

Being in charge: Muslim women's roles in Kankan (Guinea)

1. Introduction

“If a woman becomes a lion, her child becomes a cat that cannot even crack an egg”
(proverb told by women in Kankan).¹

In urban Kankan, a Muslim religious centre and Guinea's second largest city,² men as head of house are – according to popular perception – supposed to be the breadwinner of the family. Women's domain on the other hand is at home where they are in charge of their children and all household activities. However, in a place where basic infrastructure is not available for most of the population and secured employment is rare, daily realities show a different picture: nowadays many households depend partly or even entirely on female income activities.

This female labour participation stands in contrast to public opinion of gender division according to religious and 'customary' norms. Officially, the image of the man who is in charge of the family and who takes all decisions is upheld, as is the case for many other West African countries.³ Nevertheless, more and more men – aware of economic hardship – encourage their wife/wives or girlfriend(s) to launch commercial activities, to learn a proper profession or to complete higher education (cf. Chant 2007: 184). As a result, most women in Kankan have some degree of economic independence.

From a social anthropological perspective, this paper analyses the resulting impact on gender roles and intra-household dynamics in a Guinean town. It addresses the following questions: how and by whom is income generated? Who is in charge of which household expense? What impact does female labour participation have on intra-household dynamics? How does domestic decision-making work?

This case study gives insight into the local actors' evaluation of the actual economic and social situation in urban Kankan. It contributes to a better understanding of gender division regarding income-generating activities and its impact on female bargaining-power in a competing polygamous environment. This paper is part of an on-going PhD-project at the University of Basel, Switzerland, on women and the imageries of the state in Guinea.⁴

The empirical basis of this paper is data I gathered during two long-time field researches in Guinea between 2011 and 2013. The methodology relies on the triangular *Emic Evaluation Approach (EEA)*. The circular procedure of the EEA relies on three pillars: a) mapping of social actors, b) discourse analysis, and c) social practice analysis (Förster et al. 2011). Through participation and observation – the main elements of the study that were conducted on a daily basis – I gained insight into the social practices of the population. For the purpose of this paper, participating in women's and men's daily activities took place in

¹ All translations from French to English by Carole Ammann.

² Kankan is situated in the Upper Guinea Region, some 650km northeast of the capital Conakry. The local government estimates that 200'000 people actually live in the city (personal communication with the mayor's representative, Kankan, 22.11.2011).

³ For Dakar see Adjamagbo/Antoine (2004: 10).

⁴ Carole Ammann, MA African Studies, is a PhD-candidate at the Institute of Social Anthropology, University of Basel. She is part of the research project *The Work of State Imageries*. URL: <http://www.unibas-ethno.ch/forschung>. The Swiss National Foundation (SNF) financed the first field research; the second was enabled due to the grant of the *Freiwillige Akademische Gesellschaft (FAG)* and the *Josef und Olga Tomcsik-Stiftung*.

different arenas: markets, coffee shops, tailor and hairdresser shops, homes and compounds, during meetings of (women) associations and other social events such as marriages or baptisms. Some of the actors were interviewed with semi-structured, narrative or biographic interviews. These interviews were complemented by group discussions and numerous informal conversations.

The first part of the paper will provide an overview over the city of Kankan. It looks at female economic activities and at how couples manage the household budget. Further, polygamy, a central topic for women in Guinea, its impacts and consequences for the female population are analysed. In the next chapter, the short life histories of three women are recounted. On the basis of these examples, the last part discusses the impact of female income-generating activities on intra-household dynamics.

2. Kankan: economic hardship, and the impact of polygamy

Kankan was founded in the 18th century and is known for its trading activities. It is a Muslim religious centre and has a university with five departments. Even though Kankan is Guinea's second largest city, basic infrastructure lacks and simple one or two floor houses mark its architecture. Besides, many families still live in round huts.⁵ Only recently a Guinean company (re)bituminised the city's main roads. Water supply is a major problem, especially in the dry season. In mid 2012, public electricity became available during the night, but its disposability was very unreliable and in the last three months it stopped working completely. Especially elderly people living in Kankan like diffusing an image of the town as being special in a positive sense. It is called *Nabaya*, which, translated from the local language, means *ville des venants*.⁶ Kankan also has the image of a place where different ethnic groups live harmoniously next to each other,⁷ where religion⁸ and 'tradition' are important and where elders have much to say. I often heard people pointing at these circumstances by uttering things like: "That's not possible here, you know, we are in Kankan."

