences, not only kin-groups are becoming more and more in-homogeneous, but also households.

In the following I first give an account of my understanding of Johnson-Hanks’ concept of vital conjunctures and then apply it to an extended case study from my research in Benin. I focus on the story of a rural Baatombu girl called Gloria, who was given to an urban middle class household of relatives in order to “help” working there². Although she wanted to stay in town, she had to leave the household after some years, and given into marriage to a young peasant man in the village. I analyze the case story by relating it to Johnson-Hank’s concept of vital conjuncture. However, somewhat different from her argument, I analyze my case story as an entanglement of different vital conjunctures of various people, who are negotiating different futures, not only the future of the girl Gloria but also their own. In my analysis I indicate how the potential of the concept of vital conjunctures as outlined by Johnson Hanks can be enlarged by adding further dimensions to the concept. In my conclusion I explain how these further layers of analysis relate to the dimension of time.

2 Vital conjunctures

In her seminal book “uncertain honors” (2005), as well as in the article “on the limits of life stages in Ethnography: Toward a Theory of Vital Conjunctures” (2002), to which I am referring

1 The research project “middle classes on the rise”, in which I am working together with anthropologists Lena Kroeker and Maïke Voigt, as well as with sociologists Dieter Neubert and Florian Stoll, is part of a larger collaborative research project, namely the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies. I am deeply grateful for the financial support and intellectual input of that project and my colleagues in Bayreuth. See www.bayreuth-academy.uni-bayreuth.de/de/teilprojekt/mittelschichten_im_aufbruch/index.html

2 The expression “helping” translates a local way of naming the arrangement that rural and not enrolled girls are sent to urban households in order to do the domestic labor. In these arrangements, no salary is paid, but the household in which the girl is working is expected to “do something for her” as people name it: pay an apprenticeship or paying the dowry. Thus, “helping” means not-salaried work.

here, Johnson-Hanks introduces the *vital conjuncture* as her key concept. It is discussed as an alternative to the wide-spread and relatively old concept of *life stage* in the anthropology on the life course.

She developed the concept in order to better explain how young middle-class Beti women in Kamerun are “navigating” (Christiansen et al. 2006) through a childhood and youth in the context of complex normative expectations concerning the honor of young women. The main goal of these young women is to become honorable adults who fulfil, if any possible, the normative expectations of their society to successfully finishing proper schooling careers. This means, as Johnson-Hanks shows, that they have to postpone their mothering careers, since early motherhood is widely seen as a shame for educated girls. Convincingly Johnson-Hanks argues that the postponement of the mothering career, and therewith, the full achievement of the status of adults, does not have, as a consequence, in any case to abstain from sexuality – this seems neither to be possible nor realistic – but to take decisions in the case of pregnancy. Girls can carry the pregnancy and give the child after delivery to foster parents, so that they “return” from the status of motherhood back to the status of school-girls. Or they can decide to finish the pregnancy by an abortion. Or they can decide to keep the baby, and, thus, become mothers and maybe even wives. Johnson-Hanks’ point is that in light of these different modes of navigating between different options for the future, the concept of clear-cut life-stages, as for-seen in “classical” anthropology, is too static.

“Rather than a clear threshold into female adulthood, here motherhood is a loosely bounded, fluid 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. (...) „Life stages“ emerge only as the result of institutional projects; their coherence should be an object, rather than an assumption, of ethnographic inquiry.” (Johnson-Hanks 2002: 866)

Johnson-Hanks’ key argument in rejecting the idea of clear-cut life-stages is, thus, that even such a seemingly clear defined status as motherhood that is imagined to designate a clear-cut line between youth and adulthood, appears to be fluid. She refers to other authors such as Goody and Bledsoe who already challenged the idea of motherhood as being so unambiguous as the classical literature argued.³

One could add other authors who have also questioned the idea that motherhood is the central criteria to make a woman an adult. One of the most impressive works on the fluidity of the category of motherhood is Mette Line Ringstedt’s (2007) article on the collisions on life courses among Tanzanian female teenagers. Ringstedt analyzes teenage motherhood in urban Tanzania with a special focus on the inter-generational negotiations between the young mothers and the grandmothers, and mentions a variety of strategies for the young women to include the grandmothers into the responsibility for the children. Some of these grandmothers refuse to help her daughters to care for the children. They argue that they are still too young to become grandmothers. Some of the teenagers, in contrast, are arguing that they are still too young for being responsible for children. Nevertheless, some of the teenage-mothers make their mothers to become the mothers of the children. Others are just neglecting the children by leaving them at home when going to bars and clubs at night. Doing so, the girls are traversing

