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Between 'forced marriage' and 'free choice': social transformations and perceptions of gender and sexuality among the Balanta in Guinea-Bissau

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Introduction

In January 2014, when I arrived in Bissau, Buassata (a man in his early thirties) wanted me to hurry to his village to meet his *Benanga*. 'She is here only for a few days and you have to know her! Every day my wives prepare a special dish and my friends come to entertain her.' He knew that I was interested in the study of changing gender relations and marriage practices among the Brasa-speaking people (referred to by the category 'Balanta', although they encompass different subgroups),[1] but he also wanted my 'approval' (presumably as an elder) of his potential third wife.

The Balanta, a group of mangrove farmers of critical importance in the making of the postcolonial nation, are currently experiencing galloping transformations. Every institution for which they were well known in the past is being shaken up from both inside and outside (see, for example, Temudo and Abrantes 2015). Since the beginning of the anti-colonial war (1963–74), young Balanta men have increasingly challenged their elders' authority. However, it was the combination of a prophetic movement, declining rice production, the Balanta's engagement in party politics and their adoption of a tree cash crop (cashews) that enabled a quasi-revolutionary transformation of the social organization of production and reproduction in less than two decades (Temudo 2018). Young men

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[1]The Balanta, or Brasa as they call themselves, are divided into several subgroups with some linguistic and cultural differences, the most important ones being the Brasa Ntohe (in the north around the towns of Bissorã and Binar) and the ones known in Kriol as Balanta de Nhacra. These latter (much larger in demographic terms and the group that has been the subject of this analysis) include several subgroups named Brasa Txoi N'dan, Txoi Nhuse, N'Kdradn and N'teda (who migrated to the margins of the Mansoa and Geba rivers), and the Brasa Buungé (who migrated from there to the southern regions of Quínara and Tombali). During a two-decade period, I have worked in a total of ninety-four Balanta villages (many of them revisited several times and some of them sites of ethnographic fieldwork), affording me both wide and deep empirical knowledge of Brasa-speaking society and agriculture. Specific research on Balanta women and gender relations was conducted in 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016 over the course of nine months. Fieldwork methods included participant and direct observation, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations and group discussions with a set of 124 women and forty-three men of all ages and living in or visiting Malafu, Enxale, Rotxum and Thum (northern province of Oio), Djabada Porto, Bissássema, Foia, Tite, Jiu de Infanda, Kbil and Soa villages (southern provinces of Quínara and Tombali), and Bissau and Bafata cities. All names are pseudonyms in order to protect interviewees.

can now be initiated into manhood and create their own household very early in their lives, they can study and engage in private for-profit activities, and their access to young women has become relatively easy.

Marriage (and its interpretation) is one of the loci where such social transformations are most visible, and we are in a privileged position to observe the direction of this ongoing transformation because we can discuss it with elders and young people. Until very recently, marriage arrangements were almost always made on the occasion of a girl's birth or soon afterwards. Young girls were – and most still are[2] – fostered within their future (older) husband's compound under the supervision of one of his wives who belonged to the same descent group as the girl. However, about two years after marriage, women were free to travel and to have extramarital affairs. *Benanga* (usually translated into Kriol by *kerensa*, which literally means 'loving') is a Brasa concept that refers to married women's practice both of having distant sexual partners and of initiating unmarried young men in sex and sexuality. It is also used to designate any woman who engages in the practice and eventually runs away from an arranged marriage to marry a man of her choice. In this case, *Benanga* translates into Kriol as *krida* (literally 'darling'). Throughout this article, I use *benanga* to refer to the practice, and *Benanga* to refer to the woman involved.

When I approached Buassata's household, I started to hear music and the laughter of young men and women. Buassata ran towards me and, even before the usual greetings, he asked me to 'come and meet my *Benanga*!' The use of this term to refer to Bistámná, my friend's new lover, started an avalanche of heated debates in the days to come, which pitted the alleged *Benanga*, a young urban woman (who was accustomed to engaging in sex for money with older, wealthy urban men, as she later told me), against all the other rural interlocutors. She explained why she did not like the name:

> I am not his *Benanga*! I was not brought to him during the night without [us] even knowing each other. We first met and he liked my looks, he asked for my mobile phone number and I agreed to give it to him; we then started to exchange text messages and he invited me to visit his household. His wives also phoned me to say that they would like to meet me and then I came.

To this, someone else replied that she was indeed a *Benanga*, albeit a 'modern' one:

> This is the modern [practice of] *benanga*! The old one is finished! Now you choose each other 'eye to eye' [*ulhu ku ulhu* in Kriol], but it is still *benanga* because you are coming to his household to see if you like each other and if you want to stay and eventually marry him. But anyway, it was one of your relatives who introduced you to each other and, to come to the village, you also searched for a relative here to bring you and take the responsibility for your well-being in case you did not like Buassata's attitudes or those of his household members.

The main difference between the two arguments related to the 'modality of agency' the woman had in her decision to have an intimate relationship with a

[2]In this article the alternate use of present and past tense was explicitly adopted in order to bring to light the ongoing permanencies and transformations of marriage and extramarital practices (according to individual actors' choices and power relations, and to localized processes of structural change, which present various temporal and regional dynamics).

man. Was such a decision based on following a 'traditional' Balanta practice or the result of freely exercising 'choice' through making 'eye-to-eye' contact (*no na kulhi un utru ulhu ku ulhu* in Kriol; literally 'we select each other eye to eye') with the man? It must be highlighted that, in traditional forms of *benanga*, the woman was said to be 'given' (in local parlance) to a man in *benanga* (often in the middle of the night, when neither party could see each other) by an intermediary broker. To a certain extent, this explains why some young women today stress the compulsory aspect of the practice; however, as I will show, even in the past, many women were easily able to refuse to abide by *benanga*.

