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Patriarchal Anxieties and Masculine Sexual Privilege in Contemporary Urban Mali

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Abstract

The neoliberal transformation of Mali's burgeoning capital city, Bamako, has undermined men's capacity to provide for their households and dependents even as it has boosted women's economic participation, leading senior males to express mounting anxieties over their declining economic power. As more men find themselves unable to assure economic stability for the women and children under their charge, many double down in their bid to exercise authority over women, particularly their wives. Some men use polygynous marriage as a means of performing certain masculine ideals, acquiring social prestige despite their diminished roles as breadwinners. Others find maintaining multiple female partners outside marriage similarly useful for offsetting their economic disadvantages. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with men and women in Bamako, this paper examines the extent to which modern masculinity in the city remains predicated on the control of women and their bodies.

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Keywords

Mali, masculinity, gender, polygyny, sexuality

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Introduction

In recent decades, masculinity has become subject to increasing scrutiny from scholars in a wide range of disciplines. Some of this scrutiny has, unfortunately, come in the form of what Gutmann et al. (2021: S5) critique as “biobabble” – that is, “reductionist and simplistic pseudobiological explanations about human “nature”” with regard to men’s behaviour. While such explanations have been especially prevalent regarding violence and its alleged links to male biology, similar explanations circulate regarding behaviours pertaining to sexuality and marriage for which men are ostensibly “hard-wired.” Similar explanations may turn to demography or cultural variables but remain largely reductionist insofar as they exclude vital context from the analysis. This article considers the enactment of masculinity in the city Bamako, capital of the West African republic of Mali, within the overlapping sites of heterosexual marriage and men’s sexual relations with women. Specifically, it seeks to clarify links between masculinity and two practices: polygyny (the form of marriage in which a man has multiple wives) and sexual infidelity.

Making such an assessment of African society is a daunting task for any non-African scholar. The analyses of both polygyny and infidelity are particularly problematic, given the long and troubling history of Western stereotypes about hypersexualised African males, as well as discourses that use polygynous marriage to advance racialising projects (see analysis of these discourses in Heath, 2023). Many scholars, activists, and organisations continue to treat polygyny as a “harmful cultural practice” (see discussion in Lawson and Gibson, 2018). My intention here is neither to criticise cultural practices in Bamako nor to single out male Bamako residents as solely responsible for the oppression of female Bamako residents. No reductionist approach, moreover, can account for either polygyny or sexual infidelity. Neither can be understood as purely demographic phenomena, for example as artefacts of imbalanced sex ratios, though such explanations are certainly widespread in Bamako and beyond. Nor can polygyny be explained mainly as a reflection of Islam, even though religious narratives about the practice play a prominent role in justifying it among Bamako residents.

Here I seek to situate polygyny as well as sexual infidelity within local understandings of masculinity, and to situate these understandings in turn within a broader political-economic context. As Kopano Ratele has argued, any analysis of masculinity must consider the “intersection of gender and poverty/unemployment in *male* lives” (2008: 517; emphasis in original).

I contend that behaviours such as polygyny and sexual infidelity, far from being “natural” expressions of male biology, are best grasped as intrinsically *social* practices that men use to fashion themselves as persons and to shape their identities in the eyes of their peers. We can think of these behaviours as “masks” in this respect, simultaneously constituting one being while representing someone or something else. The concepts of masks and masking, and of the various personae that masks embody and portray, can help us appreciate the complex nature of personhood and social interaction (Picton, 1990; Van Wolputte, 2020). Masks do not exist on a purely psychological or

symbolic plane, however. As I will show, their fabrication and deployment are always influenced by political-economic forces.

This article is based upon research from a broader examination of how marriage and specifically polygyny has changed in a dynamic urban landscape (see Whitehouse, 2023). I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Bamako during three visits between July 2010 and January 2020, amounting to twelve months spent in the city across that nearly decade-long period. During these visits, in addition to conducting my own interviews and participant observation, I worked with local and American research assistants to conduct focus group discussions and interview a sample of fifty-eight husbands and fifty wives in neighbourhoods throughout the city. While we did not select this sample randomly (we deliberately over-represented spouses in polygynous marriages, and also recruited somewhat better-educated males than the average), we designed it to reflect the diversity of Bamako's population in terms of socioeconomic status, labour market participation, and ethnicity. Some interviews and discussions were conducted in Manding, the dominant language in Bamako, and others in French, Mali's official language. Throughout this article, I draw from these interviews (using pseudonyms when referring to interviewees) and discussions to illustrate how men have navigated changes to gender roles and marriage in their community. While the population of Bamako is heterogeneous in terms of ethnicity and regional origin, I have found throughout my research that certain norms and practices regarding marriage and sexuality have become generalised among Bamako residents. I therefore do not distinguish between interviewees of different ethnicities, and instead I focus on aspects common to a broad spectrum of city dwellers.

