Marriage on a whim: pragmatic traditions, modern aspirations and early divorce in Malawi

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Introduction

In villages, towns and cities around the world, romantic love is sweeping young people off their feet, and sweeping arranged marriages under the rug of tradition. Young men and women, empowered by education and inspired by global cultural productions from Hollywood, Bollywood and Nollywood, are challenging elders' advice on family formation and choosing their own spouse, based on mutual attraction, tender feelings and common projects. Scholars have taken note of this global adoption of ideals of romantic love and companionate conjugal relationships, and of the ways these ideals are interpreted and enacted in different material and cultural circumstances (Cole and Thomas 2009; Hirsch and Wardlow 2006; Hirsch et al. 2009; Padilla et al. 2007).

In African settings, these marriages are often depicted as the opposite of traditional family formation that involves extended family. In fact, "love marriages" are far from new in Africa – on the contrary, the defiant re-appropriation of romantic love by young generations has been happening for nearly a century, and might have become an African tradition in itself (Behrend 1998; Fair 2009; Thomas 2006). This does not prevent moral panics of varying shape and size from taking root, as elders, politicians and religious leaders express concern about the threats that individualism, foreign influence and girls' education pose to the stability of families (Barlow et al. 2005). In the absence of reliable data on divorce, this sometimes leads to concerns about the rise in the number of divorced women and commentary about the decline of "the African family"(Clark and Brauner-Otto 2015). While few advocate for the return of strictly arranged marriage, many are suspicious about the effects of modern love marriages.

In Malawi, a country with a very high rate of divorce, such complaints are familiar – despite evidence that divorce has long been a normal part of marital trajectories (Kaler 2001). Divorce often occurs early, and some authors even speak of a tradition of “trial marriage” in the matrilineal societies of Central Africa, where men occupy a delicate position in their wife's community (Mair 1951; Parpart 1994). Divorce remains common in Malawi: around half (40-65%) of Malawian women will experience divorce in their lifetime and a majority (61%) will experience postmarital single motherhood by the time they are 45 (Clark and Hamplová 2013; Reniers 2003). One factor that contributes to this situation is the ease with which traditional courts grant divorce. Reasons considered valid grounds for ending a marriage are clear and not uncommon: failure to fulfill marital obligations, excessive violence or infertility (Chimango 1977). Divorced men and women often re-marry, and are able do so rather swiftly (Bracher, Santow and Watkins 2003).

The ease of divorce does not explain, however, the "inherent vice" that seems present in so many unions – the reasons for seeking divorce from someone with whom, just a few months earlier, one was planning to spend a lifetime. Insofar as marriage is valued by individuals and socially rewarded in their communities, young couples do not start a union with the goal of making it last only a few months or years; yet this is a surprisingly common outcome. Are young people taking marriage less seriously than their elders would like? Are they selecting unsuitable mates based on romantic notions or, on the contrary, are traditional marriages proving less resilient in the face of young Malawians' difficult material circumstances?

In this paper, we argue that what characterizes very short first unions in Malawi is a form of spontaneous marriage that differs from both traditional and romantic notions of union formation. Spontaneous unions are characterized by very short courtships: put simply, newly married couples are more likely to find deep flaws in each other after marriage if they have only known each other for a few days or weeks. Moreover, such marriages are less likely to be embedded in kin networks of social relations that can enforce trust and protect marital relationships when conflict occurs. We further argue that in Malawi, many such spontaneous marriages reflect the social navigation of young women at a key moment, when they are looking for a companion with whom to undergo the transition to adulthood. Drawing on various cultural scenarios of marriage, in a context where young men's access to material autonomy is severely challenged, some young women decide to take a chance on a stranger who may just bring them the success they aspire to. In this context, early divorce means that the gamble did not pan out.

Courtship, marriage and divorce in Malawi

Various explanations have been put forward to explain the prevalence of divorce in a society (Reniers 2003). One is based on the idea of women's empowerment: women's greater autonomy means they are less dependent on husbands, which leads to weaker marital bonds and more divorce (Takyi and Broughton 2006). A second explanation is based on autonomy in the choice of a spouse: young people who are free to choose their spouse are more likely to get along with them, and thus less likely to divorce, compared to those in arranged marriages. A third explanation is based on the life course perspectives, and frames both marriage and divorce are strategies used by women for greater control over their lives (Locoh and Thiriat 1995). In this paper, we put forward a variation on the last of these, which frames marriage and divorce as strategies of social navigation that women use to achieve a successful life.

"Changing worlds and human agency"[1]: life course meets social navigation

The two perspectives that we combine here explain individuals' decision-making and their trajectories in a changing environment. The life course paradigm asks the question of "how dynamic worlds change people and how people select and construct their environments", with a particular focus on time – both historic time and particular sequence of events (Elder 1995). It sees

[1] This phrase is taken from Elder 1995, p. 107.

individuals as going through life in parallel trajectories (for example work, family life, housing, etc.) that are made up of a series of linked states (for example student, employed, unemployed). Each change of state constitutes a transition, some of which are more salient and age-specific than others.

Individuals do not go through these stages and transitions alone; indeed, many of them entail interdependence with the trajectories of others. This is the idea of *linked lives*: human lives are intertwined with each other and with broader social changes in their society. Transitions often consist of a change in such ties, forging new relationships of interdependence in addition to, or as a replacement for, older relationships. Individual lives are also linked to their societies through the influence of economic conditions, social policies and cultural norms: this is particularly true of early childhood and youth, periods that will often mark an individual's trajectory for the rest of their life (Elder 1995).