3 See Goody 1982, Bledsoe 1980, Bledsoe and Uche Isingo-Abanike 1989, Bledsoe and Brandon 1992

back the borderline between adulthood and youth in order to become, again, childless youngsters. But, in this process, not only they are traversing fluid boundaries in their life-course, but also their mothers who are traversing the fluid line of becoming elders by accepting the status of grandmothers. Very much in line with Johnson-Hanks and referring to her, Ringsted argues that even such a seemingly unambiguous category as motherhood can be reversible in so far that after leaving their children, the young women return being teenagers, as if they have never had the experience of giving birth.

Even if at first sight Ringsted and Johnson-Hanks are arguing in the same way, there are nevertheless two meaningful differences. While Johnson-Hanks speaks about the fluidity of motherhood, Ringsted is even more radical by mentioning its reversibility. Even if a concrete life-stage is meant to be achieved later in the life-course, persons who have already achieved that stage could return to the previous one.⁴

The second difference between both author's argumentation concerns the persons involved: While Johnson-Hanks is focusing on individuals and their trajectories in their own life-courses, Ringsted focusses on the inter-generational entanglements and on the way how transitions in the life-course are affected by the inter-generational relations. She shows that the refusal or achievement of motherhood by teenage girls does not only influence their own status but also the position of others, especially the status of the grandmothers. Ringsted's chapter therefore impressively demonstrates that an anthropology of the life course should not be limited by focusing solely on individuals. Rather, it must take the inner- and inter-generational relations into consideration, because not only the position of one single person is at stake but the position of various people. I will come back to this point.

Johnson-Hank's central focus, however, is not the intergenerational entanglements but the phase or zone in which transformations in lives occur, the "vital conjunctures". She defines the concept as follows:

"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."
(2002: 871)

What is highly relevant and convincing of this concept and its definition is the notion of uncertainty and potential which is linked to an idea about future making. The relevant frame of any vital conjuncture, she argues, is the "contingent and anticipated future". In her own words:

"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."
(2002: 871)

With this definition, Johnson-Hanks opens up a perspective on processes of timing in the life course that highlight a relatively simple fact, nevertheless often neglected in the literature. It is the fact that people are acting, in any moment of their life, not only on the basis of their know-

4 See also Häberlein, 2015 who demonstrates the same for old age in northern Togo. Rituals, and afterwards the very old people become younger.

ledge and experience referring to the past, but also in relation to an envisaged future which is, at the same time, unknown and contingent. Johnson-Hanks is therefore right when she criticizes the structurally and somewhat static oriented life-stage literature which takes the succession of life-stages for granted, and which seemingly suggests that every person's life is following the order of clear-cut life-stages. In contrast to that idea, Johnson-Hanks is emphasizing the fact that in every moment of their lives, people do not know what the future brings to them. However, it is the "potential social futures" Johnson-Hanks mentions in her definition, which are the basis for the actions and decisions made and taken during a vital conjuncture.

To conclude this part of introducing my understanding of the vital conjunctures concept, I would like to mention *three points* to which I will come back in my analysis and conclusion: The very importance of the concept of vital conjunctures does, *firstly, not lie so much in its criticism of the concept of the life-stage*. Drawing on Ringsted's idea about the reversibility of the stages, I am arguing that one *could* preserve the concept of the life-stages if one does not take them as concrete, in-avoidable and, thereby, mechanical steps in the lives of individuals. Rather, one should take them firstly as normative ideas about a "right" and ordered life-course specific to any society. I assume that any society has shared ideas about how a "normal" life-course should be, and the life-stages are part of this assumption about an ordered life. Of course, social change has an impact not only on the "real" life trajectories of people but also on the ideas about the life-course and the life-stages. Johnson-Hanks, herself presents us a good example for these changes: she argues that it is expected from educated young women to start their mothering careers later on.