Bamako's Shifting Economy, Gender Roles, and Gender Ideology

With a population currently around three million, Bamako is among the fastest-growing cities in Africa and the world. Its dramatic demographic growth has been accompanied by significant changes to its economy and social structure (Mesple-Somps et al., 2014). Since the 1980s, the neoliberal transformation of the Malian economy (including the downsizing of the civil service, the privatisation of state-owned enterprises, and the growing importance of informal employment for many households) has reconfigured everyday life for Bamako residents. Sluggish economic growth, persistent youth unemployment, inflation, cyclical drought, and public spending cuts combined to lower already depressed urban living standards.¹ Currency devaluations in 1984 and 1994 made urban life significantly more expensive (Bertrand, 2013; Marcoux and Piché, 1998); the urban cost of living continues to skyrocket today. These changes have diminished economic opportunity in Bamako, delayed young people's entry into marriage (Bagayogo and Coulibaly, 2014; Bleck and Lodermeier, 2020) and undercut men's earning capacity.

Despite these economic disruptions, for people in Bamako and throughout Mali, marriage remains nearly universal, an essential component of adult status. Islam, the religion

of at least 90 per cent of Bamako residents, has had a pervasive and growing influence on social and political life in recent years (Schulz, 2012). But social life in Bamako is also shaped by local customs and institutions, particularly where gender is concerned. To explain how these customs shape social life, I turn to the concept of gender ideology.

In feminist analysis, gender ideology concerns “normative beliefs about the proper roles for and fundamental natures of women and men in human societies” (Philips, 2001: 6016). Each society is characterised by one or more dominant gender ideologies composed mostly of unquestioned assumptions about what it means to belong to a gender category and how members of the different gender categories should relate. Gender ideologies model social reality. A patriarchal gender ideology, more specifically, entails “a cultural understanding that men should have power and authority over women that women should not have over themselves or men” (Philips, 2001: 6019).

Much evidence suggests that the dominant gender ideology in Bamako, and in Mali at large, is highly patriarchal. On surveys, most Malians voice opposition to equal rights for women, indicating instead that women should remain bound by “traditional laws and customs” (Afrobarometer, 2013: 17). Women often give far more “traditionalist” responses than men when answering survey questions about sensitive gender issues. During a 2018 survey in Bamako, 75 per cent of wives responded that a husband could justifiably beat his wife, while only 26 per cent of husbands gave that response. In total, 54 per cent of wives agreed with the statement that husbands should be allowed to beat wives who refused sexual intercourse with them, while less than 7 per cent of husbands agreed (DHS, 2019).² These responses appear to suggest that male domination over females seldom relies on physical violence, as females have internalised strongly gendered codes of conduct.³ They might also suggest that women are more reluctant than men to voice non-normative opinions on those sensitive gender issues.

Surveys such as the Demographic and Health Survey point to women’s diminished agency regarding sexuality. In 2018, only 36 per cent of Bamako wives reported being able to ask their partner to use a condom, and just 28 per cent reported being able to refuse sexual intercourse (DHS, 2019). While Malian cultural norms accord women a right to request and enjoy sex with their husbands, women are also socialised to satisfy their husbands’ sexual needs and to accept the imposition of unwanted intercourse (Diallo, 2004).

Such attitudes, emphasising male pleasure and decision-making prerogatives, combine with male provider ideals and expectations of male authority over women to form what Wyrod (2016: 25), based on his research in Kampala, Uganda, calls “masculine sexual privilege.” Men see their ability to dispense money to their dependents as giving them the right to maintain multiple sexual partners. Their normative status as household heads contributes to what Wyrod describes as a “reservoir of privilege that men could draw on when their relationships became stressed, often due to financial problems” (2016: 119).

Gender ideology also defines forms of labour and domestic tasks for males and females. A wife’s domestic duties in Bamako include doing the cooking, shopping, housekeeping, water fetching, and laundry, as well as supervising the home and the

children's upbringing more generally (Tounkara, 2015). Although most households with sufficient means employ at least one girl domestic worker, even a well-off wife cannot outsource these duties completely to her paid help. She cannot escape the obligation to cook for her husband⁴, since women fear that poorly fed husbands are more likely to stray (de Suremain and Razy, 2011). Thus domesticity remains at the core of married women's everyday lives, regardless of whether they work outside the home. The largest occupational category for women in the city has long been "housewife" (in French, *ménagère* or *femme au foyer*; see Rondeau, 1996), despite the fact that over half the city's women report being employed (DHS, 2013, 2019; INSTAT, 2018). Essentially, the housewife category includes any woman who does not collect a salary and even some who do.