While life course focuses on the wider world that individuals inhabit, social navigation draws attention to the way in which their immediate environment is shifting, perpetually revealing opportunities and dead ends. If the life course is "constructed by the individual, in terms established by the larger society" (Elder 1995:107), social navigation is about that active construction of a satisfying life. It draws attention to the fact that individuals exercise their agency in a world that is far from static: it is "the act of moving in an environment that is wavering and unsettled", environments "that move us as we move along" (Vigh 2009:420). In addition to this double movement, social navigation highlights to the double temporality of social life and decision-making: the immediate present, with its need to stay afloat, but also the more distant future of aspirations, dreams and life goals (Vigh 2006). Actions are thus oriented towards both the socially immediate and the socially imagined: individuals must get through the day, but must also build a life trajectory that will satisfy their ambitions for a good life (Vigh 2009:425).

From this combined perspective, young women's first union represents a key moment of social navigation in their transition to adulthood, as they attempt to link their life with a man who will play a key role in shaping their life trajectory. The double temporality of social navigation is acutely felt during the period of courtship that precedes unions: young women are under immediate pressure from family and friends to find a suitable mate before they are considered too old, but they must ensure that this man will help them realize the good life to which they aspire. In situations where resources are scarce and institutional support is weak, creating and sustaining relationships – linking lives – is a key navigational strategy, and often the only way to achieve a modicum of success.

Marriage, success and adulthood

In Malawi, wedding traditions vary among the different cultural groups, but for all of them marriage entails a fundamental change in the nature of the person. Marriage and parenthood are the key milestones needed to fully exit childhood and thus attain the most socially desirable state of being, that of grown adult, which is only lost upon becoming an old person, before becoming an ancestor (Freeman and Coast 2013). This transition is part and parcel of becoming a full-fledged, respected member of the community. The ontological implications of this transition are deep, such that an

unmarried and childless person, regardless of any other achievement, remains a social inferior to any person who has had child.

This transition also features an important material component. In order to become an adult, young people must operate a reversal of relationships of material dependence: from the position of a dependent in a parent's home, one becomes a senior in his or her own home, the one on which others depend[2] (see for example Chikovore et al. 2015; Englund 2001). This form of "successful maturity" (Dijk 1992) entails strength and power, which is expressed in the obligation to care for others; indeed, those who achieve a certain level of wealth without redistributing it are seen as deeply immoral (Swidler and Watkins 2007). Within couple relationships, this becomes "provider love" (Hunter 2010) and it shapes the expectations about masculine and feminine roles with regards to love, sex and marriage. Women usually depend on their spouse for access to cash, but ideally they will have enough to redistribute some of this wealth to their own dependents, beginning with their children.

While there seems to be widespread agreement on what constitutes success, there are different ways of achieving it, according to the ways in which a man generates cash for his family. From the early days of the Nyasaland protectorate, conditions were created to send Malawian men to work in the farms and mines in the Rhodesias and in South Africa (Sanderson 1961). This tradition of labour migration shaped social relations and masculine employment until economic downturns and migration restrictions all but put an end to it in the late 1970s (Chirwa 1997). The colonial and post-colonial state had also created the "modern" pathway to success, consisting of Western education, followed by white-collar formal employment. This form of success, with its reliance on a powerful public sector, has become all but inaccessible; it remains, however, a widely shared aspiration among young Malawians who dream of pursuing higher education to become nurses and teachers (Frye 2012). This white-collar dream has partly been replaced by dreams of careers with NGOs (Watkins and Swidler 2013), and of wealth through trading. "Doing business" is increasingly seen as the most promising way to material wealth, while the subsistence agriculture in which a majority of Malawian households engage is seen by most young men as a dead-end and a poverty trap (Chinsinga and Chasukwa 2012).

Being an adult is thus not a fixed category defined by a set of characteristics or events (Johnson-Hanks 2002), rather it is accorded to a person through various relationships with others. As young women enter the second half of their teenage years[3], they start looking for a boyfriend who has the potential to undergo this important transition with them. In life course terms, transitioning to the "married" state requires linking lives with a man to achieve both parenthood and material independence from parents, and possibly a little more. Given the structural problem of poverty in Malawi, a very small proportion of those who dream of a modern lifestyle will be able to

[2] This does not mean that adults are no longer dependent on anyone; rather, it means that they start occupying both positions, as patron and as client, in the complex networks of interdependence that form the basis of Malawian social life.

[3] In rural areas, most women marry around the age of 18; the marriage timetable is postponed by a few years in urban areas, where brides are more likely to be around 20-22 years old, depending on their education. In 2011, the age of 25 seemed to be the uppermost limit for marriageable age, beyond which women were considered hopeless spinsters.

achieve it. This dream is, however, an important aspect in the choice of spouse – perhaps especially so in misguided ones that lead to very short marriages.

Youth relationships

It is thus in this context, having to undergo the transition to adulthood while aspiring to a good life, that young people create intimate relationships with their *chibwenzi* (boyfriend or girlfriend), some of which will lead to marriage. Youth relationships in Malawi draw on a variety of cultural scenarios of love, which stem most prominently from tradition, romance and Christianity (Bertrand-Dansereau 2012). These cultural influences are not mutually exclusive, quite the contrary: they can be seen as cultural repertoires from which young people draw according to their circumstances (Swidler 1986, 2003).