Economically, the situation for the population is quite difficult. There are no factories operating any more. Due to its climate, people living in Kankan and its surroundings cannot yield a large crop like in other parts of the country, mainly the Forest Region. Thus, agricultural products, especially fruits, are rather expensive. Further, the city has no mining activities in its surroundings as other towns do.⁹ A young man from Kankan who has a good position in a telecommunication company in Conakry speaks for many who have seen other Guinean cities or even foreign countries (informal discussion, Conakry, 24.02.2013):

"Kankan is a city without money. All the money that is there comes from other parts. Everybody just sits around and waits for someone to send them money. I am from Kankan and I love the city, but, honestly, I would not recommend anybody to invest there."

⁵ O'Toole/Baker (2005) write in their historical dictionary of Guinea about Kankan: „It is more a large cluster of Maninka villages around an administrative and commercial core than a truly urban area.“

⁶ Meaning: a city where strangers are welcome.

⁷ In reality, however, inter-ethnic cohabitation is much more complex and challenging (see Ammann/Kaufmann forthcoming).

⁸ Even though the huge majority of Kankan is of Muslim faith, there are no apparent cleavages between Islam and Christianity. Kankan's population is very proud of this. People like to mention that a Protestant church stands just besides the city's main mosque.

⁹ In Siguiri, some 120km north of Kankan, commercial and artisanal mining boom. The resulting impact on the environment, health, education, but also on the city's landscape and its commercial activities are enormous.

Nowadays, as a result of economic hardship, spouses have to rely more on each other, very much like Brand (2001) observes for Bamako. Most women help their husbands financially, which in Chant's (2007: 333) words lead to a "feminisation of responsibility and/or obligation". Female income-generating activities are not particular to Kankan, on the contrary (Chant 2008; Locoh 1996).¹⁰ Adjamagbo/Antoine (2004: 10) describe them as a result of urbanism, economical crisis, unemployment, and population growth. According to them, they are the most important change in the relationship between the spouses in the last two decades.

There are many ways for women in Kankan to generate revenues – whether they have a fix employment or not. Some work for example as tailor, hairdresser, teacher, and nurse, rarely in the local administration or for an association or an NGO. Other women prepare food or drinks and sell it on the streets. Further, they own a vegetable garden or participate in long- or short-distance trade. Many, above all non-educated and poor women, engage in petty trade on the market. Others, who do not go to the market, increase their budget by selling non-pervertible items of daily use in small boutiques or in little sales stalls in front of their houses. Some young women work as prostitutes or simply profit financially from a relation with (a) boyfriend(s) or a sugar daddy (cf. Brand 2001). Elderly women, on the other hand, gain some extra money with crochet or embroidery work. Often different forms of income-generating activities are combined and interchanged rapidly according to the situation.¹¹

In Kankan, household budgets are usually separated between the couple. But there are also husbands who request all the money their woman/women earn. Later, men might return (part of) it to buy food or other items. Other women are allowed to keep their earnings. There are also women who willingly show their husbands their income and share part of it as a gift, as Somé (2013) describes for the Dagara-speaking women in Burkina Faso.

In Kankan, men are allowed to take up to four wives and polygamy is widespread (Koundouno-N'diaye 2007).¹² My interviews and conversations clearly show that almost every woman would like being the only wife of her husband and not having any co-wives.¹³ But many women I talked to also stressed that, generally, they have nothing against polygamy, if the man lives up to his duties. First, that is being able to nourish the whole family and second, to treat each of his wives equally. They complain, however, that in reality this is never the case. If a woman already lives in a polygamous household, she tries to become the beloved and favourite wife. This has certain emotional and economic advantages.

