

“YOU WHO HAVE BEEN TO SCHOOL, WHAT HAVE YOU BECOME?": AN
ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF UNIVERSITY LIFE IN BENIN

By

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ABSTRACT

“YOU WHO HAVE BEEN TO SCHOOL, WHAT HAVE YOU BECOME?”: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF UNIVERSITY LIFE IN BENIN

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This dissertation examines the relationship between higher education and social mobility among students and their families in Benin, West Africa. In this study I draw on ethnographic research conducted at the public University of Abomey-Calavi in Cotonou, Benin in 2010. I utilize interviews, historical documents, and participant observation to analyze the shifting relationships that students have with their families.

In 1990 Benin had one of the lowest rates of enrollment at all levels – primary, secondary, and tertiary – in sub-Saharan Africa. Twenty years later, after numerous awareness campaigns and education policy adjustments, Benin’s educational system is overflowing with students. Among sub-Saharan African countries Benin is projected to have the second highest number of university students per 100,000 inhabitants by the year 2015. The rapid increase in student enrollments has been accompanied by efforts to build up the infrastructure within the education system, partially funded through international aid. Donors have played a significant role in shaping Benin’s education reform, in part because access to funding is often tied to Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers that must be approved by the World Bank.

In this dissertation I ask: How does the process of “becoming something” affect the students’ relationships with their families, many of whom have very little formal education? How do their experiences shed light on the effects of global initiatives designed to increase access to education as part of a larger strategy of poverty reduction?

Using Bourdieu’s theories of habitus and cultural capital, I analyze the shifting

relationships that students have with their family members. University students enjoy positions of status within their families, and express aspirations for upward mobility as adults. This growing segment of society, and their families and communities, have been told that education will enable them to go forward and “become something.” Yet such upward mobility is not necessarily transferred to all members of the extended family, leading to jealousy and resentment. In this dissertation I aim to present an alternative narrative to the dominant discourses on the benefits of education found throughout reports issued by the World Bank, UNICEF, USAID and other agencies, as well as to allow the reader insight into the lived experience of being a university student in Benin during a period of fantastic growth. I examine the excitement, ambiguity, and uncertainty that come with being a university student in Benin.

My findings suggest that there is a disjuncture between the elite aspirations of the students, including social status, upward mobility, and ability to reciprocate with their extended families, and their perceptions of possible success upon graduation. Particularly among students with lower socioeconomic backgrounds, education as a means of “becoming something” is an empty promise. This study contributes to literature on higher education policy in contemporary Africa, as well as the expanding body of scholarship examining higher education and social inequality.

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To Stu

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Key to Abbreviations

Bac – *Baccalaureate* Exam (secondary school diploma, also serves as tertiary entrance exam)

BEPC – *Brevet d’Etudes du Premier Cycle* (equivalent to 8th grade certificate)

CE.BE.LA.E. – *Centre Béninois des Langues Etrangères* (Benin Center for Foreign Languages)

CEP – Primary Study Certificate (equivalent to 6th grade certificate)

EFA – Education for All

EFA/FTI – Education for All Fast Track Initiative

FCFA – *Franc Communauté Financière Africaine* (Francophone West African currency)

HDI – Human Development Index

IIEP – International Institute for Educational Planning

IMF – International Monetary Fund

INSAE – *Institute National de la Statistique et de l’Analyse Economique du Bénin*

IREEP – Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy

MDGs – Millennium Development Goals

NGO – Non-Governmental Organization

STG/MST – Sexually Transmitted Grades/*Moyenne Sexuellement Transmise*

UAC – University of Abomey-Calavi

UNDP – United Nations Development Programme

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNICEF – United Nations Children’s Fund

USAID – U.S. Agency for International Development

WB – World Bank

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

TOVIKLIN, Benin, 22 October 2008 – “We want to go to school, achieve primary education, and go forward in order to become ministers, civil servants, teachers, physicians, top executives,” sang 12 young girls from Toviklin, a rural town in the southwest of Benin.

Thus began a press release marking the inauguration of the fourth “All Girls to School” campaign organized and funded by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). The event was attended by Benin’s First Lady Chantal de Souza Yayi, Beninese singer and UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador Zeynab Habib, as well as representatives from the education sector. The highly publicized All Girls to School campaigns were created to “raise awareness among community leaders, parents, traditional chiefs, the media and children themselves about the vital importance of sending all children – both girls and boys – to school”

(www.unicef.org/infobycountry/benin_46117.html). The initiatives are just one segment in a larger education strategy in Benin designed to attain universal primary enrollment (UPE) and gender parity at all levels of formal schooling. The campaigns and initiatives center on discourses of inclusion – inclusion not only in access to education, but also in the benefits that having an education is supposed to entail for its recipients. Education has been positioned as central to “a world of peace, dignity, justice and equality” throughout campaign literature and reports (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 2007).

All Girls to School, and its parent initiative, Education for All (EFA), have contributed to a jump in primary school completion rates followed by a greater number of students attending secondary school. As secondary school completion rates increase, so too do the number of students who pass the *baccalauréat* (bac), an exam that serves as both a diploma and an entrance exam for university. These students are the academic elite; just 6 percent of Beninese youth attend tertiary education and the majority of these youth are from privileged social classes (Brossard and Foko

2008).

In this dissertation I present an alternative narrative to the dominant discourses on the benefits of education found throughout reports issued by the World Bank (WB), EFA, UNICEF, United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and other agencies, as well as to allow the reader insight into the lived experiences of university students in Benin during a period of fantastic growth. I examine the excitement, ambiguity, and uncertainty that come along with that role. In particular, I analyze how students experience the complicated social status that being an intellectual-in-training entails, and how that status affects distinct, yet overlapping, areas of their lives, including their career trajectories, choices of residence, and choices of mate.

My research follows the lives of a group of students attending the University of Abomey-Calavi in southern Benin in the year 2010. Most of them were born in or around 1990, the year that was marked by extreme political changes as Benin transitioned from a Marxist-Leninist state to a multi-party democracy. At that time Benin had one of the world's lowest primary and secondary school enrollment rates as well as significant gender disparities (Fichtner 2010). During that same year a national conference was held to address the education crisis and to renew faith among Beninese in their "deeply dysfunctional and inequitable" educational system (Overseas Development Institute (ODI) 2011:4). International donors such as WB, UNICEF, and UNESCO became involved with Benin's education policy and curriculum¹ (Bloom et al. 2006). In addition, *sensibilisations* (awareness campaigns) were held throughout the country to encourage attendance.

In one sense these campaigns, and related education policy, have been highly successful. By 2010, after twenty years of education reforms and campaigns, nearly 90 percent of all school-

¹ These agencies are often referred to as donors, but in reality, a large portion of the funds is granted in the form of loans.

aged children were enrolled in primary school, and Beninese children were spending more years in school (7.3 on average) than children in more than three-quarters of African countries (World Bank 2009). If the aim of these programs was simply to increase access to education, statistics show that they have achieved their targets.

Yet the campaigns have also hinged on notions of what education attainment can do for the recipients and their families. Ministers, civil servants, teachers, physicians, top executives – these are all career options available to those who complete their schooling. At least that is what the campaigns portray in their efforts to convince Beninese of the importance of attaining formal education. Noticeably absent from the list of preferred professions in the song that begins this chapter are farmer, seamstress, mechanic, market vendor, or hairdresser – much more common forms of livelihood for Beninese which do not require formal education.² What are the realities for students in Benin who not only complete primary school, but who progress through to university? How do their experiences shed light on the effects of global initiatives designed to increase access to education as part of a larger strategy of poverty reduction?

In 2000, a set of eight goals designed to reduce extreme poverty and improve living conditions globally were adopted by world leaders at an international summit organized by the UN; known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the goals have an achievement date of 2015.³ Currently Benin is one of the few sub-Saharan African countries on target to achieve universal primary education, the second goal specified in the MDG. The rapid increase in

² Training for trades such as hairdressing, sewing, and carpentry is often done through apprenticeships, which last for several years. Apprenticeships do not fall within the formal education system, although they are partially regulated under a separate Ministry.

³ The eight over-arching goals are, 1) End Poverty and Hunger, 2) Universal Education, 3) Gender Equality, 4) Child Health, 5) Maternal Health, 6) Combat HIV/AIDS, 7) Environmental Sustainability, 8) Global Partnership

student enrollments has been accompanied by efforts to build up the infrastructure within the education system, partially funded through international aid. Donors have played a significant role in shaping Benin's education reform, in part because access to funding (ranging from \$49 million per year in 1999 to over \$83 million per year in 2007) is often tied to Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers that must be approved by the WB (Engel, et al. 2011). One such program, the \$76 million dollar Education for All Fast Track Initiative (EFA/FTI) initiative, has been successful in building capacity to accommodate the increasing numbers of students who attend primary school in Benin (UNESCO 2010).⁴

Yet social demand⁵ for higher education is steadily growing among all social classes; Benin has one of the fastest growing rates of enrollment in higher education in sub-Saharan Africa and is projected to have the second highest number of students per 100,000 inhabitants by the year 2015 (Brossard and Foko 2008). As the 2015 MDG deadline approaches, reports abound on the status of each country that receives funding, and many of the funders' yearly reports call attention to the positive effects that educating children have on families.⁶ Benin has been highlighted in several of these reports as a success story because of the turnaround of the educational system (USAID 2005; UNESCO 2011; WB 2012). The students at UAC today have spent their entire academic careers in an educational system that has been influenced by these international organizations; theoretically they *are* the success stories. This growing segment of

⁴ Projects include building primary schools, training teachers, and building latrines for existing schools.

⁵ The term "social demand" refers to the number of students accounted for in enrollment statistics and projected for a period of ten years (Brossard and Foko 2008).

⁶ Reports commissioned by, and sometimes created by, the funders of education initiatives in Africa are often lengthy, sometimes over 200 pages long, but are also generally quantitative in nature. The majority of the information is in the form of tables, with significant gaps in data for Benin.

society, and their families and communities, have been told that education will enable them to go forward and “become something” (Aboh 2006:606). They are to be the ministers, top executives, and doctors of tomorrow. Becoming something entails not only having a job, but also attaining an elevated social status, perhaps owning a car, and living in a nice home (ibid). Yet are these expectations realistic? How does the process of “becoming something” affect the students’ relationships with their families, many of whom have very little formal education?

A characteristic shared in the majority of conversations about the university student experience in Benin is an emphasis on jealousy, and the link between jealousy and access to education. The link is important because a significant portion (approximately 80 percent) of Benin’s school-aged population has not attended formal schooling beyond the primary level (WB World Development Indicators 2012). While education is compulsory for all children between the ages of six and eleven, in contemporary Benin it is not uncommon for only some of the children in a family to be sent to school. This decision is dependent on a combination of factors including finances, grades on entrance exams, and the need for children with various skills to remain in the household (Isiugo-Abanihe 1985, UNESCO 2005, Zhang, Kao and Hannum 2007). A common family strategy in many African countries over the past 50 years has been to view certain children as insurance, and to hedge one’s bets by keeping some children involved in household maintenance while others are sent to school (Goody 1989). This practice still exists in some families, as several of the students in my study indicated. One family in particular used an arbitrary method to determine which children were schooled and which were not; odd numbered children in the birth order were sent to school and even numbered students worked around the home and on the family farm.

The elimination of primary school fees in recent years has increased the number of

families who send all of their children to school, but the transition rate between primary and secondary is less than 50 percent (UNESCO 2011). As noted above, just 6 percent of youth between ages 18 and 25 attend tertiary institutions in Benin. These higher education facilities are located predominantly in urban centers, and students from rural areas must relocate to attend; in some cases, they live with members of their extended families (Isiugo-Abanihe 1985). Other students are able to live in residences on campus, including those who attend UAC. The campus environment may allow for a modicum of freedom that students were not able to enjoy at other times in their lives; their movements are monitored much less than when they are at home with family. Also, many students have far fewer domestic duties on campus than at home.

Whether the students live on campus or with family, their parents and other authority figures are in the unique position of giving up some of the power they have over their children or wards after years of inculcating moral guidance through home training. Relationships shift among the younger generation as tensions rise among siblings or co-generationalists who see their friends and relatives gain status or responsibilities, and eventually they drift apart. This is an important dynamic, and the conflict and negotiation in families is certainly a facet of education (Adepoju 2000; Gold 2005). University students are children in the family setting, yet are also on the cusp of adulthood. However, while some students take part in family meetings that emphasize their future roles as leaders, their studies may cause them to postpone marriage and starting families—events that signal maturity in Benin. Konings (2009) goes as far as to say that university graduates in many African countries are “obliged to defer their entry into adulthood indefinitely” (212) because they are not able to become financially independent, get married, and start their own families.

My findings suggest that there is a disjuncture between the elite aspirations of the

students, including social status, upward mobility, and ability to reciprocate with their extended families, and their perceptions of possible success upon graduation. I argue that simply increasing access to higher education will not level inequalities in Beninese society. Instead of creating family stability and upward mobility for the entire group, my research suggests that students who would have the most impact on their families' futures displayed a greater fear of disappointing their families and of the ability of their extended family members to use supernatural forces as a leveling force. My research also suggests that as an indirect result of the All Girls to School efforts, marriage patterns are likely to change in the coming decade as Beninese men come to terms with educated women as potential spouses. Students, therefore, are faced with a paradox. Their education has been presented to them, their families, and their communities as a means of becoming successful and of being included in the formal employment sector. Yet the opportunities to do so are limited. Ostensibly they could participate in the sector of the economy that is steadily growing, the informal sector. However, according to students at UAC, doing so signifies that their education was not as necessary as had been portrayed by the campaigns. More importantly (to the students) the informal sector is beneath the social status that university students enjoy.

Significance and Purpose of the Study

Benin is a small, narrow West African country located on the Gulf of Guinea. It ranks 167 out of 187 on the Human Development Index⁷ (HDI) (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] 2011). Benin's population is estimated at 9,500,000 with a land area of 112,622 square kilometers (UIS 2011). Benin's neighbors include francophone Republic of Niger and Burkina Faso to the north, Togo to the west, and anglophone Nigeria to the east. The

⁷ The HDI was introduced in 1990 as an alternative to traditional GDP-based development indices. HDI measures health, education, and income in an effort to broadly define well-being.

national census in 2002 revealed 59 ethnic groups, the most dominant of which include the Fon, Yoruba, Bariba, Adja, and Dendi. The dominant local language in southern Benin is Fon, which is spoken by over 50 percent of the population. The majority of Beninese identify as Christian (62.2 percent). Muslims account for 24.4 percent of the population, and 17.3 percent identify as Vodoun practitioners (CIA World Factbook 2012). The literacy rate is 54 percent for youth (ages 15 to 24) and 42 percent for all Beninese over the age of 15.⁸ Gross enrollment in primary school is 126 percent,⁹ secondary school is 54 percent, and tertiary education is 6 percent. According to the WB (2012), 47 percent of the population lives under the international poverty line of U.S. \$1.25 per day. Access to education has long depended on socioeconomic status, but disparities have decreased substantially since the early 2000s.¹⁰

While Benin is one of the poorest countries in Sub-Saharan Africa - with a GDP per capita of \$739 USD - the economy has been growing steadily at a rate of 2.9 percent. However, the majority of that growth has been in the informal¹¹ sector, which has been estimated to account for 95 percent of the GDP, the highest of any African or Latin American country for which there is data (Bierschenk 2009). Declines in the formal sector have been due in part to Benin's commitment to "control recruitment" in the civil service in the same Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers that were required to obtain funding for education (WB 2011). Yet students are reluctant to participate in a sector that represents a lower social standing, and the majority of the

⁸ Female literacy rate for youth is 43 percent and 29 percent for adults.

⁹ Gross enrolled students can exceed 100 percent due to over-aged students and repeaters.

¹⁰ In 2001 wealthy children were five times more likely to attend secondary school than poor children, as of 2006 they are less than three times more likely to do so.

¹¹ "Informal," in this context, means that the occupations are not officially regulated by the Beninese government, and therefore the government does not receive tax on the profits. Cross-border trade, micro-enterprises, and small-scale agriculture make up the majority of the informal economy in Benin (Bierschenk 2009).

students in my research indicated that they would rather face unemployment than participate in the informal sector.

One might ask why a study about current students has a focus on post-graduate employment opportunities. I argue that much of the conversations that students have on campus is about the future, and about their place in the future. Students see their education as a means to an end, and not as a permanent state of being. It is a way for them to gain qualifications in order to be something. The education campaigns that have characterized their entire academic careers have been couched in terms of what their education can do for not just them, but for their families and for their country. When the World Bank measures poverty on a global level, one of the indicators it uses is what they call “non-monetary poverty.” This type of poverty is quantified using a formula including the number of deaths under 40, the number of illiterate adults, and the number of individuals who do not have access to potable water. Increasing access to schooling is seen as one way of reducing the number of illiterate individuals in a society, and will ostensibly reduce non-monetary poverty. Experts have advised Benin’s Ministries of Education regarding the benefits of education “within the framework of poverty reduction” (WB 2003:29). Yet the poverty rates in 2010 remained almost the same as they were in 1990 (36.8 percent in 2006), and studies indicate that poverty inequality (the gap between rich and poor) has actually increased in urban areas (WB 2011).

This dissertation speaks to both inclusion and exclusion. While in school, specifically at the tertiary level, students are becoming part of a group of intellectuals. Schools, particularly those that remove students from their family homes, are spaces that accord students freedom to do significant self-work in order to embody the social statuses they would like to attain. They are taught not just academic subjects, but how to be a certain type of individual according to the

curriculum, existing French notions of intellectuals and status, and the rhetoric eschewed by the numerous education campaigns. Yet for those who are the first in their families to go to university, their inclusion in one social group may cause problems with their extended families. If students display attitudes of superiority, their families and community members may feel resentment and jealousy. These feelings of jealousy and inequality sometimes lead to witchcraft in Benin, and thus the students' close family members may encourage students to limit their participation in extended family gatherings to keep them out of danger. Inclusion in the status group of intellectuals, therefore, may lead to exclusion for these students. Even those who do not exhibit elitism may face jealousy from others in their home environments who feel that it is not fair that they were not given the same opportunities. The same behavioral changes that lead to inclusion and acceptance on campus may result in ridicule when they return home.

Yet not all students felt that their education served to exclude them from family. A small segment of the students who participated in this research felt that their position as intellectuals-in-training allowed them access to the group of family members who held power. Through their formal education, they had gained the qualifications necessary to be among the elders, despite their young age. These students were the least likely to fear witchcraft and family jealousy. They were also the students who appeared to have the greatest amount of what Bourdieu (1986) calls cultural capital when they arrived on campus. Cultural capital can be thought of as the cumulative effects of education and family environment on an individual, in essence a family background that includes exposure to the arts, educated parents, and reading or educational materials around the house.

Research on higher education has shown that students who arrive on campus with considerable amounts of cultural capital are more likely to feel at ease on the campus and in their

classrooms, socially and academically (Horvat & Antonio 1999; Mills 2008; Stuber 2009; Dumais & Ward 2010). They may believe that it is every bit their right to be there, and conversely, those who do not share their background or savvy do not belong. For students with little cultural capital, the transition between home and school is much more of a disjuncture and they become “travelers between two very different worlds” (Horvat & Antonio 1999:339).

Studies conducted in the United States and Europe, however, draw on a constrained model of family and household in which the interplay between the cultural capital and habitus of the *parents* determines, to a high degree, the cultural capital and habitus of their children. During the colonial period missionaries and churches were largely responsible for disseminating the nuclear family ideal (in which children belong *to*, and *with*, their parents) (Goody 1989; Alber 2004), and that family ideal continues to be promoted today through development campaigns in Benin. Alongside aging billboards encouraging families to send their girls to school are newer billboards for family planning depicting the “nuclear” family with a mother, father, and two children. Such ideals seem to have been taken to heart, as UAC linguistics professor Bienvenu Akoha¹² explained to me in 2005, “I have a small family because I am educated.” Yet Oyewumi (2002) asserts that “the nuclear family remains an alien form in Africa despite its promotion by ... international (un)derdevelopment agencies, feminist organizations, contemporary non- governmental organizations (NGOs) among others” (np). Coe’s (2009) research confirms that the “nuclear” family in Ghana has “far more permeable boundaries than it does in the West” (228). Although Akoha has a small family that does not mean that he has a small household. Like many in Benin’s higher social classes, Akoha has taken in children of his extended relatives.

¹² In accordance with anthropological conventions, each participant in my research was given the choice to be identified or to have a pseudonym assigned to protect her/his identity.

In this dissertation I interrogate the nuclear family as an ideal unit and argue that taking into account Beninese cultural norms allows for a richer analysis of the impact of education. I accept Bourdieu's theory of the transmission of cultural capital, and the importance of habitus on students' success, but in this dissertation I extend it to include flexible living arrangements. Larger households, particularly those in polygamous families, are typically made up of individuals from a wide range of ages and siblings may be up to 25 years apart in age. Wealthier individuals may take in the children of their less-well off relatives or friends; these arrangements may last from several months to several years. These arrangements may eventually lead to important wealth transfers, and in this way the use of an extended kin network can serve to facilitate social mobility (Isiugo-Abanihe 1985). Because children may spend a considerable amount of time living in households other than that of their parent(s), parental educational levels are less important in determining cultural capital than that of the child's elder siblings and extended family members. The student's level of closeness with educated extended family members is a better indicator of cultural capital than natal household alone.

Engaging with the Literature

This dissertation is informed by, and engages with, two main bodies of literature concerned with education and social stratification. The first is primarily quantitative studies that attempt to determine the impact that various inputs have on educational attainment. The second segment of this literature deals with qualitative studies that ask how education affects the individual through her or his accumulation of cultural and social capital, and how cultural capital, in turn, affects educational attainment.

Quantitative research on education and social stratification in lower income countries has focused on four main areas: (a) macro-structural forces shaping education including state policies

and global forces, (b) the impact of family background on educational attainment and achievement, (c) school factors as they relate to educational outcomes, and (d) the impact of education on social mobility in developing regions (Buchmann and Hannum 2001: 79).

Literature on the role of macro-structural forces has suggested that a weak state is likely to have severe problems in the educational sector including poor teaching quality, excessive demand for higher education, and regional disparities in terms of resources (Buchmann 1999). Further, research has shown that weak states are more likely to be open to interventions from global institutions and NGOs, which often spread Western ideologies and curriculum (Fichtner 2010). Global regulations and initiatives enacted in West Africa, including the Education for All campaign, influence the curriculum and values that are taught in schools (Welmond 2002, Totto 2007). Recent scholarship analyzes the effects of education policy on the students, institutions and teachers, in many cases concluding that the policies have not had the expected results (Kendall 2007). The case in Benin supports such suggestions, as argued by Fichtner (2009; 2010) who examined in-depth the role USAID played in the New Study Programme enacted during the 1990s.

Research on the impact of family background has been influenced greatly by two major projects conducted in the United States and Great Britain. The Coleman Report (Coleman et al. 1966) and the Plowden Report (Peaker 1971) both determined that family background was more influential than school factors in determining educational attainment. Several years later a report on education in Uganda challenged the theory, as family background was found to be less influential than school factors (Heyneman 1976). Research building off of Heyneman's report has indicated significant cross-country variations and "wealth gaps" among children falling within the top 20 percent and bottom 40 percent of the wealth distribution in countries in Africa,

the Middle East, South Asia and East Asia (Filmer and Pritchett 1999). The family is a unit of analysis often used in the education literature (Adams and Kirova 2006; Hannum and Fuller 2006) but I would argue that studies that draw on a narrow understanding of family have created a gap in the literature (Vaughan 1983) that my research will address.

Family structure has also been analyzed in this body of research, and some studies done in African contexts have found that female-headed households are more likely to have children in school than male-headed households (Lloyd and Blanc 1996; Fuller and Liang 1999). Lloyd and Blanc (1996) found that the extended family network was essential in increasing educational attainment in seven sub-Saharan African countries. In much of West Africa the notion of siblings can include those who share both father and mother, just one parent, or even those who are not related by blood but may spend a portion of their lives living in the same home (Goody 1982; Geiger 1986; Lloyd and Blanc 1996; Morduch 2000; Coe 2008). Policies based on the suggestion that smaller family size is correlated with greater success in school (Reimers and McGinn 1997) may have overlooked the resources an extended family may provide, including child fostering, assistance with schoolwork, and the financial remittances from family members who may not share the same residence (Shavit and Pierce 1991).

Following Heyneman's report in Uganda which contradicted previous findings in the US and Great Britain, a plethora of studies were conducted to better understand the relationship between family inputs and school inputs. The majority of these studies utilized the "production function approach" which has been defined by Buchman and Hannum (2001) as "the relationship between school outcomes and measurable educational inputs...Family inputs are commonly measured by parental education, income, wealth, and family size. School inputs are typically conceptualized as teachers' characteristics, school organization, and community factors" (286 fn

3). Findings suggest that in low-income countries basic inputs such as books, libraries and teacher training have a greater impact on student achievement than higher cost inputs such as laboratories, increased teacher salaries and smaller class size (Heyneman and Loxley 1983; Cohn and Rossmiller 1987). Yet until the early 2000s little qualitative data had been obtained regarding the classroom and campus experiences of students to determine how student-teacher interaction might affect educational attainment (Lloyd et al. 2000). My research suggests that gender plays a significant role in the student-teacher interactions at UAC, and may be reflected in educational achievements. Females are particularly affected by sexual harassment or coercion; those who refuse the advances of their professors face failing grades, others purposely enter sexual relationships as a means of obtaining passing grades without necessarily putting forth academic effort. In addition, the emphasis on female education by international NGOs has caused some male students to feel overlooked, and to question the equality of Benin's educational system. These themes will be fully developed in Chapter Five.

A final segment of the education and social stratification body of literature is concerned with long-term effects of schooling on society, specifically its "role in fostering economic development and democracy" and "individual behaviors and social mobility" (Buchmann and Hannum 2001: 88-89). While significant longitudinal studies have been conducted in Costa Rica (Hansen and Haller 1973), Chile (Farrell and Schiefelbein 1985), and Jamaica (Strudwick and Foster 1991) there has been little consensus on the effects of education and mobility. In fact, Strudwick and Foster (1991) found that education and occupational mobility were linked only for those in the middle classes in Jamaica; "intergenerational class inheritance" was much more likely for those in the poorest and richest segments of society (153). In essence, regardless of the level of education attained, the rich would likely stay rich and the poor would likely stay poor.

Yet that is not the message that education initiatives and publicity campaigns would like the families in Benin to hear. For if they did, why would a poor family choose to send their children to school rather than have them remain at home and contribute to the household? My research answers the call for studies that “refine[s] the common definition of family to include broader kinship structures” as well as to “explicitly examine family background and school factors as simultaneous and interactive forces in determining educational equality (Buchmann and Hannum 2001: 93-94).

A related body of literature grounded in qualitative research has expanded on Bourdieu’s theoretical work to understand the relationship between education and social mobility. Bourdieu’s (1984; 1986; 1991) work on higher education is one of the most cited, and sustained, of any social theorist. His concepts of cultural capital (the skills, diplomas, background, and social standing that contribute to a person’s ability to gain financial capital), habitus (the combination of a person’s own experiences, their family and regional history, acquired mix of beliefs and capabilities), and social field (a social universe with its own laws of functioning) have been used to theorize why and how certain people are more or less successful in education than others.

Habitus, as it is used by many of the education theorists, is a fluid and constantly shifting set of dispositions created through personal history and social history (Bourdieu 1977). Dispositions, in turn, can be understood as the capacity to differentiate and appreciate certain practices and products; it is commonly referred to as “taste” (Bourdieu 1984). Bourdieu created a theory of cultural capital to better understand why certain students performed better than others; he disagreed with the “commonsense” notion that success in school was related to students’ natural aptitudes (Bourdieu 1986). Cultural capital has been described as the ways in

which “families confer social advantages on their children increasing their potential to move upwards through familiarity with particular types of culture or activities” (Nunn et al 2007: 33). Cultural capital is linked to habitus in that the environment in which a child was raised helps shape the distinctions – manners or tastes - that the student has, as well as the expectations or possibilities that the student sees for his or her future. Individuals who are exposed to the arts, who have educated parents or family members, and who are raised in homes that contain “cultural goods” (books, dictionaries, pictures, instruments, technology) obtain cultural capital in what Bourdieu describes as the “objectified state” (Bourdieu 1986).

The dispositions that are appropriate in the academic setting may align or contradict with those accepted in the family and social environment of students, and may help or hinder their transition into academia. Bourdieu’s work suggests that academic culture will never be able to replace or duplicate the efficacy of cultural capital obtained in the home through constant exposure (Bourdieu 1984), and he later argues that the domestic transmission of cultural capital is the “best hidden and socially most determinant educational investment” (Bourdieu 1986:48). Betz (2006) also found a strong link between a student’s social background and education attainment; citing sex and race to be indicators of the likelihood of educational inequality.

In their study of an elite secondary school in California, Horvat and Antonio (1999) argue that educational institutions can be a place where some individuals “learn, or relearn, their status as different, lesser, or Other” (319). Their ethnographic study of African American girls attending a primarily White elite school suggests that students who were outside of the dominant habitus experienced pain and anguish related to their education (Horvat and Antonio use Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic violence to analyze the discomfort experienced by the students); rather than fulfilling promises of social mobility, the institutional habitus of the school reinforced

a notion that the students would always be lesser, in school and in society at large. In contrast, Hsiao (1992) argued that first-generation college students were able to use the period away from home to assimilate to the styles and norms pervasive in the college environment and thus acquired cultural capital by adjusting their vocabulary, taste in music, and style of dressing so that they aligned with the aspirational middle-class status.

Reay (1997) argues that habitus can be a useful tool to interrogate qualitative data, as a means of understanding the world. Reay (2004) departs from the idea that adapting to an institutional habitus is a form of symbolic violence, and argues that habitus “reflects a social position in which it was constructed” but also carries within it “the genesis of new creative responses that are capable of transcending the social conditions in which it was produced” (435). Reay argues that vagueness defines one’s place in the world, and the vagueness is what allows for social mobility. Habitus, as a multilayered compilation of individual and collective trajectories may allow students to resist their “predestined” futures and work for change. The university has been portrayed as an “institution of contradictions” within which students are confronted with social divisions at the same time that they are presented with opportunities for social mobility (Morley et al. 2006; Adusah-Karikari 2008:36). Similarly, Reed-Danahay’s (2000) work in rural France suggests that segments of the student body with similar backgrounds may work together to resist the hegemonic institutional habitus. Reed-Danahay found that when more students from poorer families attended school, the overall institutional habitus shifted to dispositions (such as accent and usage of French) common to the lower classes. Despite punishment from the administration and faculty, student resistance affected the institutional habitus.

Studies on social mobility and education in the United Kingdom suggest that although

social mobility and educational attainment are closely linked, the correlation actually declines when access increases because “children from better off households have been better able to take advantage of improvements in the educational system” (Nunn et al 2007: 13). Similarly, Murphy (2006:29) argues, “many people from low socio-economic groups do not think higher education is for them and are less confident about their ability to succeed; many do not know anyone who has been through higher education,” in contrast, “middle class families have been able to protect their less able children from downward social mobility.”

Recent work on cultural capital and habitus as they relate to education has focused on the macro-level – highlighting global education as a social field and the production of knowledge as a political, global, and social undertaking (Hazelkorn 2009). Marginson (2007) argues that worldwide higher education is a relational system that is interwoven between global, national, and local settings and forces in which asymmetrical “flows” of information and persuasion are both limited and channeled by differences in power. Expanding Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital and institutional habitus has allowed researchers to analyze the asymmetrical relationships between universities in the global South and those in the global North. Marginson asserts that trends in global higher education emanating from the North have influenced the development of curriculum, research agendas, and language (English is currently the preferred language of academic publications, of business, and of a majority of Master’s level programs worldwide). Similarly, many African countries have adopted the Bologna agreement (License, Maitrise, Doctorat or LMD) designed to integrate and streamline degree structures in Europe.

My research contributes to this body of literature through my analysis of habitus and cultural capital that students obtain through their extended family. My research suggests that in countries such as Benin, cultural capital and habitus must be understood in the context of

households with varying compositions of individuals at any given time. My research also suggests that students in higher education institutions in Benin are dissatisfied with the limited role that Benin has played in the production of knowledge, and that such dissatisfaction has the potential to lead to resistance.