Youth relationships are heavily scripted, in Malawi as elsewhere (Simon and Gagnon 1984; Simon and Gagnon 2003). Young people meet in different ways – as neighbours, school mates or church goers – but the relationship does not begin until the young man formally "proposes love" to the girl (see also Izugbara and Undie 2008; Pattman 2005). In the prevailing gender norms of Malawi, the proposing script features a reluctant female being pressed by a persevering male. Young women who want to accept a proposal often demand a delay to give their response, from one day to three months. Refusing a boy's proposal during a certain period is thus a way for a girl to perform her gender role, but it also gives her time to enquire about him and see if he is a serious suitor. Once the relationship begins, both partners expect sexual activity and material exchanges to become part of it (Poulin 2007; Tavory and Poulin 2012), unless one or both partners are religious enough to have included sexual abstinence in relationship negotiations.

Not all relationships end in marriage, but those that do can evolve in different ways. In the ideal scenario, both persons finish the level of schooling to which they aspire, following which they announce the relationship to their family[4] and begin engagement and marriage arrangements. More frequently, the relationship is kept secret until the young woman becomes pregnant. As soon as the pregnancy is acknowledged, the girl must leave school. The couple then either starts living "as a family", or break up if the young man is not ready to accept the responsibility of fatherhood. In the latter case, the woman transitions to adulthood while the man remains a youth until he finishes school and starts working.

Another type of relationships is the elopement, which follows a very similar script, but on an extremely compressed timeframe and without the families' participation. In an elopement, the meeting, proposal and cohabitation all happen within a very short time, from a single day to a week. The couple usually goes to live in a town or village far away from the girl's family. This form of cohabitation is considered a *de facto* marriage. Elopement is not a new practice in the region, and it has been described as a "safety valve" to proceed with marriage when negotiations are in a stalemate (Forster 1994:487). In this paper, we make a difference between elopements and

[4] In Malawian society, it is generally understood that having a *chibwenzi* and going to school are mutually exclusive options, and that young people have to choose between them. Most young people thus seem to operate on a "don't ask, don't tell" basis with their parents until they are ready to marry.

spontaneous marriages as the former implies a marriage done without the consent of the family, whereas a family can agree to a spontaneous marriage.

If elopement is the act of individuals against families, arranged marriages are the act of families that go against individuals. Most arranged marriages are linked to wealth, and involve parents who want to match their daughter with a wealthy man. Arranged marriages reflect the social navigation of parents around their daughter's transition to adulthood, insofar as this transition affects them directly. Arranged marriages are not common in Malawi, and many girls use strategies to avoid, subvert or end an arranged marriage – a goal in which they are helped by the ease of divorce. Like elopements, arranged marriages often lead to unstable unions.

Methods

In order to answer those questions, we draw on two distinct sources of data: one qualitative project on young Malawians' narratives of love, and one survey

Qualitative study

The qualitative data for this project comes from the *Nkhani za chikondi* (Stories of Love) project, conducted in 2011 in the Central region of Malawi.

Data

This project was conducted using peer interviewing, a method that entails working with non-professional researchers who share one or many characteristics with the respondents. Inspired by participatory research, our use of peer interviewing sought to involve "those who might have traditionally been the objects or respondents of research as [...] co-researchers" (Brown and Strega 2005:7). The rationale behind peer interviewing is to facilitate trust during the interview on the basis of shared experiences, thus helping interviewers gain "insider status" (Klocker 2012:896; Ryan, Kofman and Aaron 2011). The resulting research interaction is informal, which favours the expression of non-normative ideas and narratives, thus helping researchers go beyond the simple repetition of HIV prevention orthodoxies (Angotti and Kaler 2013).

In collaboration with local youth organizations, groups of young Malawian men and women were selected and took part in trainings on the research process, research ethics and interviewing skills. Ethics training focused on risks for both respondents and interviewers. The research process took place in two separate moments: in the first place, the interviewer would meet a respondent, obtain their consent, conduct an interview in a conversational style, and take notes on the exchange immediately after the interview. Once a week, the researcher and the interviewers would meet in small groups, tell each other about the stories they had heard and comment on others' interviews. These conversations were recorded and transcribed, along with our observations.

In total, 181 narratives of love were collected in this manner in both urban (Lilongwe) and rural (Dedza district) settings; only the ones from Dedza are used here. The result is a third-person

narrative based on the respondent's story, as told by one young peer interviewer to the other interviewers. This is accompanied by a series of questions and comments from the group. The interviewers tried to be as faithful as possible to the words used by respondents, and the data reflects the ways in which young Malawians talk about other people's love, sex and intimate relationships – rather than the way a young Malawian would answer a research question in a formal interview. This is a strength of the data, as this type of peer exchange is an important source of information on sexuality and relationships for adolescents in Malawi (Bankole et al. 2007).

All elements that could identify respondents have been removed. Interviewers were instructed to use pseudonyms when telling their stories; those pseudonyms were changed to other pseudonyms upon coding. All the names of villages, schools and businesses have been removed.