Nowadays, according to numerous interviewees, 'forced marriage' (*kasamentu forsadu* in Kriol) – a recently introduced term that replaces the former designations of 'elders' [arranged] marriage' (*kasamentu de garandis*) or 'customary marriage' (*kasamentu de uso*) – no longer exists or is coming to an end, as is the practice of initiating young men in sexuality by 'offering' them a married woman. More often than not, unmarried young women are getting pregnant by their boyfriends and elders are no longer forcing their daughters to marry older men, chosen by them. I was frequently told that, nowadays, 'we choose each other eye to eye'. Women and men alike subscribe to a narrative that authoritarian patriarchal rules existed in the past but are being eclipsed by freedom of choice in the present. But such a narrative elides explicit forms of institutionally recognized economic independence, freedom of movement and extramarital sexual encounters with lovers of their choice that Balanta women enjoyed in the more obviously patriarchal past.

Despite the patriarchal nature of traditional Balanta society and the structural trends that gave young women no say in the selection of a husband, the 'free' choice women boast about gives them a temporary voice in today's transition towards more complex forms of alliance; however, it frequently subjects them to despotic and violent young husbands later on, and does not allow for temporary forms of 'exit' (to play with Albert Hirschman's (1970) famous conceptual notion). This leads to somewhat counterintuitive decision making by some young women.

Following Jon Abbink, in this ethnographic case study of Balanta marriage and extramarital practices, I have adopted a descriptive-analytic approach, looking at the 'interaction between structure, agency and normative or reflexive discourse' (2005: 10). In doing so, I have looked at multiple, sometimes opposing, voices and life strategies, and to what Saba Mahmood has referred to as 'modalities of agency' (2005: 167), which include actions that go beyond open protest and hidden resistance. Agency, then, is assumed to be both resistance,[3] accommodation to or collaboration with hegemonic power, and 'a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable' (Mahmood 2001: 210). As Tania M. Li reminds us, power, its agents and manifestations must be studied in particular 'conjunctions', and we also need to look at how power works by 'produc[ing] subjects who desire particular ways of living' (2014: 33).

For the purposes of this article, the concepts of 'tradition' and 'traditional' refer to a set of African ideas, technologies and social structures that people self-

[3]See Ortner (1995) for a thorough critique of resistance studies and the need for a 'thick' contextualization.

consciously accept as having been transmitted by their elders, and which are thus clearly distinguished from exogenous aspects that are perceived as being borrowed (either from Western or from neighbouring people). It goes without saying that some features deemed 'traditional' may also be the result of the successful incorporation of external elements or of previous exchanges of knowledge (see Gable 2000 for the case of the Manjaco of Guinea-Bissau).

The article is structured as follows: first, I present both explicit institutionally recognized and everyday forms of women's power in Balanta society; second, I focus on traditional marriage practices and the various routes a woman could choose to divorce and select a husband of her own choice; and third, I discuss the practice of *benanga* within traditional marriages. Finally, I describe some of the negative consequences of free choice for women, and the somewhat counter-intuitive decisions some of them are taking. Thus, this analysis of shifting Balanta marriage and extramarital practices challenges visions of male domination/female subordination in African societies (see, for example, Bledsoe 1980; Oyewùmí 2002; Arnfred 2007) and ideas about the new frontiers of female power and independence opened up by modern life and by the materiality of non-marital sex (see, for example, Hunter 2002; Cole 2004; Bryceson *et al*. 2013).

'It was not me who married you!': women's power in a patriarchal society

As in other West African societies (see, for example, Ferme 2000), Balanta women perform important ritual tasks. Some villages have an anti-witchcraft cult called *Fyere Yabte*, composed of married women (see Callewaert 2000), which – according to Balanta scholar José Lingna Nafafe[4] – also plays a role in controlling older men's despotic and individual for-profit use of magical power. Furthermore, in every household it is women who make the clay pots used in shrines, since they are responsible for the libations to the individual spirits of every household member. Women can even perform higher ritual duties, showing that we should be wary of too rigid notions of gender even in African societies that we label as 'patriarchal' (Amadiune 1987: 17; see also Coulter 2009: 50). A married woman can take on typically male roles, such as head of compound (*fa ne kpan* in Brasa), head of village (*fa ne botch*), or even head of the initiation into manhood (*fa ne fnufe*), if her husband – who was responsible for the task – dies before another man of his compound has been initiated. Once a man has been initiated into manhood and wants to take over the religious or political role she has been filling, he must pay her for the work she has conducted.

There are also other everyday forms of power performed by women. When a wife is angry with her husband, for example, she may shout at him, 'I was brought here! It was not me who married you!' – meaning that she had no say in the decision. Indeed, after having accepted the men chosen and imposed by their fathers, married women are entitled to divorce and to go on adventurous *benanga*. During the dry season, women travel to sell their products (such as smoked fish, mats and rice) and to visit their relatives. It is during these travels

[4]Personal communication, July 2014.

that, according to my interviewees and direct observation, they often engage in extramarital relationships. However, contrary to practices common in other West African societies, no 'woman damage' fee must be paid to the husband – a practice that has created economic stratification, through wealth in children and through the control of the labour force and political clients (see, for example, Bledsoe 1980: 83, 95, 96; Mokuwa *et al*. 2011). Among the Balanta, when a woman likes the sexual partner but also likes her husband – or does not want to abandon the children they have in common – she returns to the husband's compound. Every time she can and wants to, however, she visits her sexual partner(s), who shelters and feeds her for periods that can last longer than one month. In cases where a woman likes one sexual partner and his household and is unhappy with her own marriage, she may decide to divorce. When she is still in her sexual partner's compound, it is considered legitimate for the husband to come and use violence (against his wife and her sexual partner) to force her to return home.