Throughout this dissertation I draw from Bourdieu's theory of the forms of capital and habitus, and extend them to include the specifics of Benin's current social environment. Because of the low rates of literacy among the adult population in Benin (currently 40 percent in those above the age of 40) many of the students come from homes with very few books or educational materials. Yet the practice of flexible living arrangements means that many students have been able to increase their cultural capital by living with wealthier relatives whose homes may contain cultural goods. In addition, young people who circulate among households must necessarily be more flexible in their dispositions as they adapt to the norms accepted in each household. I utilize Bourdieu's theories to analyze relationships that students have with their extended families, and how students who live in campus are able to use their time away from home to cultivate dispositions that may not be compatible with those accepted by their extended family.

In this dissertation I analyze positive and negative aspects of the ambiguity inherent in the process of "becoming someone" through Turner's (1967) theory of liminality. Turner (1967) speaks of the *liminal persona* as "neither this nor that, and yet is both," and I see a similar ambivalence among the students I encountered. Students are able to cultivate dispositions, perform work on the self, and change their habitus' because they occupy an ambiguous social position, they are no longer children but they have not yet entered "la vie active" or working life. I also argue that students are able to use the physical and social space of the campus as a means of avoiding family interactions when they deem such as problematic.

I then use Tsing's (2004) theory of friction, or the "awkward, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference" (4) to analyze the effects that a shifting gender composition has had on the student body. Just twenty years ago female attendance at UAC was less than ten percent, in 2010 it was over 30 percent and some faculties were as high as 50 percent. In this dissertation I use friction as a means of interrogating how gender is actively constructed through educational institutions, and conversely, how education allows some students to resist gendered expectations.

Methodology

This dissertation is the result of 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Benin that began in 2005. Using ethnographic methods, including interviews, field notes, television and radio programs, personal narratives, and photographs, I address the issues that contemporary university students in Benin face within society and their families. Most of the specific information was obtained in 2010 through 60 recorded interviews and hundreds of hours of unrecorded conversations with students, their families, Ministry officials, non-governmental organization (NGO) employees, street vendors, and friends. Throughout my research I was affiliated with the *Centre Béninois des Langues Etrangères* (CE.BE.LA.E.) at the University of Abomey-Calavi (UAC).

My academic experience has been a continuation—albeit one that is complex—of conversations I have had for 15 years with young people around the world. In the early to mid-1990s, I worked for a travel agency and eventually an airline. I had a love of travel and experiencing other ways of life, and my flight benefits allowed me to visit many countries on a budget. The best part of each of my trips was sitting down and talking with people who lived in the locales I visited, exchanging ideas, and telling one another about what life was like in our

respective countries.

In some of the poorer countries, like Indonesia and Tanzania, the conversations centered around school. Young people would tell me what school was like for them, and so many of them shared their stories that eventually aspects of those stories became familiar to me. A common theme that emerged was that in most families certain children were identified early on as the ones who would attend school. Those children would be given resources that others would not; they also expressed that they felt pressure to succeed because they knew how special it was that they were going to school. In many cases, the higher the level of schooling, the greater the physical distance from family, particularly for young people who came from rural areas. It seemed like these individuals were dealing with a paradox: How is it that education can simultaneously pull people together (all of the family working together so that one or two children could attend school) and push them apart (the higher the level of schooling, the further the physical distance from the family)? All of the young people that I spoke with on those trips recognized that they had a responsibility to give back to those who had sacrificed for them. The situation was not unique to Tanzania, or to Indonesia, or to India, or any of the countries in which I talked to people.

In the early 2000s I left my career to return to school as a student in anthropology with a focus on education and social stratification within families. In 2005 I took my first trip to Benin to conduct a pilot study on migration and education among students at UAC. Because of my affiliation with CE.BE.LA.E., I also met a cohort of Ghanaian students who were participating in a year-long language immersion program. I spent a significant portion of each day in between language courses visiting with those students in their residence halls. During the course of that trip to Benin, I also conducted my first “real interviews” with students on the campus of UAC.

The distinction between these structured interviews and the conversations I had with students in the dorms was immense. My “real interviews” felt shallow, almost false. I asked the questions as I had them on my paper, in the order they were listed. I thought that the participants needed to be chosen at random so that my study could be “scientific” and not biased. Part of this was due to time constraints; I was only in Benin for a month and needed to work with my colleagues’ schedules. The main campus was also a long way from CE.BE.LA.E. and the road was under construction. As a result, the interviews were the last project activity during my stay. It seemed that my time had been spent going on tours of the city or the royal palaces, hanging out with the Ghanaians in their dorms, or going to people’s homes for dinner or lunch.

It was not until I returned home and began reviewing my journal entries and notes that I realized the value of all of that “wasted time.” If I was interested in studying migration for education, and I spent the majority of my time with students from Ghana who were spending a year abroad for their schooling, was that not migration for education? Our conversations had begun rather superficially as we got to know one another, and yet by the end of the month I knew several of the students well. From my notes I could see a progression, a change in the nature and topic of our conversations, yet it was not forced. I actually thought of those conversations as distinct from my research. All of the various facets of my trip were serving different purposes in terms of anthropological research. Not only was I learning history, I was learning it in a way that allowed me to feel it. By accompanying my research associate, Bienvenu, on trips to visit his extended family, I experienced the slow, but palpable change between the city and the village. In retrospect, it was the “deep hanging out” that provided the basis for most of my insights from that trip, and I realized the value of informal conversations and settings to anthropological research and ethnography (Geertz 1973).

During subsequent trips to Benin in 2008 and 2009, I lived with families rather than in the hostel where I had stayed the first visit. The trips were invaluable to understanding the flow of households and the complexity of family relations and obligations. I met people such as Armel, a young man in his early twenties who explained that Pauline, the head of the household, had taken him in several years before so that he could prepare for the bac. Once he passed the exam, he felt an obligation to continue living there with her even though he did not necessarily want to, especially because he could not find a job. Maman Eli, a woman in her thirties, told me that the main reason she worked as a domestic¹³ was so that her daughter, Eli, would have a chance to go to school, and that Pauline had promised to pay for the incidental expenses related to Eli's schooling.

When I returned to Benin in 2010 for my dissertation research, I felt that I had built a substantial base of friends who trusted me enough to speak openly about their experiences. Because we had known each other for several years, I could ask them to explain situations that I did not understand. These relationships were particularly important in the first few months because UAC students and faculty were on strike and I was unable to begin my research on the main campus. I was affiliated with CE.BE.LA.E. as a Fulbrighter and began the year reconnecting with the faculty and staff there. I also became acquainted with the expat community in Cotonou, a community I never associated with during my earlier visits. I became friends with individuals who worked at the U.S. Embassy, USAID, Catholic Relief Services, and the Peace Corps. These friendships were invaluable during my stay, both personally and professionally. No matter how much I enjoyed being with my Beninese friends, my visits with other Americans allowed me to speak English and vent my frustrations typical of homesickness.

¹³ Domestic is the term used for a variety of live-in employees whose main duties include childcare, cooking, and cleaning.

In addition, I met individuals working for NGOs and development agencies who were more than happy to discuss their participation in education projects, and who introduced me to their colleagues.

The university was on strike in the first few months of my stay, and in that period I focused on making connections within the education community, and conducted several interviews with members of the Ministry of Education and UNICEF to gain an understanding of the background of the EFA initiative. The semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and took place in Cotonou and Porto-Novo, the administrative capital of Benin. I asked the participants to explain the history of EFA, the relationship between that initiative and the All Girls to School program, and the shift to All Children to School.¹⁴ We also discussed the problems Ministries and NGOs encountered when trying to balance the needs of families with the expectations of donors, and the unique problems that rural families faced because of their schedules working the fields. The interviews were conducted in French; I was accompanied by my research assistant Natacha Hounmavo, who worked part-time for the Peace Corps as a cultural liaison.

After a month and a half in the field, the university strike ended and classes began at UAC. Natacha and I spent several weeks going through the proper procedures to gain access to the students and to be allowed in the dormitories. These visits highlighted both the hierarchy of the university and the gate keeping that reinforced the sense that we were entering an elite area. The trip from my apartment in Cotonou to Abomey-Calavi could take anywhere from 15 to 45 minutes depending on the traffic on the northbound road. A large construction project, staffed by and financed by the Chinese government, made travel difficult, particularly during the rainy

¹⁴ These projects are discussed further in Chapter Two.

season. As Natacha and I arrived each day on the back of our *zems* (*zemidjans*, or motorcycle taxis), we had to pass through the one official gateway onto campus. A concrete fence circles the entire campus, and although there are several small passageways accessible by foot, there is just one gate for vehicles.

While the university had granted us access to the campus, the Directrice of Campus Life advised us to gain permission from the concierge in each dormitory we wished to visit. In 2010 there were 18 *cabines* (dormitory buildings) on campus, three of which were in disuse, and two of which were still under construction. The newer buildings are much larger than the older buildings; each of the new buildings has 100 rooms and can officially house up to 224 students, while the older buildings ranged in size from 20 students to 145 students. We selected one dormitory from two of the sections so that we could gain a feel for the different atmospheres.

A table of the *cabines* is listed below, and demonstrates the range of capacity and age of the buildings, as well as the political alliances that were strengthened through funding of education initiatives. While it is not in the scope of this dissertation to give an in-depth analysis of the funding of dormitories, it must be noted that these projects operate under what Ferguson (1994) calls “a complex set of social and cultural structures” which include the interests of the states or development agencies giving aid (17). In 1977 the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) funded construction of university residences as part of an initiative to “strengthen human capital” and “help people living in poverty” while engaging in “policy development in Canada and internationally” (www.acdi-cida.gc.ca). Similarly, buildings funded by North Korea reflect a foreign relations strategy designed to increase its sphere of influence with former communist allies (Owoeye 1991). In the 1970s North Korea established diplomatic relations with Benin and 24 other African nations in an effort to compete with China’s already

established economic and diplomatic influence. By the late 1980s, however, the end of the Cold War approached and a shift in dynamics in international politics ensued. Although Benin had abandoned Marxism/Leninism in 1990, North Korea focused on development projects in an effort to maintain diplomatic relations and a presence in former socialist countries throughout Africa.

As the number of students enrolled at UAC steadily increased throughout the late 90s and early 2000s, UAC received aid through the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), a 56-nation institution of which Benin is a member. In 2006 IDB granted an interest-free¹⁵ loan in the amount of US \$2.3 million for the building of residences. The stated purpose of the IDB is to “foster the economic development and social progress of member countries and Muslim communities individually as well as jointly in accordance with the principles of Shari’ah” in an effort to “significantly transform the landscape of comprehensive human development in the Muslim world and help restore its dignity” (www.isdb.org). 1.74 million Muslims live in Benin, the majority of whom live in the north or along the Nigerian border to the east. The residences funded by Canada, North Korea, and the IDB bear the names of the funders and serve as historical markers of their complex relationships.

¹⁵ In compliance with Shariah, while the loan itself is interest-free a service fee was charged to cover IDB administrative costs.

Table 1: Residence Buildings on UAC Campus

Building Name	Construction Began, Funded By	Beds
A	1991 - North Korea	85
B	1991 - North Korea	None (converted to campus radio and newspaper offices)
C	1991 - North Korea	20
KISS	1991 - North Korea	Uninhabitable
F	1977 – Canada	210
G	1977 – Canada	210
H	1977 – Canada	210
PIP – D	1993 – Benin	100
PIP – E	1993 – Benin	100
PIP – I	1993 – Benin	300
BID – A	2004 - IDB	224 (incomplete in 2010)
BID - B	2004 - IDB	224 (incomplete in 2010)
BID – C	2004 - IDB	224
BID – D	2004 - IDB	224
BID - E	2004 - IDB	224
BID – F	2004 - IDB	224
MK II	1997 – Benin	145
HASSAN II	2004 – Morocco	Uninhabitable

Bâtiment (Building) PIP-D is located on the interior of the campus, close to the soccer fields and basketball courts, in a row of smaller residence buildings. It is known on campus as a “handicapper” residence because students who have physical disabilities are the primary occupants of the first floor. Generally, dormitory residents are given new rooms each year with new roommates, but that is not the case for residents of *Bâtiment* PIP-D. They are allowed to remain in their rooms from year to year, and as a result, seem to develop closer relationships with their roommates. In addition, the concierge, or “house father”, appears to take on a paternal role, greeting the students by name as they pass by and asking questions of them that demonstrate personal interest in them. When Natacha and I asked his permission to enter the dorms to do our research, he sat us down and wanted to know what our research would entail,

how and when we would be coming to the campus, and if our presence would be a distraction to the students. He also offered to be interviewed for the project, which we gratefully accepted.

In contrast, the procedure to gain permission to enter the new dorm, *Bâtiment* BID-E, was quick and almost entirely forgettable. Because the building is much larger, and there is more than one entrance, the concierge is not able to keep track of who comes in and out with anything more than a cursory manner. Natacha and I explained our purpose in being there, offered to give him a written explanation of our research, and were granted permission with the proviso that we should always attempt to see him when we entered and departed the building (and despite going back at least three times a week for six months, we never saw him again). *Bâtiment* BID-E, along with the three other buildings financed by the Islamic Development Bank, is located on the outer edge of campus close to the main road leading to Cotonou. The sounds of the street can be easily heard in the dorm rooms, and there is a significant amount of foot traffic as students from all over campus pass by as they take short cuts to get to the road. There are also several nightclubs located on the other side of the road, and music can be heard as night falls, regardless of the day of the week.

Natacha and I went door-to-door in both buildings, briefly explaining our research project and asking for expressions of interest from the students. We explained that we would be selecting students at random once we had a suitable number of proposed participants. Because we wanted to compare the experiences of students living with family members to those who lived on campus, we also recruited participants from the main garden area where students relax between classes. Our original pass resulted in 125 students who expressed interest, from which we selected 25. We obtained permission from the students and from the university to audiotape the interviews.

The thirteen female and twelve male students who participated in this study were a heterogeneous group, as illustrated in the infographic below.¹⁶ Although Natacha and I did not discuss family income with students because that would be culturally inappropriate (in addition to that, the students would be unlikely to know that information), we were able to loosely categorize students based on information such as their parents' (or guardians') occupations, whether or not they had *motos*, their clothing, and what percentage of their siblings attended school. The majority of the students in this study come from families with at least one parent whose highest level of formal education is the *Brevet d'Etudes du Premier Cycle* (BEPC or 8th grade certificate) or less. Only a small minority has one or more parent who attended university. We classified the twenty-five participants into the following groups: five students as high socioeconomic status (SES), twelve as middle SES, and eight as low SES. In addition to their economic backgrounds, the students came from varying family compositions. Fifteen of the students came from polygamous families and ten came from monogamous families. Family size varied as well, and as would be expected, those from polygamous families had significantly more siblings than those from monogamous families, ranging from a high of twenty-two siblings to a low of three. Seventeen of the students lived in *cabines* on campus, four rented rooms nearby, and four lived with family or extended family in the city. Two students self-identified as Muslim, three as Christian, and nearly all of the other students, while not stating their religions outright, frequently mentioned *Dieu* (God), which is common among Beninese. Although Vodun is a legally recognized religion in Benin none of the students identified as vodun practitioners, which may be an indication that they have internalized some of the religious meta-

¹⁶ A complete list of the students and various features of their backgrounds is presented in Appendix B.

narratives that have developed equating long-standing spiritual beliefs with backwardness.¹⁷

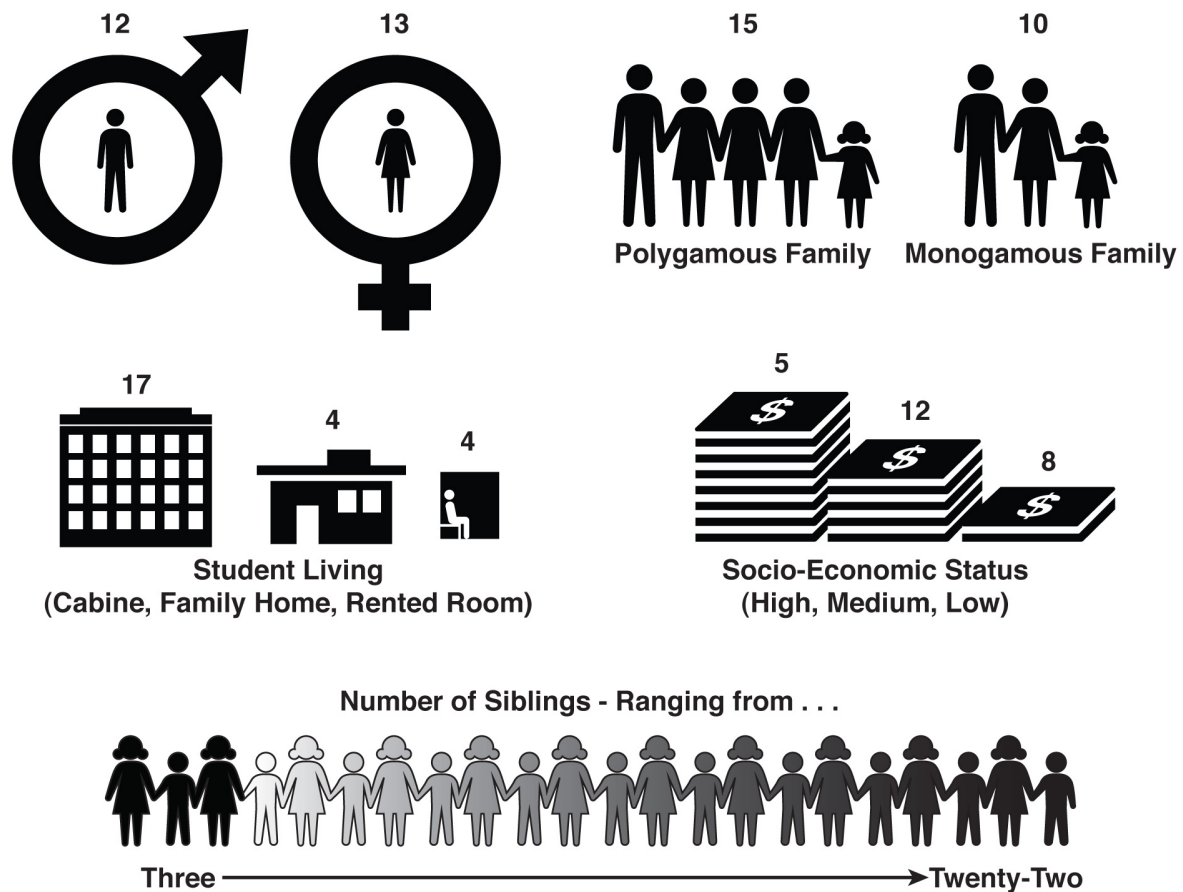


Figure 1: Student Participant Characteristics

Based on my reflections from my first visit to Benin, Natacha and I decided to make regular visits to campus to hang out with the students before getting to the formal interviews. We began by making the rounds to the students and asking them to share their backgrounds. Natacha took the lead in these interactions, as she could engage the students in a joking manner, and because she had lived on campus as a student at UAC in the early 2000s. We taped these

¹⁷ It may also be an indication of their level of comfort with me as an outsider. Vodun is explained in Chapter Three.

initial conversations and explained that we simply wanted to get to know the students better.

The students were asked to talk about themselves, including their years in school, how long they had lived in *cabine* or with family in Cotonou, their family backgrounds, and how they found the campus and the university as a whole.

For the next several months, we visited students without recording our conversations. We were simply visiting, getting to know them, taking in the flow of people on campus and in the dorms. These visits were invaluable because the students eventually felt comfortable with us around, and we were able to engage in deeper conversations about family, their frustrations with the economy in Benin, and the advantages that they felt from living on campus. I began to notice a distinct difference between the dorm rooms occupied by young women versus young men. Most female students' rooms had some form of commerce taking place. Items for sale included *alimentation* (tinned fish, tomatoes, rice, etc.), prepared food (fried fish or yams), and photocopied class notes. Not only did these rooms allow the women to be closer to their classes, but they had a ready clientele for commerce during their off hours. In contrast, I observed little to no commerce taking place in the male students' rooms, and what I did see was limited to the sale of phone credits.

When Natacha and I were not visiting students in the dorm rooms, we went to the garden and called students who did not live on campus. Often they would come to see us, or stopped to visit as they passed by on their motos. We shared meals with the students, both in their rooms and out in the garden. We watched television shows with them. We hung out as girlfriends and did one another's hair. We sat on the beds going over notes as students did homework. Eventually, I began to bring meals to campus—I provided the sauce and the students provided the rice. My love of cooking came as quite a shock to most students, whose impression of

*yovos*¹⁸ was that we never cooked and hired cooks to do it for us.

Over the course of five months, I kept notes on these visits and used them to inform the semi-structured interviews, which took place on campus in late July and early August. In some cases, several students took part in conversations, as there was always a flow of students in and out of the rooms.¹⁹ We discussed topics including what family meant to them, if formal education affects the family dynamic, and how their family obligations had changed since they became university students. I also asked them if they could explain several phrases that I had heard in conversation through the months, including “The environment at home with family is not proper for students/intellectuals.” In addition, based on the conversations I heard among students, I asked about their preferences for mates—in essence, I wondered if they could marry individuals who did not have the same levels of education they had achieved. This question elicited very different answers from male and female students, and highlighted some of the concerns that the women expressed, including the fear that their educational attainments were going to make it more difficult to find spouses. We generally finished the interviews by talking about the future of Benin, the progress it had made since independence (which was timely because August 1, 2010 was the 50 year anniversary of Benin’s independence from France), and the role that university students play in Benin’s future.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) suggest that ethnographic methods allow researchers to glean relevant information by participating in people’s daily lives over an extended period of time; although researchers may rely primarily on one source of data (such as interviews).

¹⁸ *Yovo* is a generic term used to refer to Europeans or Americans. Children often sing a “*yovo* song” to any *yovos* who may pass by, but are in turn scolded by family members.

¹⁹ In each instance we offered students the opportunity to have these conversations in private, and only on three occasions were we taken up on the offer.

Participant observation and relatively informal conversations are used to gather data with a relatively small group of cases or individuals. Ethnographic methods are not typically used to create representative samples, in part due to the time required for in-depth study. In my own research, I do not assert that the twenty-five students are representative of the entire student body at UAC, nor are they representative of all tertiary students in Benin. What I aim to do through my research is to analyze the “meanings, functions, and consequences of human actions and institutional practices” (Hammersley and Atkinson : 3) among a group of individuals at one particular institution during one particular time period. In ethnographic research it is expected that an in-depth approach over an extended period of time will allow the researcher to refine, or even transform, the initial interests or questions that she brought to the field. Such a method is particularly important for foreign researchers whose initial interests may have little overlap with those of their participants. In my case, I found that my initial interest in outward migration was far less interesting to my participants than their more pressing concerns about the quality of their education and expectations of upward mobility.

Fieldwork Challenges and Positionality

The greatest emotional challenge that I experienced during the period of fieldwork was the sudden death of a friend Aubin who was also a participant in my research.²⁰ My sense of obligation to his sister Annie, who is my best friend in Benin, also affected how my time was structured for a period of several weeks as Annie and her children stayed with me in my apartment. Because Aubin was a UAC student, and the campus was buzzing with rumors related to his death, my research was also directly affected. Most of the students with whom I interacted on campus knew I had been a close friend with his family, and so it seemed like I could not go

²⁰ The circumstances surrounding his death are complex, and are developed in Appendix 1.

through an interview without hearing about the dangers of villagers and *la sorcellerie*.²¹ The topic came up most often in response to questions about the ambiance of the family home. As Geneviève, a first year student living with her brothers near campus, said: “In Africa especially there are many things that go on. There are mystical powers, and *gris-gris*.” She went on to describe the jealousy present in villages where there are not a lot of educated people. If you decide to go to school, “they [villagers] can pursue you with malevolent forces. They can put you under a spell. Or they can even want to kill you.”

During the course of the research, three of the students who completed the first interviews did not do the final interviews. Aubin died in early April. Celine, a smart second year student in Geography living in *Bâtiment* BID-E, became ill after going home to the village to see her family (she is 1 of 18 children). She complained of terrible headaches, and an inability to do her work. Her good friends on campus blamed her illness on *la sorcellerie*, and used her case to illustrate why they avoided going back to the village whenever they could. I saw Celine once after she became ill, and she could hardly speak. She eventually left the campus to stay with her family, a move that was seen by her roommate as unfortunate, but necessary. Celine’s experience suggests an important paradox in family relations among Beninois: while students express feelings of closeness with their family members, they also fear the jealousy that family members could harbor against them.²²

The last participant who began the research, but did not complete his final interview, was Adolphe, a bright fifth year student in Environmental Engineering who lived in *Bâtiment* PIP-D.

²¹ *La sorcellerie* is a French word that can be translated into English as both witchcraft and sorcery. I will develop this topic fully in Chapter Three.

²² In Chapter Four I will address the ambiguity that students felt toward their families; a push-pull between wanting to visit home for ceremonies and other events, and wanting to avoid contact with family members or villagers because of the excessive demands put upon them.

He had completed all coursework and was ready to begin his internship when he hurt his foot and needed surgery. We saw him a few other times on campus, but he was in a wheelchair and in quite a bit of pain, so he was not up to participating in the interview. Unlike Aubin and Celine, his misfortune was never attributed to *la sorcellerie* during our conversations with his roommates and friends, perhaps because his condition was pre-existing (when I first met Adolphe he used a cane due to a foot deformity that he had from birth), or because the accident that caused his condition to worsen occurred while he was a passenger on a *zem*, and such minor accidents are common.

Finally, I must add a brief word on my own positionality and how it changed over the course of my visits to Benin. In a country of more than 9 million people, there are just over 3,000 foreign residents from non-African countries. As a result, it is hard to escape notice as a young, white woman living in Benin. My country of origin was an important factor in establishing rapport with students; toward the end of my fieldwork period a group of students told me that if I had been French they would not have opened up to me. When I first came to Cotonou, I was thought of mainly as a student of French at CE.BE.LA.E., and maintained that student designation throughout my visits. In this way I could commiserate with my participants about classes, papers, and exams. My status as a student also explained, in a way, why I was not yet married and did not have children.

As the years went on and I never graduated, my position as the eternal student became a topic of conversation. Why had I not yet finished? Despite my explanations that I had achieved my bachelor's degree and was working on my master's degree, and later that I had finished my master's degree and was working on my doctorate, the question remained: How long will you be a student? Several of the young Ghanaian women I met in 2005 had finished school and married,

and a few had children. When was I going to get married? Why was I still childless? I was even told that I better not wait too long because all of the good men would be taken, and my body would be too old for childbearing. Eventually I did get married, and although that marriage was quite brief, I experienced a period in which I gained status in Benin. I was finally *Madame*. And yet it was not until I remarried and became a stepmother that I felt that I was a “grown-up” among my friends. My married friends and I would jokingly emphasize the “*Madame*” in each other’s names, occasionally calling across the room: “Tu est là, *Madame* O’Neil?” “Oui, *Madame* Azehoungbo.” “Et les enfants?” “Ça fatigue!” “Aah.” It has been emphasized that motherhood and status are closely linked in West Africa (Amadiume 1987; Achebe 2005) and I think that I would not have been able to really understand the transition in my own status had I not spent so much time in Benin.

In addition to the status associated with my newfound motherhood, I was also identified as a Fulbrighter among the expat community and those in the Ministries and NGOs. I was able to parlay the relationships that my undergraduate mentor had made in the field into helpful social contacts. Yet by doing so, I was associated with a program that had once brought money into the area through a study abroad program. I am not sure how many of the officials allowed me to interview them just out of a sense of obligation or duty to Professors Montilus, Akoha, or Hountondji.²³ Regardless of their motivations, I am grateful that they agreed and gave of their time so generously.

Lastly, I was seen as a person of relative wealth because of my country of origin, the size of my apartment, and the color of my skin. This became one of the trickiest roles to negotiate. Before I left on my first trip to Benin, Dr. Montilus advised me to be careful, not to get taken

²³ I explain my relationship to these three professors in the acknowledgements.

advantage of, and not to “have too soft of a heart.” As he explained it, if a person becomes known for giving out money, he or she will be approached far too often and will contribute to a cycle of dependency. He advised that I use my material resources in helpful ways, buy products from street vendors, eat in local restaurants, compensate any research assistants fairly, and so on. His advice was helpful, and because of him I was able to learn from the women and men who worked on my street while patronizing their kiosks. This is not to say that I was not taken advantage of from time to time, nor was I immune from requests for money. As a temporary member of the community with significant financial means, I contributed as expected of a privileged individual. I helped out when my friends needed it, either for medical reasons or emergencies, and contributed appropriately during ceremonies and for school expenses for Maman Eli’s children. Most importantly, I was given the privilege of naming Annie and Bienvenu’s baby who was born in 2010. This privilege comes with an unspoken financial responsibility, one that continues beyond my stay in the field, and one that I am happy to fulfill.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter Two provides contextual information that will allow the reader to understand historical, political, and economic events that led up to the emergence of elite, educated youth as a social category. I trace the role of French colonial policies in the educational system as well as more recent interventions of global funding agencies. Formal education in Benin has historically been biased toward elites, and has been influenced by religious and political meta-narratives that tended to instill notions of superiority among the educated.

In Chapter Three I use ethnographic data to examine the social class of students using Bourdieu’s (1986) concepts of cultural capital and habitus. I analyze class emergence and elitist behaviors among students at UAC and suggest that students who are the first in their family to

attend university, or who are cut off from educated members of their extended family are more likely to repeat stories of failure, of jealousy, of *sorcellerie* attacks, and of humiliation.

Chapter Four explores the concept of the campus and dormitories as temporary havens. I look at the campus as a site of freedom, progressive social customs, and a place for productive studying, and I explore Turner's (1969) concept of liminality as not just a phase, but as a more lengthy status in itself. In this chapter I also discuss some of the strategies that students use to manage family expectations, obligations, and potential problems. I argue that their liminal status allows them to temporarily suspend roles they would otherwise be expected to perform. I end with a discussion of how students use the campus as a refuge from witchcraft.

In Chapter Five I analyze the relationship between gender and education in Benin. I examine the perceptions that students had of female students using their sex or sexuality as an unfair advantage, marriage prospects for graduates, STGs (so-called Sexually Transmitted Grades), and the impact that postponing marriage and family may have on students and their entries into adulthood.

I conclude with a discussion looking to the future of education in Benin. My findings suggest that there is a disjuncture between the elite aspirations of the students, including social status, upward mobility, and ability to reciprocate with their extended families, and their perceptions of possible success upon graduation. I argue that simply increasing access to higher education will not level inequalities in Beninese society. Using data projecting the number of students and graduates into the future, I argue that changes must be made to both the university infrastructure and to the expectations of students regarding their future employability. I then discuss implications for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: HISTORY AND POLITICAL ECONOMY OF EDUCATION IN BENIN

In order to understand the plight of university students in Benin, it is necessary to place the educational system in historical and social context. The current situation is the result of a historical flow that includes the legacy of French colonial involvement, post-independence political structure, global monetary agency policies, and the ongoing involvement of transnational development agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and Education for All (EFA). Education in West Africa has long been portrayed as an overburdened system in disarray, in need of outside intervention (World Bank [WB] 2000; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] 2006). In particular, there has been tension between what is sometimes referred to as "traditional" education and "formal" education (Adeyemi and Adeyinka 2003).

The English word "education" can be translated into French as both *instruction* and *éducation*. While the meanings of these two words are closely related, in Benin, "instruction" tends to be used to indicate formal training; "education", on the other hand, is a broader concept that encompasses formal instruction as well as what might be called "a good upbringing" or "home training" in English. My research suggests that while students in Benin say that they value *éducation* (the training in morals and norms that they receive from parents and society in general), their comments in everyday conversation indicate that, in fact, they place individuals who have been *instruit* (formally educated) on a higher social plane than those who have not. The most advantageous position, however, is to be a person who has received both types of education.