These shared assumptions about how life should be are indicators for life-stages, as normative ideas, not as lived practice. Therefore, I would *keep the idea of life-stages* and even argue that the fluidity of the stages such as motherhood that Johnson-Hanks states, is based on a normative understanding of life-stages. Assuming fluidity between two stages nevertheless implies that there is an idea about these stages. In this regard, I would also like to refer to the "father" of anthropological research on life-stages, Arnold van Gennep (2005), who had already focused on the "in-between" of two life-stages, namely the rites de passages and the liminal phase in which the crossing of the border is accompanied by rituals of impeding and delaying, steps of returning and so on. The boundary between two life-stages has always been a dynamic one, even in the view of the authors cited by Johnson-Hanks.

Secondly, and here I refer again to Ringsted, vital conjunctures as well as life trajectories should not be understood only with the perspective on individuals but also with regard to the entanglements within the webs of kinship, the inter-generational relations and maybe even the different but interacting vital conjunctures of different people. It is not a single person that makes herself a mother, but her parents, siblings, in-laws and others who are regarding her as a mother by expecting a certain behavior, or by addressing her as mother and, thus, maybe preventing her from escaping to fulfil the expectations. And, becoming a mother does always have consequences on the life-course of others: not only the men who become fathers at the same time, but on the mothers who become grand-mothers, the sisters becoming aunts, and so on.

And *thirdly*, the very strong point of the concept of the vital conjuncture lies in its reference to the future making, which is relevant at any point of the life course, but especially in those moments of uncertainty and potential when future making takes place with all the consequences. I come back to these three points in the context of the story of Gloria, to which I am turning now.

3 Negotiating girls' futures in Benin

Benin is one of the countries with the highest population growth. Currently, there is an annual growth of 2, 7 percent. It is a country with an enormous internal migration rate that causes, among others, an accelerating urbanization process. Actually, about 45 % of the population is living in the cities, and the migration rates from the countryside to the cities are continuing. Cotonou, for instance, has grown from about 70.000 habitants in 1960 to about a million in 2010. World Bank statistics indicate that about 18 % of the population from Benin are part of the middle classes, and about 51 % are living in poverty. This has increased from 35 % in 2009 to now.⁵

What I want to point out with this rough outline is to give a background for my observations on the micro level, that while economic differences within the country are rising, so do the differences within kin groups. It has become very normal that brothers are living in very different circumstances – one brother as analphabet and peasant, the other as middle-class officer. In a situation of these mentioned rising inner-familiar differences, it has become an everyday practice that richer parts of the family take the children of poorer parts, or that poorer members of the family are hosted in the households of richer family members. This involves various conflicts, some of which can be illustrated by the story of Gloria.

I came to know Gloria⁶ in 2010, when I realized field research in the village of Tebo, northern Benin. One of my close friends, Kora, told me that he had, some years before, engaged a girl from a neighboring village for his foster son MamMam. Among the Baatombu child fostering is a very wide spread pattern, many rural children are growing up with foster parents. (Alber 2003, Alber 2014) When he recently went to her family asking if his son's wedding could now take place, he was told that the girl had been sent to Cotonou where she was still working. Therefore he should wait a little more time. Now he was worrying if the wedding would still take place. As he had invested in the girl and he felt obliged to give a wife to his foster son, he was really concerned about the wedding. The issue was even more serious for him since MamMam – with the financial help of his biological mother – had already taken another wife by himself with whom he was living since some month.

Some days later I talked with MamMam himself, who also told me that he was waiting for the wife his (foster)-father had promised to give him in marriage. Curious about the girl and the whole story, I asked my friends from Tebo to give me the telephone number of the family the girl was living with. On my next visit to Benin, in 2011, I got the number and called the man who had brought the girl to Cotonou and for whom she was working. His name was Gunu. When I gained his confidence and made sure that I did not only contact him in order to take the girl back to the village, he invited me into his house where he was living with his wife, two small children and the girl, Gloria.