Traditionally, according to my female and male interviewees, a woman wanting to divorce would move to her father's compound and wait until her husband brought wine for her family, requesting her return. Depending on the reasons presented by the husband and wife, her father would accept the divorce or would take the part of the husband, forcing her to go back to his compound. If a woman is determined to abandon her husband, she will run away again and again, until the husband gives up. The motives presented to me for divorce were various: constant illnesses or barrenness (often suspected to be provoked by witchcraft attacks by someone in the compound); insufficient food provision by the husband; domestic violence against the wife for a reason considered 'illegitimate' (such as being drunk or bad tempered); excessive workload; the death or running away of the woman who had brought the wife to the compound; a bad relationship with other women in the compound; and having fallen in love with another man she met through *benanga*, among others.

If a woman does not become pregnant after some years of marriage, the elders of her own descent group will take her back and let her choose another husband. They blame the husband either for being infertile or for doing nothing to solve the problem, such as taking the woman to a diviner or healer or to the hospital. Divorces triggered by women, however, never imply the restitution of bridewealth[5] (either total or partial) to the husband (or his descent group), as would be the case among many other African groups (see, for example, Bledsoe 1980: 111; Lovett 1996; Shipton 2007: 123, 136–7).

Despite the strong male orientation of power, women's agency in Balanta society cannot be discounted. Even faced with the calamity of the failure of the rice harvest and the distress caused by inadequate money or rice supplies, women are not obliged to give their earnings to their husbands. They do not contribute money either to the frequent house repairs and renovations or to the payment of labour groups for the rice fields. Usually, they lend money to their

[5]Among this Brasa main subgroup, bridewealth consists of a few litres of local brandy (used to settle the marriage arrangements and to allow the girl to be raised at her future husband's compound), a pig (the meat is divided between in-laws), and a goat to be sacrificed at the main compound shrine of the *first* husband to see whether there are any impediments (for example, the future husband has stolen cows from the future in-laws and must confess to this).

husband to be repaid later. Husbands risk being insulted if they fail to pay back the loan, and, as many interviewees put it, 'to have his reputation destroyed [through the disclosure of the unpaid debt] in the village' by his wife every time she is cross with him.

Polygyny is also partially under women's control. On the one hand, a wife usually brings very young women from her own descent group for her husband to marry (and if she runs away, these younger wives will go with her); on the other, if she does not like a later wife (one brought by the husband), she can make the latter's life impossible, even causing her to run away. Another example relates to the woman's previous capacity to refuse sexual intercourse with her husband. Since it was traditional practice for the man to go to the wife's room when he wanted to sleep with her, if she refused, the husband was placed in a subordinate position, especially if she voiced her refusal loudly.

In sum, women's control over their own lives was ultimately revealed by their economic autonomy and the right to have distant sexual partners and either to stay or to run away after marriage, as the life stories of many men and women testify.

Routes to marriage, routes to divorce

At first glance, one would tend to think that it was easy for a Balanta man to marry, since access to women has so many forms, the groom does not have to work for his future in-laws (bride service), and bridewealth is considered to be low.

My friend Kintunda (a man over seventy years old) laughed as he recounted his marriage record:

> My first wife I made her run [away from a former marriage] when I was still a *N'hess* [the age grade of non-initiated young men in which they can start to have sexual relationships with married women]. My second one I 'dressed' her [to marry a virgin].[6] It was one of my father's brother's wives who brought this woman from her descent group and gave her to me [in marriage]. My third wife was the daughter of a friend and I asked him to give her to me. My fourth wife was inherited [through levirate] from my deceased brother. I dressed my fifth and sixth wives and they were brought to the compound by the wife of one of my eldest brothers, who gave them to me. My seventh and eighth wives were given to me by friends, but they [the young women] were asked if they agreed to marry me and they did, otherwise they would have run away. Now if I or any other man of my compound has a daughter, and no woman [biological or classificatory sister of the men of the compound] comes to request her [to raise her and give her in marriage to her own husband], I can give her to my friends, but I'm not compelled to do so.

Kintunda's first wife, Thobá, was sitting next to him and clarified:

> I was married to an old man and had a child with him, but one day I came to visit my [mother's] family and I was given to Kintunda in *benanga* [in this case, the broker was the wife of one of her mother's brothers]. We liked each other and I decided to stay

[6]The groom must give two pieces of black cloth (in which the bride is dressed for the two months before the marriage) and one of white.

with him. My husband came and took me by force and hit me violently, but I ran away again and he gave up.

I then asked Kintunda how many wives he still had. They both started to laugh and he replied that he now had four wives because the other four had run away. Like Kintunda, my young friend Buassata had lost two of the wives he had 'dressed'. Now he has only one, whom he made run away from a previous marriage, as he has been unsuccessful in his efforts to entice Bistámná (the urban woman who did not accept being called a *Benanga*) into marrying him.

As Kintunda's and Buassata's cases show, married women are encouraged to have extramarital affairs, through the set of practices encompassed by *benanga*, by male and female friends, as well as by the members of their mother's descent group. They also used to initiate young men from distant villages in sexuality (and some still do). This means that, if the patrilineal descent group creates social relations through the organization of a girl's first marriage, the descent group of the girl's mother (and her personal friends) competes in order to provoke divorces and promote its own social networks.

In the Balanta case, marriage arrangements reinforce social relations, but they do not generate debt, as they do in many other African societies (see, for example, Shipton 2007: 120–57). As Kintunda testified, marriage does not imply reciprocity in the exchange of women between two descent groups. I was persistently told by Balanta men and women that they do not accept any form of direct exchange (*troku* in Kriol) of women, which they regard as a Muslim practice.[7] Like many other African people living on the margins of Islamic religious culture, the Balanta often define or describe their cultural practices in direct structural opposition to Muslim ones. Paradoxically, 'wife takers' may even receive more women later – also illustrated by Kintunda's biography – as a wife can bring other young women from her descent group to be married either to her husband or to another man in his compound.