Qualitative analysis

The recorded conversations were later transcribed by a research assistant and reviewed by the author. The resulting transcripts were coded using HyperRESEARCH software. The codebook and analytic system were developed throughout the process and systematized during the initial phases of coding, while making allowances for new themes to emerge upon close inspection of the text. A range of themes emerged, including family, education, couple activities, interviewing dynamics and media, among others. For this paper, all instances of break-up and divorce were retrieved, out of which short first unions were identified and further analyzed.

Quantitative study

The quantitative data comes from the Malawi Diffusion and Ideational Change Project (MDICP), a longitudinal cohort study of individuals and families living in three rural sites in Malawi.

Quantitative survey

The MLSFH started in 1998, and has since collected seven rounds of data (Kohler et al. 2014). It provides a record of more than a decade of demographic, socioeconomic and health data, including detailed marital and birth histories. Respondents were initially selected using a clustered sampling strategy, in which a total of 145 villages were selected. For each of those villages, a list of residents was compiled, from which a sample of women was randomly selected and interviewed. Throughout the years and various sampling additions, the MLSFH has reached 7647 respondents, with each wave including 2500 to 4000 respondents. The MLSFH does not have a nationally representative sample design, but it has few substantively-relevant differences with the rural samples of nationally representative studies, and overall it reflects the considerable heterogeneity of social and demographic contexts across rural Malawi (Kohler et al. 2014:26-27).

For the purpose of this paper, the 2006 wave of the MLSFH was chosen as it was the most recent year in which a series of questions about the respondent's first spouse was included, whether or not they were still married to him. We restricted the responses to women, as men and women have different marital patterns and women tend to report on unions in more reliable ways than do men

(Chae 2014). We restricted the sample to respondents age 50 and under, as older women are more likely to misreport early unions, especially if they were short and deemed unsuccessful (Reniers 2003:181). We also excluded widows, to focus on voluntary union dissolution.

Quantitative measures

To better understand why some unions dissolve quickly and others endure, we assess a host of both individual respondent characteristics as well as relationship characteristics for their effect on union dissolution.

Union dissolution, the dependent variable, was created based on reported years of marriage and separation or divorce. Respondents were asked, for each of their unions, the year it began, whether they were still married to that partner and, if relevant, the year it ended. We grouped together those who were divorced or separated. For the first four years of the first union, we created a binary variable that indicates whether or not divorce or separation occurred in that year. If the couple got married in the year 2000, we thus look at whether divorce occurred in 2000 (year 0), 2001, 2002 or 2003.

Respondent characteristics

Region: Each respondent is coded as living in the North, Center or South of the country.

Age: Age is given in years, and was re-coded in categories based on decades (women in their 20s, 30s and 40s).

Age at first marriage: Age at first marriage was calculated by subtracting year of birth from year of first marriage. Categories were then made to differentiate between respondents who married at a very young age (age 11-13); at a young age (age 14-16); at a normal age (age 17-19); at a somewhat older age (age 20-22); or at a much older age (age 23 and older).

Wealth quintiles: Wealth was assessed in the survey based on a list of common household items (ex. radio, bicycle, material used for the roof), and each respondent was given a score. These scores were then divided into roughly equal quintiles, that are part of the MLSFH data. This was done at every survey wave; we use the quintile ranking for 2006.

Education: The respondent's level of education was obtained from the family and household roster, which asked about the highest level of schooling attended (primary, secondary and higher education), and the number of years completed at that level. For the purpose of this study, we re-coded these in four categories, according to the highest level completed: never attended; some primary; primary finished; and secondary finished, which includes the one respondent who completed higher education.

Born-again or Tauba: Muslim respondents were asked if they had made Tauba, and Christian respondents were asked if they were born-again. Both are measures of a high degree of religious belief and commitment.

Relationships characteristics

Lobola: This indicates whether or not the marriage involved a *lobola* (bridewealth) transaction in cash or kind, from the family of the groom to the family of the bride. Lobola is widely practiced in the North and the Centre and is much less common in the South.

Ankhoswe: This indicates whether or not the marriage involved the presence of *ankhoswe*, elder relatives who act as diplomats between families during the negotiations of the marriage transaction, and later as marriage counsellors to the couple.

Polygamy: Respondents were asked if their husband had taken any other wife during the course of the marriage; for women whose first marriage was ongoing, this does not exclude that the husband would eventually marry another wife.

Age difference with first husband: Respondents were asked if their first husband was older, the same age or younger; and by how many years, based on 6 categories (5 years or less, 6-10 years, etc.). The resulting 13 categories were re-coded as 4 categories: younger or the same age; a bit older (5 years or less); somewhat older (6-10 years); and much older (11 years and more).

Courtship length: Respondents were asked how long they and their husband knew each other before they got married or started living together, and had to choose from six categories; less than 1 month; 1-6 months; 6-12 months; 1-2 years; and more than 2 years; and more than 10 years. For the purpose of this analysis, the last three categories were grouped under "More than one year", as the last two categories (over 2 years, and over 10 years) had very small numbers.

Same church or mosque: Respondents were asked if their husband attended the same church or mosque as themselves during the relationship; the questionnaire did not ask about a specific moment in the relationship (for example, at the beginning of the relationship) and did not leave room for answers that included changes in religious affiliation. We interpret these answers as being about the beginning of the relationship.