Gunu was a professional soldier, somebody who had left the village – and, therewith, a whole style of life, as he told us openly – with relatively few formal educational skills, but with the strong will to become an urban citizen, a member of the middle class. Therefore, he envisaged climbing the social ladder in the army. He never regretted this choice. When I met him in Cotonou, he was just back from a stay of nine months in Ivory Coast, as a member of the UN peace-keeping forces. He immediately started talking about Gloria, because this matter

5 See <http://liportal.giz.de/benin/wirtschaft-entwicklung> (download 24.1.2016), www.indexmundi.com/g/g.aspx?v=24&c=bn&l=de (download 24.1.2016) <http://countrymeters.info/de/Benin> (download 24.1.16)

6 All names in this text are anonymized.

discomposed him, as he told me. Since some weeks, he was regularly called by the villagers and asked to send her back. However, he did not plan to send her back. He had taken her to Cotonou in order to pay her an apprenticeship and not to let her go into a marriage with a villager. I asked him to explain how and why he took her to Cotonou. Gunu answered that as he was often absent and as his wife was working as well, he had been looking, after the birth of the second child, for somebody who could take the first child to school. Firstly, he had wanted to take his youngest sister, who was still living with the peasant parents, from the village to Cotonou. His idea was to enroll her together with his child. However, as his parents refused, and, even more problematic, as in the school of his own child, the class his sister should attend was missing, started looking for another girl from the village, one which did never attend to school. He wanted to let her care for the children, and then, when grown up a bit, to pay an apprenticeship for her. Therefore he asked his brother to send him such a girl. Gloria was a girl from his own village, a relative, the daughter of divorced parents who had grown up with an aunt who had already before sent her to a foster family for some time. The aunt had given the girl to Gunu's brother who sent her to him. Now they were repeatedly calling him and asking to send her back, because she should marry somebody. He, by contrast, found that a stupid idea, the girl did not want to return to the village, she had already learnt French, why should one send her back to the backward-oriented peasants? When he had told to the girl that he wanted to send her home, he finally told us, she had started crying.

On the same evening I visited the family at home. Gunu was sitting in the sitting room, together with one of his children and Gloria. I asked him if I could talk with her alone, and he agreed. Our conversation was difficult, since she was very shy. She told me that she had left the village three years before without knowing any word in French which she had now learned here, in Cotonou. The family was good to her, the work was not too hard, and her future plan was to make an apprenticeship. However, that did not depend on her alone, she told me, and she did not want to return to the village. The conversation was short and very shy. Then Gunu asked her to buy drinks for all of us. When she returned and we had the drinks, together with Gloria – a fact that made clear that her status in the household was more the position of a kin than the position of a domestic worker – she lost a bit of her timidity. Together with the son of the family we were watching a photo album of the family, in there, some pictures of Gloria, in the same clothes as the children of the family. This, again, is a sign that she was seen at least partly as a member of the family and not only an outside worker.

After this first encounter with Gloria in the context of Gunu's urban household, I planned to visit Gloria's rural relatives in the neighboring village of Tebo. I travelled to the north of the country and spent a day in Tebo where I talked again with my friend Kora, who again, told me that he was impatiently waiting for the return of the girl from Cotonou because he wanted to organize the marriage for his foster son. Then I went to Gloria's village, which took me two hours by car, since the road was very bad and a big detour had to be made. Arriving there, I first met Gunu's brother who told me, to my astonishment, that Gloria had already been back from Cotonou. Indeed, he told us, Gunu had wanted to keep her in Cotonou, but as Gloria's family had insisted to send her back, he had to accept that. After that, I went to the family where she was living. The brother of Gloria's foster mother was the head of the compound. He openly told me he had sent her to Cotonou, and now, as she was back, he was very satisfied. For, the dowry she had taken from Cotonou was much bigger than the ordinary dowries that village girls take from their family when being sent into marriage. He frankly told me that even if somebody had wanted to keep her in Cotonou, this has never been the plan of Gloria's family. Finally, I had

a short meeting with an again very shy Gloria. It was difficulty to get the permission from her uncle to talk alone with me. She only stated in a very shy manner that she did not know why Gunu had sent her back. Maybe, she said, he was not satisfied with her work. I asked if she would now marry in the village. “What could I do?” she answered.