While a wife might use her own money to pay for her cooking utensils, clothing, social and personal expenses, according to the dominant gender ideology in Bamako, her husband should be the primary provider. Under a type of "patriarchal bargain" (Kandiyoti, 1988), the city's residents tacitly accept a set of gender relations that reduces women's autonomy in exchange for economic protection. Under this bargain, husbands are supposed to acquire and maintain their families' dwellings, give their wives money for all purchases of food, and cover dependents' health care and school fees (Miseli, 1998). They should be able to receive guests, including relatives from out of town, with hospitality. A man's duty to house his dependents is central to his identity, and a married woman is always at least nominally housed by her husband. Asked to cite the qualities of a good husband, most interviewees we canvassed began with "good provider." By local custom, men are also supposed to control the mobility, labour, and marriages of their households' younger members (Bertrand, 2013; Meillassoux, 1981). Men act as the official arbiters in all important matters concerning their households and wives. Most Bamako women aged 15–49 report that they lack the final say over their own health care, major purchases, or even making visits to family and friends; that power lay firmly with husbands. Women typically do, however, maintain control over the income that they bring home, remaining theoretically free to spend it on themselves or their children. In total, 88 per cent of Bamako women report that they alone decide how to spend the money they earn (DHS, 2019).

For many years, the ideal of a husband as both economic provider and ultimate authority in family matters has no longer matched marital reality for many Bamako dwellers. If Bamako husbands' formal role as decision-makers and authority figures has held relatively constant over time, their capacity as providers has been undermined by a set of economic changes well known to readers familiar with many African urban settings since the 1980s (Vaa et al., 1989).⁵ Under the conditions of Bamako's neoliberal transition imposed by multilateral financial institutions, weak labour demand and rising costs of living have considerably strained men's ability to earn incomes and provide (even nominally) for their families, jeopardising the terms of the patriarchal bargain. As in so many African cities, young men in Bamako therefore frequently find themselves unable to satisfy the local conditions of adulthood—namely, earning a living wage and marrying—and thereby see themselves as forced to live as "(non)men" (Ratele, 2021: 771) in a state

of “waithood” (Honwana, 2012). Yet, while frequently unable to play the role of dominant providers for their households, men remain under strong social pressure to embody that role. Even in the face of significant changes to Mali’s economy, as Schultz (2021, 873) writes, “the hegemonic foil of becoming a breadwinner and household head remains of central importance.”

Against the backdrop of economic precarity, older males who have attained adult status and who act as household heads have also struggled, particularly to meet kin demands for hospitality and economic assistance. Wives have increasingly had to contribute their own earnings toward expenses such as food and housing that were supposedly men’s responsibility (Bertrand, 2013; Marie, 2011; Miseli, 1998; Rondeau, 1996). Nevertheless, women remain compelled to pay tribute to the patriarchal bargain that recognises only men as household breadwinners (Diallo, 2009). Only under exceptional conditions can a woman claim the title of household head – if her husband is deceased, or durably absent, for example. Still, growing numbers of women become *de facto* household heads when men come up short economically (Marie, 2011).⁶ These women generally avoid the official title of household head and represent themselves as housewives, even when they participate in the labour force and even when they are their households’ primary earners. A woman’s economic activity in no way diminishes her tendency to justify her participation in the labour market by representing her domestic role (wife/mother) as her primary responsibility (Bertrand, 2004). By framing her role in this way, she can build up social esteem without challenging conservative gender norms.

In short, wives in Bamako must be careful not *to be seen* to supplement, let alone supplant, their husbands’ roles as economic providers (de Suremain and Razy, 2011). This role, and thus the patriarchal bargain, remains symbolically powerful: Even when men fail to hold up their end of the bargain, their wives are still expected to respect the bargain and usually do, fearing the social sanctions for breaking that bargain (for example, by leaving their husbands and setting up their own independent households). A woman who becomes her household’s breadwinner must maintain the bargain’s pretence, quietly passing her earnings to her husband and allowing him to preserve his dignity (Schulz, 2012; Vaa et al., 1989), not to mention his masculine sexual privilege. This generally unspoken arrangement enables men to preserve their official positions of domestic authority, masking their own difficulties as providers.