Kintunda's story also reveals that the levirate is practised among the Balanta, although it is not enforced. If a widow is old or has many children, she may decide to stay in the compound without marrying; some young widows run away from the compound, leaving their children behind, while others prefer to marry one of their late husband's sons (provided he is not her own biological child) or brothers. Most of the young men I have interviewed find this practice 'backward', but I know of some who have recently married the widow of their biological father, arguing that her children (who are also their biological half-brothers) are still too young to become motherless.

Despite these multiple ways of accessing women, most men were only able to marry very late in life, and many never got married or had difficulties in getting married and then lost their wives. This is especially the case for men belonging to poor villages or compounds with bad rice fields that are known for their poor harvests, and for those believed to have an evil spirit or witch in the compound that causes human deaths, barrenness, bad harvests and/or livestock

[7]Islam is the largest world religion in Guinea-Bissau, and although by and large the Balanta are not Muslim, they do live very close to Muslim people and are aware of their practices. See Sarró and de Barros (2015) for a survey of religious pluralism and coexistence in Guinea-Bissau.

losses. All of these factors, even when they do not prevent marriage, could provoke married women into running away shortly after marriage. Beyond these economic and spiritual factors, in order for a man to be able to marry (and to keep his wives), he also needed brokers (someone to find appropriate partners and to mediate possible conflicts after marriage) and considerable social skills to keep his wife or wives happy. As in so many West African societies, mediatory figures were fundamental, not only for securing access to marriage, but also in making the very practice of *benanga* possible and trouble-free. In the words of N'Damé (a man aged twenty-six): 'In old times, many men only had women that someone gave to them in *benanga*. It was not them who got the women! They were given to them!'

In the next section, I describe the practice of *benanga* and how it worked – and still works, although changes are occurring rapidly.

Stealing one's body

As argued by Tamale (2006), sexuality in African male gerontocratic societies 'is a key site through which women's subordination is maintained and enforced'. Elderly men's control and repression were backed by colonial constructions of women's (heightened) sexuality and by Christian and Islamic moral codes in relation to women's bodies as wives and mothers (see, for example, Lovett 1996; Tamale 2006). The Balanta of Guinea-Bissau largely destabilize this general narrative. They have been known for their resistance to colonial oppression and to the adoption of world religions (see Temudo and Abrantes 2015). In addition, women's control of pre-marriage sexuality was conducted by their female age mates and later, during the marriage ceremony (considered by men and women as their initiation into adulthood), by older women of their husband's village and compound. Moreover, married women were the main agents in the establishment of marriage alliances. However, as previously stated, after two years of marriage – a period called 'bridehood' (*noibandade* in Kriol) – wives were free to go on *benanga* and have different sexual partners in faraway villages.

Whatever its origins, *benanga* can be examined as one of the Balanta practices that, as Diana Handem (1986: 163, 171) has argued, aimed to reduce structural tensions between generations and gender. Until quite recently, men were forbidden from marrying and creating their own household before initiation into manhood (which usually occurred after their mid-forties), and from engaging in trade and other private for-profit activities, probably as a result of the high labour demands of mangrove rice production; besides, a man's wealth should all be accumulated in cattle to be slaughtered in mourning ceremonies for the elders of his descent group (Temudo and Abrantes 2015). Gender tensions also developed between young women and old men (both their fathers and their husbands). We can also hypothesize that some old men could be impotent or not very fertile, which would endanger the 'wealth-in-people strategies' (see Bledsoe 1980) needed for rice production. In such a context, *benanga* would indeed lower tensions and facilitate social reproduction.

Balanta women who have married for the first time (*txéguélé* in Brasa) – women who have been 'dressed' by their husband – and those married after divorce or widowhood have the same rights, as do their children. The practice of *benanga*, however, offers some relevant variations. These are mainly regional, and depend

on the demographic characteristics of the different areas occupied by Balanta farmers. In the south – an underpopulated zone at the time when Balanta migration from the north started in around 1915 – *benanga* seems to have been a strategy to increase wealth in people, since the children born out of these relationships were desired and fully integrated into the patrilineal descent group. In sharp contrast, in the densely populated north, as Kintunda explained to me, 'A man would do a ceremony [*manji* in Kriol] when his wife went travelling to prevent her from getting pregnant by another man.' Both my female and male northern interviewees confirmed that wives would hide the fact that they were going on *benanga*.

In a conversation with several southern men and women, Maria (a woman in her late fifties) reported a rather different attitude to the one described by Kintunda: 'In old times, a man could like the "shape" [*forma*, a Kriol term meaning physique] of another man and ask his wife to go on *benanga* with him, so that he could have a son who would look like that man. Sometimes, she would not agree and he would entice her until she accepted.' To this, Buota (a man in his fifties) added:

> A [northern or southern] woman could like another woman [to become co-wife] and would entice her to come and sleep with her husband … When a cow is stolen, a [southern] man can ask a wife, with whom he has a good relationship, to go on *benanga* in distant villages and try to find it.