¹⁰ Findings of The Gambia and Senegal demonstrate that women's motivation to start some sort of income-generating activity, especially petty trade, came from pure necessity (Casier 2010: 613). Women in Guinea have been affected in particular by the long-lasting economic and political crisis since the 1980s. Owing to this crisis specifically young women suffer from general insecurity in the domain of employment regarding future prospects (CEDAW 2005). The present paper does, however, not address the increased working load women have to fulfil (cf. Chant 2010: 133).

¹¹ Chant (2007: 111) also notes that "in many parts of the South, especially those which have experienced major debt crisis and/or undergone neoliberal restructuring, multiple earning has been one of the most common strategies adopted by low-income households to keep afloat".

¹² According to the USAID sponsored demographic and health survey of 2005 (Republique de Guinée 2006: 97) 53% of the married women live in a polygamous household.

¹³ Brand (2001) and Gemmeke (2008) confirm this observation for Mali and Senegal.

In polygamous families, one woman is usually responsible for cooking, washing and ironing the husband's clothes, bringing the water for showering etc. for two to four days (Doumbouya 2008). During this time, it is also her right to spend the nights in her husband's room. After this, it is the next wife's turn. The husband is supposed to support his wives financially. The amount of money he gives for his favourite wife might be higher than for the other(s), though. Additionally, he might make her special gifts, such as jewellery or dresses. Thus, jealousy is a widespread problem in polygamous families (Brand 2001). It does not only affect the women themselves, but also their children and other members of the family. I heard, for example, many stories about half-siblings not having a good relationship to each other. Thus, the mothers' competition confers to the children (Brand 2001; Doumbouya 2008; Gemmeke 2008).

In order to obtain the goals of remaining one's husband's only wife or becoming his beloved one, women adopt different strategies. The most promising is to please one's husband. First of all, this is done by obeying him, always asking for permission and not doing things he does not appreciate. Women also need to give birth to many children (and at least one boy), to take care of them, to have a good relation to the family and not to quarrel. Many women told me that being a good and attentive wife includes cooking special meals for their husbands, caring about him when he comes home, not having a bad mood, being sexually available all the time and trying to gain a good reputation. A forty-year-old woman, who is well educated and known for her cooking abilities, self-confidently elucidated to me (Kankan, 15.12.2012):

“I cook very well and I like doing it. If I am absent because I have a vocational training in Conakry, my husband remarks it immediately. The food is not the same. Every woman has her own way cooking.”

Another way women try to influence their fate is by consulting a marabout. “Maraboutage is a popular weapon used in competition in marriage” (Gemmeke 2008: 71). The goal “is to keep the attention of one's (future) husband or lover from straying to other women, not just for the sake of love, but also to secure an income for oneself and the children” (Brand 2001: 155). By paying a small amount of money a marabout should help a woman attaining her conjugal objectives. I heard many rumours and stories about women who obtained their matrimonial goals due to the visit of a marabout. In Kankan, visiting a marabout is, however, socially condemned; so most women do not openly talk about this theme.

In Kankan, money issues are a constant source of quarrels between couples. I witnessed countless complains of women about their men not giving them enough money for the daily shopping on the market. On the other side, men lament constantly about greedy women who only think about having a new, fancy dress to wear for the next social event. Thus, female income-generating activities do not only add to the household budget, they might also contribute to a better social climate between the couple. Not being forced to ask one's husband for money all the time often diminishes matrimonial problems. This enhances the chances of remaining the only wife or of being the beloved one.

The following examples of three different, but more or less successful women¹⁴ illustrate why and how they generate revenues and how this influences their intra-household dynamics.

¹⁴ All names are changed.

3. Being a woman in Kankan

*Fanta Doumbouya*¹⁵

Fanta Doumbouya was born in 1984 and grew up in Guinea's capital, Conakry. She has no formal education. As her father lived in Kankan, she spent her holidays there and one day, she just stayed. In 2001, Fanta had a Ghanaian boyfriend. According to Fanta, he shared everything with her and helped her whenever he could. This boyfriend also encouraged her to learn a profession. He stressed that she had to be economically independent, if he ever was to go back to Ghana. So, she started an apprenticeship as a hairdresser. During the apprenticeship, Fanta invested the money her boyfriend gave her in trading. She bought artificial hair in Conakry and sold it to her clients in Kankan. Like this, she was able to gradually increase her budget.