Inevitably, however, women’s heightened economic importance in twenty-first century Bamako has altered the city’s gendered political economy and relations between men and women, marital or otherwise. “Women have changed completely!” exclaimed a radio host in 2011 when I asked what had changed with respect to marriage since her parents’ generation. “Now, if a woman doesn’t have means, men don’t want her anymore. You must have the means, a car If you don’t, he’ll leave you. Now women are buying clothes for their men, cars even, everything.” Many upholders of tradition and defenders of Bamako’s social status quo are alarmed by the prospect of women gaining the financial upper hand. Surveys (e.g., DHS, 2019) show that men play dominant economic roles in most households, but interviewees agreed that collectively, men have lost

much of their former influence within their households, and women have gained. Male elders who previously controlled the marriage process for the young men and women in their charge, either by arranging the union or approving it and often financing the wedding celebration, increasingly sense their power slipping away. They complain that *du fanga tiyenna* – as translated by anthropologist Dorothea Schulz (2012: 48), “patriarchal authority has gone kaput.”⁷ Such “patriarchal anxieties” (Heywood and Ivey, 2021: 1062) have grown widespread in Bamako, contributing to a shared perception that the social prerogatives of manhood are being steadily eaten away.

Yet men’s domestic authority has by no means vanished in urban Mali. In spite of the many factors constraining men’s economic standing with respect to women discussed above, sexuality, both within marriage and without, remains a powerful tool enabling men to shore up their status and power within the home at women’s expense.

Normative Polygyny

Political scientist Stephen Macedo (2015: 150), referring to fundamentalist Mormons, uses the term “normative polygamy” to designate a social environment in which plural marriage is understood as not merely a possible outcome but a mainstream, socially legitimate, and perhaps preferred practice. Polygamy – specifically polygyny – has long been and certainly remains a significant part of Bamako’s marriage system, by which I mean the combination of cultural practices, social norms, formal and informal institutions, and power relations that shape the formation and experience of marriage in the city. In 2018, about one in four married women and one in ten married men in Bamako indicated that they were in a polygynous marriage (DHS, 2019). Normative polygyny is therefore a prominent feature of the local marriage system, making every union at least potentially polygynous. Plural marriage is by no means restricted to elite-status or wealthy men. In fact, polygyny is *negatively* correlated with Malians’ socioeconomic status, and rates of polygynous marriage were lowest in the higher economic strata (DHS, 2019; Diamouténé, 2015). Impoverished Bamako husbands might seek out polygyny to benefit from their wives’ diverse income-generating activities and hedge their households against economic risks (de Suremain and Razy, 2011; Miseli, 1998).

“Monogamy isn’t worthwhile,” declared Yacouba, a 67-year-old market vendor with three wives, exemplifying the view of polygyny as normative. “Oneness is fitting only for God [*Kelenya ka di Allah dɔrɔn de la*],” he continued; “where men are concerned, it’s only the lack of means that keeps them monogamous. Otherwise, they should take two, even if they must borrow money to do so. That’s what is best.” Despite such confident pronouncements by some men, there was no consensus among male interviewees on the desirability of polygynous marriage: Many Bamako men did not aspire to it, and some were categorically opposed to it. Those in the latter camp still had to contend with normative polygamy in the form of peer pressure and trenchant remarks at their expense, however. As Joseph, a 50-year-old schoolteacher and the lone Christian husband in our interview sample, said, “Often, when you’re not polygamous, you’re treated like a weak

man, yet it is not a weakness.” Yet it was not the views of men like Joseph but rather of men like Yacouba that set the tone on polygamy in the city.

Normative polygyny, in this manner, shapes hierarchies of power and status among men. “He with only one wife is older brother to the bachelor” [*Muso kelen tigi ye cegana kɔrɔkɛ ye*], states a Manding proverb, suggesting that a monogamous husband suffers from many of the same challenges an unmarried man would. It thus frames monogamy as an inferior state, exposing husbands to various privations, particularly when their wives are away, ill, or otherwise indisposed to care for or engage in sexual relations with them (Luneau, 2010: 89). Spared such domestic inconveniences, the polygynous husband sits atop the social pyramid, “older brother” to bachelors and monogamists alike. He enjoys his marital status as a form of social distinction based on his masculine prerogatives. This distinction, as a key component of “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell, 1987) in the local context, is one important justification for the continued practice of polygyny in Bamako and throughout Mali.

Men have multiple reasons for entering into polygyny in Bamako. Based on interview data, I have grouped men’s stated personal reasons for entering into polygyny into categories that I call the “seven D’s” (Whitehouse, 2023: 53): along with distinction, these include domestic factors, duty to elders, desire, discipline, divine will, and demography. These categories are seldom clear-cut or mutually exclusive; justifications for marrying multiple wives often blend together.