When I left the village and arrived back in Tebo, I was again astonished to find in Kora’s compound some visitors: Gloria’s household head together with some other men from her village. Immediately after my visit, they had left the village and walked the direct footpath to Tebo, so that they arrived before myself who had taken a lot of time in the bad road. They were shouting and disputing. What I understood from their many accusations was that my arrival was interpreted as an intention to make trouble and to disturb the planned wedding. Kora tried to explain that I was just an anthropologist who wanted to study kinship among the Baatombu, and assured them that the wedding would in any case take place. On the occasion of my next visit to Benin, in 2012, I met Gloria again. Now she was married and already pregnant, and lived in the new built house of MamMam, together with him and his other wife. So far the story of Gloria, which illustrates a quite typical conflict between rural and urban households in contemporary Benin. For a better understanding of its context, I give some general characteristics of urban Baatombu households like the one of Gunu one and their relation to the countryside, before analyzing the conflict more in detail.

Baatombu peasants are relatively wealthy peasants in Benin. The same is true for the urban households of Baatombu in Cotonou, the biggest city of the country. As the first Baatombu households were founded in the cities only after 1960, up to now most of them do still have strong exchange relations with the rural households of their parents, siblings or cousins. Still today many rural children and youngsters are leaving their villages in order to continue schooling, to go for an apprenticeship or just to work in the towns. In the big cities like Cotonou, many households consist of first-generation migrants from the rural areas. Such is the case for Gunu who was born in the village and left it in order to look for a different future, aspiring access to an urban middle-class life-style, and a free life, far from what he called during our meeting a “villagois” way of being.

What Gunu vividly expressed in our conversation is also a typical finding of my research: the rising socio-economic differences between close relatives go hand in hand with deep differences in the life-style, the future aspirations and the normative ideas about life trajectories. For many urban people, their rural relatives are backward people with quite distinct future aspirations. They argue that many villagers only want to marry their girls early whereas urban people mostly want their children to be in school and make careers as professionals,

However, despite and partly balancing these differences, many urban households are connected by modes of exchange with the households of their rural relatives. As Gunu’s example shows, this is also the case for those Baatombu who have left the villages because they wanted to escape a “villager’s life-style”. One important and frequent mode of exchange between the rural and urban households is the exchange of minors, boys and girls, for several reasons. Almost all urban Baatombu households are hosting rural adolescents, often school children, students or apprentices. Many of them are also hosting young women or girls who are working in the domestic sphere. The forms of this practice have, however, changed.

When I started doing research in urban Baatombu households in 1999, 50 % of them employed minor girls as domestic workers, the majority of them being from other ethnic groups of northern Benin. Influenced by various campaigns against “child slavery”, the age of the domestic workers has increased so that today, there are still many households employing an in-house domestic

worker, but normally girls or young women who are elder than 14 years.⁷ In the last 10 years, a new practice has become more and more common: the sending of un-schooled rural girls to urban households of relatives. I would see this practice as a new variation of the practice of child fostering which has been a very wide-spread way of parenting, maybe the most frequent form during the whole 20th century (Alber 2014). Some rules have been established such as the rule that the urban households have to pay an apprenticeship or the dowry for the girl. My research, including case studies such as the one presented here prove that the rules and norms of this new form of exchanging persons between households are still in flux and encompass many conflicts such as the conflict around Gloria. These conflicts, I argue, call for an extension of the concept of vital conjunctures as conceived by Johnson-Hanks.

My suggestion is that one could understand the presented case as an entanglement of vital conjunctures in the life course of different persons. Firstly, it was a vital conjuncture in the life of Gloria, during which a central decision about her future was taken. Should she continue in the town, make an apprenticeship, hopefully marry an urban young man and start a relatively late mothering career? In Benin, as in the Beti case of Cameroon described by Johnson-Hanks, following a school career or another formal education means a prolongation of childhood and youth and a relatively late motherhood. Or should she return to the village for a relatively early marriage with a peasant and mothering career? Different from the case stories presented by Johnson Hanks', in Gloria' case the decision was taken not so much by herself, but by others, her foster mother, her uncle, and by Gunu, her removed cousin who hosted her in his household in Cotonou. I have followed several similar case studies in which the decisions over the trajectories of girls, even if they had ideas and plans by themselves, were widely taken by other relatives. This is why I argue that the concept of the vital conjuncture requires, at least for the cases I know, the inclusion of a multitude of deciding and influencing persons, not only the person whose life course is at stake.