After her boyfriend had left the country, she got to know a young man who claimed he wanted to marry her. He promised Fanta to bring her to the West, where she might open her own hairdresser shop and make more money. She trusted him and fell in love with the image he constructed of her future. Hence, she took her saving and went to Bamako with this young man, where he wanted to bring her papers in order and organize her a visa. But one day he just disappeared with all her money. Like this, she saw her dreams fading away. "At this moment, I really suffered a crisis, I could not talk anymore", Fanta told me. It was her aunt who brought her spirits back and gave her the courage to return to Kankan.

After coming back she met another young man who had just finished his studies and finally they married. Until today, Fanta has no children of her own, but she 'adopted' her husband's two children. "I can handle the situation, I have the best position to be in charge of them", she self-confidently declared. Additionally, she takes care of two children of her cousin, who lost his mind. Even though she is not their biological mother, she does everything to make ends meet for these four children. She not only feeds and dresses them; she also tries to come up for their school fees. But as they are not her own children, Fanta is worried about the future: who will take care of her one day? So far, she is the only wife of her husband.

In 2004, when she finished her apprenticeship, Fanta opened her own hairdresser shop. She usually opens at ten and works until five p.m., sometimes even longer, if she has many clients. Fanta's husband has no fixed job. As a result, she is the only one of the family who has a regular income. She buys the food for everybody, even for her husband's mother and his sisters. At the moment, the business is not so good, but she can more or less handle the situation. There are, however, always economically difficult situations. In January 2013, for example, she had to pay the rent of her saloon for six months in advance. As she had no cash, Fanta had to borrow some money from a friend. "People do not give me money easily", Fanta explained. "Because I come to work by motorbike every day and have my own saloon, they think I am luckier and wealthier than most of the people in Kankan."

Asked whether Fanta felt she had more bargaining power vis-à-vis her husband because she was the main breadwinner of the family, she shook her head and said: "Women are the basis of every development. It is them who struggle to make ends meet. Nevertheless, the husbands remain in power. African men treat their women like slaves. Women subordinate to their men. They do so in order to get their children

¹⁵ Interviews, Kankan, 16.12.2012 and 21.01.2013.

blessed by Allah. If they put themselves on a same level with men, only because of their income, it would be not good for the benediction for their children. They have to be subordinate in order to make their children succeed.” Fanta is convinced that the high unemployment rate in Kankan is the source of most domestic problems. As men only linger in coffee shops or around ‘grins’, the famous ataya-tea ceremony, they get grumpy and a feeling of being useless arouses.

To sum up, Fanta is economically independent of her husband. More so, she is the main breadwinner of the family. Until now, Fanta has no own children, which is usually a huge problem for a woman in Kankan, because she is not considered to be a ‘real’ woman. On the one hand, people talk badly about them. On the other hand, this is the best excuse for a husband to take another wife. Fanta, however, decided to foster four children. This gives her high esteem by her community. Having her own hairdresser shop increases her independence. She is her own master during the whole day, negotiating among others with her apprentices, the saloon’s lessor, the painter and her clients. If for example her husband complains about her being still in contact with her former Ghanaian boyfriend, she argues self-assured that without the latter and his encouragement for her to learn a proper profession, no one in the family would eat regularly. At the same time, Fanta is aware that, in the end, she – as every other woman in Kankan – has to submit to her husband.

Saran Camara¹⁶

Saran Camara is approximately 38 years old and has one daughter. She is a vendor at Kankan’s Sogbé market, where she owns a little boutique of 4 square meters. There, Saran sells beauty products, artificial hair, and dresses. Thus, she is better of than most of the other vendors who offer their merchandise on simple, wooden market stands or even on the ground, with barely any shelter against the rain and the hot sun. Saran’s mother, who already pursued the same business, initiated her daughter in the trade of beauty products. Usually, Saran arrives at nine in the morning and stays still the evening. She spends most of the time sitting on a wooden bench in front of her boutique, crocheting and chatting with other female vendors. Like Fanta, Saran complains about the low level of trade. Normally, beauty products are too expensive for women to buy, so they can only purchase on credit and thus, she does not make “fast money”. Saran’s husband sells rice and cement, but does not earn much either.