Children: We created this binary variable that indicates whether or not the respondent had children in that year of marriage. Respondents provided the year of birth of all their living children; this is a serious limitation of this data, given that half (49%) of respondents have experienced child mortality, and the birth year of children who had passed away by 2006 is not recorded. Births that occurred during the year of the marriage were counted as being in that union. We then coded the values as 0 for those who had no child, or no child who survived until 2006, and 1 for those who had 1 or 2 children.

The sample

Our analytics sample (see table 1) consists of 1333 women under the age of 50, who provided complete information on their first marriage, and who are not widows (see Table 1). Respondents' ages range from 16 to 49, with a mean of 31. Two thirds (66.8%) of them are still married to their first husband, and the remaining 33.2% are divorced or separated. Excluding widows and older women has led to a slight over-representation of the middle quintile (22.8%) and under-representation of the lowest quintile (18.1%).

A majority of respondents have not completed their primary education, either because they never went to school (28.5%) or because they attended some primary school but did not finish (51.4%). A minority completed either primary school (18.8%) or secondary school (1.3%). At the time of the survey, 23.7% of respondents were Muslim; 18.4% attended African Indigenous Churches (AIC); 18% attended mission protestant churches (Presbytarian, Anglican, Baptist); 17.4% were Catholic; and 13% attended new mission protestant churches (Church of Christ, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventist)[5]. Just under a third of respondents (31.7%) were born-again Christians or Muslims who have made Tauba.

These respondents married men who were, for the most part (59.3%), a little bit older than them. Over a quarter (27.7%) married men who were 6-10 years older than them, and 7.3% married men who were 11 years or more their senior. Only 5.6% married men who were of the same age or younger. These marriages were overwhelmingly (94%) negotiated with the help of *anskhoswe*, and a majority of them (61.8%) included a *lobola* transaction. A majority of respondents (73.7%) attended the same church as their first husband. Regarding fertility, 35% of respondents had not had a child by the third year of their marriage; 50% of respondents had one child, and 15% had 2 children.

These marriages took place after a period of acquaintance which varied from less than a month (22.8%), to 1–6 months (33.3%), 6-12 months (15.1%) or more than a year (28.5%). We thus find important differences in length of courtship, with large proportions of both short and long courtships. It is worth noting that nearly a quarter of first unions seemingly followed a spontaneous marriage scenario, in which respondents considered themselves married to a man they had met in the previous 4 weeks.

[table 1 about here]

Analysis

In order to answer our question on the factors that are associated with reporting a divorce in the early years of marriage, we used discrete-time survival (DTS) model. This type of model is particularly well suited to study outcomes such as divorce which are dependent on duration and which may be censored because some unions may have been formed very recently and their ultimate outcomes are unknown. . This approach also allows for the inclusion of time-varying variables, in this case for example whether or not a woman has a child in each year of marriage. Finally, the discrete specification of time is appropriate for our data since union duration is measured in years rather than months or days and, thus, cannot be treated as a continuous measure of time.

Data were arranged in person-period format, with each woman potentially contributing up to four observations ranging from zero to three years of marriage. Each marriage-year was marked as (1, if

[5] It must be noted, however, that only 22% of respondents had never changed denomination at the time of the survey; untangling the links between changes in religious affiliations and marital transitions is beyond the scope of this paper.

the respondent divorced that year and 0 otherwise. The vast majority of unions lasted three or more years; 4.4% between two and three years, 4.7% between one and two years, and 3% ended before their first anniversary. In total, we analyze 1333 unions contributing a total of 4807 marriage-years

We ran a logistic discrete-time hazard model to assess the effects of the individual and relational variables, described above, on the odds of experiencing a divorce during a specific year.

Findings

Here we detail findings from both qualitative and quantitative datasets.

Stories of early divorce: Leaving and being left

Stories of early divorce cover a range of situations: some women exercise their agency in ending a bad marriage, while others are abandoned by their husbands, and others still are forced to end what they thought was a good marriage, upon learning damning information about their new spouse.

Grace: undoing an unwanted marriage

Peter was born in a poor family, and left his village at the age of 12 to work in another district, about 200km away. After 11 years working in the tobacco sector, he comes back to his home village to settle back and start a business with his savings.

> Francis[6]: He came back in Dedza, with money and he bought a new bicycle, a radio, and clothes, for his relatives. Then, the neighbour woman came to propose this boy on behalf of her daughter, Grace. Because she thought "Eh! This person can also help us. The money he brought he can also share with us, if he marries our daughter".
> So the parents of this man agreed, and told their boy to marry this girl. Peter agreed to marry her, but Grace refused and said "No, I don't want him". But the parents forced her, saying "We will stop paying your school fees. Because you are old enough now, we want you to marry". That's when she accepted, but because she did not love him, as we have said, she started cheating on him with other boys. Then Peter heard from friends that "Your wife is in love with this other man". And then he discovered that it's true. So the man just dissolved the family.
> Researcher: Did she admit that she was cheating - or he just had suspicions?
> Francis: She was cheating because she wanted an educated person, not uneducated like him. Because him, he doesn't know how to read, how to write. So this girl was looking for a person who can be in the same class. (Peter, age 23)

Although Peter was telling his story, the real protagonist here is Grace, who was coerced into marriage by her parents, but took the necessary steps to end it as soon as she could. She knows that

[6] Francis is the name of the peer interviewer who conducted the interview; this exercpt shows him telling the story to a group of other interviewers, one of which asks a question to clarify the story.

female infidelity is grounds for divorce, and that if she cheats on her husband openly, he will dissolve the marriage. The double standard with regards to extramarital affairs, which can seem unfairly harsh to women, is used intentionally by a woman to end a marriage she does not want.