Mazonde (2007) outlines this distinction in his examination of what he calls African customary education in the pre-colonial period,²⁴ the aims of which were to (1) preserve cultural heritage of the extended family, and (2) adapt members of the new generation to their physical environment and teach them how to use it and “to explain to them that their own future, and that of their community, depends on the understanding and perpetuation of the institutions, laws, languages and values inherited from the past” (3). He further argues that it was impossible to separate the physical from the social situation in which education was received at that time. Education was not dependent on any one place, such as a school; rather, lessons were contextualized and realized through shared experiences. Mazonde’s analysis, while of an earlier period, almost mirrors the viewpoints of many of my participants who explained that it was entirely possible to be well-educated (*éduqué*) without ever setting foot in a school. This type of education is available to all, regardless of socioeconomic status, gender, or age.

One experience during my fieldwork serves as an example of this perspective on education. I accompanied my friend, Annie, to the hospital when she went into labor, and returned the next day to accompany her and her family back to their house to introduce the baby. Car trouble caused us to sit in the shade of a tree in the parking lot for several hours as we waited for a mechanic. As Annie and I took turns holding the baby, her oldest son, Kevi, began to get restless and started acting up. He was immediately scolded with the admonition: “You are now a *grand frère*, you cannot act like a little boy anymore. You are a *fofo*,²⁵ you must set an example for your younger sister. How can she respect you when you act like a child?” Annie instructed

²⁴ For most African countries the colonial period began in the late 1800s and lasted until the early 1960s.

²⁵ *Fofo* is a Fongbe word used to denote respect for a man; it means something like “big brother.”

Kevi to use his time wisely as we waited, and to go around the entire parking lot and pick up any trash that had been thrown on the ground. Annie's role was illuminated by comments offered by Romaric, a student who lived in the dorms, who stressed that both parents and culture in general are the teachers of proper education. "In Benin we say that if a young person greets an older person, they must take off their hat. It's the culture that obliges the parents to teach their children how to greet, how to show proper respect for elders."

In contrast, formally educated individuals can exhibit behavior that is interpreted as ignorant, or disrespectful— when they do so, they are described as *maléduqué*. On one occasion my friend Sourou and I met another friend on the grounds of a large Catholic church in Cotonou. As Sourou and I walked, we passed several groups of teenagers who had attended choir practice. When one group passed, I heard Sourou suck his teeth in disgust. "What's wrong?" I asked. Sourou explained: "Young people have no respect anymore. They should be greeting me first, as their elder. I was their instructor and did you see how they averted their eyes as if they did not see me? It's not good, what's happening with these young people." In Sourou's eyes, although these students had been well-taught (he was their instructor, after all) they were not well-educated. During my fieldwork, students at University of Abomey-Calavi (UAC) described behaviors such as smoking, getting drunk, and sexual promiscuity as evidence of *maléduqué*, despite being *instruit*. In addition, some students argued that although speaking French signified that people had gone to school, if people used the French language to berate or shout at others, they were showing the world that they were not well-educated, and were considered less educated than people who had not been to school, but knew how to behave in society.

However, throughout my research period I noted that many individuals who had attended schools, particularly those who had progressed through to the tertiary level, exhibited behaviors

that indicated that they felt superior to those who had not been to school. Some students referred to themselves as “civilized” in contrast to those who were not formally educated; their demeanor toward street vendors, restaurant employees, and *zem* drivers could be interpreted as disrespectful. Yet the students themselves argued that they did not need to respect these members of the informal economy, they were merely reacting to the disrespect shown to them by individuals who had been *maléduqué*. In the students’ eyes, their formal education put them in a social position that demanded respect. How did such a divide come about?

In the following section, I outline a brief history of Benin as it relates to the growth of formal education as a means of creating, and eventually perpetuating, social divide. I argue that religion, nationality, gender, and region all played important roles in determining who has access to schools, what those schools were designed to do for the students, and how schooling affects families’ socio-economic outcomes.

Dahomean Empire



Figure 2: Representation of 16 Dahomean Kings (For interpretation of the references to color in this and all other figures, the reader is referred to the electronic version of this dissertation.)

The Dahomean empire, located in the southern region of what is now Benin, was one of the most powerful empires in Africa between 1600 and 1900. Its leaders have been criticized for trading people for power, money, and cloth (Bay 1998). The military power of Dahomey was well-known throughout West Africa, and European traders and visitors shared stories in Europe about the “savage” practices they witnessed, including cannibalism, slavery, and human sacrifices (Bay). Of note is that the majority of the travelers’ accounts came from individuals who were active participants in the slave trade; an estimated 1,000,000 slaves were traded through the port of Ouidah from the 1670s to the 1860s (Law et al. 2001). Despite the “bad press” (as Bay calls it), Dahomey was a reasonably well-functioning state; power changed hands between individuals of varying backgrounds in what Bay (1998) calls “a social history of ruling coalitions” (5). This was possible because while a king in the royal palace in the city of Abomey

ruled the empire, he was aided by a monarchy of men and women from varying lineages and social groups. Dahomey was an expansionist empire—as the army conquered surrounding lands, it also ‘consumed’ the people, who became part of the kingdom, some through the marriage of women to royal lineages whose children could become part of the monarchy. In this way, the empire used kinship as a means of integrating political power at the highest levels.

Although lineage and kinship were some of the main means of maintaining relationships between individuals in the expanding Dahomean empire, another important means of creating loyalty among the disparate members was oaths and pledges of lifelong support (Hazoumé 1937). In the early 1800s, a noteworthy oath was taken between an heir to the throne, Guezo, and a Portuguese man named Felix Francisco de Souza. De Souza was a slave trader who had commercial dealings with King Adandozan, but whose dealings eventually landed him in prison in Abomey. While there, he befriended Adandozan’s brother, Guezo, who helped him escape by providing a 60-person escort to help him reach the coast. In 1818, Guezo became king through a *coup d’état* with the financial assistance of de Souza (Soumonni 2001). Guezo returned the favor by installing de Souza as the governor of and titled commercial agent in Ouidah, where he acted as an intermediary between the Dahomean monarchy and Europeans and between proponents and opponents of the slave trade. As the slave trade declined, and slave insurrections arose in Brazil, free blacks were deported in 1835, many of who made their way back to Benin under the coordination and administration of de Souza (Mann and Bay 2001; Soumonni 2001). The majority of the Brazilians settled in Ouidah. De Souza’s influence in Dahomey cannot be underestimated; his wealth combined with his close relationship with King Guezo afforded him the prestige and respect of most Dahomeans. He left a sizeable legacy, and according to some reports, he fathered over 300 children who quickly became part of the elite in southern Dahomey

(Soumonni 2001). The Brazilian community, including de Souza's descendents, were (and to some extent still are) recognizable not only by their names, but by their lighter skin, relative wealth, and education.

Missionaries, Colonialism, and Education

The history of formal education in Benin is closely entwined with politics and religion, primarily Christianity. Portuguese established mission schools in Dahomey in the 1800s, and all instruction took place in both Portuguese and English. In addition to academic lessons, the missionaries imparted social and cultural values upon students. In fact, Bay (1998) argues that missionaries brought with them European standards of proper behavior, including gender norms and monogamous marriage arrangements. In addition, indigenous worldviews were condemned, including the common belief in the power of vodun (spirits or dieties) to intervene in human affairs. Vodun were not accepted as deities "linked to humanity through complex relationships of mutual interdependence" (Bay: 22), but instead were portrayed as evil beliefs by the missionaries. In the 1860s, Ouidah became the site of struggles between the Portuguese and the French Catholic missionaries who took possession of the fort, reportedly with the permission of the Brazilian community (Soumonni 2001). By 1865, the Portuguese reclaimed their authority at the fort and ousted the French missionaries, and by 1885 Dahomey was named as a protectorate of Portugal.

Two years later, the French once again occupied Dahomey and Governor Ballot decreed that all school courses were to be taught in the French language by French instructors who had been trained in France. After a prolonged struggle between King Behanzin and the French General Bayol (1891-1894), the French claimed Dahomey in an official decree on June 22, 1894. French colonial policies enacted shortly thereafter had long-lasting consequences on the

educational system as schools were portrayed as a primary means of “bringing [primitive populations] up gradually to [civilized nations] level” (Claudié 1897 as cited in Gyasi 2012). Gyasi argues colonial language policies were an expression of power that contributed to “discrimination and disagreement” between those who spoke it and those who do not understand it. Understanding the importance of French policy is vital to understanding how upward mobility was linked, not just to birth, but to education in Dahomey.

During the early French colonial period Catholic missionaries took the lead in formalizing education. Father Aupiais, in particular, arrived in 1903 and spent the majority of his 23 years in Dahomey establishing and running mission schools (Ronen 1974). His efforts were crucial in the success of mission schools in Dahomey to remain out of the control of the French state, and Dahomey was the only colony in French West Africa in which mission schools expanded during the late 1800s and early 1900s.

In 1900, in addition to the mission schools there were approximately 20 lay schools throughout the country whose students were primarily the sons of chiefs and notables, including many of the Brazilians in Ouidah (Bunche 1934). The Brazilians were of particular interest to French administrators as they had “attained a high level of civilization. They dress as Europeans... When French instruction will have penetrated this population, when the day-to-day influence of our institutions and certain measures will make them ours, we will find strong support for the civilisation of the region” (*Archives Nationales d’Outre Mer, Paris; dossier, Dahomey, général* as cited in Ronen 1975). Viewpoints such as that demonstrate the early links expressed among the administrators between “civilization” and dress, language, formal instruction, and institutions. The French relied on the formally educated Brazilians to occupy places in their administration and to perform duties such as interpreters, secretaries, and teachers

(Soumonni 2001).

Some Dahomean elite embraced the colonial idea that formal (French) education and civilization were deeply entwined, as expressed in a 1939 newspaper article: “If we want progress in Dahomey, imitate the white men or European by taking advantage of education” (*La Presse Porto-Novienne* Jan 1939 as cited in Ronen 1975). The new Africans were socialized into new forms of power relations as well—relations based on the possession of certain types of knowledge gained through a closely controlled curriculum and methods (Brenner 2001). Although mission schools remained separate from the state, by 1914 the French government mandated that all schools in Dahomey follow the “Metropolitan Model” in which the schools were required to conform to a French curriculum, in addition to the language and ethnicity restrictions that were already in place (Manning 2004; Fichtner 2009).

Official Colonial Policy, Formal Education, and Status

Some African scholars have criticized the imposition of a foreign language on colonial populations, arguing that language imperialism is just one facet of political and/or religious imperialism (Awoniyi 1975; Bamgboṣe 2000). The close relationship between education and status, and language and education, creates a situation whereby it appears natural that certain languages become dominant while others are relegated to lower statuses and usefulness among the dominant minority (Mufwene 2002; Gyasi 2012). Mufwene argues that language choice in multilingual societies depends on what a speaker needs a language for, as well as a cost-benefit analysis of the extent that competence in a particular language “facilitate[s] survival in a changing socio-economic ecology” (2002:4). In colonial West Africa the French language was positioned as a solution to a particular need; a language to unite the millions of individuals who

spoke hundreds, if not thousands, of dialects (Conklin 1997). Adopting the language was a useful strategy for some living in colonial Benin because individuals who had gained competency in the French language were able to secure positions within the colonial administration, make more money, and gain status (Gyasi 2012). In contrast, those who did not attend school and/or learn the French language were left out of the growing class of *fonctionnaires*, or civil servants (White 1996).

According to West African scholar Ndjio (2008), colonial policies regarding education were also designed to produce people who were *évolué*, or individuals who were taught to feel “uncomfortable with their customs” and to embrace the “superiority” of French culture. From the moment students entered the schoolhouse, they were faced with an “ideology that saw the simplicity of African languages and the people who spoke them and, syllogistically, the superiority of the dominant language [French] and the people who spoke it” (Gyasi 2012:227). *Evolué*, according to Moumouni (1968), meant a “frantic imitation of everything ‘white’ on the part of those who called themselves (or were called)... ‘*évolué*’”(49). The word *évolué* is still used in Benin today, although the connotation has changed slightly. During my interviews with students at UAC, I asked them to define the word as they understand and use it. In most cases it is described as a progression, or success through small steps. Although half of the students explicitly equate *évolué* with education, most expanded their definitions to include business or financial success.²⁶

For students at UAC, their evolution is to progress in their studies, to pass each grade, and move on to the next level. Yet their descriptions are much more inclusive. A student named Yves gave the example of a person who first had to walk to get around town, and then saved

²⁶ Interestingly, the vast majority (85 percent) of the male students led with education as a criterion for *évolué*, while only 33 percent of the female students did so.

enough money to buy a moto, and eventually had enough money to buy a car. That person had evolved, progressed at each step. *Evolué*, tied with a sense of being at ease, tends to mean that a person has enough money to take care of oneself and his or her family. It also implies a sense of forward motion, of striving to improve one's quality of life, and of providing for one's family. It is generally a positive word in everyday use among students, and not necessarily equated with colonialism or a striving to become "white" or French. In fact, I asked a student named Sandrine if she thought it was a colonial word and her response was negative: "No, I don't think it is. You can even be *évolué* in tradition if you are someone who really knows African history, even if you have never gone to school." Although students seem to have decoupled the term *évolué* from its colonial past, I would argue that the essence of its meaning remains tied to notions of superiority from the masses – and much of that superiority comes through access to schools.²⁷

Schooling, particularly when it is not equally available to all members of a society, can serve to create a divide; it can be part of a process of social exclusion that systematically locks certain individuals out of a status group that is based on the possession of diplomas and the knowledge that such diplomas signify (Agonhessou Yaya 2009). By the 1930s, primary school was technically available to all children in Benin yet only 12 percent of school-aged children attended (10 percent of whom were girls) due to a lack of facilities and trained teachers (Bunche and Henry 1995). French administrators attempted to control attendance through strict age regulations, which required parents to provide birth certificates for their children. Attaining the certificates was not easy, entailing a visit to a colonial administration building with seven witnesses of the birth and nine francs to register the birth (Bunche 1934).

²⁷ Despite students' assertions that *évolué* had nothing to do with colonialism, some of their elder relatives did not feel the same. In Chapter Three I discuss the Fon phrase, "*e djan blo yovo*" which signifies that the youth want to act "white" or European through their use of the French language.

In addition to the restrictions regarding age, parents were outraged because students were also sent away *en masse* at the beginning of each school year due to a lack of space in schools (Ronen 1974). Ronen argues that these policies were designed to keep the children and young adults working the fields so that the French government could benefit from agricultural profits. Ronen also asserts that limited formal schooling was a deliberate attempt on the part of the French to create a limited local elite who could collaborate in the project to disseminate French culture among their contemporaries. Dahomean parents expressed frustration with the policies, as this anonymous letter to the governor, published in the newspaper *Le Phare du Dahomey* in 1933, demonstrates: “The French came to civilize us, but they prevent us from learning to read, to write, and to speak...The administration is afraid that once the Black is educated, his eyes will open, he will see and understand.” (“*Lettre ouverte à M. Le Gouverneur DeCoppet,*” *Le Phare du Dahomey*, August 1933; as cited in Ronen 1974). As Ferguson (1999) argues, schooling is one way of “hooking citizens into a...universal grid of modernity (243).”

The highly vocal *évolués* in Dahomey during the colonial period used the media to distance themselves from the masses and from long-standing customs and practices. They also put forth demands for better education and for “social and cultural emancipation from the traditional past (Ronen 1974:58).” These new forms of power relations were based on the idea that formal education was required in order to be good leaders. As one anonymous letter to the Mayor of Porto-Novo argued, “placing these imbeciles (non-literate chiefs) over educated men is offensive” (“*Lettre Ouverte à M. Bert, Administrateur-Maire de la ville de Porto-Novo et Commandant de dit cercle,*” *La Presse Porto-Novienne*, July 1933; as cited in Ronen 1974:59). In contrast, France was positioned as a benevolent mentor, “leading us out of the barbarism of our ancestors” (“*Nos mauvais chefs de canton,*” *La Phare du Dahomey* 1933 as cited in Ronen

1974:7). The “barbarism” that was mentioned in numerous newspapers was also referred to as “totems” and “fetishes.” Without being referred to outright, these comments were directed toward the spiritual belief in vodun, and in many cases expressed a hierarchy of religious beliefs, with Christianity as vastly superior to “bizarre customs” of the Dahomeans (62). Newspapers also carried editorials lauding the separation of Dahomeans into categories of elite and “native” along with a physical separation between “civilized” cities and towns in the south and “barbaric” villages in the interior and north (71). According to this argument, education and training were linked to space and place, to be obtained in formal French-built schoolhouses and taught by people who were separate from, and superior to, the masses.

The French *mission civilisatrice* came out of the enlightenment belief that French culture was superior to others, but that others could be taught how to become civilized (Conklin 1997). Colonial administrators were outspoken in their disdain for Africans, as Albert Charton, Inspector General of French West Africa stated, “The black races of Africa have not attained a complete and coherent civilization of their own, nor do they possess the necessary foundations on which to build up a real system of education” (as cited in White 1996: 15). With this belief, it was the obligation of the French to spread culture, predominantly through their territories and colonies in a process known as assimilation. The use of the french language was seen as crucial to assimilation, as William Ponty, Governor General of French West Africa, declared, “The goal of elementary education is the spread of spoken French among the natives...French is the only language to be used in the schools” (Decree 12 November 1912 as cited in Gyasi 2012). Conklin (1997) describes the *mission civilisatrice* as “the inculcation of new needs and wants, and the spread of French institutions and values” (18), and I argue that my research suggests that some aspects of the mission have remained, including the connection students place between French

language and being “civilized.” Mahadi (1996) goes so far as to call colonial education “brain-washing,” preparing people not for their own society, but for one in which they will never fully belong. This interpretation was echoed in conversations I had with Beninese professors who were educated during the colonial period, as expressed by one participant: “School was created to depersonalize the Africans and create new Africans. [W]ith colonialism going to school is equivalent to becoming a citizen. In those days at school you have to learn French, to avoid traditional ways of life and with French you become [a] citizen...you have to avoid traditional things like vodun, like African languages, when you return to the village you have to speak your African languages differently with a citizen accent. And that’s why Colonialism created schools” (Akoha Interview 2005). Akoha’s comments reflect accurately the elitism and disdain for African-ness that French colonial policy contained, as illustrated in the following report written by Georges Hardy, Inspector General of Education 1912-1919, “these are our ideas, which constitute our moral, social and economic superiority, and little by little they will transform the barbarians of yesterday into disciples and assistants” (as cited in White 1996: 14).

During the colonial period, Dahomey became known as the Latin Quarter because of the reputation it had for being an intellectual society whose educated elite went to University in Senegal or France and who were assigned to posts throughout French West Africa (Ronen 1975). Dahomey also boasted the largest percentage of primary school attendance among the French West African colonies (Ronen 1974). However, these intellectuals were in an ambiguous position. On one hand, they were given modest positions that provided good pay. On the other hand, they recognized that they were not respected as Frenchmen, and they would never be considered true Frenchmen by the French Right whose colonial policy on education stressed that African colonies were separate and inferior and would always be so regardless of the level of

education achieved by citizens (Ronen 1974; White 1996).

The Dahomean elite pushed for more education and greater political representation, and criticized the French administrators for their superior attitude. They fought for representation in the French National Assembly and were finally given one seat in 1946 (Schmitt 2011). The group of intellectuals who used their influence to speak out against the French colonial occupation were no longer viewed favorably as mouthpieces of the administration. In fact, open hostility toward colonialism resulted in a minor exodus of Dahomean intellectuals during the period leading up to independence in 1960 (Buijtenhuijs 1978).

Independent Dahomey and Marxist Period

Dahomey gained its independence on August 1, 1960. The first 12 years after independence were characterized as a period of instability, during which there were 9 changes of power, and several bloodless coups as power shifted between civilian governments and military rule (Assani 2010). Hubert Maga, a former schoolteacher who had served as one of the Dahomean members of the French National Assembly, was appointed as the first President of the Republic of Dahomey. Maga was raised in the Islamic faith and attended secondary school in Dakar. He later converted to Christianity and married the daughter of a prominent Brazilian from Ouidah. During Maga's term French experts were brought in to reform the educational system – as of late 1961 just 2.8 percent of Dahomey's youth (ages 15-24 years) had received a primary school completion certificate (Quirino Lanhounney 1965). The plan, adopted by the Maga and the Dahomean National Assembly on December 31, 1961, included a hybrid educational system in which “gifted” students were trained according to the French academic standards, and “less gifted” students were selected to obtain agricultural training (ibid). Quirino Lanhounney (1965) argues that the reforms failed because the educational plan contradicted the deep aspirations of

the people, particularly youth who had no interest in attending agricultural schools. Maga faced a term characterized by a weak economy, public strikes led by trade unions in response to wage cuts, and strikes by students angered by Maga's imposition of forced youth labor to strengthen the agricultural sector (Azizou 2010). A military coup led by General Christophe Soglo wrested power from Maga in October 1963, but Soglo's reign was short and the nation returned to civilian rule in January 1964, led by former premier Sourou-Migan Apithy (Assani 2010).

During Apithy's term the Dahomean and Togolese governments jointly established the *Institut d'Enseignement Supérieur du Bénin*²⁸ in 1965 with campuses in Lome, Togo (literature) and Porto-Novo, Dahomey (sciences). The university was intended to quell the "brain drain" that occurred as those who passed the *baccalauréat* exam (bac) migrated to other countries to attend university and were placed in administrative posts throughout francophone West Africa (Yaya 2008). This new institution attracted academics back to Dahomey in the role of professors at the university.

Once again, the student population was largely male from the southern region of the country, the children of Dahomey's wealthier class (Agboton 1968). These educated elite, with their "highly valued Western knowledge symbolized by their university diplomas" were rewarded not only with social status, but also with lucrative positions in the public sector as civil servants (Ndjio 2008: 207). University graduates were guaranteed jobs with the state, and as the number of graduates increased, so did the ranks of *fonctionnaires*, or civil servants. These employees of the state were relatively well-paid, enjoyed fringe benefits including access to education for members of their households, pensions, and reduced-rate health programs. Education appeared to be a prime factor in creating material and social inequities, but a sense of obligation to family

²⁸ Named for the Bight of Benin, the body of water that both countries border on the south.

members could serve to level some of the material disparities. In the period following independence, the redistribution of wealth (and underlying “stability of relations among people”) was largely dependent on the ability of the Dahomean government to pay the salaries of its *fonctionnaires*.

By 1968, Dahomey faced an economic situation described as catastrophic as it struggled to balance its budget. France announced that it could no longer deliver any budget-balancing funds, and the Dahomean government took drastic measures to stay afloat, including cuts to civil servant fringe benefits and increased taxes (Decalo 1970). In response to these policy changes, university students demonstrated, and eventually a general strike erupted that effectively stopped all telegraph, postal, and railways services, and ultimately resulted in an assassination attempt on the President and a coup in December 1969. The new administration, led by a three-person presidential council, made concessions to restore order, effectively reversing the cuts made to *fonctionnaire* benefits. As early as May 1970, economists and academics from outside the country again expressed concern over Dahomey’s “bloated civil service” that spent over 75 percent of the country’s budget while noting that trimming the fat had been a suicidal course of action in the past (Decalo 1970: 446). Adejunmobi, a scholar from neighboring Nigeria, drew similar conclusions as Decalo when he noted the “top-heavy civil service” in Dahomey and suggested trimming the numbers as an “obvious solution to deficit problems” (1976:279). There appeared to be no simple solution to the economic and political problems that Dahomey’s interim administration faced in the early 1970s.

Matthieu Kerekou, who was educated at military schools in Mali, Senegal, and France, led a military coup in October 1972 and seized power from the three-member civilian council, declaring that Dahomey would no longer follow foreign ideology. In 1975, Kerekou made a

statement to the populace declaring that scientific socialism informed and guided by Marxism-Leninism would be the driving ideology of the nation (Iroko 2001). The Dahomean government nationalized private companies operating in the country. Kerekou renamed Dahomey to Benin in 1976, partially as a means of uniting the nation, as Benin was a more neutral name without the legacy of the expansionist Dahomean empire. The socialist orientation affected foreign relations greatly; relations with the United States declined, while diplomatic relations were established and an increase in exchange occurred between Benin and the Soviet Union, China, North Korea, and East Germany. The shift in diplomatic relations also affected students in Benin, and during the mid to late 1970s more than 2000 Beninese students received scholarships to universities in socialist countries.

However, education in Benin during the Marxist-Leninist period suffered; teaching quality was weakened and the educational system was near collapse (United States Agency for International Development [USAID] 2005). By the mid-1980s, Benin faced yet another economic crisis and requested assistance from the transnational lending community. The WB and International Monetary Fund (IMF) provided loans with the stipulation that the public sector needed to be cut significantly going forward, including a freeze on recruitment in the public sector (Fichtner 2010). Beginning in 1987, a series of teacher training centers were closed and the Ministry of Education determined that primary school diploma holders were qualified to teach. The year also marked the end of the automatic recruitment of university graduates by the state, and a veritable hiring freeze meant that the only positions available in the civil service from that point forward would be due to retirement (WB 2012).

University students also faced some of the fallout from these policies—scholarships were scheduled to stop being paid in 1989, and they no longer had the prospect of smooth transitions

from being students to becoming white-collar employees of the state (Hountondji Interview 2008). The situation culminated in a period of *déscolarisation* in which confidence in the educational system plummeted along with the net enrollment rate; by 1989, the percentage of school-aged girls attending primary institutions dropped to less than 30 percent, and overall enrollment dipped to just 45 percent, the lowest it had been in a decade (UNICEF 2008). The 1988-1989 academic year was lost due to a prolonged strike over teacher salaries, which had not been paid for months, and IMF mandates that teacher salaries would be cut by 50 percent going forward (Guignido Gaye, Laourou, and Zounon 2001). Students at the university in Cotonou also went on strike in early 1989 to protest the cuts in grant funds. Students and teachers were not the only groups to strike in this period; the government was eight months in arrears in paying most *fonctionnaire* salaries, which led to a general strike. The entire economic system was in extreme crisis, and in 1989 the banking system collapsed. The government was shut down and Kerekou abandoned the Marxist-Leninist ideology that had characterized his leadership to date (Kiragu and Mukandala 2003).

Democratic Renewal and Outside Interventions

In 1990, a period of *renouveau démocratique* (democratic renewal) was ushered in after a national conference was held in February to address the crisis. Kerekou stepped down and World Bank economist Nicéphore Soglo²⁹ was chosen as the new Prime Minister, and was later officially elected into office as President of the multiparty democracy. It was also an important year for global education, as the international initiative EFA was spearheaded by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), supported by WB,

²⁹ Nicéphore Soglo is the cousin of Christophe Soglo. Nicéphore Soglo attended university in Paris, and had been employed by the IMF and WB before taking office in 1990.

UNDP, and UNICEF, and accepted by Benin's new administration. The initiative committed to the goals of expanding and improving primary schools and ensuring that all children, particularly girls, would have access to free, compulsory primary education by 2015 (UNDP 2008; UNICEF 2009). In response to growing pressure to reduce the gender gap, Benin's administration enacted policy based on the concept of Basic Quality Education to directly address the gender inequities in the school system.

In 1992, school fees were eliminated for all girls, and incentive programs such as All Girls to School were set up to encourage rural families to send their daughters to school. The All Girls to School program was funded primarily by UNICEF, which served as the overarching organizer of several localized efforts throughout the country, such as BØRNEFonden and Batonga Foundation. BØRNEFonden is a private, secular Danish organization whose stated work aims to "strengthen the youth and children in poor countries to become independent, competent people, who inspire and contribute to a positive change in their community" (Mission Statement, www.bornefonden.dk accessed 9/18/12). Batonga Foundation is a US-based NGO whose Board of Directors includes the popular Beninese singer Angélique Kidjo. Kidjo, and the Batonga Foundation, believe that educating girls in Africa will allow them to become "mothers of change" who will fight to ensure that both their sons and daughters are given the opportunity to attend school (Vision, www.batongafoundation.org accessed 9/18/12). Projects facilitated by these NGOs include community-selected scholarships that paid for uniforms, school supplies, and tutoring for girls in Benin. A project that met with acclaim throughout the region was sponsored by the United Nations Girls Education Initiative, which gave stipends to older girls who acted as mentors to younger girls who were just entering the school system. EFA, with the support of the Beninese government, built classrooms, paid the salaries of female contract teachers, and

performed awareness campaigns for rural parents to encourage them to send their daughters to school (Guingnido Gaye 2004). Education was positioned as a fundamental human right, and no longer as a privilege of the elite, or for males only.

By 2000, progress in many of the countries targeted by EFA had been slow and uneven, despite significant gains in Benin. Representatives from Benin attended the World Educational Forum in Dakar, Senegal and joined the international community in reaffirming commitment to the project. The Dakar Framework for Action was rolled into the higher profile Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were signed through a resolution adopted through the General Assembly of the United Nations. Education was positioned as critical to the success of all eight MDGs, which included ending poverty and hunger, gender equality, child health, and combating HIV/AIDS. According to Benin's EFA coordinator, the country was selected for the EFA Fast Track Initiative (EFA/FTI) because of the severe shortage of learning facilities, teachers, and instructional materials in the country.

Countries selected for EFA/FTI were given increased funding and the assistance of outside experts to complete education projects in a set five-year period. The efforts of programs included in the All Girls to School initiative were so successful that the initiative was modified to include all children and was renamed All Children to School. School lunch programs were established in rural areas to encourage attendance and to meet students' nutritional needs while relieving the burden on families to provide mid-day meals. Primary school fees were eliminated for both boys and girls, and secondary school is currently subsidized for boys until the end of junior high school and for girls until the end of senior high school. The elimination of school fees does not mean, however, that schooling is free. There are costs associated with sending children to school, including the compulsory khaki uniforms (pictured below), textbooks, school supplies,

and the extra fees – “*frais de scolarité*.” These costs vary depending on the region, but as an example, the *souscription* in Abomey-Calavi is 10,000 FCFA³⁰ per child and the contribution is an additional 10,000 FCFA.

Sidonie, a second year student in Juridical Sciences at UAC, spent two years in the military prior to entering university. She spent the majority of that time in Gjanya, a village near the Nigerian border where mothers are “always desperate to enroll their children and to pay for the necessary documents.” Sidonie explained that these mothers have gardens, work in the fields, and sell the items in the market to as a means to pay for their children’s education. Yet the mothers become discouraged because they see a disconnect between the promises of free education for their daughters, and the reality in which they are “asked to buy and buy and buy. For All Girls to School they had *sensibilisations* (awareness campaigns) on TV. They said school would be free, but we don’t feel that way. Because before when we had to pay for school we paid less than now. We have to purchase so much. They say they will send books but we don’t get them. Parents don’t understand the system, we don’t understand the system. It’s bizarre.” She explained to me, “I would appeal to the parents. Ask why their children were not at school. The mom would say ‘it’s because I don’t have the money to buy this or that book.’ Sometimes I even used my own money to help those who didn’t have any. So there are serious problems that need to be addressed, but I don’t know how to get financial aid for them. I see sometimes on TV that UNICEF has donated to children in Benin, but I don’t see the money going to the schools.”

³⁰ FCFA (*Franc Communauté financière Africaine*) is the French West African currency. As of August 20, 2012, the exchange rate is 531 FCFA to 1 USD. UNICEF 2010 figures state average household income of 375,000 FCFA.



Figure 3: Primary school students holding Khaki material for uniforms (photo by author)

In addition to the hidden costs of “free” education, Benin currently faces difficulties providing quality education. As explained to me by Comlanvi Maodi Johnson, National Coordinator for EFA in one of Benin’s Ministries of Education,³¹ the primary concern of FTI has been creating access to education, while the issue of quality has been positioned as a secondary concern. In the early 2000s, Benin reached 100 percent gross enrollment in primary schools, and education leaders now face issues of quality. There are not enough qualified teachers for the

³¹ As of the time of my fieldwork, Benin had four separate Ministries concerned with education, and the number of ministries fluctuates regularly with each administration change. Currently there is no single overarching Ministry of Education, although a National Council on Education was formed in 2010.

primary schools, particularly in rural areas that teachers find undesirable. Pupil-to-teacher ratios can be as high as 58-to-1 in some public schools (Debourou et al. 2005). While the state has hired contract teachers,³² these individuals are not *fonctionnaires* with the salary and benefits that are accorded to civil servants. Their level of commitment remains low, and many teachers take on private tutoring jobs to earn more money - some of them during school hours (ibid).