The category I label “discipline” is, to my mind, the most salient for the purposes of exploring masculinity and masculine sexual privilege. Where distinction concerns the effect that taking another wife can have on a man’s relationships with his male peers, discipline concerns the effect that taking another wife can have on a man’s relationship(s) with his existing wife/wives. In short, it stems from a dynamic of divide-and-rule: as one man told sociologist Aly Tounkara, “When you have one wife, she imposes her law—you have to put up with all her whims; but when there are two of them, even three, you can play one against another and only grant favours to the most obedient” (2015: 142). A husband might, in other words, use polygyny to make a defiant wife fall into line: by adding another woman to his marriage, he pits his wives against each other in competition for his time, resources, and affections (Camara, 1978; de Jorio, 1997).⁸

This divide-and-rule theme arose frequently during interviews with Bamako husbands. Some interviewees frankly described using polygyny as a tactic to keep wives on their best behaviour:

There’s a certain kind of happiness with a woman that you can’t have with only one wife. Because the wife can do certain things, like not taking good care of your parents or not taking care of you – so if you take a second wife, it can lead [the first wife] to take good care of you. (Mahamadou, male, 23, market vendor, two wives)

When I married my second wife, I wasn’t getting along with the first. But after [my second marriage], she straightened up. The second later became intolerable, so I divorced her. (Souleymane, male, 55, driver, one wife)

I have a friend: Since he took a second wife, his first wife has become the best wife in the household today. But before his second marriage, she was a viper! (Madou, male, 46, civil servant, two wives)

With your second marriage, you really benefit from greater respect from the first wife; it changes completely. (Fousseyni, male, 55, civil servant, two wives)

If you enjoy peace 20 percent of the time as a monogamous husband, once you marry a second wife, you have peace 60 percent of the time. It multiplies your happiness. The peace you have in a polygynous marriage, you can't get that in a monogamous one. It took me some time before I remarried, and after I did, I regretted not remarrying earlier. (Sambou, male, 41, market vendor, two wives)

And polygyny's disciplinary effect can even benefit *monogamous* husbands in their bid to maintain power over their wives. Male interviewees pointed out that the mere threat of being joined by a co-wife might suffice to prevent a wife from misbehaving. As Malik (45, office employee, two wives) put it, "The very fact that there is this possibility of having a second wife, the fact that it's there calls her to order, it brings her to order." Some research has suggested that in high-polygyny communities, wives in monogamous unions actually have *less* bargaining power with their husbands than wives in polygynous unions; this pre-emptive disciplinary effect might explain why.⁹

Polygyny can signal an already-married man's social standing, indexing his appeal to women outside of his marriage. At the same time, the very prospect of it can remind his existing wife or wives of their subordinate position within the domestic hierarchy. Such a husband wears many masks, showing a different side to his peers than he shows to his elders, and a different side to his wife than he shows to his mistress.

Sexual Infidelity and Masculine Sexual Privilege

The preceding section evokes a sexual double standard that has long shaped male-female relations in Mali (to say nothing of other societies). A female Bamako resident critiqued this double standard in 2018:

We have grown up in a society filled with prejudice against women, making them wear a yoke that might smother them while claiming to protect them against infidelity. We prevent women from having friends, as though a woman with links to other men were at higher risk of cheating on her husband. This is like saying that women are weak beings who cannot control their impulses

What disgusts me is that this rigour is not applied to men. Married men can hang out with as many women as they want, can even pick up girls, abusing their positions of power without anyone taking offence. If a married man is caught cheating on his wife, he will say that he has a right to four wives and that he is getting ready to take a second wife.

But even if this were true, we often forget that religion strictly prohibits intimate relations with one who will be the second wife prior to marriage. We forget that it was to avoid infidelity that Islam allows polygamy

Even more discouraging, a man seeking divorce because his spouse was unfaithful is encouraged, while a woman seeking divorce for the same reason is called “stupid,” an “insolent woman,” “disrespectful,” etc....

I would like people to denounce men’s infidelity the same way they denounce women’s. I want those who have committed infidelity to be judged by their actions, not by their sex. (Touré, 2018)

Bamako residents use the Manding euphemisms *tilenbaliya* and *tilenɲogɲebaliya* (literally, “lack of being honest/lack of being straight with each other”) to refer to sexual infidelity; a related term, *ko lankolonw* (literally, “empty/worthless things”), refers more generically to “naughty acts” or “fooling around” – a category that includes flirting and other seductive behaviours in addition to sexual intercourse. A common French euphemism for infidelity is *faire les bêtises* (literally, “to make mistakes”/“to do foolish things”).