Harriet: leaving a disappointing marriage

Interviewer Gladys told the story of Harriet, a young woman who marries Jones, a man she met at the market. They had known each other for only two months, but she had travelled to meet his relatives in the city, and they were kind and generous. He had also met her parents, who had a bad feeling about him. When her parents voiced their suspicions about the man, saying he looked like a thieve, and expressed their desire for Harriet to continue her education by attending college, Harriet decided to marry him anyways.

> She said "Why are you saying like this? Just leave me. Let me chose what I want. Cause I know what I'm doing". She didn't listen - she did not listen to anyone. But the one thing she wanted was a family. After engagement, the man took his wife to another town in the district because he wanted to start a business there. In their new home, the man was coming late, sometimes he came at midnight, but his wife didn't know where he was coming from. After some months, she heard a rumour from her friends, that the man was a womanizer. It was true indeed. One day, she found her husband at a resthouse, in Dedza town, with a prostitute. So Harriet came back and packed her properties and went back to her village. (Harriet, 20 years)

Gladys says that the one thing Harriet wanted was a family; this refers to the expression "living as a family", which refers to the change in status that comes from being an adult with her own home to manage. Marriage with this man, and an alliance with his wealthy urban relatives, seemed like a promising way for Harriet to achieve a good life – at the time, a more promising path than taking a course at college. When it becomes obvious that he is not a good husband, she leaves him and goes back to her parents, where she sees better opportunities.

Leslie: discovering her husband's first wife

When she was 18, Leslie eloped with a truck driver that she met on the road when coming home from church. They went to live in Zomba, in the Southern region, where she had a child and she was happy because “she had everything in the house”.

> Milly: But suddenly one day, she heard a knock on the door. That time, her husband was in Mozambique, he was transporting tobacco. When she opened the door, she saw a short woman with 2 children, asking for her husband. And she just said "Who is your husband?". "The one who lives in this house". "Ah! He didn't tell me that he has a wife". The wife answered "I am the one, and these are children from him so I command you to pack and go and leave this home".
> Leslie just left to go back to her home village. This occurred in the year 2004, February. It was very hard with a little baby to stay in the village without the support of his Dad. So she suggested to another one to marry her. And she found him. Until now, they have 2 children, both boys. Lastly she said, we're living a lovely, joyful and peaceful life now [...]

Researcher: And did she ever speak again with her husband?
Milly: No. She found some other one. [...]
Esther: So she just packed her things and... like, went home?
Milly: Yeah. (Leslie, age 26)

As is so often the case in story of masculine infidelity, this story is about two women, and the husband's opinion on the situation is not even included. Probably informed by rumours about her husband's new family, the first wife comes to confront Leslie and ends this second marriage, which can only be a drain on the resources that she gets from him. Leslie thought she had made a successful conjugal life with this truck driver, who is wealthy by village standards, only to find out that she was a second wife.

Maria: making a marriage work

This is in contrast with the story of Maria, which we provide as a counter-example of early divorce: a young woman who is determined to make her relationship work despite problems. Maria meets her boyfriend Peter when she is 15; he lives in the city with his sister, but visits the village regularly. They face difficulties early on in their relationship, because many girls in the village, including her friends, wanted to be Peter's girlfriend. In fact, he did have a relationship with another girl from the same village.

> When Maria found out about this, she became angry and when she confronted Peter, he refused the accusation. Until one day, Maria and the other girl fought because they both found out that they had a relationship with the same boy. But the relationship with the other girl did not last long, because she was also cheating on Peter with a married man.
>
> When Maria's parents found out about the boy, they told Maria that if the boy was her boyfriend, he should be coming to their house to chat. Her parents did this so that if she became pregnant, they should have an idea of who is responsible for the pregnancy. After meeting him, Maria's parents and relatives told her that she should not break up with the boy because he was a boy with good behaviour. Some of her friends were jealous of her and said that she only agreed to his proposal because he was from a rich family. She said this was not true, she loved him and she did not leave him despite what her friends were saying.
>
> They decided to get married in 2008, without any church wedding. Now she's happily married with their first daughter. At the end of the story, she told me that even when they were married, her husband also cheated on her, because she caught him once with another girl, here in town. And when she reported this matter to his uncle, and his uncle tried to talk to him, she said that he has changed. (Maria, age 25, Dedza, N1)

Maria's story shows a relationship where a woman, faced with a cheating spouse, embeds the relationship in familial ties instead of ending it. In rural Malawi, introducing a boyfriend to parents is akin to declaring that the couple intends to marry. This makes Maria's relationship stronger than other secret relationships Peter may have. Later, when they are married and he is unfaithful again, Maria confront him through his uncle, his *ankhoswe* who has the kind of authority that his wife cannot have. This does not necessarily mean that Peter will stop having extramarital relationships,

but perhaps he will better preserve the appearance of faithfulness in order to maintain his marriage – and avoid sermons from his uncle (on the rules of infidelity, see Smith 2001).