Low teaching quality has meant that many students repeat grades, or fail the CEP exam (Primary Study Certificate), which prevents them from beginning secondary school. Despite the efforts to increase access to education for all children in Benin, completion rates are still affected significantly by region, wealth, and gender (Debourou et al. 2005). Less than 10 percent of female students from poor families make it to 9th grade, while over 40 percent of rich males reach that benchmark. In theory, the students who make it to the higher grades, and who pass the CEP and BEPC, are those who receive the highest grades. A significant problem in the system, however, is the fact that there are no predetermined passing grades for these exams. Exam results are used to match the number of students who qualify to capacity in the public secondary school system. The government-administered tests are graded and are then reviewed by a departmental commission. There are frequent allegations of corruption by members of Ministries or wealthy individuals who are able to sway the commission to assist their relatives (ibid). These allegations further decrease general confidence in the equality of the educational system.

Despite the challenges, there has been an increased demand for access to higher education by the families of students who pass the bac exam. The student population at UAC has grown substantially over the past decade, and the current infrastructure is struggling to meet the

³² In 2002 the percentage of contract teachers in primary and secondary school was 61 percent. Contract teachers for primary are required to hold a BEPC (8th grade certificate) and do not receive professional training.

growing demand. In 2010, the enrollment was nearly 80,000,³³ almost double the EFA target of 45,000 students by 2015 (Darboux and Farougou 2010). According to current students at UAC, classrooms and auditoriums are over capacity, the number of students in science faculties is so high that students are only able to use the laboratories once or twice a year, and the libraries are under-stocked.

Approximately 20 percent of the students at UAC are *boursiers* who receive scholarship funding from the state. During the period of my research, there were two levels of scholarships based on the grades that students' received on the bac; the highest ranking students received stipends of 341,000 FCFA per year, and the second tier of students received 132,250 FCFA per year.³⁴ The cost of supporting students coupled with the need for strengthening infrastructure and hiring more faculty members has caused the university to seek outside funding from international donors. In addition, a family's cost of sending a child to university are substantial, especially if the student chooses one of the more competitive professional faculties, such as medicine or law, where fees range between 300,000 fcfa to 650,000 fcfa per year (WB 2010).³⁵

In response to the increased demand for higher education coupled with the changing global economic landscape, there has been significant growth in private higher education institutions in Benin in the past decade. As of 2010, there were 94 accredited higher education institutions, the vast majority of which are private. These institutions differ from public universities in that they focus on short vocational courses designed to respond to labor market

³³ 77,804 students: 59,461 male and 18,343 female

³⁴ Students who received grades of 11.51 out of 20 on the Bac comprised the highest tier of scholarship recipients, and students who received between 11 and 11.5 on the Bac comprised the second tier.

³⁵ Public universities in Benin operate on a two-tier fee system. Most faculties in the social sciences and humanities are free, while fees are charged for professional and vocational faculties.

needs and to increase the employability of graduates. This is an important aspect of education in Benin where almost 95 percent³⁶ of the economy is dependent on the informal sector, whereas just 5 percent depends on the formal sector (USAID 2011). University students in Benin face a 25 percent unemployment rate when they graduate and many students fear that the public university is not preparing them for the global market. The current situation in Benin, where the number of degree holders is expected to more than double to 335,000 by 2025, is serious. During my interview with Johnson, he explained that the educational sector (private and public) in Benin is struggling to create curricula that will provide students “*compétence de la vie courant*” or the skills that are necessary to succeed in contemporary society. Secondary schools as well as the universities are attempting to build infrastructure in information and communication technologies (ICT) so that graduates are better able to position themselves in the global knowledge economy. Unfortunately, the geographic distribution of infrastructure and materials in Benin has been decidedly southern and urban, and instead of decreasing an education gap, it has contributed to an imbalance that may have long-term effects of social inequality (International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP)/UNESCO 2000).

As demonstrated through this brief overview, formal education in Benin has long been linked to notions of civilization and superiority for those who have received it. Schools were places where the children of elite gathered to become trained, not only in language and academic skills, but also in their place in the social hierarchy. During the colonial period education was a precursor to a career in the civil service and the monetary benefits that accompanied such a position. Religious meta-narratives espoused through the *civilisatrice* movement and the missionary schools indicated that to be civilized meant that elites must reject “traditional”

³⁶ Up from 60 percent in 1992 and 70 percent in 2002.

practices including the veneration of vodun. Regardless of whether or not elites internalized such narratives, elites needed to show outward signs that they belonged at the top of the hierarchy.

However, changes in access to education over the past twenty-five years along with the decoupling of administrative positions with degrees have disrupted the notion of a natural hierarchy between an elite class and a subservient class. The student body is more diverse now than it has ever been in terms of gender, religion, geographic origins, and socio-economic status. Has increased diversity among the student body led to increased diversity among the elite class? In the following chapter I examine notions of social class and upward mobility as they relate to higher education. I use ethnographic data to analyze the effects that students' families and past experiences have on their university experience and on where they place themselves in a social hierarchy.

CHAPTER THREE: CULTURAL CAPITAL, RECIPROCITY, and *SORCELLERIE*

Part One - Inherited, Embodied, and Acquired Cultural Capital

Although the student body at UAC has become increasingly more heterogeneous in the past ten years, youths from privileged social classes are by far overrepresented in higher education in Benin (Brossard and Foko 2008). These students arrive on campus with significant amounts of what Bourdieu (1986) calls cultural capital, or the cumulative effects of education and family environment on an individual. To display cultural capital is to have internalized appropriate manners, to know how to behave in certain situations, and to speak in a way that will either give or gain respect. Amassing cultural capital is a process, in varying degrees a matter of inheritance (ie, name), embodiment (self-improvement), and accumulation (educational qualifications) that begins at birth.

Bourdieu's theory has been used to analyze why certain students perform better than others, and to refute the "commonsense view" that equates academic success (or failure) with natural aptitude. Because cultural capital is transmitted primarily through the household, Bourdieu describes it as the "best hidden and socially most determinant educational investment" (48). In fact, Bourdieu argues that the effectiveness of transmission (ie, that younger generations will inherit the cultural capital of their parents) depends on the cultural capital embodied in the whole family. The cultural capital of the family is one of the factors that "flows from habitus" (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990 (1977): 94).

Habitus can be conceptualized as a matrix consisting of personal experiences and the knowledge of history and family background that helps an individual make decisions based on what he or she deems possible. Education scholars often use Bourdieu's concept of habitus to analyze processes of social stratification and belonging in academic settings (Horvat and Antonio

1999; Reed-Danahay 2000; Reay 2004; Marginson 2008; Dumais and Ward 2010). Households in Benin, however, are far more fluid than those in the European or North American contexts that Bourdieu is referring to when making his theoretical arguments. I extend his theory to the Beninese social context in which children may live with members of their extended family for any length of time ranging from school vacations to their entire academic careers. In this dissertation I am using the term child circulation as defined by Leinaweaver (2008) whereby “a child is born into an existing household space and grows up surrounded by variously shifting configurations of family members” (99). In the case of students at UAC the “variously shifting configurations” of households members when they were children has affected their habitus as university students. Not only have they been able to draw upon their own experiences, but also upon the experiences of other household members. Habitus’ are permeable and responsive to what is going on around them (Reay et al. 2009) and any new member of the household, if even for a short period of time, has the potential of affecting the other members.

The circulation of children between households in Benin is also symbolic of social relationships of exchange, obligation, and reciprocity. Social capital, or the actual or potential resources linked to membership in a group, is strengthened or maintained through these exchanges (Bourdieu 1986). Conversely, withdrawing from these social relationships can lead to resentment and a deficit in social capital among members in the group. There are various reasons for which students might withdraw, including a sense of superiority because of their education, conflicting religious views, or fear of jealousy from those who were unable to send their children to school. Some students in this study have been virtually cut off from their extended families and natal villages; citing the “very, very wicked” extended family that is in the village (as described later in this chapter by a student named Gratien). For those students, or

their parents, the social capital to be obtained by becoming an intellectual is greater than the social capital obtained through membership in the extended family. Instead of expanding the impact of education and transferring cultural capital between households, the practice could potentially limit the benefits of education to the individual level rather than the family level. Students who exhibit elitist behaviors, or who cut off social relationships with those who are not formally educated run the risk of becoming targets of *la sorcellerie* (witchcraft or sorcery). Those who are particularly likely to fear being targeted are students who both display their cultural capital – through language choice, possession of educational qualifications, and mannerisms - while hoarding their social capital by limiting social relationships with those that they perceive to be of lower social classes. In many cases students conflate social class or level of education with physical location, using the term “villagers” and “illiterates” interchangeably in our conversations. Despite the potential for tension and disjuncture, I argue that Benin’s recent influx of students at all levels – primary, secondary, and tertiary (post-secondary) - has the possibility of increasing the cultural capital of all of the households in which these students live as long as the system of social exchanges takes place.

In the first section of this chapter I use ethnographic examples to demonstrate how cultural capital is embodied by students, ways in which they attempt to distinguish themselves from others who do not possess the same type of cultural capital, and the tensions that arise between family members when cultural capital is valued differently in the home and academic settings. In the second section of this chapter I analyze reciprocity and obligations among families in Benin. I examine the ways in which cultural capital is converted into social capital through exchanges, and conversely, how students “hoard” their social capital when they feel threatened. I follow that with a discussion of witchcraft in Benin, and specifically focus on the types of

witchcraft that students feel may be directed toward them. Not all students feared witchcraft personally, but nearly every student mentioned it in our interviews. It is typically associated with “the village” or the “*grande famille*” in our conversations with students. I will touch on witchcraft accusations as one aspect of urban/rural relations in Benin.

According to Reay (2009) “individual histories...are vital to understanding the concept of habitus” (76). In light of that, I present two individual case studies of students at UAC to understand how personal circumstances become layers in a larger class habitus which “raises or lowers the level of expectations and aspirations” of those within that class (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990: 116). Superficially the two students may seem similar, and they could both be used as “success stories” in the reports by education NGOs. They are both in their early twenties, and both passed their bac on the first attempt, although neither of them received a score high enough to merit a scholarship. They both come from polygamous families, and their parents are still living. Both of their fathers are retired, and their mothers participate in the informal economy to help support their families. Both of them have older siblings who have attended UAC. Yet their individual habitus’ and cultural capital have led them to experience university life differently, and I argue that these differences may significantly impact the effect that higher education has on their ability to affect the habitus of those around them.

Fabrice, a first-year student in English, has had the support of his immediate and extended family throughout his academic career. His story, while particular in its details, illustrates the advantage that some students have when inherited, embodied, and acquired cultural capital align. I will then contrast his story to that of Geneviève, a first-year student in Modern Literature, who experienced a deep disjuncture between the cultural capital valued by her immediate family and formal schooling, and that valued by her extended family and some residents of her natal village.

Her story, while also particular in its details, illustrates the challenges that some students face in obtaining higher education and the exclusion that they feel because of it.

Case Study: Fabrice

I met Fabrice in June 2008 when I accompanied his brother Bienvenu to a funeral in Abomey. Bienvenu suggested that we hire a car and driver for the day so that we could be more at ease rather than taking a shared taxi, which would be crowded and uncomfortable. As we left the congested, polluted city the landscape changed drastically. The road going north was surrounded on both sides by lush greenery; we entered some rolling hills, and passed through numerous small villages on our way. As we drove I noticed that we were in one of the only cars that was not dangerously overfilled with people and products; most taxis carried at least six or seven passengers. When we arrived in Abomey we were dropped at the main transportation station and immediately surrounded by *zem*³⁷ drivers who wanted to take us to our final destination. I was surprised that all Bienvenu had to say was his last name, and the drivers knew where to go. We hopped on and were dropped off at the gate of the *collectivité*,³⁸ which was flanked by two statues of lions. The lion is the symbol of Glele, one of the last kings of the Dahomean empire who actively fought the encroaching French occupation in the late 1800s. Bienvenu explained that he was of royal blood and that King Glele was one of his ancestors, “I am a prince, as are my brothers.”

³⁷ A motorcycle taxi.

³⁸ A home consisting of separate rooms for multi-generational members of a lineage.



Figure 4: Front entrance to the *collectivité*

The *collectivité* contained at least fifty individual rooms or apartments. There were children running around laughing and chasing one another; Bienvenu explained that it was the school vacation and many of the kids had been sent to Abomey by relatives in Cotonou and Porto-Novo.³⁹ As we passed women cooking over charcoal stoves, they greeted Bienvenu in Fon, asking after his wife and children.

The first thing that we did once we arrived was ask to see his father, a retired orchard

³⁹ According to Bay (1998) child fostering is a longstanding practice in Benin. Her history of the Dahomean Empire suggests that the fluidity of family arrangements in Dahomey allowed for young people from poorer branches of the royal lineages to work in the homes of wealthier relatives hoping to prosper from the relationship. Child circulation is prevalent in Benin in the contemporary period, but not all children are expected to perform work in the households in which they live.

owner who is the *Dah* (family head). This position is highly respected within a family, and those who are appointed as the *Dah* are nearly always older men. All family decisions are taken to the *Dah*, who acts as both a mediator and an authority figure. Bienvenu and I were brought in to his father's living room, where he was sitting in a carved wooden chair reserved specifically for him. Bienvenu knelt on the floor in front of his father and brought his forehead to the ground, greeting him in Fon. I curtsied, not knowing the correct greeting to use with someone of his status, and said I was pleased to meet him in French. After a few pleasantries Bienvenu and his father began speaking about his younger brothers who were getting ready to take the bac. The *Dah* wanted to know how much money was going to be required for each of them if they moved to the city to attend UAC, and if there was room with Mémé. Mémé is Bienvenu's paternal aunt, a warm woman who owns a take-out restaurant in Akpakpa, the area of Cotonou just east of the river that all of my friends call the "*real* Cotonou." At a certain point during the conversation Dah summoned Fabrice and he joined in their discussion regarding their preparations for his schooling. Fabrice is one of the youngest of Bienvenu's siblings, and his mother is the youngest of Dah's wives. Fabrice once referred to all of his mother's children as the *Benjamins* of the family; they are the last six of his father's fifteen children.

I got to know Fabrice well over the course of the next two years. In July of 2009 he attempted, and passed, the bac. He spent a portion of July and August at Mémé's house preparing to move in when the academic year started. By February of 2010 Fabrice and several of his brothers and cousins lived with Mémé, and Annie and I often went there to visit. The front porch of the restaurant is a lively spot where family and friends gather surrounded by young girls who never seem to stop working. These girls' tasks include preparing food, washing dishes, doing laundry, caring for young children, and cleaning the home. While all of them appear to be

school-aged, their presence at home during the day indicates that they do not attend school.

Apart from basic greetings, I never heard any of the young girls speak French. Some of them are related to Mémé and others arrived through a social system of child placement referred to in Fon as *vidomegon*.⁴⁰ In a typical day nearly all of Fabrice's needs are taken care of by these young girls; ranging from the food that he eats to the clothes that he wears. Yet Fabrice has made comments indicating that he believes girls are protected, pampered, and given more advantages than boys, citing the focus on girls in the media and at school. In our conversations over several years, not once did he acknowledge that he is able to spend more time in his own academic studies because of the work done by the girls and women who surround him.

Fabrice has inherited cultural capital in the form of his lineage as symbolized by his "great name" (Bourdieu 1986:52). Because he is a descendent of one of the kings of Abomey, Fabrice has been taught the history of his lineage and of his own importance as a royal prince. He is able to recount his family's history, which he views as the history of all of Benin, with great detail. Fabrice has also embodied cultural capital in the form of his "distinction" or his adaptation of certain manners, ways of speaking, and appearance (Bourdieu 1984). By watching others interact with his father, a "plenipentiary" (Bourdieu 1986:52) who is authorized to represent the entire extended family group, he has learned the behavioral cues that show respect. This includes averting one's eyes, initiating greetings, and prostrating oneself when greeting the *Dah*. From a young age he has been taught Fon and French, and has had ample opportunity to practice

⁴⁰ Although the practice of sending children to live in wealthier households is common, there is the potential for exploitation and abuse. In fact, I listened to a conversation where a woman spoke of beating her domestic (as *vidomegon* are often referred to in French) when the young girl first arrived from the village so as to teach her respect. She indicated that the girl was not obedient at first, but after several serious beatings she had become a "good domestic." The practice of *vidomegon* has been condemned by some international organizations as forced labor, and 95 percent of *vidomegon* are girls (US Department of Labor).

his language skills with his elder siblings and cousins who often code-switch during their conversations. He prides himself in speaking French “like Sarkozy,” the former French president, and on more than one occasion has corrected the improper use of French among younger family members (and myself). Promoting the French language was a significant piece of the colonial *civilisatrice* movement, and speaking the language is still an aspirational skill. Language choice can stand in for issues of class and status, as illustrated in a comment made by one of Fabrice’s classmates named Rose, “a person who hasn’t been to school just can’t understand. You are an intellectual, you are at that level because you understand French. The intellectual must understand French first.” Proficiency in the French language is also a practical skill for an individual with middle-class aspirations; it is very difficult (if not impossible) for a person to find employment as a *fonctionnaire* (civil servant) in Cotonou without speaking French. In addition, it is a necessary skill to participate in the broader notion of the production and consumption of knowledge, as the selection of academic books written in local languages in Benin is limited. Fabrice benefits from being raised in a household in which Fon and French are both given priority. He has been raised bilingual (in fact, he is a polyglot and is able to speak multiple Beninese languages in addition to French and English) and is able to interact in a respectful manner with elders in the village and in academic settings, in the proper contextual language. Yet speaking French in the home can also cause discord among the extended family, as his classmate Jocelyne suggested: “If you speak French at home everyone says ‘*e djan blo yovo*’.”⁴¹ We’re from the same society and you look down on us.”

⁴¹ According to students this is a phrase that non-literate Beninois will say to younger family members who are practicing their French or using French in the home. It means “he wants to look yovo, act yovo, be yovo.” Non-literates will sometimes mock young people who dress and act “yovo” by saying the following proverb: *A long stay in the water does not make a tree trunk into a crocodile*. In other words, they may want to act European, but they will always be

Fabrice's sex and birth order have been influential in his ability to accumulate cultural capital in the form of educational qualifications. Young boys typically perform fewer household tasks in Benin, particularly in households that employ domestics, as was the case for Fabrice. As a result, throughout his education he has had more free time to study and prepare for his courses – supporting Bourdieu's (1986) assertions that the more free time a family can give its members, the better off and more advantaged they will be. Fabrice has ten siblings who have completed secondary school, and six of those have been to university; they have also aided Fabrice in his studies, and helped him prepare for the bac. In 2009, when Fabrice passed the bac he accumulated more cultural capital in the form of educational qualifications as he became publicly known as a *bachelier*.

In his eyes, his success is due to his own hard work and intellect. As Bourdieu (1986) argues, because the “social conditions of its [cultural capitals] transmission and acquisition are more disguised than those of economic capital” it is easy for Fabrice to see his accomplishments as the result of “legitimate competence” (49). This is not to say that he is not competent, nor that he is not intelligent. Yet Fabrice benefits from a support system that ranges from his close siblings, to his extended relatives, to the vidomegon “employed” by Mémé. His habitus, or “acquired mix of beliefs and capabilities” (Marginson 2007:307) has been shaped from birth by the social context in which Fabrice was raised. He is able to draw upon his own experiences, as well as his knowledge of family history, as a matrix that guides his expectations. He thinks of himself as an intellectual, and is confident that he will pass his courses with little difficulty. Although Fabrice is aware of the high unemployment among graduates, it is not something that preoccupies him. He expects to find a job when he is done, “most likely as a professor of

English, like my brothers.”

Mills (2008) describes habitus in terms of habits, things that eventually become reflexive, without much thought—what she calls the “recurring patterns of social class outlook - the beliefs, values, conduct, speech, dress and manners - that are inculcated by everyday experiences within the family, the peer group, and the school” (80). Fabrice’s habitus is a reflection of his individual privileged social position within his broader “collective history of family and class” (Reay et al. 2009:75). Nearly all of his experiences within his family and within the formal educational setting reinforce his expectation that he will “become something.” It is also expected that he will continue to play an active role in his extended family through social exchanges, including regular visits to Abomey. Upon graduation he expects to find a job, calling upon his family’s social capital if necessary. Fabrice’s experiences, in turn, affect the habitus of his family, or the expectations of what is acceptable “for people like us” (Bourdieu 1984:65). His experience on campus, and the cultural capital that he has brought with him, greatly differs from that of his fellow classmate Geneviève.

Case Study: Geneviève

When Natacha and I met Geneviève she was sitting on a bench in the Jardin U with another female student, quietly studying a photocopied book. As Natacha explained our research and asked if they would be interested in participating, Geneviève barely looked up. It was only after Natacha made a joke that Geneviève agreed to put her name on the list of potential participants. During our first informal meeting we asked Geneviève to tell us about herself and her thoughts about being a student at UAC. Just a few sentences into her introduction, Geneviève’s eyes welled up with tears, her voice quavered, and she said, “As for me, I didn’t think I could continue. It’s difficult, photocopies, renting an apartment, all of that. Because of the money.

It's a cause of concern." She took a breath, and seemed to gain resolve as she went on, "But now I have the intention to continue. I will study, and I will become something." In further discussions with Geneviève she revealed that her concerns were much broader than financial difficulties. Her feelings toward members of her extended family and village leaders highlight a common theme of ambiguity found among students at UAC. Her story is one of both uncertainty and self-doubt, and resilience and an ability to cope with adversity.

Geneviève was born in a polygamous household, and lived in the family home for the first few years of her life. Her father had two wives, and nineteen children. At some point during Geneviève's early life her mother divorced her father and left with her seven children (two daughters and five sons). They moved back to the village where Geneviève's maternal aunts lived. Geneviève remembers visiting her father occasionally, but feels that her father was much more preoccupied with his other wife and her twelve children. Her mother provided for the material needs of her children by selling used clothing in a market in Bohicon, a town close to Abomey in south-central Benin.

By the time Geneviève turned ten years old her older sister had married, and "because of that I prepared all of the meals for the family. In Africa, and especially in Benin, it is the women who prepare the meals." She and her brothers attended primary and secondary schools near Bohicon and with the support of their mother and their maternal aunts, all but one of Geneviève's siblings passed the bac. "In contrast," Geneviève explained, "the other woman has twelve children but there is just one child who has the bac...Despite our difficulties, God has helped us and we have succeeded. And it is that which has created jealousies." Geneviève reference to her father's wife as "the other woman" indicates that she does not feel close to her, and Geneviève regularly mentioned jealousy and polygamy as the root of many of Benin's

problems.⁴²

“In some villages,” she explained, “there are entire families where no one has gone to school. If you decide to send your kids to school, they [other villagers] can bother you with mystical forces, with sorcery, with *gris-gris*.⁴³ They can even try to kill you. Even this year I didn’t know that I would succeed. All because of jealousy, especially in polygamous families... As they have *gris-gris*, they can kill you. It doesn’t matter how. They don’t have fear, they don’t have feelings for mankind. If they think of you, they can do that to you. In fact, they made my brother sick three days before the exam [bac]; they wanted to kill him. They sent him atrocious headaches. But it was because of our God that he was delivered. He went to the bac exam, and he passed. All that we can do is to know God, be close to him. That is the solution for us.” Geneviève feels that her father’s other wife has targeted Geneviève and her siblings because of her extreme jealousy of their success. As a result, she and her siblings have limited their contact with their half-siblings and extended family members. Each immediate family within Geneviève’s extended family keeps to themselves, and only associates with one another occasionally during large family gatherings.

Geneviève’s comments also speak to a religious divide within her extended family. Because of her strong Christian faith she attends church regularly and has developed close friendships with members of her church. She is a positive role model for young people in her

⁴² Comaroff and Comaroff (1993) suggest that jealousy occurs frequently in polygynous households because each mother and her offspring compete against other mothers and their offspring for limited resources and/or power. My research suggests that not all polygamous households can be characterized by jealousy and mistrust, as seen in the case of Fabrice above.

⁴³ These terms will be explained further in the second half of this chapter. When Genevieve uses the French term *gris-gris*, she is referring to what is called *bo* in Fon. Falen (2007) describes *bo* as “the use of magical charms and spells that produce a desired effect” (Aze and Bo: Witchcraft, Sorcery, and Magic Definitions, para. 4).

religious community and has noted that she assists primary school girls in their studies when she can. She is transmitting cultural capital to her Christian family, rather than to her blood relatives. Similarly, nearly one-third of the students in this study defined family through shared characteristics rather than by genetics; underlying themes in their comments were sharing, caring, and reciprocity. Family was described as “people who have the same point of view, the same social realities” by Joel, a student who spent a number of years living with extended family after his father died. Geneviève, and her immediate family have distanced themselves from the extended family because they do not share the same point of view. Based on Geneviève’s comments, I would argue that much of the discord is related to religious differences.

In many ways Geneviève feels that she does not belong in the village. Those who have remained in the village “only know how to work the land, that’s their job. They’ve never been to school, they don’t know our realities. We’re civilized, whereas a person who is civilized and who has been to school can understand things that a person who has never been to school cannot.” She went on to give the example of greeting the *Dah* in the village, and explained that her relatives were astonished that the way one learns greetings in school conflicts with the accepted manner. “When you are in front of a *Dah* you are expected to prostrate yourself as if you worship him,” she explained, “whereas a person who has been to school can see that it is bullshit. He [a person who has been to school] says that a man is not God that we should kneel to him. The *Dahs* say “ah, so that’s what they teach you at school, that is why you will not obey us.” So they [*Dahs*] are against us [students].” Education in Benin has long been linked with religion, particularly through Christian missionaries who were repulsed by the subservient demeanor toward elders (Bay 1998). Geneviève’s commentary demonstrates how difficult it is to decouple religious meta-narratives from formal education, and both of those from notions of

superiority, as exemplified in her description of herself and other students as “civilized.” She sees students not only as targets of jealous family members, but also as against the village leadership. According to Geneviève, elders in the village interpret her behavior as a rejection of their authority as a result of her education.

Yet the tensions do not stop there. One afternoon as we relaxed in the Jardin U Geneviève spent half an hour explaining the “village mentality” that makes it difficult for educated girls to find spouses. She recalled a newspaper article that she had read which showed a photo of a young man, and the headline read, “I will never marry someone who has the same degree as I do.”⁴⁴ Geneviève explained that “tradition” dictates that males are given respect while females are humiliated. Tradition is the reason why a young boy must be referred to as “*grand frère*” by his elder sisters, and why he can be considered the head of the family even if he is just a young boy. Geneviève’s characterization of “the village” as backward, uncivilized, and patriarchal is common among students at UAC. She refers to herself and other students as people whose “eyes have been opened” in contrast to villagers whom she sees as ignorant. I argue that Geneviève understands “civilized” much as Ferguson (2006) has defined modernity: “a social status implying certain institutional and economic conditions of life” (Ferguson 2006:168). The tendency of young urban individuals to characterize villagers as stupid, dirty, or irrational is not a new phenomenon, as Ferguson (1999) and Gugler (2002) have documented.

When Geneviève passed the bac in 2009, she moved from her mother’s village to Abomey-Calavi to share an apartment near campus with two of her brothers. Both of her brothers are *boursiers*, or scholarship recipients. Approximately twenty percent of the students at UAC receive stipends of some kind from the state, between 132,250 and 341,000 FCFA per academic

⁴⁴ I was unable to locate this article, and have no way of knowing whether it really exists, nor whether the man quoted lived in a rural or urban locale.

year, based on the score that he or she received on the bac.⁴⁵ The stipends represent a significant sum, in fact the 341,000 FCFA yearly stipend is almost equal to the average yearly income (GNI) per capita for the general population.⁴⁶ Geneviève's score on the bac, however, was not high enough to grant her a scholarship. She relies on her mother's financial assistance for her daily needs.⁴⁷ As a result, she feels stressed when her professors tell her that she must purchase photocopies, or when she is told that she must make the trip to Cotonou to purchase books for her courses. Her brothers pay the rent on the apartment using some of their scholarship money, and in turn Geneviève feels indebted to them and does their laundry and other tasks around the house to compensate.

Her gender has been a factor in limiting the time she has had available for studying, and in turn has affected her acquisition of cultural capital in the form of educational qualifications. Because she is a woman who grew up in a home without a domestic, she was obliged to spend a majority of her time after school (primary and secondary) cooking and cleaning for her family once her eldest sister got married. As seen in the photo below, food preparation and laundry are labor-intensive and time-consuming household tasks commonly performed by young women in Benin.

⁴⁵ As of 12/15/12 these sums would be equal to \$265 - \$687 USD.

⁴⁶ Figures for the average yearly income in Benin (GNI) vary according to the sources, but it is generally cited to be anywhere between 269,000 FCFA and 524,000 FCFA (UNICEF 2010 figures say 375,000 FCFA). Of course, wages for positions that the students may hope to attain are much higher than the GNI. Positions with NGOs such as the UN offices range from 6,800,000 FCFA (starting salary for a Secretary) to 15,000,000 FCFA (starting salary for an Assistant Administrative Officer).

⁴⁷ Financial assistance includes money as well as large bags of rice, *gari* (powdered cassava) or other starches that parents send back with students after visits home.



Figure 5: Young women doing laundry (photo by author)

Yet Geneviève appears to have internalized the notion that her lower test scores are reflective of her gender because, “we [women] don’t like to put forth a lot of effort.” Geneviève keeps quiet during class and prefers to sit in the back so as not to attract attention.⁴⁸ According to Geneviève, professors mock the female students, saying, “it was *you* who sought emancipation, *you* said you wanted to be equal to males. Speak out!’ But we women are ashamed, at least that is the case for me. Even if I know [the answer] I just can’t do that [answer in class]. I’m ashamed because the men mock us.” While gender certainly plays a role in the discrepancy between Fabrice and Geneviève’s experiences at UAC, it is but one of the factors

⁴⁸ Remaining quiet in class is a common strategy among female students at UAC who do not wish to attract the sexual advances of their professors. This issue is discussed at length in Chapter Five.

that contributes to a student's habitus, or the "interplay between free will and structures" (Bourdieu 1984: 170).

Education as a Means of Inclusion and Exclusion

While some aspects of Fabrice's and Geneviève's stories are similar, they diverge more than they converge. They are similar in that they both live with family in Cotonou, neither of them receives a *bourse*, and both of them have been able to benefit from the experiences of older siblings who have attended university. Yet Fabrice seems to go through life with a more carefree spirit, and has expressed positive feelings about his future prospects. Instead of separating him from his family, his education appears to have solidified his place in the family hierarchy and caused him to want to share his knowledge with his younger family members. Although not all members of his extended family have formal schooling, Fabrice does not vocalize fears of their jealousy. Perhaps in his habitus, it is unthinkable that others should be jealous of him. In his mind, his accomplishments are due to his hard work, not his station in life. His role in the family hierarchy has been established and visits home serve to reinforce his feeling of celebrity.

In contrast to Fabrice, Geneviève has not inherited cultural capital in the form of a great name, a royal lineage, or wealthy parents. Nor has she been able to utilize a network of closely-knit extended family members as a means of assimilating into university culture. Geneviève has embodied certain characteristics according to the knowledge that she receives at school and church, while rejecting much of what she has been taught in the village setting. Her Christian upbringing has inculcated the notion that reverence for "traditional" leadership is in contrast to a proper respect for Jesus and God. Because she feels so strongly, she refuses to conduct herself in the manner that is expected by elders in the village. She feels that these elders are "against" her and other students, in her mind it is because of her schooling. Her outward manifestations of her

distinction both serve to include her in a status group (Christian intellectuals) and exclude her from her extended family, including the lineage heads. Bourdieu (1986) speaks of the effectiveness of the transmission of cultural capital depending on the cultural capital embodied in the whole family. Geneviève's experience illustrates how this transmission can be hampered when there is friction between a student's personal and extended family habitus.