There is no accurate way to gauge the proportion of husbands or wives who actually participate in extramarital sexual relations. From interviews and focus group discussions, however, the clear *perception* among men and women in Bamako is that marital infidelity is rampant and rising. “[Men and women] have changed,” said Sambou (male, 56, teacher, two wives). “Before, wives would be faithful. Infidelity wasn’t so widespread. But where we are now, infidelity has become a national scourge.”

Perceptions of widespread adultery reflected deep-seated misgivings about society’s direction in the era of neoliberal globalisation (cf. Smith, 2017). Three significant developments affecting life in Bamako, all of them emerging during the first decade of the twenty-first century, deserve emphasis in this regard. First, mobile phones came into common usage, making telecommunications accessible to virtually every adult. Second, affordable Chinese-made motorcycles facilitated travel around town; known locally as *djakartas*, they cost about one-fifth the price of the Yamahas that had previously dominated the local market. Whereas only 28 per cent of Bamako households owned a motorcycle in 2001, nearly 70 per cent did in 2018 (INSTAT, 2018). Third, in neighbourhoods throughout Bamako, private entrepreneurs began opening small, discreet establishments selling alcohol and offering rooms by the hour. One journalist estimated that the city was home to over 500 of these so-called *bars chinois*, so named because most belonged to expatriate Chinese entrepreneurs (Tembely, 2017) – another product of globalisation. If hotel room trysts were once a privilege of elites in a few pricey locations downtown, the *bar chinois* brought them, along with inexpensive commercial sex, to the masses where they lived. “And it’s not just young people going there either, it’s older ones too, married people,” fretted one imam to me in 2012. “It’s very serious. [Infidelity] has always been there, but the *bars chinois* have added to the gravity of the situation.”

Taken together, these developments had indelibly altered Bamako's social landscape by the time my fieldwork began in 2010. People who once had little choice but to submit to the mutual surveillance system of the extended family household and residential neighbourhood can now escape that system's gaze, at least for a few hours. The mobile phone provides the means to establish a contact in complete privacy – one Bamako journalist described it as a “vector of infidelity” (Gnimadi, 2009) – while the *djakarta* facilitates lovers' covert liaisons, usually at *bars chinois* far from their own neighbourhoods. And many city residents have the impression that these developments have generalised once-rare illicit behaviours.

Bamako residents view male infidelity as more common than female infidelity. In focus group discussions, participants' estimates of the percentage of Bamako husbands who cheated on their wives ranged from 60–100. Impressions were just as bad among members of the interview sample: “Out of 100 men, well, you might find 100 unfaithful ones,” said Ali (male, 39, unemployed, one wife). Women often described a penchant for straying as an essential male characteristic. “Infidelity is in men's nature, nobody can do anything about it,” said Niaghalé (female, 54, market vendor with one co-wife). Mamou (female, 31, secretary with one co-wife) made a direct connection between men's tendency to stray and the institution of polygyny: “Men's infidelity is natural for them, for they think that they cannot limit themselves to one wife.” Such explanations are often grounded in notions of a biologically determined male sex drive casting polygyny as the only responsible answer (cf. Spronk, 2014). If a woman refuses to share her husband with a co-wife, this thinking goes, she will end up sharing him with a mistress instead (Blanc and Gage, 2000).

The potential consequences of extramarital affairs remain highly gendered: a wife catching her husband cheating is expected to forgive him, while a husband catching his wife cheating is expected to divorce her (cf. Smith, 2009). This sexual double standard has even found expression in the legal system in Mali, where in 1985, a court declared that a husband's adulterous behaviour did not render continued marriage to his wife impossible. Five years later, the same court ruled that a wife's adulterous behaviour rendered continued marriage to her husband impossible.¹⁰ Many Bamako residents, judges included, construct male infidelity as natural or even inevitable, while attributing female infidelity to weak moral fibre and poor upbringing.

Moreover, some people believe that Islam, and specifically its scriptures allowing men to practice polygyny, effectively gives husbands *carte blanche* to engage in extramarital affairs:

A man can be unfaithful because religion authorises him to take up to four wives. But he should do it respectfully, in such a way that his wife never crosses paths with his girlfriend. In my own case, I know that my husband is cheating on me, but he has always kept it secret and I see this as a sign of respect. He could have done it openly, without respecting me. (Aminata, female, 21, housewife, no co-wife)

To many husbands, the ability to pursue extramarital sexual relations offers another way to maintain power over their wives. Tiemoko (male, 50, civil servant, one wife) described

a husband's ability to seek out relationships with other women as "useful, because your wife won't underestimate you." Significantly, he added, a man facing difficulties providing for his wife might find such relationships particularly appealing: "If your financial situation is stable, she'll respect you. On the other hand, if the situation deteriorates and you don't have much money, she won't respect you." Tiemoko stressed that husbands must exercise their right to seek the company of other women, if only to remind their wives of their subordinate position. "When you have no happiness and are always unhappy with your wife, you go out *pour aller draguer* [to pick up women]," he said. "If you're always with your wife without going out, she can even underestimate you. She must know that you're going out, even if you're just taking a walk." Here Tiemoko clearly articulated masculine sexual privilege as a means of preventing wives from "underestimating" their husbands. We might consider masculine sexual privilege as a mask that some men don to conceal their economic difficulties and project an aura of social and sexual power. Donning such masks enables men to preserve the existing patriarchal hierarchy within the home, even when they struggle to meet their domestic obligations as breadwinners.