In the north, a woman would go back immediately to her husband's compound when she suspected she was pregnant, and the children would be considered her husband's. Among southern Balanta, however, men would not care if their wives brought new children after an extended trip: 'The children belong to the owner [husband] of the canoe [wife]![8] While men's perceptions about *benanga* vary according to geographic location, age and their role as either beneficiary or loser, middle-aged and especially older women speak of it in rather nostalgic terms, with their eyes shining and a smile on their lips, as a time of leisure, lust and joy:[9]

> It was only pleasure [*sabura* in Kriol]: eating chicken, chatting until the rooster crowed and during the day to chat with the man's friends. I could go on *benanga* around ten times each year, but for the sake of the children I never left my husband![10]

> The elders married us with old men, but during *benanga* you were given a man of your age or younger than you. To marry an elder was good because he had no strength to prevent you to go around and, as he was afraid you could leave him [for another man], he cared for you.[11]

In contrast to Thamá and N'Tinhebá, quoted above, a great number of the women interviewed had left their husbands for another man, chosen by themselves (*N' busca di mim* in Kriol). In the words of N'Tinhebá, 'There are mothers who

[8]Interview with Samna, a man in his seventies.
[9]These testimonies resonate with the ones collected by Groes-Green (2013) on the subject of 'transactional sex' in Maputo.
[10]Interview with Thamá, a woman in her sixties.
[11]Interview with N'Tinhebá, a woman in her early fifties.

have pity on their children and don't abandon them, but others don't care and run away to live with the men they want.' Some of the women I interviewed, however, had run away because they had no children or because all of their children had died after birth.

A paradoxical aspect of the practice of *benanga* is the complex knitting of freedom and duty, pleasure and economic gain, resistance and compliance. I am aware that nostalgia, as a structure of feeling (Tannock 1995), may create an idealized image of *benanga* in the elderly women's memory. But the truth is that, even if the presence of intermediaries is part and parcel of the picture, *benanga* is not remembered by either elderly or younger interviewees as having been forced upon them. In my long, intimate conversations with them, some women stated that they never performed *benanga* simply because they did not like it. Others, perhaps more astute with their 'weapons of the weak', explained to me that whenever they did not feel like sleeping with an unknown man they simply lied, saying that they could not accept because, for instance, they were menstruating or their husband had a friend in that village and he would know. Most of them told me that they would usually agree to sleep with an unknown man – because it was 'their custom' – but that, if they did not like him, they would leave his household the following morning. In contrast, men could not refuse a *Benanga* given to them under any circumstances.

Let us return to the voices of my female and male interviewees to get more of a sense of the complex nuances of the customs and rules.

> If you live in the village and you are given [by a fellow villager, either a relative or a friend] a woman [in *benanga*] you cannot refuse, even when she is very old, because no one is going to give you women anymore.[12]

> During the night someone knocks at the door of the wife's room and tells her that there is a guest for her husband. It is the wife who is going to bring her [the *Benanga*] to the man. It is our custom, that's why there is no need to ask her permission [the wife's]. But men also accepted that their wives could go on *benanga*.[13]

> We say it is theft! Because we are going to steal [our own bodies] from their owners [the husbands].[14]

> We both wanted to, we were not forced, but it was not 'eye to eye' [they did not choose each other], as we were going during the night without knowing each other [the first day].[15]

> When you find a woman in your bed or when you are sleeping and a woman comes to sleep with you, you just start touching and pulling on her [slightly and from time to time]. It is like you are playing. She will show you that she has no interest in you, but you will keep on trying until she accepts.[16]

[12]Interview with Sana, a man aged thirty-two.
[13]Interview with Sanan, a woman in her fifties.
[14]Interview with Guin, a woman in her late thirties.
[15]Interview with N'Dan, a woman in her eighties.
[16]Interview with Samna, a man in his seventies.

> The first time [a *Benanga* was received by a man], a pig used to be killed to encourage the woman to leave her husband, but in the following visits he would only kill chicken and when she was going away he would give her what he had, such as cloth, money, rice.[17]

> I do not go on *benanga*, because men do not give money anymore! I'll have to pay the transport and so it would only mean expenses [for the woman]. What are you going to look for if the men do not give you money?[18]

Benanga follows a complex ethical code, which defines local notions of promiscuity and adultery, secures protection for women and their children, and prevents husbands from feeling dishonoured and ashamed. *Benanga* could be seen as one of those mechanisms (child fostering being another) that generate 'from-below' alliances, beyond, or underneath, the alliances 'from above' that are normatively established by kinship rules. Both types of alliance are equally necessary to increase mutuality in segmentary groups prone to division and to multiply the overall wealth in people of descent groups (as well as the avunculate relations between them). However, even if *benanga* may be considered to be part of a moral economy, and women expect some kind of economic return (in gifts and/or cash and special food) in exchange for their sexual favours, it is clearly different from what is commonly known as 'transactional sex' (see Hunter 2002). Indeed, these new kinds of relations of sex for material benefits – framed within what Nicole Constable (2009) calls the 'commodification of intimacy' – have been connected with globalization, neoliberalism and increased poverty in recent literature (see, for example, Hunter 2002; Cole 2004).

Contrary to my initial intuitive expectations, ethical codes also prevent widows or divorced women from trying to find the best available option or a man with whom they could fall in love. Moreover, the selection of a husband (in contrast to a sexual partner in *benanga* relationships) seems to be more pragmatic than emotional (see also Bledsoe 1976: 378 for the case of the Kpelle).