“Here in Guinea, women suffer a lot”, Saran stated. “They have to do all the work, they do everything for the family. Women are very courageous. They tighten their belts because they want to help their suffering husbands. Thus, most of the women in Kankan sell something on the market”, she explained.

At her home, Saran’s husband usually pays for the basic needs and she helps him out. For example, she buys a stock of soap and coal for the whole family. “I am very lucky”, Saran illuminated her situation. “My husband gave me the budget for my economic activities, but now, he has nothing to do with it. I do with the money whatever I want to.” Saran – like many elderly women – stressed, that in former times, men would not have accepted their women being engaged in trading and thus being outside the house.

¹⁶ Informal conversations, Kankan, 06.03.2012 and 24.01.2013.

But nowadays, they see also the positive side of their wives earning money. If women now want to buy something for herself, that is what they do. In the past, they had to ask their husbands for every penny.

Saran and the group of women with whom I discussed in front of her boutique talk respectfully and with plenty of jealousy of educated women. They imagine the latter's lives as being less restricted than their own. "If you have a respected place in society, you can go wherever you want to, even if you are a woman. Besides, your economic situation is better, if you went to school. You own fancy dresses, a nice car and live in a villa."

Generally asked about domestic decision-making, things are quite clear for Saran: women do not impose themselves upon men. Nevertheless, a woman can talk gently to her husband, trying to sensitize and thus convince him, for example, if she doesn't want her daughter to get married. "But in the end, the husband decides and you have to accept it", Saran emphasised. "Otherwise, you are blamed if the marriage does not work out and they separate."

Some time ago, Saran's husband took a second wife. She did not like this at all and the two quarrelled all the time. But fortunately in her view, this matrimony was difficult and her husband sent the second wife back to where she came from. Saran now hopes to remain the only wife. She does not even want to discuss the subject with her friends, one of which even helped her own husband looking for a second wife. "You are sick!" was her only reaction.

In a nutshell, it seems like Saran's gently talks to her husband are quite successful. In December 2012, she, for example, travelled alone to Conakry for a family event – something not every husband in Kankan would allow. Further, she has the right to decide what to do with the money she earns in her boutique. It is self-evident for her that she also contributes to the household budget with her earnings. At the same time, Saran is very clear about who has the decision-making power at home. She has, for example, no means to prevent her husband from taking a second wife again.

Hawa Kouyaté¹⁷

Hawa Kouyaté is 36 years old. At the time she went to school, pupils had to make two school leaving examinations. She passed the first one, but failed the second. As on the one hand she was quite frustrated by this and on the other hand, she was already 21 years old, and thus older than her classmates, she decided to abandon school. Her parents didn't encourage her to continue either. She should get married instead, like all her sisters. The same year, Hawa did so. Between 1998 and 2006 she stayed at home, looking after her two children and the household. When her husband died in 2006, Hawa found herself in a completely new situation, where she could not rely on the income of anybody anymore. Hence, she decided to take her chance in a one-year formation in order to become a teacher. When she finished the training, she started teaching, but could hardly make ends meet, as the salary was very low. Around this time, Hawa started being interested in a local NGO that does gardening. Like this, she could plant her own vegetables and better nourish her children. After the death of her husband, she refused to marry her late husband's younger brother, as is the custom in Guinea. Thus, she had to return to her own

¹⁷ Interview, Kankan, 15.02.2013.

family. There, another man saw her and proposed to her. She accepted, even though she was his third wife whereas formerly she had been the only one. The first two had been chosen by her husband's parents and did not go to school. Hawa and the fourth wife, who works as a nurse, on the other hand, are well educated, earn their own money and can therefore nourish their children.

In 2010, before the presidential election, she had been elected to the Prefectural Independent Election Commission (CEPI) as one of two members of civil society. This year, in order to prepare legislative election, the bureau had to be newly constituted and it was the civil society's turn to provide the president of the commission. Hawa, after some sleepless nights, decided to present herself. Again she was elected. For the first time in the history of Kankan, the CEPI is now presided by a woman.