Single women, concerned that their own paths to marriage might be blocked by a shortage of economically viable single men, are frequently complicit in this pattern of behaviour. Given the prospect that an extramarital affair can be legitimised into marriage, such women might be tempted by married men's romantic overtures. "A man can easily have a *deuxième bureau* [a mistress] because he tells her, 'Act properly, and if I'm happy I'll marry you,'" Penda, a female journalist, told me in 2010. "There are many cases of married men with mistresses who really take advantage of many women like that."¹¹ Meanwhile, wives such as Aminata (quoted above) are frequently complicit in their husbands' masking performances by not confronting their husbands about their infidelities.

Conclusion

Making ethnographic observations about the most intimate aspects of people's lives, particularly sexuality, is extraordinarily difficult and problematic. The findings presented in this article, therefore, stem primarily from interviews and focus group discussions, and thus may fail to capture important distinctions between informants' discourse and behaviour, as well as between their perceptions and lived realities. Nevertheless, I believe that these findings reveal significant aspects of the cultural frameworks that underlie ongoing tensions and changes with respect to gender roles in Bamako, and perhaps in Mali more broadly.

The patriarchal anxieties that have accompanied the uncertainties of Mali's neoliberal economy fuelled a public backlash against efforts to reform national family law in 2009. Foreign donors and women's rights organisations supported a progressive set of laws aimed at eliminating provisions that discriminated against women (Soares, 2011). Perhaps most prominently, this reform would have replaced one section of the 1962 marriage law stating that wives owed obedience to their husband with a new section stating that husbands and wives owed each other "mutual respect." The unprecedented uproar

that greeted proposed reforms, instigated by Islamic civil society organisations, caught Malian politicians (overwhelmingly male and secular in their education and outlook) off guard. In the face of overwhelming criticism and opposition, they backed down and gave conservative, male-led Islamic interest groups free reign to draft the law to their liking. The legal requirement that wives obey their husbands was restored in 2011 (Whitehouse, 2023). Despite this return to the status quo ante, however, patriarchal anxieties persist in Bamako in light of male household heads' diminished economic capacity amid rising urban costs of living.

Masculine sexual privilege enables men in twenty-first-century Bamako to offset these anxieties. The significant place of polygyny in the local marriage system, which masks men's increasing economic dependence on women, operates in tandem with the gendered double standard regarding extramarital sexuality, which is masked and justified in Islamic terms, to reinforce men's superior position in domestic power structures. Thanks to masculine sexual privilege, male control over women's bodies and their sexuality remains strong despite women's increased economic and political participation. What might this situation suggest about masculinity in contemporary sub-Saharan African societies?

First, the Malian government's inability or unwillingness to reform its marriage and family laws, despite considerable political and economic incentives and even pressure emanating from donor governments, highlights the significance of patriarchal anxieties in neoliberal postcolonial societies. In Mali's case, efforts to shore up women's legal rights never took into account men's fears over their diminished standing in society and within the household. Would-be reformers in Mali, not to mention their foreign partners, were quite unprepared for the strength of the opposition to their proposed law because they did not appreciate the extent to which economic precarity had already destabilised masculine notions of self-worth. In a more favourable economic environment, men might not have been so concerned about women gaining legal rights, nor so easily mobilised against perceived threats to their masculine identities.

Second, at least in twenty-first-century urban settings, polygyny might be less a product of "traditional" African masculinity than a masking response to heightened economic uncertainty. The growing challenges that young men face in establishing themselves as self-sufficient adults have compelled many to delay marriage. Meanwhile, young women remain under considerable pressure to marry early: while the median age at first marriage in Bamako is 28.4 for men, it is only 19.7 for women (DHS, 2019). This substantial age disparity, coupled with high birth rates, creates a surplus of women on local marriage markets. Such a distortion offers more marital options to older men, leaving young women hard-pressed to find suitors who are both able to support them and committed to monogamy (Whitehouse, 2023).