Quantitative results: the importance of courtship length

Results from the quantitative analysis show that early divorce follows strong regional patterns, and that relationship characteristics matter while individual characteristics seem to have little impact on the likelihood of divorce.

Table 2 shows a first basic model, including region and year of union, as well as a model based on individual characteristics. Model 1 shows some basic variables that remain significant no matter which other variables are included in the model: respondents from the Southern region are more than twice as likely to experience divorce, compared with respondents from the Central and Northern regions. As for year of union, divorce is less likely to occur in the first year of marriage than in following years. This is unsurprising, given that in this case "first" year means the year in which respondents got married; except for respondents who married in January, this first year is bound to have fewer months than subsequent years.

Model 2 shows the effects of individual characteristics of the respondent on the likelihood of divorce. Region and year of marriage remain significant, but few other individual characteristics show a significant impact: respondent's wealth, education and age at first marriage all yield insignificant effects. The only exception is the religious variables: being born-again or having made Tauba decreases the likelihood of experiencing divorce. We include husband's religion here, since we consider it a better predictor of the respondent's religion at the time of her first union than her religious affiliation at the time of the survey.

[Table 2 about here]

Table 3 shows the final model, in which relationship characteristics reveal strong predictors of divorce reporting divorce in the first years of a first union. This model reveals the importance of courtship length: compared to respondents who knew their partner for a year or more before marrying, respondents who knew their partner for a month or less are 2.7 times more likely to experience a divorce, while respondents who had between one and six months of acquaintance are twice as likely to experience a divorce.

The age difference with one's husband is also linked to the likelihood of divorce, but in a surprising way: the small minority of respondents who married someone of the same age or younger are much more likely to divorce than those who married an older husband. Respondents who married a much older husband seem to have the most stable marriage, at least in the first four years. The presence of *ankhoswe* in marriage negotiations is also significantly linked to more stable early unions.

While being born-again or having made Tauba is still significant in this model, attending the same church or mosque is a stronger predictor of marriage stability: couples who attend different religious congregations are seven times more likely to experience divorce.

Finally, having at least one child lowers the odds of experiencing divorce. by a third.

Discussion

This paper aims to make sense of very short first unions, in the context of a debate about the role of modern love marriages and traditional marriages in sub-Saharan Africa.

Our combination of qualitative and quantitative data shows that courtship length matter, and that spontaneous marriages, between partners who have known each other for a few weeks or months, are much more likely to end in divorce in the first years of a union. The length of courtship seems especially important for building trust: knowing someone for a year or more before marrying someone is not a guarantee of a long marriage, but it does provide more time to know someone well, including getting feedback from neighbours or friends. After all, the causes of divorce (laziness, alcohol abuse, cheating) can often be gauged relatively quickly. Leslie, who elopes immediately upon meeting, and Harriet, who marries after less than two months, both find out crucial information about their spouse once they are married. It is unlikely that they would have chosen to marry an already-married man or an alcoholic womanizer; but because of the short courtship and lack of shared social network, their husbands were able to hide these characteristics until after the wedding.

This result is reinforced, in both sets of results, by the importance of a shared community: attending the same religious congregation, or embedding a marriage within a network of family relationships, protects young marital relationships from dissolution. Research from the Malawi Religion Project, a branch of the MLSFH, shows that congregations and religious leaders are most effective in HIV prevention when they not only preach, but intervene directly with members who do not respect the religious and social norms of the congregation (Trinitapoli 2006, 2009, 2011). Beyond the trust that comes from knowing someone well, this is a type of enforceable trust that rests not just with the couple, but rather with the larger community (Watkins 2004). The eyes, ears and words of others are essential in informing spouses of each other's mischief, but also in conveying family concern over a misbehaving spouse, showing that more than two people are involved in this relationship.

Spontaneous marriages: a gamble between tradition and romance

What can we make of such unions – are they fast-tracked traditional marriages or love-at-first-sight whirlwind romances? Why would someone marry so quickly, when the potential consequences of this choice seem so important? Social navigation helps us see how it can make sense to take a chance on a stranger: in a shifting social environment, young women meet men who seem to hold the potential for a good life, a life better than the one they can foresee with a man from their village. These men from far away appear for a short while, and the young women must decide whether to link lives with them, or decline the offer and never see them again. Young Malawian women live in a world where sudden change for the worst is common due to health shocks and economic shocks, but sudden changes for the better are few and far between. In the absence of education and employment prospects, they know that their choice of first spouse is one of the few opportunities they will have to inflect their life trajectory in the direction they want. These handsome strangers, whom they met on the road or at the market, promise them a wealthier, more comfortable life – but the offer only lasts a few hours, days or weeks.

A common refrain in Malawian men's conversations is the lamenting of girls' greed. These results, which show women willing to marry wealthy strangers, could be construed as giving credence to this complaint. The decision to marry a near-stranger, while it may seem thoroughly modern, is in fact anchored in a pragmatic approach to marriage that is part of Malawian tradition. A good spouse is defined by his or her ability to perform well-defined marital duties, and since the colonial imposition of a hut tax, the husband's key role has been to bring in the cash income necessary for the family (Duff 1906; Mair 1951; Tawfik and Watkins 2007). Marrying a man who seems to have more disposable cash than other suitors is thus not out of line with tradition. Young women are looking for love, but they expect love to grow from staying well together, and they know that this is more likely in a home without money problems. Interestingly, marriage with a man of the same age or younger, who we assume is less financially stable, is more likely to lead to a quick divorce than marriage to an older man, no matter the age difference.