Conversely, Fabrice's schooling has not caused him to reject the norms of greeting and respect for the *Dah*. The same "tradition," gender norms, and notions of male superiority that Geneviève sees as negative have impacted Fabrice's habitus in a positive way. Perhaps this is because becoming the *Dah* is a possibility for him; his habitus is a product of his socialization within the family. It is within Fabrice's realm of possibility to follow in his father's footsteps and become the leader of the family. Even if he never becomes the *Dah*, Fabrice, like many of his peers, sees his education as a means of gaining respect within the family. As his classmate Paul put it, "The way I see *evolué* is someone who has acquired a higher level. The most *evolué* in the family is the one who is the most intellectual. A person who has had a lot of schooling." Fabrice's experiences on visits home to Abomey are similar to that described by his fellow student Paul: "When you go there, everyone gives you respect, it's kind of like you are equal to the decision makers in the family. On par with the grandparents. On par with the mothers and fathers, you're there too and everyone comes to talk to you. They really respect you." While acquiring the type of cultural capital that is valued in the academic setting and in the workplace is important, of equal importance in the Beninese context is being able to cultivate the type of cultural capital that is valued in the extended family.

A student's success, both in school and out of school, depends on the ability to "code-switch" his or her behavior as appropriate. Gugler (2002, citing Ferguson) argues that most

migrants are capable of switching between urban and rural mannerisms and behavior, but there are situations in which individuals who do not regularly rotate between both become more accustomed to the urban situation and are “terrified” when placed in the rural context (28). While they may try to change their clothing or appearances to be in line with rural norms, their manners of speaking and even the ways in which they carry themselves are a “tell” or a giveaway that they are not comfortable in the village. The better equipped a student is to sense which behaviors are appropriate, the less they will alienate those around them, as Bourdieu (1986) put it, “dispositions that are given a negative value in the educational market may receive very high value in other markets - not least, of course, in the relationships internal to the class” (56 fn5). Unfortunately for Geneviève, some of the dispositions valued by her extended family goes against her religious views, her academic experiences and her sense of gender equality. Geneviève’s disposition, her bodily and verbal manners, diverges from many of her extended family members and causes her to see little to no social capital through membership in the group. Rather than strengthening and maintaining these relationships through regular exchanges, she has rejected the larger family group. Her success has the potential to positively impact her extended family, but because of this disjuncture it is not likely to have far-reaching effects.

Part Two - Reciprocity and *la Sorcellerie*

In the second half of this chapter I discuss the complexities of exchange in the Beninese context. I analyze reciprocity as a means of constructing or maintaining social relationships. I argue that withholding the social aspects of reciprocity may negatively impact future generations of Beninese, most importantly those who are born into poor families. Specifically, when students exhibit condescending, elitist, or withdrawn behavior it is possible that jealous or hurt family members may resort to *la sorcellerie* out of spite. In turn, fear of *la sorcellerie* may cause successful family members to cut off communication or exchange with others in the family. The cycle of jealousy and fear may hinder the transfer of cultural capital between households, and subsequently the potential benefits of having an educated family member are limited. The promises of upward mobility for the entire family as touted by education NGOs are perceived as empty.

Reciprocity and Social Obligations

Early in my fieldwork I had a discussion with Bienvenu about the number of ceremonies that he had to attend in Abomey. He explained that he was very busy and it was inconvenient to go back to the village so often (he had been going there about once every three weeks), but that he had an obligation to support his friends and family. When I asked him if he could just send money, he related a parable that explained the true sense of his responsibilities. “There once was a man who lived in a village,” he began, “and this man was very rich. He was invited to many ceremonies in the village, funerals and weddings, and so on. He never wanted to go to them because he was very busy with his business, but instead sent his children over with gifts of money. As the years went on, the other villagers began to notice that he would never show up, despite sending gifts. Eventually this man died, and his family made arrangements for a large

funeral ceremony with lots of food and drink. The hour of the ceremony came and went, and the only people who came were messengers with envelopes filled with money. At the end of the night, the man's casket was surrounded by piles of envelopes, and no guests."

Bienvenu continued, "You see, Marcy, I must go. I can't just send money or people will talk, and they will not come to the ceremonies that I hold. We have a saying here in Benin: 'You talk with your feet.'" The story that Bienvenu shared speaks to the complexities of reciprocity, where the importance of symbolic elements in the exchange may surpass the actual economic exchange (Piot 1999). While he may feel pressure to fulfill family obligations, in actuality it would be impossible for Bienvenu to attend every ceremony or event that takes place and he must make choices regarding how closely he will associate with various relatives, if at all. Gugler (2002) argues that African urbanites utilize agency in their dealings with family members, and the expense or difficulties of travel can be used as excuses for reduced contact and reciprocity. At the same time, however, Bienvenu's story speaks to the villagers' gaze; any return home for one relative's ceremony may be seen as a snub for the previous invitations that were not accepted.

Social scientists have long expanded on Mauss' (1966) theory of reciprocity in which gifting serves important social roles. First, it can be used to construct or maintain networks of social relationships, and second, it creates a sense of obligation in the receiver who will then have a moral (and/or financial) motive for maintaining the relationship (Weinreb et al. 1998). As Ferguson (2006) argues, "wealth in Africa has long been understood as first of all a question of relations among people" (82). In this dissertation I am focusing on exchange and sharing, rather than outright gifting, because of the limited resources that most students have available. I accept Piot's (1999) assertion that "making money allows one to participate more fully in the

gift-giving that leads to expanded social relations” (73). Yet for the majority of the students in this study, it will be years before they are able to participate in wage labor and have the financial capacity to reciprocate. Even *boursiers* are included in the social category of students and are not expected to contribute to ceremonies and family expenditures as much as someone who is in “*la vie active*” or working life. The gifts of financial, emotional, and moral support that students have received from their extended families are meant to create a sense of debt and obligation, to “render the receiver subservient” (Piot 1999:54). With the support of others, students have acquired cultural capital in the form of skills, dispositions, and educational qualifications. Yet cultural capital without the benefit of social capital, or connections, is limited in its impact.

Bourdieu (1985) describes social capital as the aggregate of resources (real or potential) that are linked to membership in a group: “material profits, such as all the types of services accruing from useful relationships, and symbolic profits, such as those derived from association with a rare, prestigious group” (22). University students possess symbolic profits through their membership in the social group of intellectuals, but their material profits are limited. Some students arrive on campus with social capital in the form of relatives with “long arms” or connections. Other students are seen as the connections themselves. They are in an ambiguous position, in which they receive attention from the extended family and yet still rely financially on others. A first year student named Bruno spoke of the pressure that he felt: “My obligations are to do all that is possible in order to become someone, to finish my studies and to be able to support my family because now my parents support me. I have a debt to repay to them and I have to do everything possible to reimburse them. In a few years they will retire and it will be up to me to support my younger brothers who are in secondary school.” For twenty years awareness campaigns in Benin have stressed the importance of sending children to school so that

they may “become somebody.” Poor families who did so often made short-term sacrifices in terms of their children’s limited participation in household income generation. These sacrifices were made with the expectation that education would pay off eventually, and with hopes that the benefits would extend beyond the student to the family. The specific type of social capital that the students possess is their future earning ability, and the majority of students expressed a sense of obligation to take care of their families when they were able. Yet most of these same students spoke of limiting their social contact with extended family and villagers because of changes in personality, interests, or beliefs. Examining the web of obligation and exchange may help us to understand how cultural capital is converted into social capital through exchanges.

By the time they reach university, students have benefited from a multitude of resources and support from family, the community, the state, and NGOs. Over half of the students in this study benefited from the generosity of older members of their extended families who took them in when they were younger and provided atmospheres conducive for studying. In Benin, as elsewhere in West Africa, children are not seen as the sole concern of their biological parents, but in many senses belong to the entire family. As I was told on one of my visits to a student’s home, in Benin there is a saying: “A woman’s children are not her own.” This is not to say that a woman has no rights to her children, or that she is not to be respected. But what it does mean is that the task of raising children does not fall solely on one or two people. It is a very natural situation to have one’s children live with other family members, and child circulation (or child fosterage as it is called in much of the literature - although it is not thought of in those terms in Benin) is quite common, not a response to crisis. Goody (1989) stressed the importance of child fosterage as a means of strengthening family ties through what he called “mutual dependencies.” In his survey of rural-urban ties in Africa, he argued that these extended ties of kinship are

extremely important, but the younger “modernizing” generation (who have been the primary beneficiaries) reject the dependencies (123); in essence, they refuse to reciprocate. My study suggests that this is not necessarily the case among UAC students today, as illustrated by the experience of a fourth-year student named Joel.

Joel’s father was a wealthy entrepreneur who owned an electrical contracting company. Due to his work contracts he traveled throughout West Africa, and according to Joel his father took a wife in nearly every country where he worked. As a result, Joel is one of 22 children, but he did not know any of his half-siblings growing up. He met his father’s other children for the first time at the age of 12 at his father’s funeral ceremony. According to Joel, his mother and her six children suffered very much because of financial hardships. Throughout his childhood Joel felt that his father was more concerned about his other wives and their children, and did not make the proper arrangements to take care of Joel and his immediate family. When he was 13 Joel was “adopted” by Catholic priests with whom his father had been friends and lived in the seminary for two years before deciding to live in his father’s empty room in the *collectivité*.⁴⁹ During that period contact with his brothers declined and eventually they lost contact.

After living in the *collectivité* for one year Joel was taken in by a paternal uncle who was a teacher.⁵⁰ Joel benefited from the cultural capital that his uncle’s household contained; the home was filled with books and the children’s time was highly regimented. According to Joel, “there was a time to study, a time to play, a time to eat, a time to watch television” and all of the

⁴⁹ Joel was one of four students who used the french term “*adopte*” to refer to their care by non-extended family members. He also stressed that it was his own idea, not his mother’s, to move into his father’s room in the *collectivé*.

⁵⁰ Although Joel called him an uncle, during our conversation it became clear that the man was not his father’s brother, but rather a more distant paternal relative. Joel indicated that they became acquainted because a fellow student (this man’s son) in secondary school had the same last name.

children in the household, “even those who don’t have the bac, they know how to speak French correctly!” With his uncle and aunt’s support, Joel passed the bac on his second attempt. The morning after the results were announced on the radio, Joel’s brothers showed up at the door of his uncle’s house.

As Joel told us his story, my research assistant Natacha began to smile and nod; she was sure that the brothers’ visit had been a precursor to future obligations. “After I got my bac I didn’t tell anyone” Joel continued, “but my brothers heard my name on the radio and they arrived at my house at 6 am to greet me.” At this point in the story, Joel’s friend Laurentia interjected: “Now because he has the bac, they take him seriously. Now they want to get closer to him little by little.” Joel agreed: “Exactly, they understand that I’ve started to succeed and those who have kids, maybe tomorrow when I am *un grand cadre* I can help the family.” I asked him to elaborate, and he explained that he could take in their children, send them to school, and buy them clothes. As scholars have noted (Goody, E. 1982; Isiugo-Abanihe 1985; Coe 2008), in West Africa it is an honor to have children of one’s relatives come to live with you. Joel acknowledged this outright in our conversation, and he said that he would be proud if someday his siblings asked him for help, for employment, or to take in their children.

Joel knew that his brothers’ visit was not simply to congratulate him, but it was a calculated reconnection in an effort to secure a better future for their own children. Joel’s brothers actively rekindled the familial connection to benefit from his social capital and the symbolic profit associated with Joel’s *bachelier* status. Much as Leinaweaver (2008) found in Peru, child circulation in Benin serves to connect households and builds up social relations. The cases she describes are similar to the situation in Benin where flexible living arrangements can serve multiple purposes; children may live with wealthier relatives as a means of obtaining

formal education, but typically the children are not isolated from their birth families⁵¹ and their placement may be seen as a means of upward mobility for the entire family. While Joel did not fully support the behavior of his brothers, he did feel that it was his responsibility to assist his relatives if he was able. His success is tied in to his family's "hopes and possibilities" (Leinaweaver 2008:129). His willingness to help out, despite the fact that his brothers had "forgotten him completely," is balanced by his own experience with his uncle and aunt who took him in and gave him the support that he needed to obtain his bac.

The underlying dynamic, an exchange of power and a level of subservience, is a powerful force in the reciprocity between family members. Who is taken in, and who takes children in to their household, speaks to the asymmetries in financial, social, and cultural capital within extended families. Yet these exchanges are what enable the cultural capital of one individual to be converted into the social capital that can be accessed by various members of the group. It is in this way that students who have actively done the personal work to increase their cultural capital are able, in turn, to become a conduit for upward mobility in their families, if they choose to do so. Education has long been seen as a means of upward mobility, not just in Benin but throughout Africa and the world (Ronen 1974; Buchmann and Hannum 2001; Schuller 2004; Betz 2006; Dumais and Ward 2010). Upward mobility can be defined as an individual's opportunities for progression within the social hierarchy (Nunn et al. 2007) or "the movement or opportunities for movement between different social classes or occupational groups" (Aldridge 2003:189). Gratien was one of the students who explained that if a person came from a family

⁵¹ It is both important, and also nearly impossible, to distinguish between child circulation and *vidomegon*. In this case, I am not speaking of the young girls or boys who are virtually sold off by their families to work as unpaid laborers (*vidomegon*) and who rarely return to their families. In addition, children who live with relatives (child circulation) may or may not be treated equally as those who were born in the household.

that was not educated, but through studies and hard work became something, the family would also become well known. He said that his hard work (specifically the combination of his work at school and the good job that he finds after graduation) would affect the lives of his entire family. Jocelyne, a student whose parents were of modest means, but who sent her to live with wealthier relatives during secondary school, spoke of the debt that she felt toward her parents because of their sacrifices to ensure that she went to university: “I’ve become something today because of them. They could have said that I would never go to school. But they didn’t, they said ‘this girl, she is going to become something tomorrow.’ I always tell myself that I have a debt toward them and because of that I have to work hard.”

The indebtedness and obligation felt by Joel, Jocelyne, Gratien, and others can be contrasted to Paul’s ability to pay back his debts by using his scholarship money. When Natacha and I asked Paul how he typically spends his *bourse* each year, he responded with a laugh: “Oh, lalalalala. Seriously, that’s quite a question. What a question. But it’s private, you know?” We reassured him that he was not obligated to answer the question, but he responded by telling us that it was a complicated issue. He quickly recounted the number of family members who had helped him financially as he prepared for his first year at university, and suggested that he had a responsibility to pay back their generosity. But at the same time, he prefaced his next comments by saying, “And so in regards to the 341,000 that I received, we have an adage that says ‘He who has done, is who will eat’”. Paul explained that after he paid 22,500 for his yearly cabine fees and saved 5,000 a month for food and drink, he had enough left over to reimburse his relatives and buy a small plot of land near his family where he would eventually like to build a home.⁵²

⁵² Paul indicated building the home, but never mentioned plans of moving there. Other students (with lower SES) have commented that some villagers interpret the practice of urbanites building rural homes as a means of showing off their wealth. Paul did not seem concerned that his plans

His comments indicate that he did not seem to think that he owed anyone anything beyond the money he had already paid back to his family; his money was his own.

Because he was able to pay back family right away, I argue that the exchange was more economic than social. The “ambiguity of social exchange” requires time, and it is the time lag between receiving and paying back that is required to change a simple debt into the “nonspecific indebtedness which is called gratitude” (Bourdieu 1986:54). Piot’s (1999) fieldwork in neighboring Togo suggests a similar theme – repaying a debt too soon is not culturally appropriate because it reduces a social obligation to a financial transaction. This is not to say that Paul will withhold transferring his cultural capital to others, and in fact he may take in the children of others when he is able. However, because he does not feel a sense of indebtedness toward family it is likely to affect his future relationships with them.

While paying back debts financially was not an option for the majority of the students in this study, they attempted to reciprocate with family members through social means. They spoke of the importance of sharing experiences, time, and emotion as a means of developing close personal relationships with others – an indicator of who they may share their social capital with at a later date. Laurentia, a second-year student in Geography who lives on campus, defined the family as a group of people with whom one shares joys and sorrows, successes and failures. She described a change in the way her extended family treated her once she came to UAC. I asked Laurentia if she thought that it was her formal education that influenced her relationships with family members and she answered enthusiastically: “Yes, yes, yes! Sometimes they treat me like I’m already one of (*les grandi*), like someone whose future is secure. Before, when I was in secondary school they dismissed me, but now they respect me. They say, ‘at least, she’s going to

would result in ill will by extended relatives.

become something.’ It’s like I’m insurance or something. Now they really respect me in the *grande famille*. They say that I am trying to become something.” Laurentia’s education served to elevate her status within the family, and also linked her future success to the success of the entire family. Although she lives on campus, Laurentia said that when she visits home she tries to help and do what she can. Laurentia seems to be speaking of family members who are themselves of the educated elite - notice that she says that when she was in secondary school, they dismissed her as nothing, but when she went to university they began to consider her to be important and an insurance that “she is going to become something.” Earlier she had described her home conditions in a positive light; Laurentia comes from a household where education is valued, her diploma and future degree elevate her to a level of respect that she shares with others in her family. Her comments indicate that she arrived on campus with a significant amount of cultural capital, and that she feels that her education puts her in a place of respect (along with others in her family). Because of that, she feels comfortable with her prospects for the future. As she said, her family members are educated and feel that her future is already assured; they do not have a need to envy her because they, too, have their bacs.

Yet nearly half the students in this study noted that they were not able to share with their families as they had been able to in the past. Eric, a second year student in Geography explained that a child must visit his parents and receive their benedictions, and the visit would bring joy to both the parents and the child. Yet because he moved away from his parents at the age of 12 to attend secondary school his relationship with them had slowly eroded. Eric’s parents rented a room for him close to his secondary school rather than have him live with an uncle “to avoid problems with the *grande famille*.” As a result, Eric noted that he did not feel very close to many of his family members because they had not shared the everyday experiences as they once

had. The cultural capital that Eric acquired through his education had not been transmitted to his family members.

Even students who live with their family during university may experience a social separation from the other members of the household. Yves is a third-year student in Bio-Medical Sciences whose father is a constable and whose mother is a maize vendor.⁵³ He is one of 17 children from his father and 4 from his mother. Of all of his father's children just Yves and his older sister have attended university; he finds that they sometimes feel excluded from their siblings even though they live together in the family home in Cotonou. As he put it, "The others don't get us. Let's say you opt for university, your points of view won't be the same anymore. There isn't conviviality, mutual exchanges. This leads to disfunctionality when one person thinks like this, and the other thinks like that."

Many students agreed that changes in their behaviors and their sensibilities happened over the course of their years on campus, especially if they were able to live in a *cabine* because they did not need to behave differently in their off hours. Sandrine, a fourth year student in Socio-Cultural Anthropology, has been living on campus for three years. She has finished her coursework and must wait for her professor to be available so that he can supervise her capstone project for her master's degree. Although she only needs to be on campus occasionally, she has chosen to live in the *cabine* for one more year rather than move back in with her family. When I asked her why she stayed on campus despite being done with coursework, Sandrine admitted to changes in her personality in the years that she lived on campus: "Ever since I moved away from home I don't feel the same as I once did. I've changed. I've developed habits living here in *cabine* that just don't allow me to study at home like I could before, with all of the noise at

⁵³ Yves initially gave his mother's occupation as homemaker, but later told us that she sold maize in the market.

home. I find that here I have received another type of education that means that I can study quietly when I want and how I want. As a result, my mom feels that I am no longer as close to her as I once was. I don't talk with her like I once did." Sandrine's response speaks to academic reasons, yet also suggests that she no longer feels comfortable at home. She can no longer chat with her mother as she once could, and in other conversations she said that she sometimes feels that she does not have a lot to talk about with the rest of her family. In fact, her comments indicate that the changes that she has inculcated over time, and which have served to increase her sense of belonging and ease on campus, have actually had the opposite effect on her continued assimilation at home.

Similarly, Gratien, a third-year student in Juridical Sciences, explained that once he became "serious about his studies" his brothers found him "particularly much more reserved." Gratien comes from a monogamous family; his mother and father have six children. They are of modest means, his father is a chauffeur and his mother is a *menager* (housewife, which typically means that she participates in the informal economy as a means of supplementing her husband's income⁵⁴). During secondary school Gratien was sent to live with his uncle whose home provided the "ambiance proper for a student." Gratien feels that his older cousins who have not gone to university may be jealous of him because "they see us [Gratien and the other university students in the family] as superior to them." In one of our conversations, he transitioned from describing his *grande famille* in very literal terms as consisting of his grandparents, aunts, and uncles to describing occasions when they would get together, and explained that he would visit them in Abomey on school vacations. He immediately followed that up by saying "sometimes

⁵⁴ Many of the students said that their mothers did not do anything, and yet when prodded by Natacha, they conceded that their mothers made palm oil, sold alimentation (non-perishable groceries), or prepared gari (a common food made from dried cassava); all occupations that fall into the category of the informal economy.

we have the feeling that the *grande famille* that is in the village is very, very wicked.”

Later in our conversation, Gratien explained what he meant by wicked. He gave the theoretical example of a student whose aunts or uncles were not able to send their own children to school. When that university student visits the village, he stressed, the aunts and uncles would be jealous and try to attack him using *la sorcellerie*. Literature on the occult in Benin suggests that such fears are common; Lemay-Boucher et al. (2011) relate the story of a university graduate whose family members experienced illness and which he attributed to an attack by occult forces commissioned by jealous siblings who had not been able to attend high school. Much like Geneviève, Gratien characterized uneducated persons (and by proxy, villagers) as quick to anger, unreasonable, out-of-date, behind, not modern, ignorant, likely to do rash things, and dangerous. More often than not, villagers were described as jealous and ready to resort to *la sorcellerie* at any time. In many cases, the people who were to be feared were students’ aunts and uncles, or their mother’s co-wives who would be jealous that their own children had not gone to school or were not successful. Among the students who were from polygamous families, the father’s favoritism came up often in conversation. Geneviève and Gratien both said nearly the same thing, that their father was more “preoccupied” with the other wives and their children than their mother and her children. They felt that they had succeeded despite their fathers’ lack of support. During the conversation between Joel, Natacha, Laurentia and I mentioned earlier in this chapter, Laurentia was vocal in her critique of polygamy. When Joel explained that his father took other wives to the detriment of his mother and her children, Laurentia enthusiastically interjected, “Yes, it’s polygamy! It always causes problems.”⁵⁵

⁵⁵ During my fieldwork I was invited to a small recording studio with a local rap group. They played several of their songs that criticized their fathers’ dating and marriage behavior. The songs positioned polygamous men as disrespectful to women (particularly to “mothers”).

The tendency of successful persons to pull away, to stop sharing, to stop talking to family members was common among students. What may have at one time been a reciprocal relationship of shared experiences may become one-sided and family members' feelings may get hurt. The tension between inclusion and exclusion contributes to the use of *la sorcellerie* among family members. During a conversation with Paul about family he asserted, "there are those who think that living with your family is to be exposed to the assault of sorcerers [*des sorciers*]." When I asked him to explain he said, "Sorcery [*la sorcellerie*], get it? The people of the night, they transform into birds.⁵⁶ When you do a little [progress] you are not secure. At first there could be a problem, or maybe there is just a little *gris-gris*, it's magic, they use magic, you can become crazy." I asked him to explain if the sorcerers would be members of the family or just those who associated with the family, and he answered, "there's the saying that the person who does you harm, it's not someone from outside, it's someone that you know. Who harms you. The sorcerer [*le sorcier*] is always in your family, they say that the person who harms you is close to you. He knows you." Paul explained that *akowe* (educated individuals) sometimes act like they can no longer associate with uneducated villagers who "don't even properly wash their hands before eating." Paul's comments allude to a sense of superiority that some UAC students display, and how offensive their behavior might be to those living in the village.

Other students also invoked the notion of a rightful order with educated individuals at the top. At the end of a long discussion about intellectuals, Cédric told me, "Africans don't like when someone is successful. They want everyone to be at their same level. But when everyone is intelligent we don't progress. That is why in societies there are hierarchies and it works. When everyone is intelligent they know where good ideas came from and who will profit from

⁵⁶ As will be discussed in the following section of this chapter, birds have become a metaphor for *aze*, a form of *la sorcellerie*.

them. Then they try to stop you.” Cédric described his father as a “grand lawyer” and his mother as a *commerçante* (trader). He lives in a section of Cotonou that is relatively wealthy, drives a *moto*, and wears fashionable clothing. It is likely that he arrived on the university campus with a significant amount of cultural capital—he seemed comfortable speaking French and his expression of the need for hierarchy assumes that he (and those like him) would be on the top of that hierarchy.

***La Sorcellerie* and UAC Students**

When conceptualizing my dissertation research I had no intention of covering *la sorcellerie*. Rather than utilizing a fully formed theoretical framework to guide my fieldwork, I opted to use grounded theory as a means of better understanding the student experience in context. Grounded theory means that I was able to allow themes to emerge over time based on what I was hearing from students; an extended period in the field also meant that I was able to recognize some of those themes early on and include them in my interactions with students. It has been argued that one of the strengths of grounded theory is that it “recognizes the complexity of the social world” (Pettigrew 2000: 256). A key component of participant observation means that the researcher cannot be removed from the research itself and indeed, my positionality affected the data that came out of my time in the field. A significant event early in my fieldwork contributed to the way students perceived me, spoke to me, and shared their experiences. My best friend’s younger brother Aubin was a first-year student at UAC who died suddenly within the first month of classes. His death was attributed to *la sorcellerie* because of jealousy within the family.⁵⁷ Because I knew Aubin well, word got out among students and the topic of *la*

⁵⁷ Evans-Pritchard (1937) asserts that witchcraft is used to explain misfortune in socially

sorcellerie came up regularly during my fieldwork. As a result, a complex theme that unexpectedly emerged during my research was the interplay between family, jealousy, and *la sorcellerie*.

Witchcraft (*la sorcellerie*) has been described as “the most significant social force in Benin” (Falen personal communication) and my research among UAC students supports that assertion. Although not all students have been directly affected, everyone knows someone whose misfortune has been attributed to it. As I argued earlier in this chapter, a person’s habitus is a combination of their own personal experiences and their knowledge of history. Because of that, I argue that students modify their behavior and contact with family members based on how significant they feel the practice of *la sorcellerie* is within their family and natal village, and how likely it is to be directed toward them. It is within the habitus of certain students to expect that they may be attacked by *la sorcellerie*, and their knowledge of how it works prompts them to limit their contact with individuals who may be jealous of them. Unfortunately, those individuals are often the ones who would benefit most from the transmission of cultural capital.

While it is not in the scope of this study to thoroughly analyze all of the forms of *la sorcellerie* that exist in contemporary Benin, it is useful to understand how belief in the supernatural affects the lives of students at UAC. Increases in educational opportunities and the social and economic differentiation that accompany it have contributed to the increase in witchcraft accusations in recent years in many African nations (Ter Haar 2007). Lemay-Boucher

relevant terms; to understand the peculiarity of each case that cannot be accounted for by natural causes alone. Aubin’s death in itself did not lead the family to believe he had been attacked by *la sorcellerie*. Rather, it was the combination of several events within the family that occurred in a short period of time (Aubin died one week to the day after his father was interred; they both died after extremely short illnesses). The family consulted a diviner who confirmed their belief that Aubin’s death had been “unnatural” and that a jealous relative was attacking the family because of a dispute over who had been appointed the Dah. Aubin’s story is presented in Appendix A.

et al. (2011) suggest that education and wealth do not preclude elite Beninois from belief in mystical forces. Similarly, Falen (personal communication) has found that belief in *la sorcellerie* is equally prevalent among educated and uneducated, rural residents and urban residents. Yet in this study, students who came from wealthy families expressed less fear of dangerous jealousy than their less well-to-do peers. I do not want to conflate belief with fear; students expressed belief regardless of their socio-economic status. Yet not all students vocalized a fear of being attacked by *la sorcellerie*. I argue that the belief is common, the fear is rational, and respect for the extraordinary power of *la sorcellerie* guides social behavior among students at UAC. I also argue that the prevalence of *la sorcellerie* as a tool of the slighted may increase as the student body at UAC includes more low-income students. Further, elitist attitudes among the newly educated may contribute to the prevalence of *la sorcellerie*. This section of the dissertation contributes to the literature on supernatural beliefs and practices among educated, urban Beninois. In order to make those arguments, it is useful to understand the terminology and the various types of *la sorcellerie* that students discussed.

In our conversations students used French terms, including *la sorcellerie*, *le sorcier*, and *gris-gris*, as well as Fon words such as *aze*, *bo*, and *azeto* to describe incidents, events, and individuals. It has been argued at length that English and French words used to describe supernatural phenomena are the products of a certain contextual history—that of missionaries in the pre-colonial and colonial periods (Ranger 2007; see also Henry 2008, who argues that it was the Christian Churches that ‘diabolized’ the sorcerer). Even attempting to translate Fon concepts, such as *aze* and *bo*, into English terms is difficult without resorting to judgement-laden language (Geschiere 2005). While there will always be a problem with terminology in matters of translation, I have chosen to use what Geschiere (2005) has labeled the “highly unfortunate” and

“misleading” term *la sorcellerie* (a word that is translated into English as both sorcery and witchcraft) in most instances because that is what the majority of my participants used in our conversations. To understand the relationship that students have with *la sorcellerie* one must recognize that most Beninois express “belief in the existence of an invisible world, distinct but not separate from the visible one, that is home to spiritual beings with effective powers over the material world” (Ter Haar and Ellis 2009: 400). With this definition, spiritual power can be used for constructive, as well as destructive, purposes. In fact, Falen (2007) asserts that witchcraft in Benin may be in transition; ethnographic research has revealed ambivalence regarding the potential for harnessing its power and using it for good. Yet in my conversations with students, the predominant theme that emerged was that of destructive forces intended to thwart the success of students.⁵⁸

When speaking of mystical forces or powers in Benin, there are two prominent distinctions in the Fon language: *aze* and *bo*. It has been extremely difficult to translate these terms into English because participants in this study used the terms interchangeably, stressing differences and similarities at various times in the study. On occasion participants contradicted themselves and their own descriptions that we had discussed in earlier conversations. My experience has not been isolated, other scholars of the field in Benin have discussed their own difficulty in dealing with the ambiguity of the terminology (Falen 2007). Nevertheless, there are distinctions between the two terms and their usage.

Falen (2007) has researched mystical forces in Benin extensively and describes *aze* as an “internal psychic power that compels a person to consume other people’s life force” (Aze and Bo: Witchcraft, Sorcery and Magic Definitions, para. 3). A person who possesses *aze* is known

⁵⁸ Again, this is likely due to the stories circulating on campus about Aubin and the fact that I was a friend of his family.

as an *azeto*. Those who are most often accused of wielding *aze* are young girls and poor, old women (LeMay-Boucher et al. 2011). In conversations with friends and students in the field, I was told that *azeto* are people who can transform themselves into birds at night (as described by Paul above) and one of the key attributes of *aze* is the ability to transform, transport, fly, and to consume. They can transform themselves, just as they can transform their victims. *Azeto* are generally thought to operate as a society and hold clandestine meetings at night, during which they plot events including killing family members, causing illnesses, and destroying business opportunities (LeMay-Boucher et al. 2011; Falen forthcoming). During these meetings the bodies of the *azeto* remain sleeping in their beds. Beninois have described flexible and clever ways in which *azeto* work, ranging from causing impotence and infertility, to creating apparitions in roadways to cause automobile accidents, to causing insanity, which leads to a person's loss of fortune (Falen 2007). It is believed that *azeto* are required to take turns providing a victim to be "eaten" by the group (the lifeforce being taken). Consuming a person's lifeforce leads to sickness and death. In many ways *aze* is similar to what Evans-Pritchard (1937) classified as Azande witchcraft; it is internal, invisible, and involuntary. A further similarity is that *aze* is typically used to negative ends. Yet it differs from Evans-Pritchard's witchcraft in that it is not necessarily inherited. The process of becoming an *azeto* may be intentional or unintentional, as in the case of individuals who ingest food that has been "poisoned," after which the *aze* remains in that person's stomach (Falen 2007).

Falen has found the primary motivation most Beninois ascribe to the use of *aze* is jealousy, and it is usually (although not always) directed at members of a person's family. My research confirms this. As Paul noted "we say that *la sorcellerie* is always in the family, because it is said 'the person who does you wrong is someone who is close to you'". In fact, after

Aubin's death was attributed to *aze*, I expressed fear to Bienvenu. He reassured me, stating that *azeto* can only harm someone in their own family and because I had no *azeto* in my own family I had nothing to fear. Bienvenu's comments are similar to expressions that Falen (personal communication) has encountered, such as "*aze* does not kill strangers" and "those who are close to you are the ones who do you harm" (12). These expressions are similar to a Duala (Cameroon) proverb "One must learn to live with one's sorcerer" (Geschiere 1997:42). Family relationships are also ambiguous because jealousy implies knowledge of inequality, in order to want what another person has one must be close enough to know what the other person has. Similarly, to want to destroy another person's success means that one must be close enough to know that the other person is successful.