Third, polygynous marriage cannot by itself explain the durability of male sexual privilege in a given setting. Those who call for abolishing polygyny, on the grounds that it oppresses women, overlook the fact that even in societies where formal polygynous unions have been made illegal or fallen out of favour, men continue to practice other forms of multi-partnered sexual behaviour.¹² In urban Kenya, for example, young men increasingly spurn polygyny while maintaining extramarital relations and long-term

parallel relationships with female partners (Spronk, 2014). The pathologisation of specific African masculinities, sexualities, or forms of marriage risks obscuring the role of structural economic factors in generating the conditions in which these relationships form.

When men perform their masculine sexual privilege, whether within marriage or without, they don masks for their fellow men and for the women whom they seek to dominate. But masculinity and the behaviours commonly associated with it are never primarily cultural or psychological, let alone biological, phenomena. To see beyond the masks, we must give greater scrutiny to the array of political and economic forces that have made the masquerade possible in the first place.

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Notes

1. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, over one in five men in their early 20s was unemployed in Bamako (Marcoux and Piché, 1998; INSTAT, 2019).
2. This permissive stance toward gender-based violence is intimately linked with polygyny: Survey data from 17 African countries reveal a positive correlation between tolerance for wife-beating and the polygyny rate. They also show women to be far more likely than men to justify wife-beating (Uthman et al., 2010).
3. Men we interviewed were almost evenly split between those who defended a husband's right to beat his wife (usually within certain limitations) and those who said they saw no reason for husbands to beat their wives.
4. Some scholars such as Clark (1995) and Mbah (2019) have presented women's control over the kitchen and household food provisioning as a mutually constitutive gendered sphere of influence, and a means of expressing female power and challenging patriarchy. Thanks to Ndubueze Mbah for this insight.
5. For examples from other African countries see Hannaford (2017) on Senegal, Matlon (2022) on Côte d'Ivoire, Spronk (2014) on Kenya, or Wyrod (2016) on Uganda.
6. Female-headed households tend to be poorer than male-headed households in Mali (van de Walle, 2013).
7. A more literal translation would read, "Household power is broken."
8. An Egyptian Islamic scholar once made a similar argument, paraphrased by Yamani (2008: 23), to justify plural marriage: "Polygamy in Islam can cure the illness of Westernised, masculine behaviour in the first wife, thus improving her haughty attitude towards her husband."

9. In Nigeria of the mid-1970s, demographer Ware (1979) found women in monogamous marriages less likely than those in polygynous marriages to refuse sex with their husbands during periods of postpartum recovery.
10. While Malian law does not mandate these differential outcomes, it allows judges considerable discretion in their rulings, which tend to reflect prevailing patriarchal norms (Toukara, 2012).
11. As Wittrup (1990: 134) found in The Gambia, husbands' ability to take additional wives made having girlfriends "a legal and acceptable part of the marriage system."
12. Guinea, Mali's neighbour to the southwest, passed a law prohibiting polygamy in 1966. Yet Guinea's rate of plural marriage remained among the world's highest, and in 2016 the prohibition was scrapped (Ammann, 2020).

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Author Biography

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Patriarchale Ängste und männliche sexuelle Privilegien im heutigen städtischen Mali

Zusammenfassung

Die neoliberale Umwandlung der aufstrebenden Hauptstadt Malis, Bamako, hat die Fähigkeit der Männer, für ihren Haushalt und ihre Angehörigen zu sorgen, untergraben, während gleichzeitig die wirtschaftliche Teilhabe von Frauen gestiegen ist, was dazu geführt hat, dass ältere Männer wachsende Besorgnis über ihre schwindende Macht in ihren Haushalten und in der Gesellschaft im Allgemeinen zum Ausdruck bringen. Da immer mehr Männer nicht in der Lage sind, die wirtschaftliche Stabilität der ihnen unterhaltsberechtigten Frauen und Kinder zu gewährleisten, erhöhen viele ihre Bemühungen, Autorität über Frauen, insbesondere über ihre Ehefrauen, auszuüben. Manche Männer nutzen die polygyne Ehe als Mittel zur Verwirklichung bestimmter Männlichkeitsideale, und erlangen, trotz ihrer geringeren Rolle als Ernährer, soziales Ansehen. Andere wiederum halten die Existenz mehrerer außerehelicher Partnerinnen für sinnvoll, um ihre wirtschaftlichen Nachteile auszugleichen. Basierend auf ethnografischer Feldforschung und Interviews mit Männern und Frauen in Bamako untersucht dieser Artikel, inwieweit die moderne Männlichkeit in der Stadt auf der Kontrolle von Frauen und ihren Körpern beruht.

Schlagwörter

Mali, Männlichkeit, Geschlecht, Polygynie, Sexualität