I was interested whether people in her surroundings, especially her husband, welcomed Hawa's newly gained position. She told me that many, especially women, advised her against running for this post. They tried to convey her that in the Upper Guinean Region, especially in Kankan, being a president of a commission was not a place for a woman – contrary to the capital Conakry. People even tried to intimidate her, Hawa explained. But at the same time, her close friends – interestingly mostly men – supported and encouraged her all the time. Her husband did not have a problem with her post either. “This is because of his educational background”, is Hawa convinced. “He knows that when a woman works, she helps, especially her children. I never have to ask my husband for money. That is why he supports me.”

Nevertheless, at the end of the interview, Hawa urged me to be her ambassador, an ambassador for the voiceless. I should tell everybody that in Guinea, women are only supposed to stay at home and that they are treated unfairly. “If you say certain things openly here”, Hawa explained, “you risk getting in troubles, even with your own husband. You cannot say anything against customs. But we who have been to school, we know which customs should be abandoned, because they really do harm us women”.

Summing up, it seems like Hawa has taken matters in her own hands and that she disposes of more decision-making power than many other Guinean women. After the death of her first husband, she decided to leave his family with her children¹⁸ and not to marry his younger brother. Then she chose to complete a formation and started working as a teacher. Further, she accepted the proposal of her actual husband. Hawa was aware of his educational background and was sure he would approve of her occupations. Finally, she started frequenting a local NGO and became a committed member of civil society. As thus, she gained a highly visible position within the public sphere of Kankan. At the same time, she complains about women's social position in general. Because of her education she feels being aware of certain injustices, but does not know what to do against them.

Hawa's example also demonstrates that so called “vital conjunctures” (Johnson-Hanks 2002) are crucial to understand why and how a woman starts or changes income generating activities. Suddenly becoming a widow is an event that changes women's life courses dramatically, not least the economical side of it.

4. Discussion:

¹⁸ Land, house and children belong to the lineage of the father, thus women do not inherit (Godard/Meffe 2006).

As we have seen in the beginning, nowadays most women in Kankan somehow contribute to the household budget. With the earned money, some just satisfy their and their children's own basic needs. Others also pay the ingredients of the daily sauce that accompanies the rice. But there are also many cases of women who are in charge of almost all household expenses: from the food and clothes, to the rent and electricity bill, to school fees and medical expenses. Godard et al. (2007: 3) who conducted research in the Lower Guinea Area observed as well, that women help paying all kind of expenses, contrary to popular discourse according to which they only disburse things for the daily need. This is similar in other West African cities (Adjamagbo/Antoine 2004; Brydon 2010). Most women I talked to are convinced that it is positive if the husband and the wife/wives pursue some sort of income generating activities. If it does not work well for one person, the other one might help out. There are many cases, as Saran's portrayed above, where the husband provides his wife with a budget that allows her to start a petty trade. Sometimes the woman has to pay the loan back.

Men watch female's income-generating activities somehow ambivalently.¹⁹ Locoh (1996: 464) describes men's situation as a paradox: "Leur statut 'prescrit' est toujours celui de la domination sur les femmes, de la prise en charge de dépenses monétaires pour leurs enfants et d'un soutien substantiel à leurs parents. Mais ils sont de moins en moins capable de se conformer à ce modèle et ils souffrent d'une profonde perturbation de l'image de soi." Even though Locoh's article dates from 15 years ago, the statement is still very valid for Kankan. The local (male) population often expresses the experienced tensions between 'tradition' and 'modernity' as a contrast between African and Western values (Doubouya 2008). The statement of a 34-year-old who studied and now works as an accountant for an important international NGO provides insight into men's ambivalent feeling vis-à-vis women who earn their own money and thus add to the household budget. On the one hand, he himself encouraged his wife to start selling things on the market, because her revenues as a teacher were too small. On the other hand, he was also very sceptical. Seeing her engaging in long-distance trade, for example, was no option for him. He is convinced that if a woman travels far, she does not belong to her husband anymore. He told me (interview, Kankan, 26.01.2013):

"If the husband has nothing, it is like a shock. In our tradition, the man has to be the breadwinner of the family. So, if a woman does what a man should do, it is like the man does not take his responsibilities seriously. As a consequence, the children are not well educated, because the woman is not at home. If the man asks the woman for something, perhaps she won't give it. Divorce will follow or he becomes the slave of his wife."