Despite the predominantly negative connotation of *aze*, there is evidence to suggest that it can be used for good as well. Falen (2007) highlights the ambiguity of the force as his participants spoke of *azeto* using their capabilities to diagnose and cure illnesses or to control the rains as a means of aiding agriculture. In his argument this is a transformation of the way in which witchcraft is conceptualized that allows for the notion of witchcraft without victims, or the possibility that witchcraft does not need to be a zero-sum game where one person's success is at the expense of another. Geschiere (2005), too, argues that witchcraft may have "highly disturbing effects" (54), but can be used for constructive ends such as to heal or to control weather patterns to maximize agricultural productivity.

The Fon word *bo* is typically used to describe a learned skill utilizing magical charms or formulae that are imbued with power through ritual and incantations (Falen 2012). *Bo* is also the term used for the physical items themselves that have been instilled with power: leaves, medicinal natural products, or charms. Those who prepare *bo* are often *bokono*, diviners who

have been initiated into the Fa divination system and are respected religious authorities. *Bo* may also be prepared by *azogbleto* (natural healers) and *voduno* (Vodun priests) who have undergone a process of initiations and ritual learning, although they may or may not be initiated into the Fa divination system. *Bo* is a voluntary, learned occult power and because of that it can be compared to Evans-Pritchard's sorcery (Falen 2007). Lemay-Boucher, Noret, and Somville also describe *bo* as comprising "many forms of magical practices, offensive and defensive" (2011:4). *Bo* can also be used as a protection against witchcraft attacks, and because of this some people believe that *boto* (a derogatory term used to denote someone who makes *bo*) are closely related to *azeto*, arguing that it would be impossible to create powerful *bo* without an intimate knowledge of *aze* (Zinzindohoue 2010).

Most scholars of *la sorcellerie* in Benin agree that the motivation for using *bo* is generally an intense longing, desire, or jealousy (Falen 2008, Hountondji 2009, Topanou 2009). Madinatou, a second-year student in BioMedical Sciences explained that individuals who use *bo* are capable of casting evil spells or sending mystical things. Jocelyne used similar language, but explained that it was villagers who "bewitch you so that you cannot succeed, they *gbasse* you." *Gbasse* is a blanket term popularized in Abidjan to denote *gris-gris*, Bienvenu explained that people use it to try and get what they want, whether it is to make someone fall in love, to harm or kill someone, or as a memory aid when taking exams. Falen (personal communication) has been told of *flin*, a specific type of *bo* used as a memory aid in Benin; *flin* means "to remember" in Fon. Just as *aze* may be used for positive and negative ends, *bo* may also be used to succeed or to prevent others from succeeding.

Several differences between *aze* and *bo* as explained by Beninois are listed in the table below. However, the list generated does not capture the ambiguity in the way they are used.

Setting aside the good/evil dichotomy is necessary to understanding *la sorcellerie* in Benin. The same forces of *aze* and *bo* can be used to kill and protect, to destroy and to build up, to deflect and attract. Because jealousy is believed to be a motivation for both *aze* and *bo*, and their use may result in illness or death, it is difficult to distinguish between the two. In fact, Falen has also noted that his informants have contradicted themselves in their description of how *aze* and *bo* work, in terms of their hierarchy, methods of acquisition, and motivation for use. Some even said that *aze* is an advanced form of *bo*. Falen suggests that perhaps the confusion is related to the increasingly common usage of the French umbrella term *la sorcellerie*, which encompasses both *aze* and *bo*. *Bo* can be used in both positive and negative manners, and because it is closely linked with desire and longing it may be difficult to differentiate which is which. It can be used to harm a person, to protect a person from harm, to make someone fall in love, to make someone fall sick, to help a person pass an exam and to make someone fail an exam. Falen argues that the ambiguity within *bo* speaks to the Beninese viewpoint that all humans contain good and evil within. Just as humans are not necessarily good or evil, but carry the possibility for both inside, *bo* can be perceived as positive or negative depending on the positionality of the observer. Henry (2008) suggests that in the Beninese context, *la sorcellerie*—whether it is *aze* or *bo*—is not necessarily evil or morally wrong.

Table 2: Aspects of *Aze* and *Bo*

	<i>Aze</i>	<i>Bo</i>
Temporality	Night	Anytime
Visibility	Invisible	Material and Abstract
Primary Dimension	Psychic	Physical
Can be used to kill	Yes	Yes
Used for Good or Evil	Primarily Evil ⁵⁹	Good and Evil
Method of transmission	Ingested, Inherited	Learned Skill
Symbolic Association	Femininity	Masculinity
Primary Motivation for Use	Jealousy	Jealousy, Longing, Desire

Just as it is difficult to distinguish between *aze* and *bo*, the lines between *bokono* (diviners), *azogleto* (natural healers), and *voduno* (Vodun priests) are also blurred. *Azogleto* are healers who use leaves, plants, and other natural substances to treat illnesses. But because illness is often perceived as a “manifestation of a supernatural attack or imbalance” (Falen personal communication) the *azogleto* may create medicinal compounds which are imbued with the power to fight the attack, and therefore create *bo*. *Voduno* are religious intermediaries between humans and dieties (Vodun). They have knowledge of *Fa* (although a *Voduno* may or may not be initiated into the divination cult). Humans may offend or anger dieties through their behavior, and thus be afflicted with illness by the dieties. As intermediaries, *Voduno* are sometimes called upon to create *bo* to appease the Vodun. The fluidity between the material and spiritual worlds is reflected in the treatment of illness, prevention of misfortune, and protection from attacks which may all be obtained through the purchase of *bo*. Although the chart below shows overlap between these three titles, it creates an unnatural distinction between what could actually be much more fluid. Some individuals may, in fact, perform tasks associated with all three of the

⁵⁹ Falen argues that this is changing, and I did have a discussion with three students regarding what they called *aze wiwi* (black aze) and *aze wewe* (white aze) in which the students expressed that *aze wiwi* was used for evil, and *aze wewe* could be used for good. However, they noted that *aze wiwi* is stronger and more prevalent than *aze wewe*. Falen has also encountered this distinction in his research.

titles. The similarities between the three titles include their ability to interpret illnesses or misfortunes, and to prescribe methods of dealing with them.

Table 3: Characteristics of Azogbleto, Bokono, Voduno

	Azogbleto	Bokono	Voduno
Ritually Trained	X	X	X
Can Heal Illness	X		X
Use Plants	X	X	X
Basic Knowledge of Fa		X	X
Manufacture Bo	X	X	X
Religious Authorities		X	X
Make charms for protection or good luck		X	
Initiated in Fa Divination		X	

It is important to distinguish between *la sorcellerie* and the Vodun belief system, particularly because the two have historically been conflated in the media and among Christian missionaries. According to Henry (2008), Christian literature has portrayed both *Fa* divination and Vodun as base spiritual practices and inferior religions. In fact, consider the following media report regarding the Pope's visit to Benin in 2011: "On Saturday, the second day of his visit to Benin, the Pope travelled to the city of Ouidah where he called for respect for traditional beliefs but also issued a warning against witchcraft. Voodoo is widely practised in Benin, where it has none of the negative connotations often associated with it in Western countries" (Pope celebrates stadium Mass as Africa tour ends, 20 November 2011, www.bbc.co.uk). Despite the statement that "voodoo" is not considered in a negative light in Benin, it is often positioned as antithetical to Christianity, as the Catholic News coverage of the same event reveals, "Ouidah is known as a center of voodoo practices in West Africa, and in a meeting with Catholic faithful there the pope underlined the need to reject customs incompatible with Christianity. Understood correctly, he said, the Christian faith "liberates from occultism and vanquishes evil spirits, for it is moved by the power of the Holy Trinity itself" (In Africa, pope asks church to be model of

reconciliation, 20 November 2011, www.catholicnews.com). The word Vodun means diety, or “he/she who is in the distance and that the eye can neither see nor apprehend” (Topanou 2012:2), certainly a concept that is not “incompatible with Christianity.” Yet the word Vodun has been used as a synonym for satanic practices; *bo* as a “system of accumulation of knowledge of the Vodun religion” is equally challenged and portrayed as irrational (Topanou 2012:276). Since Christianity has historically been entwined with formal schooling, it is not surprising that students may look down on Vodun practitioners. The media portrayal of “Voodoo” and Vodun practitioners as naïve, supersititious, backwards individuals contribute to the attitude of some students regarding their rural relatives who may be Vodun practitioners.⁶⁰

Vodun’s contested place within Beninese society has not always come from Christian organizations. In fact, during Kerekou’s Marxist-Leninist regime (1975-1989) Vodun cults were portrayed as retrograde institutions that impeded Benin’s development (Forte 2010). However, the democratic renewal of the 1990s promoted “traditional cultures” and by 1991 the National Community of Beninese Vodun Cults was created (CNCUB) in an effort to bring visibility to Vodun. In that same year the Benin’s Ministry of Culture organized a religious symposium, attended by over 200 Vodun priests and priestesses. In 1996 the Vodun National Festivity was inaugurated, which takes place annually on January 10. Forte describes these events as “attempts to modernize a traditional religion as well as to promote the country’s cultural assets” (p131). Yet Elwert-Kretschmer (2012) asserts that Vodun cults are not the unchanged “traditional institutions” (248) that they are portrayed to be, but rather have changed remarkably and regularly in response to the social needs of Beninois. It is in this complex social reality that students at UAC see their relationships with their extended families.

⁶⁰ In fact, Fale (personal communication) has suggested that villager is often a euphemism for Vodun practitioner.

The Impact of *la Sorcellerie* on Student/Family Interactions

Topanou (2012) asserts that currently Benin resides in a “state of *bo*” (272) due to the prevalence of the negative usage of *bo*. The state of *bo* contributes to feelings of insecurity and vulnerability among Beninese who realize that fellow Beninese are using *bo* as a means of solving social conflicts. I take his argument further and suggest that the “state of *bo*” does not affect all Beninese equally. At least among students, those who are already in a vulnerable position are included to fear *bo* more than those who come from wealth and privilege. Three aspects of *la sorcellerie* (or the “state of *bo*”) in Benin particularly affect students. First, because the primary motivation for both *aze* and *bo* is typically jealousy, many students feel that they are going to be targets more than others of the same age. A prevailing worldview in Benin is that even among friends and family, there is always jealousy. As Cédric put it, “the African doesn’t like it when someone else progresses. He wants everyone to be at his own level.” While the literature (LeMay-Boucher et al. 2011) shows that there are many reasons why individuals would be jealous of one another (success in business or politics, for example) those were not the concern of UAC students. The students primary concern was the fact that they had been formally educated while their half-siblings or cousins had not.

The second aspect of *la sorcellerie* that affects students is the hidden nature of its use; ordinary items may be imbued with power to become *bo*, food may be suspect because it might contain *aze* or *bo*. The hidden nature means that one must always be alert. The third aspect, which may be the most important for the students, is that *la sorcellerie* is generally associated with the village and villagers. Students typically gave examples of an aunt, uncle, or mother’s co-wife. Yet the students who had the least amount of economic and cultural capital seemed to fear *la sorcellerie* the most. If jealousy is related to inequalities in wealth, prosperity, and status

(as argued by Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Geschiere 1997; Ashforth 1998, 2005; Falen 2007; Smith 2008), how might we explain the paradox?

I argue that students who have more cultural capital and have mastered the art of “code-switching” between their village and academic settings are less likely to express fear of *la sorcellerie*. Even though Laurentia, Fabrice, Joyce, or Paul had friends or acquaintances who had been victims of *la sorcellerie*, they did not express hesitation to associate with their families due to a fear of jealousy. Their habitus have also conditioned them to believe that they will be able to find a job when they complete university, which will in turn allow them to reciprocate financially when appropriate. They do not withdraw socially as much as other students, and they do not see their persona as incompatible with the extended families. In contrast, students who represent upward mobility in their families, and who exhibit elitist behaviors when they return to the village are likely to fear *la sorcellerie*. They may have more relatives who are reliant upon them to “become something” and to reciprocate in the future; they also want to demonstrate through their behavior that their education has changed them. Similar to Geschiere’s (2005) *originaires*, individuals born in the village who have moved away and become successful, these students’ position within the village is ambiguous.⁶¹ When these students attend a ceremony or return to the village they feel conflicted between pride and pressure. Contrary to Fabrice, whose visits to the family home mean that he will be around others like him, these students feel isolated and vulnerable. Abed-Nego, Bruno, Genevieve, Gratien, Madinatou, and Yves all expressed hesitation to participate in family gatherings because of their fear of being targeted. Most of these students use stories to describe why they feel uncomfortable with family, some even used

⁶¹ Geschiere’s research suggests that returning to the village for a ceremony may be both difficult and dangerous for *originaires*, despite their desire to “reaffirm their belonging to the village (2005:53).

the example of Aubin's death as a cautionary tale. Students used Aubin's story to explain why some families are dangerous and why some students prefer to limit their contact with uneducated family members who could use *la sorcellerie* to inflict harm, such as blinding headaches, an inability to read or comprehend, failed exams, or even death.

Aubin was not the only participant who was affected by *la sorcellerie* during my field research. Celine, a second year Geography student, is an example of someone who arrived on the campus with very little cultural capital. Her family is not well off; her father is deceased and her mother struggled to care for her eight children.⁶² Celine is the only one of her siblings from her parents' marriage (as they say in Benin "*même mère même père*") who made it to university. In our first introductory conversation, in response to the open-ended question 'tell us about yourself,' Celine mentioned hardship and struggle several times. She expressed anxiety, and stated things like "life here is hard" and "it will get better, but without support it is not easy." Celine fell ill directly after a trip home to the village for a ceremony. Once she got back on campus she began having bad dreams, hearing voices, and eventually could no longer read. Laurentia, Celine's friend who lived across the hall from her in the dorm, felt strongly that Celine was the victim of *gris-gris*. According to speculation, she was attacked because one of her mothers' co-wives, or one of her aunts or uncles, was jealous that her or his children were not able to attend university, and she or he acted out of spite. Laurentia explained that Celine should not have gone home to the village for the ceremony because it had exposed her to danger from jealous relatives. Just two months into the semester Celine had to leave UAC and return home to her family because she could not attend classes anymore. Aubin and Celine's experiences represent the dilemma that those students who feared *la sorcellerie* vocalized. These students

⁶² In all, there are 18 children from her father and his three wives.

experienced conflict between family obligations and personal safety. Both Aubin and Celine fulfilled family obligations by going to a ceremony in the village. By doing so, they exposed themselves to jealous relatives and were stricken ill. That is why, as Abed-Nego told me, many parents refuse to allow their children to go to the village.

Even students who return to the village to stay with family may behave in ways that are hurtful to their family members. On one of my visits to campus a heavy rain started to fall just as I was finishing up with Jocelyne and Cédrick. As we waited out the rain in Jocelyne's dorm room she offered to make dinner for all three of us. I accepted, and the conversation turned to food. Most people, they told me, would not accept food from people that they do not know well for fear that it has been tampered with. In fact, Jocelyne told me that some students bring prepared food with them to the village and do not eat the food that their mother may give them for the same reason. When I pressed her for further explanation, Jocelyne asserted that the students would not necessarily fear that their mother would use *bo* on them, but that it would be possible for a jealous person to slip something into the food.

Bruno, a first-year scholarship student in Modern Literature who rents a room in Abomey-Calavi with an elder brother explained, "I prefer to stay with my *petite famille* because when you are with the *grande famille*, we're numerous and there are often problems." Bruno was born into a polygamous family, and several of his father's wives live in the same home. Of the eight children in that household, Bruno is the only one to attend university. He explained that he and his siblings are not of the same mindset, "In any case, in all of the *grandes familles* here, there are always problems. And even small problems, people take them seriously. Maybe you are the only one of your parents' children who has gone to school," he continued, "and the others didn't have a chance to send their children to school. Then, you who have studied, you

get a job, and you start earning money. The others will give you the evil eye. That's why we prefer to live here (in Abomey-Calavi)." Geneviève, too, felt very strongly about the dangers of the village and the extended family for students. As she explained: "If you decide to go to school, they will pursue you with evil forces. The child could have an accident and die. Or the child could fall sick and lose their academic year. Or the child could go to his exam and he could be blind, he could look but not understand a word. Those are the reasons that cause students to leave their family and go elsewhere. Even if you go to France they will pursue you still. It's strong, *gris-gris*, it's *la sorcellerie*."

The ambiguity and unpredictability of *la sorcellerie*, as well as its connection to jealousy and parenthood influence students' choice to be prudent in their interactions with extended family members. The majority of the students' references were to *gris-gris*, which is typically a synonym for *bo*. While *aze* takes place in the spiritual or psychic plane, and *azeto* may transport telepathically wherever they want (even to France, as indicated by Abed-Nego), *bo* typically requires a close proximity. To be affected, one must ingest, or touch, or look at the *bo*. Because students have equated "the village" with *la sorcellerie*, this means that visiting relatives at home is intentionally going into harm's way. Even if a student does not feel that their own family members would want to harm him or her, their stories indicate that just one disgruntled person could ruin another person's life. According to Gratien, villagers do not understand that his progress to UAC has been difficult, that his mother sacrificed so that he could go to school, that he spent many afternoons and nights studying for the bac. Abed-Nego, a third-year student majoring in both Food Technology and Juridical Sciences, told me, "A person who hasn't studied can't reason like someone who has." In fact, he went on to describe an intellectual he knew who had not lived up to his or her potential and he compared that person to a peasant: "He

reasons like a peasant, like someone in the village.” They do not see villagers as possessing the ability to reason; villagers just see the success of a *bachelier* and assume it is because they were given more resources. One of the most prudent decisions that these students can make is to stay “out of sight, out of mind” so that they are not seen as flaunting their success.

In this chapter I utilized case studies to illustrate variances in cultural capital, social capital, and family environment. I chose two students who demographically may appear similar, and who are typical of the type of “success stories” put forward in reports on the progress that is being made in Benin’s education sector. An ethnographic perspective was essential to understand the underlying complexities that lead to vastly different university experiences between students. Most importantly, the two case studies suggest that cultural capital is much less likely to be transmitted to the extended family when students fear the jealousy of their relatives. In the second section of the chapter I expanded upon the case studies and examined the experiences of the broader groups that Geneviève and Fabrice represent. An examination of how *la sorcellerie* works in Benin was essential to understanding the reluctance some students felt in associating with their extended families in the village. The complex social reality in which these students were raised has caused some of them to feel that their education has made them simultaneously superior and vulnerable. In the following chapter I will take the reader inside the dormitories where students are much more likely to be able to remain “out of sight, out of mind” throughout the years that they attend UAC. I examine various ways in which students take advantage of the physical space of the campus as a productive place for studying and progressive social customs. It is also a place that highlights the ambiguous social status of studenthood.

CHAPTER FOUR: TESTING BOUNDARIES: THE AMBIGUITY OF CAMPUS LIFE

Dormitories as Sanctioned Seclusion

The construction of dormitories, while intended for students who have no close relatives nearby, has had the side effect of creating a space for students to “escape” their families during the academic year. In this chapter I discuss what the campus overall, and the space of the dormitories in particular, means for the students at UAC. First, the campus seems to create a space for freedom from family obligations, including household tasks. Second, the campus is described as a refuge from family noise and distractions where students can study in peace. Third, it is a place where progressive social customs develop and students do not fear repercussions from family or neighbors because of breaking with longstanding practices.

The students who live in *cabines* offer an interesting case for analysis because, in contrast to those who live in family homes, they have more control of their social circles and are able to remove themselves from situations or interactions that may make them feel the disjuncture between where they came from and where they see themselves going socially. Conversely, they maintain associations with others like them on campus who have also performed the self-improvement required to acquire cultural capital, or people who have the same personal taste in things like music, manner of dress, or appreciation of arts and literature. Along with the aforementioned freedoms, the campus is also a place where students experience some of the most intense liminality, where their positions of being “betwixt and between” social categories is played out. They are not children, but not quite adults. They are not financially independent, yet they are no longer fully dependent on their families, especially if they live on campus or are *boursiers* (scholarship students). While in school they are not expected to be employed, but they

worry about not finding jobs when they graduate. They are pulled away from family because of location, time constraints, and changing interests while they cultivate relationships with others who become their “campus families.”

Dormitories can also be a place of refuge for some students who feel that they are potential targets of witchcraft attacks by their extended families in the villages and family homes in the city. Jocelyne, a second-year student in Juridical Sciences who lives in *Bâtiment BID-E*, explained, “when you are an intellectual in a family that has a lot of illiterates and not a lot of intellectuals like you, there is often distrust, they start to get jealous... They can *gbasse*⁶³ you, we prefer to move away from all this because when they don’t see you, they don’t think of you.” Living in a dormitory on campus maintains students’ physical distance from family members, and may facilitate a social distance as well. Jocelyne’s comments reveal one of the benefits of withdrawing from family—out of sight, out of mind. The more time that students spend on campus, the less likely they are to rub someone the wrong way at home and irk them with their behaviors. The campus keeps them insulated and relatively safe, but at the same time it exposes them to dangers and hassles that they may not experience in their family homes.

The classical anthropological concept of liminality generally used to analyze situations of ambiguity has been useful for understanding the student experience. Turner (1967), expanding on Van Gennep’s (1909) concept explicitly highlights the uncertainty that individuals face during transitions in two distinct phases of their lives, and for university students, that transition is generally between the state of being a child and the state of being an adult. Turner (1967) speaks of the *liminal persona* during rites of passage as “neither this nor that, and yet is both,” and I see

⁶³ *Gbasse* is an Ivoirian word that is common among students at UAC—it is used interchangeably with *gris-gris*. Used as a verb “to *gbasse* somebody” can mean to make someone fall in love with you, or to kill someone, among other uses.

a similar ambivalence among the students I encountered. In the strictest sense of Turner and Van Gennep's concept, *liminal persona* are removed from society, and from the associated rules and obligations of their previous statuses in society, so that they can obtain specific knowledge that will prepare them for their new roles and statuses. The liminal period is one in which they are able to make mistakes and intentionally cultivate a "change in being." Turner calls this a "stage of reflection" during which the students "think about their society, their cosmos, and the powers that generate and sustain them" (14).

Many of the examples that Turner (1967) provides in his treatment of the concept involve rituals during which the initiates are identified, physically removed from society, and isolated for a period of time during which they are imparted with a specific type of knowledge, and are then re-integrated into society with new statuses accompanied by new rites and responsibilities. I am borrowing his concept of liminality, but adapting it to the situation at UAC in which studenthood does not begin and end with a distinct rite of passage or ritual that clearly indicates the change in status of the individuals. Rather, the process of becoming an adult, or participating in "*la vie active*", is one that takes place *petit à petit* over a period of several years. What happens when the process of "becoming" does not take place in complete isolation, or when reintegration is not accompanied by the assumption of a new role?

Perhaps being a student is not necessarily "betwixt and between" states, but rather an ambiguous state in and of itself. In this chapter I use ethnographic data to explore the freedom that living in *cabine* affords students. Liminality, or ambiguity, can be scary, but also allows for creativity. Their liminal status allows students to at least temporarily suspend the roles that they would otherwise be required to perform while the space of the campus gives them flexibility to practice new roles.

As discussed in Chapter Three, scholars of education have found Bourdieu's (1984; 1986; 1990) concepts of cultural capital, habitus, and social fields helpful when trying to understand the schooling experience. Habitus, as I am using it, is a combination of a person's experiences, history, and knowledge of the history of people "like them" as it informs their perceived places in the world and the decisions they make. In many cases, habitus influences what a person perceives as possible or impossible. The danger with a concept such as habitus is that it may lead to thoughts that the world is a reproductive place, where the rich will always stay rich, and the poor will always stay poor, because people's experiences and histories lead them down paths that are tautological or preconceived. They become self-fulfilled prophecies with no agency. Reay (2004) argues that habitus becomes active in relation to a field, and if the field changes, the same habitus can have very different outcomes. In this chapter I examine the campus as a particular social field that allows students a level of freedom that they use to change their habitus and their expectations.

La Vie en Cabine – The Campus as a Social Field

The first dormitories (*logement universitaire*) on the campus of the University of Abomey-Calavi (UAC) were built in the 1970s to house students coming from the north who did not have family with whom they could live. Some of these buildings are in disuse as they are in need of structural repair. New buildings were built with donor funds, often named after the countries that contributed the money, notably Canada and North Korea. Dormitories erected during the 1990s housed anywhere between 20 to 210 students and were quickly filled. A recent project, funded by the state, the World Bank's Fast Track Initiative (FTI), and the Islamic Development Bank (IBD) is intended to provide space for 1,300 additional students who do not have family in the greater Cotonou area.

Securing a position in one of the *cabines* on campus is considered *la chance* (lucky) for students. Each year there is the equivalent to a lottery among students who qualify for rooms based on the distance between campus and their family homes. Theoretically, the only students who live on campus are those who have been able to prove that their families live far away, or those who are physically handicapped. In reality, however, some students are able to take advantage of their connections and obtain rooms. Yves, a student from a wealthy family, told Natacha and I that he had applied for a *cabine* but had been denied. He was able to get a room, however, because his dad had “*des longs bras*” (an expression used to mean “connections”). Studies of cultural capital in the university setting have argued that individual strategic interactions with important gatekeepers such as administrators are found to be important indicators of high cultural capital (Dumais and Ward 2010). In Yves’ case, his father felt comfortable utilizing his connections to help his son, and Yves was able to draw upon the social capital of his father to get what he wanted. By doing so, he was able to secure a coveted spot in a *cabine*, and was able to parlay that into extra pocket money by taking in an *embaucheur*, or extra roommate.

During the day, dorm rooms are social focal points on the campus; students who live with family in the city spend much of their free time between classes in their friends’ rooms. One of the dorms, *Bâtiment PIP-D* is located in a quiet section of campus, close to two soccer fields. To get there, one must take the main road that winds past the bank and administrative buildings, and eventually leave the main *pavée*. Natacha and I would often meet to begin our day in the *Jardin U*, the university gardens located close to the main gate to campus, between the bank and the cafeteria. As we walked from *Jardin U* to *Bâtiment PIP-D*, we passed a two-story building where musical groups would frequently perform at lunchtime. Large crowds gathered around the

open windows to enjoy the music, and students relaxed in the shade on benches surrounding the building. Natacha and I usually took a shortcut through an open hallway of a former classroom building and passed through to the area of campus that held basketball courts. We never saw anyone using these courts, and they were generally deserted because there was no shade or place to sit. The areas surrounding the courts, however, were covered by large shade trees, and it is under these trees that the *vendeuses* often set up tables to sell fruits, sandwiches, byssap (a drink made from dried hibiscus flowers flavored with ginger and pineapple), and other food items. These *vendeuses* invariably travel to campus via zems whose drivers dart between pedestrians as they take their passengers to various buildings and locations on campus. Young men set up small tables in a smattering of gardens and passageways to sell mobile phone credits and accessories. Toward the center of campus is a collection of small kiosks offering prepared food for purchase, office supplies, photocopying services, and a *cyber* (internet café). These kiosks are authorized by the university rectorate, as annual fees are charged to operate kiosks on campus.⁶⁴ The vast majority of commerce on campus, however, is conducted by *vendeurs ambulants* (street vendors, many of whom carry their wares as they walk around campus) who are not authorized by the rector and whose items may be confiscated or destroyed at any time by the campus police.

Just beyond the basketball courts is a row of small two-story dormitory buildings that were constructed in the 1990s. One of these, *Bâtiment PIP-D*, is known as a “handicapped building” because a large proportion of the first floor rooms are reserved for students with physical impairments. The building is unique because, unlike all of the other residences, the students are allowed to stay in the same room year after year, and may request specific

⁶⁴ According to the rector, annual fees are 10,000 FCFA for kiosks selling food, and 20,000 FCFA for kiosks offering photocopies and office supplies.

roommates. Because of the consistency among residents from year to year, I observed a closer relationship between the students and the concierge in this building than I did in other buildings.

The outside steps lead directly to the main concourse of the building, which has two wings on either side of a center staircase that leads to the higher levels. Natacha and I first went to see the concierge of *Bâtiment PIP-D* to ask permission to enter the *cabines*, and spent several weeks submitting subsequent requests to various administrators. On one of the days that my research assistant, Natacha, and I were in *Bâtiment PIP-D*, we stopped by to greet the concierge in his room. As we walked down the hallway, we saw a young man carrying a toolbox filled with shoe shining supplies. The *second* (assistant concierge) noticed the young man and proceeded to shout at him, telling him he was not allowed in the *cabines*. The young man cowered; the *second* hit him several times on his upper body and eventually slapped him on the side of the head. The *second* took away the shoe shiners toolkit and instructed him to sit on the floor outside the concierge's room and wait for his punishment. As we watched the events unfold before us, Natacha and I were welcomed in to see the concierge. He explained that no vendors were allowed in the *cabines*, and that the shoe shiner knew better. He was going to be *honte* (shamed) so that he learned his lesson and never came back.

Taken at face value, the actions of the concierge and his *second* were legitimate; visitors are not permitted in the *cabines* without obtaining permission from the concierge, just as Natacha and I had requested, and had been granted, permission. The subtext, however, suggested that there are certain types of people who belong, whose presence can elevate the social status of those around them, and conversely, there are people who do not belong, whose very presence in the *cabines* is thought of as detrimental or shady. It is not likely that any *vendeurs ambulants* would have been allowed into the *cabine* either, just as it was not likely that Natacha and I would

have been beaten if we entered the *cabine* without authorization. As the concierge was speaking to us, he gestured with disdain at the shoe shiner sitting on the floor in the hallway. “We’ve had thefts in the past, and we can’t let non-students in,” he explained, and as he turned toward Natacha and me, his expression changed to a smile. “Of course, you are always welcome. Please make sure to say hello when you are on campus.”

Once we had been granted permission by the campus life *directrice* (who was described by one of her colleagues as the “campus mother”), we returned to the building, showed our letter to the *concierge*, and asked him if he would mind if we went door-to-door in the building to find participants. He asked, “Have you met the President?” Natacha and I exchanged confused glances. We replied that we had not, and asked him to explain. He laughed as he realized what we might have thought. “Paul, Paul. He lives on the first floor. If you want to know about the *cabines*, you must talk to him.”

The first-floor hallways of *Bâtiment PIP-D* are crowded with motorbikes, wheelchairs, and small groups of students gathered near portable wheeled whiteboards or chalkboards used during study sessions. We found Paul’s *cabine* at the end of the long east hallway, in a suite that contains two bedrooms and a bathroom. One full wall of the *cabine* is lined with desks that are covered with books, folders, files, and papers. One of the desks also holds food items, including tins of tomato paste, canned fish, palm oil, and a woven basket containing peppers, onions, and garlic; lying under the desk is a large bag of rice. Directly opposite the doorway are lockers that students use to store their clothes and other personal items. I observed students locking and unlocking these containers regularly, as theft on campus was a concern. There are two windows in Paul’s room, but they are adjacent to one another and do not provide a cross breeze. During our first visits in February and March, the building was extremely hot, and there was little air

circulation into the individual *cabines*. Often when Natacha and I visited, Paul or one of his friends would turn on the fan for us and someone would run out to get *sachets* of cold water for us to drink.

Paul is known as “The President” because of his ambition, his talent, and, as he put it, “because I love to talk.” He is a 24 year-old fourth-year student in Linguistics originally from Parakou, a city 400 kilometers north of Cotonou. Paul has lived in *Bâtiment PIP-D* for three years because he is visually impaired. He is the youngest of four children in a monogamous household and told us that he is one of his parents’ favorite, which prompted Natacha to ask him if she thought his parents loved him more because he was blind. Paul reflected for a moment, but decided that while his parents may have protected him and tried to keep him from getting frustrated with his blindness, he did not feel that they loved him more simply because he was visually impaired. He went to a primary school for blind children near Parakou and an integrated secondary school, and was successful in both environments.