While spontaneous marriages follow a rather traditional logic of selecting a spouse who shows potential for being a good provider, they are also driven by aspirations to a modern life, in an economic environment that simply does not provide the material basis to realize these dreams. In an otherwise bleak horizon, a wealthy-looking suitor seems to open a window on hope for a "bright future". We find here a well-known romantic theme: that of love as the great equalizer, the bridge between social classes that transforms a poor girl into a princess through the love of a wealthy man. This Cinderella scenario can only be appealing to a teenager, and can be irresistible in the absence of concrete opportunities for social mobility.

Spontaneous marriages are thus not easily boxed as either traditional or love marriages: grounded in pragmatic traditions, fuelled by modern aspirations, they reflect young women's social navigation at a key juncture in their life. Very short first unions which end within a few years of marriage show that often, it really was too good to be true, and that the perfect suitor – wealthy, faithful, kind and unmarried – is unlikely to roam the streets and markets of Malawi. More importantly, it shows that young people's marital choices reflect neither traditional nor modern types of union, but rather that they draw on both of these to realize their dreams, in the face of difficult material circumstances.

Table 1. Percentage distribution of respondents by selected background and relationships characteristics (n = 1333).

	MLSFH 2006 respondents Women under the age of 50
	%
Region	
South	34.3
Center	32.8
North	32.8
Age (mean)	31 years
13-19	2.6
20-29	39.1
30-39	34.3
40-49	23.9
Age at first marriage (mean)	17.1 years
Very young (11-13)	7.6
Young (14-16)	34.4
Normal (17-19) (R)	40.6
Somewhat older (20-22)	12.9
Much older (25+)	4.3
Wealth quintile	
Bottom quintile	16.8
2nd quintile	20.0
3d quintile	23.5
4th quintile	19.5
Top quintile	20.0
Education (respondent)	
No school or some primary	79.9
Primary finished	18.8
Secondary finished	1.3
Born-again or Tauba	31.7
Lobola	61.8
Ankhoswe	94.0
Age difference with first husband	
Same age or younger	5.6
A bit older (5 yrs or less)	59.3
Somewhat older (6-10 yrs)	27.7
A lot older (11+ yrs)	7.3
Courtship length	
Less than 1 month	22.8
1-6 months	33.3
6-12 months	15.1
More than 1 year	28.5
Same church or mosque	73.7
Had a child before 3d year of union	67.6

Table 2. Basic and individual characteristics

		Model 1: Region & year of marriage n = 4807			Model 2: Region & woman's characteristics (with husband's religion) n = 3841		
		Odds ratios	SE	sig	Odds ratios	SE	sig
Region	South	1			1	-	
	Center	0,465	0. 077	***	0,454	0,121	**
	North	0,385	0,0682	***	0,343	0,108	***
Year of marriage	1st	1			1	-	
	2nd	1,699	0,351	*	1,360	0,339	
	3d	1,769	0,37	**	1,692	0,415	*
	4th	1,962	0,413	**	2,003	0,492	**
Age at survey	teens				1	-	
	20s				0,813	0,256	
	30s				0,749	0,255	
	40s				0,693	0,252	
	50s				0,720	0,437	
Education	no education				1	-	
	some primary				1,220	0,268	
	primary completed				1,019	0,406	
	some secondary				1,240	0,556	
	secondary completed				0,763	0,830	
Wealth quintile	1 (poorest)				1	-	
	2				0,805	0,211	
	3				0,954	0,235	
	4				0,807	0,229	
	5 (wealthiest)				0,794	0,245	
Age at first marriage	12 to 15				1	-	
	16 to 19				1,137	0,250	
	20 to 23				1,457	0,434	
	24 and over				0,959	0,610	
Husband's religion	Christian				1	-	
	Muslim				0,858	0,221	
	AIC				0,592	0,196	
	Other				1,872	0,498	*
Born-again or Tauba					0,614	0,124	*

* p<.05 **p<0.01 ***p<0.001

Table 3: Odds of experiencing union dissolution, according to relationship characteristics. This model controls for, but does not show, woman's education, wealth, religion, age at survey and age at first marriage.

		Model 3: Relational variables n = 3577		
		Odds ratios	SE	sig
Region	South	1	-	
	Center	0,445	0,165	*
	North	0,449	0,180	*
Year of marriage	1st	1	-	
	2nd	1,590	0,446	
	3d	2,824	0,836	***
	4th	3,464	1,075	***
Courtship length	A month or less	2,676	0,877	**
	1 - 6 months	1,972	0,595	*
	6mo - 1 yr	1,709	0,604	
	1 year or more	1	-	
Husband is	same age or younger	1	-	
	a bit older (5yrs or less)	0,308	0,107	***
	somewhat older (6-10yrs)	0,276	0,106	***
	a lot older (11+ yrs)	0,162	0,099	**
Born-again	Yes	0,610	0,145	*
Attend same church	Yes	0,130	0,0264	***
Has kids that year	Yes	0,633	0,139	*
ankhoswe	Yes	0,372	0,140	**
lobola	Yes	0,806	0,272	

* p<.05 **p<0.01 ***p<0.001

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