This example lively shows how nowadays some men see their strong position within the household challenged by women, especially if the latter earn their own money (cf. for rural Senegal: Perry 2005). Brand (2001) stresses that "the reverse of male dominance is men's fear of being overpowered by women, which in fact is deeply ingrained in Mande society". However, given the economic conditions in Kankan,

¹⁹ Locoh (1996: 447) remarked at the end of the 80s in Lomé that female economic assistance was not a new phenomenon, but only then, in the first period of the crisis due to the Structural Adjustment Program, did men really acknowledge it. How female income generating activities in Guinea changed since independence, is not the topic of this paper and needs further investigations.

men have not much of a choice. The example above also illustrates, that especially women who earn their money through long-distance trade have a bad reputation. A man with only one wife hardly allows his wife to leave during several days. First, he does not want to be in charge of the household and the children. Secondly, he is jealous. Men often claim that Guinean women are not serious. Thirdly, and most importantly, people might think he does not master his own wife. Reputation is very important, especially outside the capital. People repeated to me that in Kankan gossip is everywhere, because men sit in coffee shops for hours due to unemployment. Above all women feel being watched all the time. “If one is the only wife at home, people talk, if one’s husband takes another wife, people talk”, a market woman complained. Men confirmed this impression.

Regardless of who the breadwinner of a household is, women in Kankan subordinate. People do not questioned this – neither men, nor women, as the three examples above illuminated (cf. Doumbouya 2008; Godard/Meffe 2006).²⁰ „The head of the household who cannot provide enough food for the members keeps a low profile, and his wife can have more visibility, though she is normally careful not to overstep and be branded ‘the man of the house’, a stigma that very few women would want to carry in this social setting“ (Somé 2013).

The following statement by an elderly woman exemplifies this further. Adama Mara was born in 1958, the year of Guinea’s independence, and lives in a poor neighbourhood in Kankan. She grew up in Sierra Leone and did not go to school. Her husband and her two co-wives live in a village, some 35km from Kankan. Adama told me (informal chat, Kankan, 04.02.2013), that no man has ever beaten her, because she obeys all the time.

“If he says to stop, I stop. That’s what is good for you and especially for your children. If a woman climbs on the head of her husband, her children will do the same. There are even women who refuse to fetch water for their husbands because he brought no money home. That’s no good.”

Adama’s statement is also interesting insofar as she gives the impression of being a very resolute woman, who is respected in her surroundings, even though she has no proper children and does not live in the same household as her husband.

Every woman I talked to stressed that it is not important who brings the money home, that it does not have an impact on the hierarchy within a household. Thus, women who are the main breadwinner of the family should not behave differently. However, even though female submission is usually considered normal, opinions diverge on how big women’s bargaining-power within a marriage should be. Generally, women of different age and educational background complain about and challenge the way they are treated by their male counterparts.²¹ In countless interviews and informal conversations women told me how much they suffer, first of all because of the daily hardship, but also because of their social position

²⁰ Evidence from The Gambia, Philippines and Costa Rica confirm the results from Kankan (Chant 2010: 114).

²¹ An exception are some elderly women who often glorify former times where women stayed at home and gender division was still very clear. Further, divorce was not so common as nowadays, they claim. Naturally, there are also women who have a good relationship with their husbands.

within society.²² A young, unmarried woman who recently completed her Bachelor lamented (interview, Kankan, 29.01.2013):

“We women are not considered to be on the same level as men. We really suffer, but we have to accept this. If we try to change it, we are insulted in different ways. It is true; a woman has to submit to her husband. I think this is the case in every part of the world. But here it is different. Here, it has a slavish aspect. Women are not allowed to say what they think. They are never right. Everything men do is good, everything women do is bad.”