However, the inclusion of the decision making of others alone would not yet explain the dynamics in the conflict. A central driving force in the conflict were Kora and his foster son MamMam who reclaimed the girl and the marriage. And here comes my second point: The conflict around the future of Gloria could as well be interpreted as a vital conjuncture for MamMam and his father Kora, and the intensity of the conflict was due to the fact that the decision over Gloria' future did also influence the decision making of the future of MamMam. In order to fully understanding what that means, one has to have a look on the construction of the life course and the life-stages for rural Baatombu boys and men.

As mentioned above, I am keeping the life-stage as a normative concept that explains how a society sees and values the different stages in the life of men and women. According to local norms, MamMam was in the right age to become an adult, and what he needed in order to realize this status was – in the rural perception – to get a wife from his father. Since MamMam had spent his whole childhood as Kora's foster son, he had the right of getting this wife and a proper marriage from Kora. Not providing his foster son with this rite de passage would be a shame for his foster father as well. There was even more social pressure on this matter, because MamMam had already taken an initiative to become an adult: He had married a girl by his own, and, thus started to transgress the border to full adulthood. Kora, thus felt even more obliged to give him the wife and to organize the marriage in which he had already invested by paying the bride price to the in-laws. Both of them did not have any idea that this could be challenged by

7 See also Alber 2004, 2011, 2014: 362 ff, Howard 2008.

the possibility that the girl could stay in Cotonou. But when I talked to them for the first time, I noticed that both were nervous because they knew that some of the girls who followed this new trend of staying for some time in the cities did not return to the villages.

It is the entanglement of these two vital conjunctures that created the dynamics of the conflict: On the one hand it concerned MamMam's growing adult according to local norms, with the related obligation of his foster father to provide him with the obligatory rites de passages. On the other hand, it was the vital conjuncture of Gloria's entry into adulthood—and the question if that should happen according to the new urban norms of late marriage after having firstly learned a profession, or to the rural norm of being early married and starting an early mothering career. In any case the conflict got its dynamics as a confrontation of different future concepts: futures for Gloria, for MamMam, but also for Gunu. If Gunu had refused the wish of his rural relatives to send the girl back, he would have risked spoiling his relations with his rural relatives, something that almost all urban Baatombu I know try to avoid.

4 Conclusion

In the light of the case stories, Johnson-Hanks (2005) is telling in her book, but also in the light of the story of Gloria, the concept of the vital conjuncture seems to be an excellent concept in order to understand critical points in the life courses. The *power* of this concept lies in the *weight* that it gives to the processes of future making and contingency in any critical situation on the life course.

Different from Johnson Hank's definition of the concept, however, I would add a further perspective on the whole bundle of social relations that are involved in *any vital conjuncture* and draw attention to the question concerning is the real decision maker: the person whose life course is at stake or others? My example shows that a vital conjuncture of one person does often influence and is often mutually *interwoven with the vital conjunctures of others*. It is not a girl alone that becomes a wife or mother and transgresses the fluid boundary between childhood and adulthood. At the same time, a boy may become a man and transgresses, as well, a line. Or a woman becomes a grandmother, as in the case referred to by Ringstedt.

Analyzing kinship is always a bit messy—since people are on the same time husbands, fathers, uncles and maybe grandfathers. Whatever they do, they are not only making decisions over their own, contingent life-course, but also over the lives, and life-stages of others.

I will conclude this reflection by drawing your attention to the work of the historian Tamara Hareven (1995, 1997) also a prominent researcher of the life-course. She is arguing that one has to distinguish three kinds of time that have to be taken into account: the individual time, the family time and the historical time. Her argument is that research on the life-course that takes these three dimensions of time into account lead to a dynamic understanding of the family and the permanent processes of societal change. Individual time is, for her, mainly an issue of modernity in which individuals are “allowed” to take personal, individual decisions—to migrate, to marry, to leave the household and so on. Family time, in contrast, means a collective timing, including collective decision-making over the right time when a man should marry or a ritual should be done.

Johnson-Hanks' concept of the vital conjuncture speaks vividly about the contingency of an individual's time. If this would be combined with the idea of what Hareven calls “family time”, then, I fear, the concept would become much messier. It would become as messy as real life is.

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