Once Paul obtained his bac, he made arrangements to attend UAC with financial support from family members. Paul recounted his experience with finances the first year on campus, and said that his aunt, several cousins, mother and father gave him food or material items to augment his savings. He was not the only student who stressed how expensive the first year is on campus. Paul stayed with an uncle in Cotonou for his first six months at UAC, but was able to provide the documentation required to secure a *cabine* on campus during subsequent years. He is extremely bright, personable, and knowledgeable about current events and world politics. When we asked him about his plans after graduation, he replied, “I have ambition. I want to be a hero. Didn’t I say that I am the President of the Republic?” Other students gather around him when he speaks, and his manner is very engaging. Despite the fact that there are five other residents in his *cabine*,

it is commonly referred to as “*Chez Paul*.”

The three twin-sized beds are kept clean, as is the room. Someone sweeps out the sand morning and night, and the area just inside the door is usually covered with shoes that Paul and his roommates have taken off. While there are just three beds, six students live in the *cabine*—three as *cabiniers* and three as *embauchers*. In the past there have been extreme cases of abuse in the *cabines* related to the *embaucher* practice, and Natacha and I were told the story of a female student who was desperate for a place to stay during her first year at UAC. One of her male classmates offered up his room and told her that she could sleep on the floor at no cost if she cooked for him. Unfortunately, the arrangement quickly led to sexual pressure and the female student was allegedly forced to have sex with the male student up to five times a day. After several weeks, she desperately contacted her brothers and her entire family came to campus and reproached the building concierge because he allowed the abuse to happen. The female student left the university out of shame, the male student was asked to leave by the administration, and the concierge lost his job. Other students related stories of extreme cases in which the *embaucher* was treated like a veritable slave, forced to do all of the cooking and cleaning for the *cabinier*, sleeping on the floor, and being sent on errand after errand at the expense of their own studies.

Paul, however, told us that he and his roommates made a pact when they decided to take on *embaucheurs*. The rule was that everyone was equal, everyone must sleep on a bed, and all tasks would be divided between everyone. Paul and his two roommates each selected an *embaucheur*, and they double up on the single beds. Paul described the close familial relationship that he and his co-cabiniers shared. Natacha challenged him, “but that one ate *pate* [a common starch made from corn flour] without you!” Paul laughed and told us that they had all

eaten together, but that his roommate was a slow eater. He reiterated their equality and said that they each take turns preparing meals. Natasha asked him who was the best cook, to which Paul replied playfully, “Frankly, I cannot say which of my children I love the most.”

While Paul was joking when he referred to himself as a father and his roommates as his children, he enjoys a position of status among his friends and associates on campus. He is well-known and respected, attains high marks in his courses, and is able to take care of his own needs. Paul’s success on campus extends to his experience with his family, yet he spoke candidly about success as a mixed blessing. On the one hand, he referenced the pride he felt when he returned to his family home in the village during school vacations: “I’ve become a flag bearer, I’ve become an intellectual.” But Paul also spoke broadly about the global economic crisis and students’ concerns regarding finding employment after graduation. He felt that there was great pressure on students because if they were not successful after school, other families in the village would take their children out of school saying, “You who have been to school, what have you become? You haven’t become anything. And you don’t even have a job.”

Paul is not alone in his conflicted feelings about the future for students. Most of the students in this study expressed both hope and anxiety. They were also conflicted about their positions on campus; living in a *cabine* gave them freedom from household tasks and chores at the cost of close personal relationships with their parents or siblings. For the female students, attending university allowed them a legitimate reason to put off marriage and childbearing, but also exposed them to unwanted advances by professors and fellow students. The physical space of the campus allows students the freedom to gather and debate long-standing practices with which they do not agree without fear of repercussions by elders. At the same time, however, students spoke of the importance of treading carefully when they returned home so that they did

not upset members of their families by acting superior.

***Cabine* as a place for productive studying**

“At home you can’t just do what you want. I’ve put a sign on the door here that says no visitors after 10pm. But at home I could never do that, tell my family not to knock on my door after 10pm. I have not had any other education besides the calm that I have here. When I go back home I just can’t find that there.” – Sandrine

Sandrine lives on the second floor of *Bâtiment BID-E*, one of the new buildings on campus that was built in 2007. The building is six stories, made of white concrete, and has three winding staircases leading to the upper levels, one on either end, and a third in the middle. The second and third floors are designated for women only. The building has narrow courtyards on each side so that persons standing on the upper levels can look down onto the lower floors. The space is open to the elements; both to the welcome breezes that flow through, and to the pounding rain that sometimes drenches the staircases and balconies. The building is one of four that were funded by the Islamic Development Bank (IBD) and built between 2004 and 2009. Each of the *cabines* has a terrace where students hang clothes to dry and where they sometimes cook using charcoal- or gas-burning stoves. The buildings are close enough together that students sometimes go out to the terrace and call to friends in the other buildings.

These new *cabines* were built just inside the perimeter walls to the campus that run along the highway; small footpaths lead from the buildings to small openings in the walls so that pedestrians can easily reach the road. As the sun goes down on campus, the sounds of nightclubs emerge from the street. Despite the proximity of the newer *cabines* to the highway, residents generally characterized the campus as a calm place where they could be at ease. Even though there is a steady stream of visitors in the *cabines*, the students are able to create their own rules for their personal spaces. The ambiance on campus is by no means monastic, silent, and completely orderly. However, the level of control that students have on their surroundings seems

to give them pleasure.

For Sandrine, like many of the other students at UAC, a typical day on campus begins when the alarm on her cell phone goes off. She wakes up, straightens her room, and chats with her roommate as they heat up leftovers from the night before on their electric hot plate in their room. She eats breakfast on her bed before reading her spiritual reflections for the day. The walls of their room are covered with large posters depicting “the good life” that are often sold on the side of the streets outside of campus. One poster on Sandrine’s wall showed a couple in their twenties leaning against a red sports car in the circle drive of a mansion. The narrow wall at the head of Sandrine’s bed is adorned with a poster of Jesus looking down with his hands together in prayer. A Bible shares space with numerous beauty products on her bedside table.

While Sandrine has already finished her coursework, she is unable to obtain her degree without completing a final research project that must be supervised by one of her professors. In our conversations, she enthusiastically described her intended project, but expressed disappointment that her professor was currently too busy to assist her. She is not alone; several of the advanced undergraduates who participated in this study were awaiting the availability of their professors. When I asked Sandrine what she does with her time on campus, she gestured to the stack of papers on her desk. “I attend classes and take notes because I know the content. I make photocopies of the notes and sell them to students who missed class.”

First and second year courses are often overcrowded with over 1,000 students in some of the amphitheaters, and it is common practice for female students to be offered a seat by their male counterparts. Students often cited overcrowding as one of the biggest challenges to learning their coursework. In addition, during the rainy season, many students who live off campus are late to class because of transportation issues. Students are generally required to take

copious notes on the professors' lectures, and missing a class can be detrimental to their grades. Because Sandrine lives on campus, has time to attend extra classes, and is able to find a seat because of her gender, she profits from the ambiguity of her situation in a creative way.

As Sandrine's comments at the beginning of this section indicate, students can utilize their space in a way that they would not be allowed to do in their family homes. Their family homes, in contrast, were often described as chaotic, and students had less control of their time and activities. Romaric has been living on his own since he passed the BEPC (8th grade certificate) at age 16 and feels that there is a definite advantage to living far from the family home. As he put it, "it's not noisy, there's nothing to bother you. Especially if the conditions are good [earlier he had been speaking of water and electricity being cut] you can study no problem. There isn't music blasting all the time, they constructed these buildings for us to study in."

Some students felt that if they were in the family home and wanted some peace and quiet to study, their families would not understand. Madinatou, a second-year student in BioMedical Science who lives in *Batiment BID-E*, felt that there was a contradiction in priorities between students and the rest of their families: "Let's say there are some who just can't study with all of the noise. You are in the family home, you have your obligations, but you also have your own priorities. The family doesn't let you take care of them. Just when you want to be alone or study, you've got your brothers, your sisters, your cousins who come along and make a lot of noise or want you to do something with them." Abed-Nego, a third year student who is majoring in both Agricultural Science and Juridical Science, is the son of a successful commercial trader and an equally successful *couteriere* (clothing designer). His father has fifteen children, and his

mother has four, but has also adopted another.⁶⁵ Abed-Nego's related his experience growing up, "We didn't live with our dad. He comes to visit from time to time. So in daily life it is me [who is in charge]. But I do so in accord with my sisters. We all get along well with our mom." While Abed-Nego is sympathetic to his classmates whose homes do not provide the proper ambiance for studying, he expressed gratitude for his immediate family. As he put it, "I come from a good family. All is calm at home, but not everyone is as lucky as I am. In fact, there are families where there certain people who are really bizarre or people who are lazy. A person who is in a family that does nothing, when he sees you in a car he comes over immediately and asks for money. Students who don't like to deal with those kinds of problems prefer to stay in the city. They just don't go to the *grande famille*."

While the majority of students felt that the ambiance on campus was better than that of the family home, some students said that it depends on the family. Sidonie is a second-year student in Juridical Sciences, the daughter of a Military Officer and a homemaker. She explained that her parents want to see her succeed. When she visits the family home, she is expected to do her work first and enjoy leisure activities with her family when she is done. She also said that when she needs to excuse herself, she simply says, "I want to go study" and her parents excuse her because, "as for my parents, both of them want to see us children *évolues*." Sidonie was one of the few students who felt that her family understood the value of studying.

When I Want and How I Want - Freedom on Campus

For students at UAC, the campus represents freedom. Living on campus gives the students the ability to control their surroundings to a degree that they would not be able to in the family home. Ramatou-Lai is a second-year student in Bio-Medical Sciences who has lived on

⁶⁵ Abed-Nego used the French word *adopter* to refer to this individual.

campus both years. She is the youngest of her parents' seven children, and her mother was originally reluctant to allow Ramatou-Lai to live on campus. Ramatou-Lai's elder siblings (who had also attended UAC) intervened on her behalf and convinced their mother that she would be secure in *cabine*. Ramatou-Lai enjoys the freedom that she is accorded by living in a dormitory, "at university, and more precisely, for me in *cabine*, here nobody can control me. You are free and you can go when you want and how you want." It is physical space in which she can gain respite from family obligations, such as cooking, cleaning, errands, and other household tasks. Female students, in particular, expressed relief that they are no longer required to regularly prepare food for their families.

Sandrine related her experience as the oldest daughter in a monogamous family that did not employ a domestic to perform household duties. While in primary and secondary school, she had to run home from school in order to prepare meals for the family, or wake earlier than the rest of the household to prepare breakfast. Now that Sandrine lives on campus, she feels some relief from her household duties. As she puts it, "since I've come to the university I also have my own obligations and everyone gets by at home. So now it's my sister who has to do the housework." Nearly all of the female students mentioned that the work they left behind fell into the laps of their younger sisters or their mothers. Research suggests that in some sub-Saharan African countries, having older sisters is helpful to male and female childrens' educational attainment (Buchmann and Hannum 2001). In fact, their findings point to the "often-significant impact of [birth] order and gender composition of siblings" (85). As indicated in the previous chapter through the case studies of Fabrice and Geneviève, birth order and gender are indeed significant factors in the educational attainment of UAC students.

However, my research suggests that even those living near campus with siblings who are

also students may experience flexibility in social roles. Perhaps the university could be considered a more “feminist” space than the family home for such students. Geneviève’s brothers prepare meals from time to time in the apartment that the three of them share near campus, but that is not the case when they all go home for school breaks. When they go back to the family home, Geneviève’s brothers refuse to help her: “It’s because here [the university] is for learning that my brothers help me. We’re here to study and they are obliged to help me because I can’t spend all of my time cooking, I have to study too. They understand. But when we go back to our family home, they won’t do a thing. They refuse categorically. They say that they are men, and the kitchen is for women.” The equality that Geneviève experiences living near campus with her brothers is lost when they return home, and her brothers fall back on cultural notions of gender roles.

Rose, a second-year Geography student, similarly lamented: “I went home during one of my school breaks, and I did everything around the house, I cleaned the whole place. It’s not because I am a student that I can say that I am too big to help out at home.” She has a sense of freedom while on campus, but visits home are a reminder that she is still a child to her parents, and she is not considered an adult. The first year that Rose attended UAC she spent her time between classes at an aunt’s home near campus; during that period Rose’s parents were experiencing marital discord and she found it difficult to study in the home because of the fighting. After being away from her parents and ten siblings every day from 8 am to 9 pm for several months she began to become accustomed to being on her own, “I said to myself, if I find something here [on campus] why leave, if I go over there [back home] what will I gain?”

Living with extended family members is certainly an option for the majority of UAC students. Yet as discussed in the previous chapter, flexible living arrangements and child (or

youth) circulation depends on the social relationships between extended family members. To further complicate matters, even if a child is taken into a household, he or she may not be well received by members of the family. Rose gave the following example, “in some families, if you stay at your aunt’s house you are like a placed child. They take you in like you are a *vidomegon*. Or your uncle will take you in and his wife will treat you like a placed child.”

Beyond the differences in gendered norms of household maintenance on campus and at home, what happens when the moral values inculcated in the home do not align with those taught at school? Recent research on the social mobility among students at elite universities in England has found that working-class students faced dilemmas that their middle-class classmates did not, including the ability to maintain connections with members of their social background (Jetten et al. 2008). Other literature on first-generation college students suggests a similar premise – that students who are among the first in their families are more likely to experience disjuncture between their home and school environments (Dumais and Ward 2010). Again, such studies rely on the Euro-American ideal of a nuclear family, and do not recognize the impact that a close extended family may have on smoothing the transition. My research suggests that students whose household composition has been fluid during primary and secondary education experience less disjuncture, even if they are the first in their immediate family to attend university. They are able to draw upon the experiences of their half-siblings and cousins, aunts and uncles, and do not view longstanding practices to be in opposition to what they learn at school. Rather, they view behavior and knowledge as contextual. As Ramatou-Lai explained to me, professors are to be respected and they represent book knowledge. She must greet a professor with a quick “*Bonjour Professeur*,” whereas at home, in the village, and with family, she must go down on one knee to greet an elder. She then described an elder as a sage, a person who has extended knowledge in

the history of Benin and in the longstanding practices. Most importantly, she explained, a sage has experience that one can only attain by living a long life. Because of her respect for the sage (she then used the term *Dah*) she greets in the manner to which the Dah is accustomed; a handshake would be incredibly inappropriate. Both greetings show respect, but are modified to fit the appropriate social group. Ramatou-lai laughed as she told me that if she simply said “hi” to her mother, “*elle va me refuse*” [she will refuse me]. Similarly, Rose explained the finesse that students must use when greeting elders, “if you want to follow the education that you have received at school, you risk speaking bad to your parents at home. You must show your parents signs of respect, that is the education we have received at home.”

Bourdieu (1986) posits that the education that a person receives at home may overlap with what they learn at school, and that such domestic education may either help or harm the student’s ability to succeed in school based on its “distance from the demands of the scholastic market” (48). If a student believes that one form of education (school or home) is superior to the other, he or she will have difficulty. But, if a student is taught the value of both academic learning and home training, and the intrinsic value in being able to bridge the two, he or she has a chance of being much more successful in both environments. I argue that the domestic education and academic education do not necessarily need to overlap – what is more important for students at UAC is that they value both types of education equally and do not view them as mutually exclusive. Romaric, a student who has lived independently of his parents since beginning secondary school, explained the discord that could arise if a student inculcated their academic lessons and valued them more than his home training. “If you go home,” he explained, “your father may correct you, and you think you know more than him. He will be angry with you and say it is because you went to school that you do not respect him. If there is a

contradiction [between education received at school and received at home] an individual doesn't know which to choose."

Joyce, a first-year Natural Sciences student, spoke of the ties to her monogamous family that could not be broken despite the distance: "Because of the distance I am obliged to live in *cabine* and to leave my parents' home. But I haven't disengaged from my family because family is for life." Yet for students who live away from family to attend university, their education has taken them away from their family home for a period of several years. Students often differentiated between their *petite famille* and their *grande famille*, and concluded that although the *grande famille* was frequently associated with jealousy, and sometimes with danger, they preferred to live with their *petite famille* and described the close relationships they had with their siblings and parents. In some cases, students seemed to feel guilty for leaving their younger siblings. As Cédric mentioned, there was a void at his family home because he was not there to help with his sisters, and he likened it to my own sojourn in Benin. "After your return," he said, "you will compensate for everything you missed. But it causes stress." Many students lamented the assistance they were once able to give to younger siblings or cousins on their schoolwork but could no longer perform because of the distance.

Social distance became a product of the physical distance for many students. A first year student named Agathe explained that she really missed her parents: "Living with my parents makes me happy. If my parents were with me here I would be so much more at ease." Students missed not only their parents, but their siblings as well. Laurentia expressed sadness that she was no longer as close to her younger sister as she once was: "Before, when I was there, I was close to my little sister. She asked me about every little thing. But now, since I've left home, she doesn't talk to me like before, she is closer with another of our cousins. You see? All

because of the distance.” Although they may have begun their stints at university with the intention of remaining close to their families, and visited home during school vacations or for certain ceremonies, eventually most students admitted that they began relying less on family and more on friends at university. In fact, for some students, their friends at school eventually became more like family than their biological relatives. As Jocelyne explained, “if there is something bothering me, that’s really on my mind, before I go to my parents I talk to my friends here. They are really more like my brothers than my biological brothers.” Eric, a student who moved away from his parents at the age of 12 to begin attending secondary school, went so far as to say that he had failed in fulfilling his obligations and created emotional distance from his family because he had been too focused on safeguarding his own future. UAC administration has recognized that students’ emotional needs are as important as their academic and has given students access to social workers and counselors with whom they may discuss their problems. Whereas before coming to university they may have relied on family members as confidants, the university steps in to fulfill that role if necessary.

What is important to the students is the effect that their social distance has on their family relationships. If the students notice a distance, it can reasonably be assumed that their families also notice the changed relationships. Even when students visit home, they may not have the free conversations they once enjoyed. Several students said that when they returned home, family members were all together, but sometimes the visits were tense or uncomfortable. They just did not have a lot to talk about anymore. This suggests that families might feel neglected, or inferior to the students. As discussed in Chapter Three, ill feelings between family members are often cited as motivation for *la sorcellerie* attacks. Students may choose to remain on or near campus to avoid interactions with family members who may be jealous.

Dorms as a Site of Refuge from *la Sorcellerie*

In this section, I examine how sorcery affects social networks and family relations among university students in Benin. I argue that while some university students consider themselves to be vulnerable because of their elite statuses, they also use distance as a way to manage family expectations, obligations, and problems. In particular, students who live on campus are able to withdraw from their networks of extended family relations when those relations are perceived as bothersome or dangerous. Many of the students in my study said that they avoid going home for funerals or other ceremonies because of the danger inherent in their villages.

When on campus, students can show off their purchases such as *motos*,⁶⁶ new clothes, mesh (hair extensions), or jewelry without the fear of being singled out as they would if they went back to the village. They are in a community of peers, socially and in some degrees, financially. There is certainly differentiation in terms of the family finances where these students come from, but there is also a sense of equality among those who live in the dorms. They all have the same amount of space, they are subject to the same rules and regulations, and they attend the same courses. In contrast, when they go to the village the majority of students noted the need to hide some of their success in order not to irk the villagers who may see them. Pritchett (2009) emphasizes the importance of repeated stories in terms of creating perceptions among villagers of city life, and vice versa. I see the stories that students tell about villagers and the village itself as a means of emphasizing why visiting the village is risky, and conversely, why staying on campus is preferred. While not all stories were exactly the same, I eventually noticed a pattern in stories that students told me.

First, the stories would start with the ominous foreboding mention of *la sorcellerie*, *gris-*

⁶⁶ A number of students mentioned that a common purchase for a new *boursier* is a *moto*, and indeed there are plenty of *motos* in and around the *cabines*.

gris, or the evil eye. Next, the student would describe a successful person, noting that he or she had either “done a little” or “*évolué*” or “made lots of money.” The victim (or target) would have to return to the village for a ceremony or for some other obligation. Inevitably that person would attempt to hide his or her success, either by wearing old clothes, by leaving his or her car or *moto* behind and taking a shared taxi, or by outright lies when questioned by villagers (as one of the students said, the people in the village would ask how things were going, and the victim would say, “oh not good, not good. Nothing is working for me right now.”). The villagers could see through the ruse, and would know that the individual was successful. The stories would vary at that point. Sometimes the villagers would then be called *des sorciers*, and would accuse the urbanite of lying and show in some way that they knew about their success (“How is your car? The red one that you left behind?”). Other times there was no mention of direct questioning, but that the victim could feel the jealousy of those around them. Inevitably, the individual would encounter trouble. The trouble could be an accident in the taxi on the way back to the city, or the onset of terrible headaches or an illness that would lay up the person for an extended period of time, or their business ventures would all start to fail. In most cases, but not all, the sophisticate would be left with nothing. All of his or her prior successes would be torn down and he or she would be worse off than the villagers. At this point in the stories most of the students would reiterate two things. First, that *la sorcellerie* is strong. Second, that people in Benin are extremely jealous and that is why students do not like to visit the village or the family home.

What does this story pattern tell us? McNally traces the recent surge in accounts of the occult in sub-Saharan Africa and concludes, “stories and legends speak to real social practices and to the symbolic registers in which popular anxieties are recorded (2011:3). Regardless of whether or not the stories being told on campus are true (and I am inclined to think at least some

of them are) they speak to the idea that trying to hide one's success when one is in the village is futile. The *sorciers*, or jealous villagers who will enlist the help of a *sorcier*, will find out everything one is trying to hide.

Eric is a UAC student who first left home at the age of 12 to live closer to school, with the support of his parents. He told me that his father decided that renting a room was a better idea than living with his uncles because of the problems that could occur. Eric's parents supported him financially and sent him food and living expenses every 15 days. When I asked Eric why his father did not want him to live with family he replied, "personally, living with family is not a good thing as such. When you're in a family we have a saying in Fon, '*oko non la ako vè*'.⁶⁷ What this means is that it is better when a friend is far from you. When everyone is together there are always going to be problems among us. But when you are far there are not so many little misunderstandings that can be blown out of proportion. When you are far, your relationships are good." It is important to note is that this is a Fon phrase used not just for students, but for family and friends in general. It is reminiscent of the "absence makes the heart grow fonder" phrase used in English. The everyday annoyances, irritations, or slights that arise in relationships between family members and friends who live with one another are avoided when students live on campus. In that respect, it is beneficial for students to limit their time with family. But what is different for the students is the time spent away from family is time spent changing their distinction - changing their habits, their tastes, their senses of superiority. So when these students return home, the heart may have anticipated growing fonder, but in some cases the friction between the home habitus and the school habitus creates a gap that can lead to

⁶⁷ Another student explained that the phrase "akɔ nɔn la, akɔ vɛ" which can be written "*ako non la ako vè*" can be translated into French as "*famille est loin, famille aimer*" which signifies that relations are better when family is far.

hurt feelings.

Because they are students, they are able to use the legitimate excuse of “studying” to refrain from visiting their villages or family homes regularly. By emphasizing the connection between jealousy and sorcery, students were able to create scenarios that made it only logical that they would have to cut off relations with their extended family members. Some of the students said that their own parents forbade them to go to the village out of concern for their safety. Abed-Nego said that his father refused categorically, “but he always says that one day all of us will be together in my village, Djigbe.”

My research suggests that those students who are able to secure places in one of the dormitories on campus use their relative seclusion as a way of protecting themselves, not only from potential sorcery attacks, but also from the inevitable family obligations they encounter when visiting their family homes. In addition, their status as students acts as a social cocoon in which they can cultivate social capital in the form of their own personal and professional networks of peers and colleagues. The physical space of the university campus itself serves to protect the students by limiting their exposure to the outside world, and particularly to their extended families. Yet this protection only lasts as long as students are in school, and even then it depends on how permeable the students’ social and physical borders prove to be.

Conclusion

The campus is a fixed place, a landmark in the social and physical topography of Cotonou and its environs. Faculty, administrators, and members of the informal economy alike form levels of the relatively stable social hierarchy. For students, however, the campus is a temporary abode. It is a place that will be their home for a few years, if that. They are transient members of the social landscape who use the seclusion to enact changes upon themselves.

Students are focused on transition, in the Turnerian sense of *liminal persona*, constantly working on “inward and conceptual processes” of becoming intellectuals or *évolué*, and at the same time transitioning from childhood to adulthood. Yet with this process comes “ambiguity and paradox” (Turner 1995: 7) as students deal with conflicted feelings regarding their places in society. What makes the liminality of students different from that of all children moving into adulthood?

While on campus the students can be who they want to be, they have relative freedom, they can imagine themselves as the future leaders who are consulted for every family meeting. They can see themselves as *évolué* who have prospered both academically and financially. I began this chapter with a description of Paul, a student living on campus who seems to be “in the zone.” Paul is a successful student, a leader on campus, a well-respected member of the community, and a favorite among his parents. He is no longer considered a child, and he participates in family discussions when he returns to his village. Yet he is not fully an adult, and is probably more of an observer than a leader in those family discussions. He jokes and calls himself the father of several children (his roommates), but in reality it will likely be several years until he is able to get married and start a family of his own. As a UAC *boursier* living in a *cabine*, he is able to take care of his own living arrangements and does not need to depend on his family for supplemental income, but receiving a *bourse* every year is not guaranteed.

I am not asserting that the campus is a veritable free-for-all in which anything goes. On the contrary, there are many social restrictions that go along with being a university student at UAC. The space of the campus allows for freedom, but it is not a complete freedom. The students feel that they can decide who can come and go in their *cabine*, but there are still restrictions because of roommates - while Sandrine does not want visitors after a certain time of

night, perhaps her roommate may - the concierge in certain dorms keep close eyes on the students' activities, and students' friends may reproach them if they behave in unsophisticated manners - Paul's roommate was openly teased because he lost his temper due to a stolen cell phone. The very things that students are trying to embody become, in essence, restrictions. They cannot behave in whatever ways they desire; they need to act like intellectuals and show restraint. Yet students do enjoy relative freedom, especially if they live on campus. But their freedom - of movement, of speech, of imagining the future - is strongly tied to the campus. Once they leave campus they are again subjected to the norms of society. Earlier in this chapter I noted that the freedom of the campus is tempered by the challenges, especially those faced by female students. In the following chapter I analyze ways in which a students' gender affects her or his university experience.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE STUDENT BODY: GENDER AND THE UNIVERSITY

It is impossible to do a study of education in Benin without addressing the issue of gender. By the year 2006, 51 percent of all projects funded through the World Bank's (WB) International Development Association included gender as a primary focus (WB 2011), and the concept has framed much of the funding available for initiatives aimed at improving education in the region. Unfortunately, the term has erroneously come to signify a synonym for "women", or "females", or "girls" in popular conception. Oyewumi (2000) calls this tendency a "vexing problem in feminist scholarship" (1095) and further asserts that the "woman" in gender studies is essentialized in the role of wife, with the Western nuclear family as the model.

Rather than consider males and females as members of inflexible categories based on biological sex, in this study I search out the complexities and contradictions that occur when gender is constructed (Berliner and Falen 2008). What does the term gender really mean, and how does an examination of it contribute to this study? Despite the potential that higher education holds for improved status and upward mobility for women and men, there are also problems related to gender, such as sexual harassment, wage equity upon graduation, and marriage prospects. In contemporary Benin, as in much of the world, the identity of a person as male or female shapes their experiences in the world, and the "expectations society has of her [him] and she of herself [he of himself]" (Achebe 2007:63).

Gender, according to the WB, is a social category that largely influences a person's participation in society, establishes life chances, and may have a significant impact on identity (WB 2001). The WB posits that each culture interprets individuals based on their biological

characteristics and categorizes them into a set of social expectations regarding their rights, responsibilities, and capabilities. This definition, while allowing for differences between cultures, does not address how the categories came to be. Amadiume (1987), however, argues that pre-colonial Igboland (in contemporary south-eastern Nigeria) was characterized by a “flexible gender system” in which access to roles of power were not merely dependent on biology (185). Gender, according to Oyewumi (2005), is a limiting system of thought that has been “exported to the South as a concept” (319). In her thought-provoking study of pre-colonial Yoruba society, Oyewumi (1997) convincingly argues that gender is a social construction that has little to nothing to do with the social realities of pre-colonial Africa. Yet she, too, acknowledges that the hierarchical system of thought has, in fact, been constructed in Africa today. Gender is not something that simply exists; it is something that was created. Oyewumi (2005) challenges us to look at the construction, in the active sense, and asks us to locate the “cultural/architectural sites” and the “variously located actors” who were part of the construction (11).

In this chapter I take the challenge and examine the role that formal education has played in creating a hierarchy based on the conflation of biology with capability and power. I understand gender to mean a social construct that varies based on culture, location, and time, and which, in varying degrees, conflates biological features with innate social characteristics, abilities, and tendencies. These social constructions may influence the way individuals are perceived, as well as the opportunities and challenges they may face based on the ways society interprets the intersection between biology and capability. Most importantly, however, is the hierarchy assigned according to the placement of individuals along the continuum. I am using gender as a concept, not as a stand-in for “male” or “female” but as a means of interrogating how

notions of superiority, entitlement, power, and desirability are shifting in contemporary Beninese society.

I examine who becomes uncomfortable; in essence, I look for friction (Tsing 2004) to problematize the notion that hierarchies based on sexual characteristics are static categories. In this way we may be able to find where Beninese individuals are attempting to de-construct what has been built (as Hountondji 2004 argued regarding underdevelopment; what has a beginning may also have an end). I first analyze one facet of the construction of gender as it relates to formal education. I argue that recent shifts in access to education have had effects on the contemporary hierarchical social structure in Benin. I then examine what the discomfort feels like for male students who feel slighted and overlooked by the general focus on females and education. I balance their views with comments from female students who relate the pejorative statements they have had to endure from teachers, family members, and fellow students as they have progressed in their studies.

I follow with a discussion of sexuality on campus, including the relationships that form between students and their professors. I argue that while there are varying degrees of coercion by professors to get female students to have sex with them, some females are able to use their “bottom power” to string along their professors in order obtain the grades that they want, material possessions, and certain lifestyle benefits. I once again return to the notion of fairness versus equality, because some students (both male and female) feel that girls are using their sexuality as an unfair advantage. Through my analysis I problematize the notion that simply sharing the same biological sex results in solidarity, as well as the thought that there is just one “truth” that can be told (Achebe and Teboh 2007). Finally, I examine how the increased power and status that students receive affects their marriage prospects differently. In essence, the more

access that a female has to outside sources of power, such as education and employment, the less desirable she is seen as a marriage partner, particularly in light of the Beninois norms of male egoism and separate finances among spouses. In each of these sections I look at the uncomfortable spaces that are created when the power hierarchy based on biological sex is undermined.

Formal Education and the Construction of Gender

In Chapter Two I examined missionary and French colonial schools and the introduction of formal schooling as an endeavor reserved largely for elite males. Access to schools was determined in many instances by the sex of the child, and in turn, access to salaried positions and power within the colonial administration was also skewed toward males. This was one of the first steps of conflating a person's sex with power in the colonial period, as gender became a factor that either limited or increased access to the formalized sense of inclusion (Falen 2011) in a power system. By limiting access to education, a vast majority of individuals—approximately half of who were female—were prevented from entering the wage labor system. That is not to say that no females were allowed in school, but the combination of sex and an individual's socio-economic status (SES) has proven to be a barrier for poorer females to gain access to schooling.

In addition to access, it has been well documented that colonial schools throughout Africa (French and British) varied their curricula based on students' sexes (Gaidzanwa 1999; Miescher 2005). While some of the topics taught were the same for boys and girls, there were variances, including a focus on domestic topics for girls. Presumably this was to prepare girls to become good housewives and caretakers of home and children, without attention for their potential to be active members of the economic realm (Gardinier 1985; Schulman 1992). The thought that there needed to be different curricula based on sex is linked to the prospects students had after

completion of their schooling. If boys were to find positions as *fonctionnaires* (civil servants), their educations required that they learn mathematics, grammar, and other skills that would enable them to become members of the administration. Females, who were less likely to go on to secondary school, were taught the basics and home economics. This is because they were being taught according to the French model of “maternal” education popular in the early nineteenth century where women stayed in the private sphere and were not overly involved in work outside of the home (Schulman 1992). This type of model was contrary to the presiding situation in Benin where women have always been involved in work outside of the home to varying degrees. Careers open to women in the pre-colonial period included small-scale commerce, production of palm oil, farming, and weaving (Bay 1998). The skills required for these occupations included numeracy and savvy negotiation skills in addition to the specialized skills related to each field. While it is important to note that in the pre-colonial period there was no clear-cut hierarchy between men’s and women’s occupations, men enjoyed greater access to positions of leadership within families, religion, and politics (ibid). Colonialism simply brought with it new notions of hierarchy and access to power which, in turn, were related to access to education.