> When a woman has left her husband, she has to wait until someone gives her men [in *benanga*] or for a man she likes [with whom she has had a *benanga* relationship] to tell her that he wants to marry her. But she can't simply go with all the men that say I want you! Otherwise all the men are going to see that she doesn't stop in the path, that she is someone that is not going to settle after marriage and nobody will marry her! … When you like a man and he asks you in marriage, then you start to study him and you'll go in *benanga* to his compound several times. If you see that you can settle down there, you'll introduce him to your father and you tell him that this is the man you want to marry. He will accept because he gave you the first [husband] and now it is he who says that you should choose the man![19]

In his study of Baga, a group geographically and culturally very close to the Balanta, Ramon Sarró has described transformations of marriage as one of the many 'crises of mediation' this group has suffered over the last sixty years (2009). Like his Baga interviewees, the Balanta I talked to also mentioned the disappearance of marriage brokers as a potential problem. Many young women sadly hear their husbands say

[17]Interview with Nhaga, a man in his seventies.
[18]Interview with Nangbá, a divorced woman aged twenty-eight.
[19]Interview with Lotiole, a woman in her forties.

such things as 'You're the one who walked and came to find me at home!',[20] in clear contrast to what wives used to be able to reply to their husbands, as previously stated. Far too often, women find that they have lost the support of their own relatives, who no longer feel that they have any moral obligation towards them: 'You found each other through the mobile phone without the help of a broker and now you have no one to stand up for you.'[21] As we shall see in the next section, emerging forms of free choice in marriage and *benanga* and the consequent disappearance of mediation come with a high price. It is not only women's sexual freedom that is affected, but also their economic independence after marriage, husband–wife power relations, and women's protection by their relatives from violent husbands who frequently fail to fulfil their previous role as breadwinners. Indeed, young husbands are now allowed by their elders to engage in many individual for-profit activities. However, their engagement in agriculture has decreased, agricultural productivity has diminished due to climate change, and their cash incomes are used for buying extra rice for household consumption and/or modern consumer goods for themselves (clothes, radios, bicycles and motorcycles, for example) and for the women they want to entice.

The dark side of 'free choice'

One evening in April 2012, I was in the company of four women: Unifin, a married woman in her late fifties; Sábado, Unifin's latest 'bride', aged nineteen, whom she had raised and recently 'given' in marriage to her husband; N'Dan, a friend of Unifin from another village, also in her late fifties; and Guin, a young woman in her late twenties, whom N'Dan had just 'offered' to her husband in *benanga*. As we sat chatting on the veranda, N'Dan was trying to convince Guin to abandon her young husband (with whom she was having problems because he used to hit her) and to marry her own, older, husband. Unifin and Sábado backed up N'Dan, and Unifin said:

> Old men look after you as if you were his daughter. They cherish you so that you will not run away. But young men say: 'Go away! Another one will come! There are lots of women now!'

I thought Unifin was in no position to talk in favour of old men as she had abandoned her first husband to marry a man slightly younger than her, whom she liked. I confronted her with this fact and she snapped:

> In old times, if a man hit a woman there was a reason. She had done something wrong. Either she refused to cook or fetch the water or she was delayed in bringing the meal for the workers [the work group hired to help plough the rice fields]. Now it is different!

Many old men and women I interviewed also mentioned that some old men sometimes beat up their wives, mostly when they were drunk, but Finhanebá (a man in his sixties) put it this way:

[20]Interview with Agnele, a woman in her thirties.
[21]Interview with N'Dan, a woman in her late forties.

> Women that you marry are daughters of others and they gave you children. You should not beat them up if you are a *homi garandi* [initiated into manhood]. Also because the children you have with them will see you and they will not be happy. That's why we were given advice in the [initiation into manhood] hut to treat our wives and children well and not to beat them. If you are an 'old man' you cannot get angry; you must be calm. You are not a child anymore! So if you get angry and you beat your wife you are an animal and all the people of your compound are going to criticize you.

For the male and female elders I interviewed, young men's violence against their wives is considered a breakdown of the social order, and in some villages old men organized meetings to advise the young. I repeatedly heard testimonies of women whose young husbands used previously considered 'illegitimate' violence against them and restricted their mobility. Less mobility results in a worsening of their economic condition; not only does it prevent them from going on *benanga*, it also stops them engaging in trade activities. Despite this constraint on women's capacity to generate their own income, most young men do not buy clothes for their wives and children, nor do they pay for health expenses (these were previously considered women's responsibilities). Many forbid their wives from starting or continuing their schooling (for fear they could have love affairs with schoolmates), and they are even reversing 'traditional' norms by forcing wives to come to the husband's room.

Young male interviewees stress the value of *benanga* for collective, wealth-in-people purposes and portray their wives' use of it as an individual endeavour that must be 'controlled'. They are not happy about their wives travelling – and sometimes they violently refuse them – because they believe that they are going to have extramarital affairs and then run away. Whenever they do agree (or are forced to do so because the woman must visit a relative), the wife is requested to provide a detailed travel plan and the husband controls her movements by mobile phone, calling for the help of his own male relatives and friends who live in nearby villages. But then again, men's attitudes can change drastically when the woman in question is not their own wife, since most of my male interviewees still wanted to reap their own benefits from *benanga*.

The men's attitudes towards women's behaviour do not seem to be influenced by Christian or Islamic moral codes – or even by the Kyangyang Balanta prophetic movement of the 1980s (see, for example, Callewaert 2000; Temudo and Abrantes 2015). Few have converted to the so-called world religions, and among these only a small proportion have totally abandoned traditional religious practices and have rejected Balanta culture. Moreover, it is not the institution of *benanga* that they question, but their wives' use of it. Some young men explicitly recognize the need for equal rights and criticize their peers who bring *Benangas* to the household. In 2014, Sautna (a man aged thirty-one) put it this way:

> Women see how their husbands cherish and give presents to the *Benanga* they try to entice to stay with them. Then they just want to be treated like that! If a man does not want his women to go on *benanga*, he must bring no other women to the household either!

Famakea (a man aged twenty-three) added another perspective:

> I'll have to marry another woman, because they go [run away] and I may hit zero! I bring *Benangas* home after asking for permission from my wife; nonetheless I do not accept her to go. But you know, women move around in zig-zag and it's difficult to control them!