Women oppose to a certain degree in certain moments and obey in many others. After doing research in Bamako, Brand (2001: 305) asserts: “(...) many women work hard to achieve economic and political improvements and more rights for women, but they are very keen on doing this without encountering unnecessary opposition, and they seek men’s co-operation by paying respect.” Women in Kankan also constantly navigate through and negotiate between different expectations and roles they have to play. In this regard, the educational background of a woman and her husband plays a role. Intellectual women²³ feel being better off somehow, as the example of Hawa has shown. First, they feel enlightened and more aware of their values and rights. Secondly, they usually also dispose of a broader knowledge concerning religion. Accordingly, men cannot tell them that something is written in the Qur’an, even if it is not true, and thus make them obey. Thirdly, educated women feel having an advantage vis-à-vis their non-educated co-wives. Usually, the latter have more difficulties bargaining with their husbands. Further, they often also generate less income than educated women. On the other hand, women who completed higher education complain about the difficulties of finding an adequate husband. Some men are very suspicious of intellectual women, also because they object polygamy more than illiterate women (Doumbouya 2008).²⁴ Men are afraid the latter might outmatch and disobey them and thus become a ‘rebel’, which – according to popular belief – immediately leads to the malediction of the children and finally to divorce.

„People say: ‘oh, an educated woman is full of herself. She wants to dominate the household.’ If your education achieves a higher level, you are already rejected by a certain part of society, you are not highly esteemed. In former times, men did not like women who had learned a proper profession. But nowadays, they like them much better than us academics. Because they say of a woman with a profession: ‘since she has an income, she can help us and handle the family’“ (interview with a young woman who studied sociology, Kankan, 29.01.2013).

In popular belief, women’s behaviour immediately reflects in their children, as the initiatory proverb illustrates. If a woman does not subordinate to her husband and other men, her children will have malediction. Many men and women told me this as an explanation for gender hierarchy in Kankan.

²²I often had the impression women in Kankan liked to air their grievances to me – a foreign woman coming from a Western country – because they knew I would not think badly about their complains. Perhaps they also hoped I might help them somehow.

²³In the Guinean context, everybody who went to school for at least twelve years is called an intellectual.

²⁴While only 33% of the married and well-educated women share their husband with another wife/other wives, the proportion of women without any formal instruction lies at 56%. The figures for men are similar (Republique de Guinée 2006: 97).

To sum up, women in Muslim Kankan are obviously not voiceless. However, women's decision-making power is not very visible at first sight. One has to look closely in order to discover female's influence. There are issues women have a say in, for example regarding their children. Certain things, however, are just decided by men. Still, sometimes men seek women's advise, for example during the night. Decisions taken by women are often not communicated as such (Doubouya 2008).

The changes regarding household income did not automatically lead to an increase of women's bargaining-power vis-à-vis their husbands. To speak in Chant's words (2007: 226): "(...) while the onus of dealing with poverty is becoming progressively feminised, there is no obvious increase in women's rights and rewards (...)". Generally, the female population of Kankan does not feel being in a powerful position. Nevertheless, women are aware of their negotiation possibilities. Above all, they have to try and gain their husband's support, not least regarding income-generating activities. Female strategies to improve their bargaining-power are manifold. For example, women try to behave properly according to social norms, for example by keeping the house and the children in order and harmonious or by not wandering around at night. Thus, they gain a good reputation. Further, women talk gently to their husbands if they want to convince them of certain issues. This might then make their husbands accept things, as we have seen in the case of Hawa, who's husband encouraged her in running for a public post. Finally, if women earn their own money and do not have to ask for it all the time, domestic harmony may improve and her chances of remaining the only wife or becoming the beloved one respectively, increases.

As we have seen, gender dynamics within a household depend on many factors. It is crucial to mention that generalisations of women and their circumstances are difficult. Their situations are up to the educational and family background, the age of marriage and the number of their husband's wives. Further, the individual character and the life history of the persons also highly influence intra-household dynamics. Earning their own money, however, is seen by women not only as a way to gain economic independence, but also to diminish their matrimonial problems. This may eventually improve their position in a highly competing polygamous environment.

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