> There are women who do not care if you bring *Benangas* home and some even aid their men, because they want other women in the household to help them with work. The biggest problem is that many young men, when they like a woman, tell her that she is the only one that they love and that they will not love another one. This is like a contract [that they make] and then if he later gets another woman she is not going to accept it and she is right!

Young Balanta women have been active agents in putting an end to arranged marriages in which they have no say, by running away and calling on the help of state authorities, asking for shelter in the foreign Protestant evangelical missions (see Sarró and de Barros 2015 on the increasing religious pluralism in the country), or gaining time to negotiate a marriage with an older man by getting pregnant by their boyfriends. To my surprise, however, many women accept being beaten by their young husbands as a consequence of their own previous choices. Some try to negotiate, without success, either for the husband to let them travel to engage in trade activities or for him to pay for their children's education, health and clothing expenses. Even when a girl's father accepts the groom chosen by his daughter, the outcome of marrying a young man can be painful. As Thumba stated in the presence of N'Gobá and Sanhiope (women in their sixties): 'Today men have too many eyes [for women] and when they have no [economic] conditions to marry many women, they just abandon the previous one when they find another that they like!'[22]

The case of Sole (aged twenty-two in 2014) is also illustrative of the challenges young women face today. 'He beats me up and brings *Benangas* home without my permission, but he does not allow me to travel.' Sole, who was talking with her friend N'Gobá and me, suddenly said: 'I want to go on *benanga*.' To which N'Gobá replied: 'You married a young man! You should not go on *benanga*. This [practice] has to end now!' Sole then turned to me and asked: 'Don't you think I have the same rights [as my husband]?' Unlike Sole, most women married to young men eventually accept their husbands' restrictions on their mobility – bitterly, but without raising the issue of equal rights.

Youth seems to be a value in itself for many women who do not refuse an arranged marriage when the man chosen by their father (or by the women who raised them) is more or less their own age; others, though, are now choosing older men because of the perceived advantages this kind of marriage provides in terms of lack of domestic violence, sexual freedom and economic welfare (as women can pursue their own trade activities). Rosa (aged twenty-four) illustrates how a 'non-choice' (in the short term) and the acceptance of norms that dictate the selection of a first husband may provide a more informed (long-term) free choice of lifestyle and love partners within modern, 'eye-to-eye' *benanga* relations. She was told that she had to marry the husband of the woman who had raised her. He was an old man and, at first, Rosa did not want to marry him, because she had a boyfriend.

> But I obeyed and now I'm happy. As he is an old man he lets me travel whenever I want to. Tomorrow I'm going to Bissau to see the carnival festivities. He doesn't even ask me

[22]Interview with Thumba, a woman in her sixties.

> where I go to, and he also lets me engage in private for-profit activities. I even can dress [in] fashion clothes [a sexy style of dress adopted by young girls]. I asked my husband for permission to start studying and he said that he really wanted me to and that he will kill a goat when I finish primary school. I'm the only grown-up in the school, but I don't care! There are many young men that want me, but I still decided not to go on *benanga* … whenever I want to, I can go because my husband does not prevent it!

Although the general landscape of young couples' relationships in terms of women's rights and obligations and violence against them is of concern, there are some interesting exceptions. The recent spread of birth control has allowed some fearless and independent-minded rural women to take measures to prevent pregnancy in two different situations: when they have been forced to marry an old man against their will, and when they are still 'studying' (*studa* in Kriol) the behaviour of a new partner, as well as the social and economic conditions of his compound and household. New forms of marital relations are also emerging, but in these cases there is no one trend, model or set of rules. As the short biographies mentioned below indicate, each couple has found its own way to reconcile the challenges and contradictions of everyday life brought about by social transformation with their own aspirations and dreams.

Lurdes' case illustrates a new trend in which some women – engaged in more egalitarian, love- and respect-based relationships – decide to share the responsibility of household rice provisioning when their husbands face problems. Lurdes attended primary school until the third year but then dropped out 'because of *juventudade*' (Kriol for a youthful lifestyle). She met her boyfriend, they liked each other, and, when she was fifteen and he was six years older, her father accepted his request to marry her. In 2015, when she was around thirty years old, she had only two small children because, until recently, she had wanted to 'study' her husband and had used birth control measures. When they married, she told her husband that she wanted to be the sole wife, because only rich men could provide for many women. He practised many crafts, but had recently become ill with tuberculosis and stayed in hospital for four months and could not work. It was for this reason that she decided to 'put rice at home', engaging in a number of trade activities.

Neuza was twenty-two years old in 2016. Her marriage was arranged when she was fourteen, because 'many girls were running to the evangelical mission and refusing forced marriage'. The woman who was raising her asked her whom she would like to marry in the compound and she chose a boy of her age. 'I said I want this one and he also said that he wanted me!' His mother helped them with money and he started a business, bought more land, and is now continuing his studies. 'You know, everything comes in small steps,' Neuza told me. She is developing trade activities and they help each other with buying food and clothes and paying for healthcare, but she spends more on clothes as she wants her children and herself to dress in new outfits for every holiday and every ceremony. She now has two sons and would like to use birth control so that she can start studying. Neuza has never gone on *benanga* because 'I do not want to, but if my husband brings a *Benanga* home, I also do not accept this and I'll lie on his bed to prevent it'.

Many of these couples – who 'make a plan together to improve [their] life', as some testified – have joint savings to be spent on healthcare, children's clothing

and school supplies, on unexpected problems (such as the death of a family member), or even on investments. Many also help each other in their individual for-profit activities. However, unlike Lurdes and Neuza, few young couples are aware of the option to use birth control measures in order to realize their dreams of increased material well-being.

Conclusion

> In old times we were living in the land of Balanta, but now we are living in the white people's land.[23]

Among the Balanta, marriage practices, as far as we can reconstruct them, might be characterized as an arena of slow, adaptive changes, which very often manage to reduce intergenerational and gender tensions. Indeed, since time immemorial there has been no bride service, bridewealth has been low, and extramarital relations have contributed to social cohesion by generating alliances and trust among individuals. Thus, in contrast to other African societies (see, for example, Lovett 1996; Tamale 2006; Mokuwa *et al.* 2011), sex has not been a key site of male control over women through arranged marriages and the payment of bridewealth. Furthermore, access to pleasure, romantic encounters and material gains were achieved through *benanga* practices, which were allowed in the arranged marriages of young girls to old men, and husbands' violence against wives was socially controlled. This study, then, adds to recent debates on materiality, sex and power in modern Africa (for example, Cornwall 2002; Groes-Green 2013), showing, as argued by Hunter (2002: 105) and Cole (2004: 575, 582), that the link between sex and gifts or money is not new. However, present-day reconfigurations of gender relations have not brought more economic power to women, as has occurred in other contexts (see, for example, Cornwall 2002; Perry 2005; Bryceson *et al.* 2013; Groes-Green 2013). Additionally, violence against women was previously perpetrated before marriage by the older women who raised them, but after marriage the violence of husbands was socially condemned and controlled. Contrary to what has been reported in the scholarly literature on African youth (see Cole 2004: 574; Honwana 2012), men's youth status among the Balanta has not been prolonged; instead, it has been shortened as a result of earlier initiations, easier access to women, and economic independence (Temudo and Abrantes 2015). Thus, it would be too simplistic to explain young Balanta men's violence as a 'crisis of masculinity' (Perry 2005; see also Cornwall 2002) triggered by frustration and/or fear of their wives' power provided by a superior, independent material status. The voices of the multiple interviewees suggest that the husbands' violence towards their wives and control over their sexual and economic life should be understood as both a 'crisis of mediation' (see Sarró 2009) and the result of young men's perception of a superabundance of women, which makes the latter powerless, disposable objects in a globalized neoliberal order.

Paradoxically, previous hierarchies of power between gender and generations allowed women to be free within their subordination to the power of the elders

[23]Interview with Sirá, a woman in her sixties.

(both male and female) and their subjection to traditional norms. Now, girls have multiple boyfriends, get pregnant before marriage at a very early age, and are free to choose their first husband with no negotiations or intermediaries, but this implies losing the very 'constraining' social relations that previously sheltered them from total subjugation to their husbands. Traditional practices, ironically, provided women with more space for choice, more opportunities to achieve economic well-being, more mobility, and more sexual freedom within their lifetime, helping them navigate their way out of a strict male gerontocracy. It is precisely the perception of these advantages that is driving some young women to resist the modernity of 'free choice'. While only a few are fighting for equal rights and duties openly, the majority of the young women I interviewed admitted to feeling trapped, with no other option than to accept total subordination to their young husbands' will; some, however, are looking at the structural oppression of 'custom' and marriage to old men with new eyes.

'Now our custom is gone, our time is gone,' Buota (a man in his late fifties) told me in 2014, complementing Sirá's statement that the Balanta are now living 'in white people's land'. I tend to disagree with their opinion, however. As I have argued in other works on these resilient rice farmers (for example, Temudo 2018), despite having very often been portrayed (even by themselves) as an example of a quasi-timeless traditional society, theirs has always been a society undergoing constant, though subtle, transformation. Like Cape Verdean youth caught between the changing tides of gender ideologies (Challinor 2017), Balanta interviewees spoke about tradition in marriage and extramarital practices in numerous and frequently contradictory ways. Their multiple voices illustrate the ongoing negotiations of gender and generation within a context of profound cultural, social, economic and political transformations and the difficulties the actors have in coming to terms with new forms of freedom, notions of romantic love and the global empowerment of young people.

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Abstract

African women are frequently portrayed as a subaltern group in need of external support, used as property in forging social relations, producing wealth in people and doing most of the agricultural work to feed household members in societies where 'modernization' does not always seem to change their unfortunate predicament. This article destabilizes such narratives by showing the complexities of marriage practices and the difficult dialectics between freedom and subjugation in one West African agrarian society – the Brasa-speaking people of Guinea-Bissau. Among this patrilineal and virilocal group, marriage was usually arranged at birth or when girls were still small children. However, after marriage, women enjoyed great freedom of movement to have distant sexual partners and to pursue private profit-making activities. Paradoxically, while at present most young women are allowed to marry a young husband of their choice, having lost the support of their descent groups they are becoming more subjected to their husbands' power and control.

Résumé

On présente souvent les femmes africaines comme un groupe subalterne dépendant d'un soutien extérieur, utilisées pour forger des relations sociales,

produire de la « richesse en personnes » et faire l'essentiel du travail agricole pour nourrir leur famille dans des sociétés dans lesquelles la « modernisation » ne semble pas toujours changer leur difficile condition. Cet article déstabilise de tels récits en montrant les complexités des pratiques du mariage et la dialectique difficile entre liberté et subjugation au sein d'une société agraire d'Afrique de l'Ouest, les locuteurs du balante de la Guinée-Bissau. Dans ce groupe patrilinéaire et virilocal, le mariage était généralement arrangé à la naissance ou pendant la petite enfance des filles. Néanmoins, après leur mariage, les femmes jouissaient d'une grande liberté de mouvement leur permettant d'avoir des partenaires sexuels éloignés et de poursuivre des activités lucratives privées. Paradoxalement, alors qu'actuellement la plupart des jeunes femmes sont autorisées à épouser un homme jeune de leur choix, le fait qu'elles aient perdu le soutien de leur groupe de filiation les rend plus soumises au pouvoir et au contrôle de leurs époux.