By the end of the colonial period, the relationship between formal schooling and occupation had become tightly coupled, and the large-scale exclusion of females from the system of schooling effectively excluded them from the wage labor system as well. Power had become linked to occupation, which had been linked to education, which had been linked to biological sex. The exclusion of women from this system had become naturalized. Women, because they had not learned to speak French or use the language of scientific reasoning that men had learned in school, were portrayed as childlike, incapable of reasoning like men. The occupations that

women held, including small-scale production of foodstuffs or vending in the marketplace, became lower on the status hierarchy than occupations held by men. These were not “jobs” or “*travail*” in the sense of going to the *bureau* or office; they were things that women did to get by.

However, the education crisis coupled with the financial crisis in Benin in the Leninist-Marxist period (1975-1989) led to two important shifts that have impacted the socially constructed hierarchy based on biological sex. First was the de-coupling of education and employment through the removal of recruitment programs by government. As of the late 1980s, university graduates were no longer guaranteed positions as *fonctionnaires*, and thus their claims to superiority via their educations became more tenuous. This period introduced a new social class, the *jeunes diplômés sans emplois* or young, unemployed degree holders, many of whom were males (Bierschenk 2009).

The second change was the large-scale revamping of the educational system and the removal of primary school fees for girls. While achieving universal primary education was one of the main goals of the Education for All initiative (EFA), the secondary goal was to achieve gender parity in both primary and secondary education. External funding for such programs ranged from \$35 million to \$74 million USD per year (EFA 2009), and a significant portion of those funds were spent on what is called in French “*sensibilisations*” or awareness programs to encourage families to send their girls to school. Aboh (2006) contends that in the past 30 years, schooling has been “relentlessly and aggressively promoted” (606) to Africans in general, but to African girls in particular. Gender may not have existed in pre-colonial West Africa, but I argue that the history that contemporary students know is one of limited access to education for girls, and for increasing numbers of outside interventions that focus on gender. The attention put on

gender in the international sphere affects individuals in Benin, as can be seen by the number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that focus on gender, in name and/or in mission.

Similarly, Manuh (2007) argues that gender has become “indigenized around Africa” and the concept has been used to “frame social transformation” (126). Gender has become a buzzword that is linked not only to a global movement, but to funding as well. One of the ways of attaining funding is to portray women (or girls) as powerless, illiterate, poor, and pitiable (Aboh 2006; Boris 2007). While I am critical of such portrayals, many of the participants in this study are grateful for the efforts of the Beninese government, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and the EFA movement. Students praised the “*sensibilisations*”, as Agathe illuminated: “The NGOs and UNICEF have really helped the state through their goodwill... Without the aid of the NGOs I don’t think that Benin could really forge its own future.” In the decade between 1990 and 2000, the enrollment of girls in primary and secondary schools skyrocketed, and as a result, in the following decade the enrollment ratio of females to males in tertiary education almost tripled (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] 2011).

While increasing access to education for females is a laudable exercise, it does not necessarily level inequalities and prejudices. If education has been linked to status and power, as discussed in the previous chapters, and restricted access has enhanced the status of the few who attain it (particularly at the tertiary level), then where are the cultural sites that are experiencing growing pains? In essence, how has increasing access to education affected socially constructed power hierarchies based on biological features? One way to look at this issue is to examine the reactions that individuals who had been part of the hegemony feel about newfound members of their cadre. These individuals are part of a group of people who have benefited from a monopoly

on their claims of superiority and are suddenly faced with an influx of individuals who previously have been systematically excluded. That, coupled with the fact that formerly excluded individuals (i.e. women) are now competing for jobs with men, causes some individuals to become highly uncomfortable.

**“I guess they call it the advancement of women” – Students’ Perspectives on the
Female Focus**

The status of women in African universities is framed by the legacy of colonization, post-colonial policies, and interventions as well as existing cultural/societal norms (Adusah-Karikari 2008). In contemporary Beninese society there is a sense among men that women are the weaker sex, and this sentiment was repeated to me time and again in the field. I did not get the impression that it was meant to be rude, but the remarks would often be quite disparaging. As Fabrice, a first-year student in Linguistics told me, “a woman is considered the weaker sex, and a precious object that we must protect.” His remark is chivalrous, implying a sense of gallantry. However, the comment is almost comical when one considers the strength women in Benin display on a daily basis, whether through physical labor, negotiating prices with vendors, or participating in the ubiquitous public debates on any range of topics. So how might this slight man in his early 20s be able to protect women in general?

As Fabrice continued his commentary, I understood that he meant “protect” in a different sense: “They [females] often benefit from certain advantages that men don’t have. There are certain privileges accorded to girls that are not given to guys.” Agathe, another first-year student who was participating in the discussion, just shook her head: “We’re treated how? I’ve yet to see that.” Her classmate Laurentia agreed somewhat with Agathe, but was vehement about equality: “We’re treated the same in secondary as well as at university. I mean that sincerely. Here there

might be exceptions but we have the same rights. We're treated in the same manner. There is not one sex that is privileged over the other, not at all." Their exchange brings to the foreground inconsistencies (or multiple truths, if we choose to look at them that way) between the ways in which students perceive their university experiences.

The female advantages that many students mentioned included using their charm to move to the front of the cafeteria lines or to get seats on the crowded buses and packed auditoriums, but they also included more serious benefits such as obtaining better grades than they deserved because professors gave preferential treatment to women. As Joel put it, females were "privileged to the detriment of the guys. Girls are considered to be the weaker sex than the guys. There are no official provisions that privilege women or to aid women. But the reality is that they are definitely favored over the men [on campus]." Not only do many male students complain that female students are pampered or protected, men often feel that it is to their own detriment and they invoke the notion of fairness.

Several students asserted that the state itself had determined that the All Girls to School program had been changed to All Children to School because it had been unfair to males.⁶⁸ To better understand the difference between the programs I interviewed several key figures in Benin who had been involved in the transition. Gervais Havyarimana, the Chief of the Education Program for UNICEF in Benin stated clearly that the program had been designed to bring gender parity to primary schools, and once it became clear that enrollment was close to balanced they decided to continue with the program and focus on rural areas and families who had low income so that all children would have the chance to attend school. He spoke about the relationships between biological sex and education and between SES and education. While it was true that a

⁶⁸ As noted in Chapter Two, All Girls to School is one of the campaigns that falls under the umbrella of Education For All (EFA).

majority of the students attending school were male, if one controlled for income, the gender disparity was far less. It was just as important to focus on improving access for poor students (male or female) as it had been to focus on females only. A recent quantitative study of the effects of EFA programs, including All Girls To School, indicated that initial gender differences are being reduced, but trends in increased enrollment continue to be skewed toward the wealthy and individuals in urban areas (Lewin and Sabates 2011).

Havyarimana later referred me to Maoudi Comlanvi Johnson, the National Coordinator for EFA at the Ministry for Preschool and Primary Teachers, who had been involved in the transition between All Girls to School and All Children to School. His assertion was not quite in line with what I had heard from Havyarimana at UNICEF; rather, his comments were more similar to what I hear on campus. I asked him about the transition, and he began with an illustration. “There is a difference between fairness and equality. Let’s say you have a plate of food, and two people are going to share it. One of them is a boy of 12 years, and the other is a man of 30 or 40 years. If the plate was to be shared equally, they would each get half. But that wouldn’t be quite fair, would it? What would be fair is perhaps the boy gets 25 percent of the food, and the man gets 75 percent.” As we continued our conversation he explained that men were responsible for providing for their families, for making sure that they had homes, and for many other things. A woman simply needed to know how to take care of the *foyer* or household. Spending too much of the EFA funding on programs for girls would be to the detriment of all students.

What remained unsaid, but was implied in Johnson’s comparison between a man and a child was the comparison of women to children. His comments are in line with Falen’s (2011) observation that men in Benin often think of women as childlike, irrational, and less capable of

decision-making, self-control, and leadership. While it seems surprising that a member of the Ministry of Education might be reluctant to spend money on educating females, his comments are similar to the discouraging stories that I heard from many female students at UAC. Sandrine expressed her disgust with a primary school teacher who once told her “girls don’t need to go to school for too long, the bac [baccalaureate diploma] is more than enough...It’s the teachers who put a barrier between boys and girls. It was that [barrier] that made it so that women couldn’t get good jobs. For them, we had to study just enough to know how to speak French and then become a housewife.”

In my conversations with many students at UAC, they conceded that there are certain families or areas in which female education is thought of as unnecessary, especially beyond primary school. Particularly in poor families, sons are favored for education because girls will eventually leave their families when they marry, and they can use their time in the day to perform household tasks and engage in commerce (Falen 2011:100). It is certainly a concern to households when parts of their labor forces (children) are taken away for significant periods of time each day and each year. Geneviève, the first-year student who was outspoken in her critique of what she saw as patriarchal village viewpoint, said that villagers discourage girls from going to school and even verbally taunt them: “You think you will become something by going to school? You’re just wasting your time over there.” In her opinion, that line of thinking was outdated and sexist, and “tradition” needed to change if Benin was going to succeed in fighting poverty and inequality. When we discussed her own family situation, however, she expressed gratitude for her mother and her aunt who had supported all of the family’s children in their studies. She was not the only student who mentioned the support of older female members of the family, which is an important trend in Beninese education today.

Male students who acknowledged the unique challenges female students face also asserted that females get preferential treatment. Yves was not bitter when he explained: “Here at the university the girls are more privileged than the guys. They are more pampered than the guys. They are more protected than the guys. By the professors as well as by their classmates... Because it’s clear that there are lots of guys [at university]. And the few girls that have made it this far, we’ve got to tip our hats to them. So many girls leave school at a young age. And because of that we pamper the ones who continue.” Pampering and protecting both denote the power that one has over the other, and if the males are able to continue the notion that they are pampering (and not being taken advantage of), they are able to believe that they are still the ones in power.

Other students indicated that they felt female students were not able to “handle” life on campus or the rigors of academic life. Romaric expressed that “there are things that a man can take but a woman would be overwhelmed...they will find that their tasks are too difficult, and as a result, some of them just give up.” However, such a notion implies that the females are helpless and unable to take care of their own needs. I argue that based on the way that females go about letting their needs be known, they are in fact manipulating the male students to their own advantage. What is fair, or unfair, is truly in the eye of the beholder.

If we revisit to the notion that gender is a socially constructed hierarchy based loosely on biological characteristics, it is interesting to note that male and female students alike find it unfair that some female students use their charms to get what they want. They have not only begun to inhabit (literally, if we think of the *cabines*) the social space (of academia) that was once largely male, they have been able to use what males could not use on one another (their sexuality or charm). Falen (20011) argues that Beninese women have long been able to skillfully

manipulate social situations to their advantage. He later describes separate but complementary male and female responsibilities that do not automatically imply a hierarchy. My research suggests that many female students use that complementarity and the portrayal of women as weak as means of getting what they want, whether it is in the short term (a seat on the bus) or in the long term (passing grades). Male students can save face by acting like they are pampering female students, when, in fact, they are being manipulated.

In one humorous conversation in Madinatou's *cabine*, she and some friends acted out the gallantry they experienced from fellow male students. "They think they are men [and at this she pulled on her shirt and puffed out her chest] but really, they will do anything you ask, if you know how to ask." Genevieve expanded on this: "We don't like to put forth a whole lot of effort. We see that the men are there, they can do it. We say that we can't do anything without men." In this case the women use the culturally accepted notions that men are stronger than women and that women are helpless as means of getting male students to do more of the work in group projects or in terms of speaking up in class.

Beyond the unfair advantage that some females receive on campus, several students took the notion beyond graduation. Eric explained: "Today we say that females are really protected. There are girls who don't even study hard but they are able to find jobs quicker than guys. In the workplace, in the job market women are really privileged, I guess they call it the advancement of women." What is particularly important to note is that Eric equated nepotism with females, and not to all students with connections. Having relatives with connections has long been a way for young people in Benin to obtain jobs, and has not been restricted to females. But the feeling among many of the male students in this study was that finding employment after graduation was going to be difficult enough, much less with the cadres of (under-qualified, in their estimation)

females in the applicant pool.

Just over 50 percent of the unemployed in Benin are male, a group characterized by their young age (80 percent are under 40) and high levels of education (25 percent have completed tertiary education) (Institute National de la Statistique et de l'Analyse Economique du Bénin [INSAE] 2001). According to INSAE, the average duration of unemployment is almost three years, during which individuals may participate in the informal economy to some extent while searching for wage employment. While the male students' concerns about unemployment are valid, in reality, they do not have reason to fear that females will overtake them in the wage job market in the near future, despite statistics that show that females are willing to work longer hours with lower salary expectations (INSAE). Employment statistics show that males fill the majority of white-collar positions in Benin (INSAE).

One of the professions that many students expressed interest in entering is academia, and yet statistics show that women's entry into higher education institutions as faculty members has been slow and uneven throughout the continent (Mama 2003). In private industry, women are more likely to occupy lower-level positions than their male colleagues (Mandel 2004). Men dominate such professional work as is available, representing 75 percent of all those in scientific occupations, 80 percent of other professionals, and 67 percent of government workers (Mandel). However, education and employment can lead to independence and respect, and through employment with the state or NGOs, women may become part of a powerful bureaucracy (Falen 2011). Anyone who has ever had to have forms signed, or papers drawn up, or even purchased a mobile phone in Benin has been at the mercy of individuals behind desks who wield their official stamps. Having women in these positions of bureaucratic power means that they can use it, not only to keep those unwilling to pay bribes at their mercy, but to advance the applications or

paperwork of their friends or family, thus exploiting their positions of authority (Falen 2011:99) and becoming nodes of social capital.

Sexuality on Campus and Sexually Transmitted Grades

Among students on campus at UAC, one of the most talked about gender issues is the sexuality and desirability of female students. Female bodies are subject to the gaze of professors in a way that male bodies are not, which is a reflection on both societal norms as well as the imbalanced ratio of male to female professors. In Benin, beginning in primary school and lasting throughout university, sexual harassment from teachers and professors is a “daily reality” for female students (USAID 2006). Unfortunately, legislation adopted in 2003 condemning sexual harassment has been difficult to enforce, despite sanctions for perpetrators of sexual violence in schools including fines of up to 1,000,000 FCFA and two years in jail (Interministerial Decree n°16/MEPS/METFP/CAB/DC/SGM/SA). The law condemns repercussions for any student who reports sexual harassment, yet the majority of the students that I interviewed had little to no confidence in the law. The Benin Country Report on Human Rights Practices explains lax enforcements of these laws due to “law enforcement agents’ and prosecutors’ lack of legal knowledge and necessary skills to pursue such cases and victims’ fear of social stigma” concluding that “sexual harassment remains common, especially of female students by their male teachers” (US Department of State 2012:13).

The threat of a schoolgirl becoming pregnant has long been cited as a reason some families keep their daughters from attending school, a concern that was repeated to me by Havyarimana at UNICEF. Bledsoe (1990) asserts that families in Sierra Leone at one time felt that educating daughters was potentially a waste of family resources, particularly if they get pregnant while in school. My research suggests that a similar mentality exists in Benin, and I

have heard comments alluding to this perspective from a variety of individuals ranging from *zem* drivers, to family heads, to female students. The newspaper article pictured below indicates that nearly 300 pregnancies occurred in the 2009/2010 academic year among students in two northern regions of Benin (Fadegnon in *Le Progres* July 23, 2010).

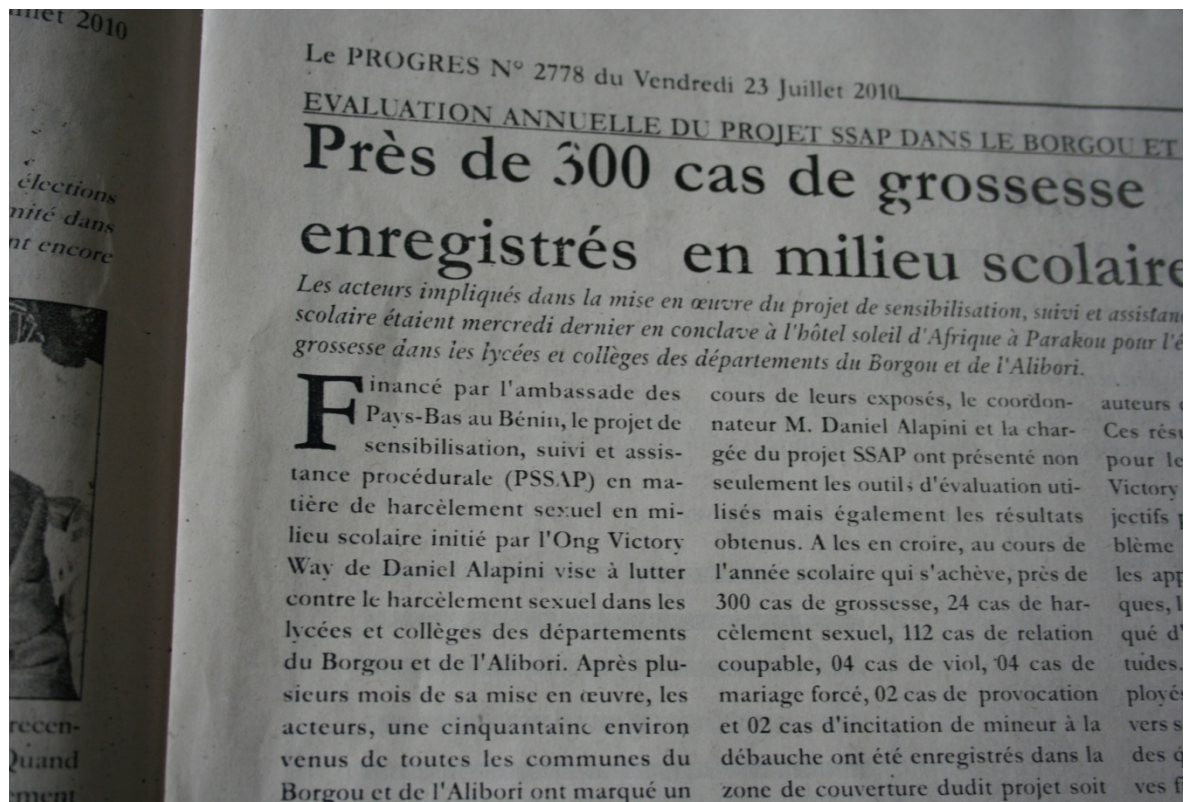


Figure 6: July 23, 2010 article in *Le Progres* daily newspaper

It is well documented in much of West Africa that schoolteachers are often accused of impregnating their students (Gaba-Afouda 2003; Thomas 2007). Students on campus describe the state-mandated short haircuts that secondary school girls must wear as a means of keeping them from becoming distracted by sexual pursuits. Bruno explained: “If girls start doing their hair, they are going to work at looking pretty and they won’t do well in their studies. Pretty soon she’s going to start going out with guys and then she’ll leave her studies.” Notice that although the result of a female doing her hair is that she will start dating, it is only the female who will

leave her studies. Implied in the statement is that there is the risk of pregnancy once a female is sexually active. It is uncommon for a girl to return to school after a pregnancy in Benin, and although condoms are widely available and covert abortions are possible, it seems that the blame for unplanned pregnancies is assigned primarily to females.

However, looking simply at female sexuality or girls' activities only in terms of reproduction ignores issues of power and agency. What do I mean by power? I prefer the definition by Nye (2004) that power is not the ability to do what you want, but the ability to get others to do what you want. Female students at UAC both use their sexuality and are used by professors in a struggle for power. Friction arises when some students perceive that others are using sexuality to an unfair advantage.

The relationships students in Benin have with their professors are very strict by North American standards. Professors are to be respected and are not to be addressed informally, even at the graduate level. The social cues that indicate higher status include using the *vous* (formal) form in French, greeting professors before they greet you, and not challenging them. It is clear in the classroom who is in charge and who is not, and the role of a student is to be submissive.

The power accorded to professors supersedes age-based seniority in Benin. In my first trip to Benin, I spent one month in an intensive French language course at CE.BE.LA.E. I was one of approximately twelve students in the class and the only non-African; our ages ranged from late teens to mid-forties. I found the treatment of pupils to be harsh; professors would shout things such as, "I don't know what is wrong with you" if a pupil answered incorrectly or could not remember a song that had been taught the day prior. In addition, the professors showed no hesitation in slapping students with rolled-up papers. These gestures were not intended to physically harm students, but I interpreted them as public displays of authority.

More seriously, UAC students in this study noted overwhelmingly that professors abused their power and authority by harassing students, both male and female, in efforts to obtain sexual favors from female students.⁶⁹ Professors are most often accused of using coercion (rather than force) to get what they want, as has been documented by scholars (Bledsoe 1990; Thomas 2007; Falen 2011). This study adds to the literature by illuminating the ways in which students interpret sexual relationships between their peers and professors.

The majority of the students in this study described the interest of professors in female students as sexual harassment, and some went as far as to describe it as “threatening.” Gratien, a third year male student in Juridical Sciences, told me that, “if you are a girl and you have to do your *mémoire*, the conditions that your professor imposes always include sex.” Others noted that male professors indicated interest in them by putting notes on their homework or their exams, asking that they contact the professors regarding their grades. According to Joyce, refusing a professor’s advances can be tricky: “Girls are mistreated by the profs. If a prof tells you that he likes you and you say no, he won’t pass you.” Some students even went so far as to say that they avoided speaking up in class to avoid catching their professors’ attention. Madinatou explained: “They blackmail you. If you are a girl, and you are a good worker, the professor is going to really like you. He’ll certainly put a note on your homework, but you know if you were a guy the professor wouldn’t bother you like that.”

Gratien related a different kind of harassment that male students experienced: “When you’re a guy, and you are close, close friends with a girl that a professor desires, you’ll have problems. The prof will say that you are an obstacle for him. He’ll bother you as well.” Male students described the same type of blackmail females experienced in that professors might not

⁶⁹ The notion that male students felt harassed may seem counterintuitive, and I explain below.

pass them or claim that they had not turned in their homework or written exams. In this case, the professors are demonstrating their power or their desires to get others to do what they want them to do, which is to stop dating the female students.

While students speak of widespread sexual harassment by their professors, it is impossible to know just how common it is because there are no official figures released by the University. In my study, although nearly all students agreed that it occurred, only one student said that it had happened to her. Sidonie spoke in the third person as we discussed harassment; she mentioned that if a professor wanted to date a student, he would try to get her to sympathize with him by telling her lies about his wife and family, saying that he was neglected, or that his wife did not give him the attention he needed, or that his wife had left him. She then said that the professor would pressure a girl to sleep with him. At this point she opened up to me: “I don’t know if I would call it marginalization, but the professors just don’t let the girls succeed. I’ve lived it. But if you don’t give them sex, you don’t *évolues*.” As we spoke she looked away: “It’s difficult, it’s really difficult. You feel threatened, at school, at university, it happens everywhere.” She, as well as most students, noted that the harassment did not occur during class, but generally after class. Female students are leery of professors who suggest that she come to their homes to discuss grades, as most female students felt that was an indication that the professors had interest in them. But “you can’t refuse,” said Sidonie, “it’s your professor. What are you going to do?” The problem is particularly serious if the professor fails the student, because depending on the course, she may be required to take it again the next year from the same professor. Several students felt that some girls simply left school rather than face professors’ unwanted advances again.

Not all students felt that professors’ advances were necessarily unwanted. I first heard

the phrase “*Moyenne Sexuellement Transmise*” or “Sexually Transmitted Grades” (STGs) in a conversation with Paul. He distinguished between STGs and harassment in terms of the willingness of the female student to go along with the professor in order to get what she wanted out of the relationship. In my understanding, it always included passing grades, but could also include meals in nice restaurants, jewelry, or even small amounts of money so that she could buy clothing or get her hair done. If we eliminate the passing grades, all of the other behaviors are typical courting behaviors in Benin. Falen (2011) describes the efforts that Beninois men will make to woo women, and pampering them through gifts and social outings are common. An interesting comparison can be made when these courting behaviors stop; Falen argues that they typically stop once a couple marries and in the case of the professor/student relationship, I have been told that it typically stops at the end of the academic year.

Bledsoe’s (1990) study of schoolgirls in rural Sierra Leone asserts that some girls use their sexuality to get the grades that they want, and she cites a newspaper article that describes girls most likely to engage in affairs with their teachers as “attractive or sexy-looking school girls not sound academically” (87 citing Weekend Spark, 27 September 1985). Her analysis is in line with comments from students at UAC who felt that some girls dress in provocative outfits that they could never wear at home, arrive in class late, and saunter slowly to the front of the classroom to attract the attention of their professors. It is not uncommon in Benin for young women to date men who are much older than themselves and who can provide material benefits that men their own age could not. In addition, some women realize that one man cannot satisfy all of their needs (physical, financial, social), and so they balance several men at once (Falen 2011). Having a relationship with a professor, while not necessarily morally accepted, is sometimes used as a strategy to free up her time to pursue other things.

I cannot speculate about the long-term intentions of students who have sex with their professors, but it would be an interesting follow-up study to understand more about STGs. For example, do the gifts and financial benefits to the girl stop before or after the sexual relationship? Is it possible for a girl to string along a professor until the end of the semester without engaging in sexual relations, and dissolve the relationship once a passing grade is obtained?

One evening, Jocelyne, Cédric, and I ate dinner in Jocelyne's dorm room while waiting for the rain to stop so that I could go back home. The discussion turned to the treatment of males versus females on campus, and the two of them had a heated discussion. Jocelyne asserted that there was no difference in the way that they were treated: "Here we're all equal." Cédric disagreed: "Officially, sure, but the problem for women here, it's a double-edged sword. The university has to be taken as a whole. There are benefits like auditoriums, dorms. But at school I noticed that there are a lot of things that go on. There are profs who are lecherous and who really enjoy the company of women." At this point, Jocelyne seemed to ignore his assertion about the advances of professors, and she focused on the positives of what he had said: "In the auditoriums when girls can't find a place to sit, there are guys who act like gentleman and they give up their seat for them." Cédric responded, "For profs it's not gallantry. It's harassment." Jocelyne brought the topic back to the girls: "There are lots of girls who come out like that [gesturing to her legs as if to show a miniskirt] for favoritism with the profs." At this point Cédric conceded that some girls were using their charm to get attention: "Because girls have a vagina that the profs covet. For those girls, [it is] 'you give me what you have, and I'll give you what I've got'".

It seemed that Jocelyne interpreted relationships between students and professors in terms of unfair advantage, and other students on campus echoed her thoughts. Her conversation with

Cédric is important on several levels. First, it problematizes the notion that members of the same biological sex exhibit solidarity, for if they did Jocelyne would side with all of the female students and condemn the behavior of the professors. To the contrary, while Jocelyne seems to feel anger toward her fellow female students, Cédric interprets the events in terms of professors abusing their power. Even when Jocelyne had convinced Cédric that some girls dress provocatively, his comments indicate that they are in effect bargaining with the professors with their available assets. It is quite possible that some female students feel jealousy toward others whose physical appearances attract the attention of their professors.

The tendency among professors to desire relationships with female students has affected the entire student body on campus. Males and females feel that they are subject to blackmail on the part of their professors. Some students feel that because the females had something that the professors desired, they have unfair advantages over males, regardless of whether the advances are wanted or unwanted. It seems that whenever students are able to attain good grades without working hard for them, those students are subject to criticism from others. However, the motivation to work hard may be dampened if female students feel that good marks and speaking out in class put them at risk of being “discovered” by their professors. In the case of the overcrowded auditoriums, females used strategies such as sitting toward the back, not speaking up in class, and not showing their true capabilities. Unfortunately, these strategies also reinforce a prevailing viewpoint among male students that I discussed in an earlier section of this chapter, which is that female students “can’t handle it” at university, and that there are many subjects that are too difficult for them. Unless measures are taken to address sexual harassment on campus, a social hierarchy based on biological sex will remain. Simply increasing access to the university is not enough.

“She Won’t Respect Me, and I Can’t Support That” - Marriage Prospects

Marriage as a social institution exists within the broader sphere of gendered relationships amidst notions of power, authority, and household finances. How has the influx of females into the social category of intellectuals affected marriage in Benin? As discussed earlier in this chapter, one of the obstacles many young women in Benin face is the notion that educating girls is a waste of time. Manuh (2002) argues that a common conception that women simply need the skills to prepare them for marriage and childbearing contributes to lower levels of female participation in higher education in much of West Africa. Marriage and childrearing are important because they are linked to status markers and adulthood in Benin.

The reality for educated women in contemporary Beninese society is that the more education they receive, the less desirable they are as marriage partners among men of their generation. There are variances among “ideal” marriage partners, and although women at UAC recognize that their male peers express no desire to marry women like them, they do not seem overly concerned about finding mates. Many female students spoke of marriage in terms of love and compatibility, while at the same time recognizing that in order to have happy unions, they need to know how to manage their husbands. Falen (2011) argues that there are multiple means for a woman to get what she wants and to manipulate her husband, either by resorting to longstanding practices and norms, by complaining to family (both hers and his), and by threatening to publicly humiliate him. Some students felt that it was the responsibility of a woman, regardless of her status outside of the home, to be submissive to her husband while in the home. One student noted a prominent female member of Parliament who was reported to have said “when I am in the office, I am the boss, and when I am home, my husband is the boss.” What may seem to be submissive, however, may actually be a savvy way of “handling” a man by

appealing to his desire to be in charge.

Previous research has demonstrated that higher education typically serves to delay entry into first marriage (Oppenheimer 1997; Gyimah 2009). These studies also suggest that highly educated women have fewer children, their ages at first pregnancies are older than other women, and their families enjoy better health (Buchmann and Hannum 2001; Schultz 2002). There has been much debate about the consequences on family life when a woman is educated and has greater earning potential. Some theorists posit that declines in women's marriage rates are a result of women's increased status and independence (Bledsoe 1990; Torr 2007), while others argue that changes in marital rates occur in conjunction with changes in gender roles in the broader social context (Eloundou-Enyegue and Calves 2006; Gyimah 2008).

Torr (2007) looks at two different theories of marital partner choice and examines the idea that "higher-status women make less attractive marriage partners because they are less focused on tasks of home production" (4). In addition, women who have high earning potential have less financial need for husbands, and thus derive less benefit from marriage. These theorists link macro-level increases in women's education to macro-level decreases in marriage among women. Oppenheimer (2000) argues otherwise, however, and posits that one must look at the greater economic climate surrounding the social institution of marriage to determine what is causing the decline. Her research suggests that the increase in women's wages coupled with the decrease in men's wages has had a significant impact on marriage. In the case of marriage in Benin, research has shown that one must take into account the relative autonomy that women have with regard to their own finances (Falen 2011). Clark (1994) and Bledsoe (1990) also argue that West African women are able to take advantage of the separate spheres of household finances and their autonomy to allocate their own money and resources.

Financial models for marriage trends, such as those espoused by Oppenheimer (2000) and Torr (2007), need to be balanced with qualitative data to capture the personal and social aspects associated with relationships. Falen (2011) suggests that marriage patterns in Benin are adapting to new cultural and economic influences. My research among UAC students supports his assertion that educated, mobile women are more likely to speak out against their partners if they behave in ways women deem unreasonable. In fact, both male and female students conceded that men are rightly concerned about differences in behavior among wives with varying levels of education. “My philosophy,” Joel explained, “is that women who are educated are difficult to manage. Someone who has her BEPC or her bac is already educated. She can already reason well. She won’t let her husband tell her what to do. If you go out with a girl who has her bac in Benin she won’t respect you. Because she believes that you both have the same education, and therefore you have the same rights.” Note that his point of reference is not a college degree, but a secondary school diploma or a middle school diploma. Joel’s viewpoint was common among students at UAC.

Some students even went as far as Paul, who described what he wanted in a wife: “I prefer a wife who has not gone to school at all. She is there [at home]. She is submissive. Everything that you say she’ll be like, ‘yes, it’s good. My husband said this or that, he’s been to school, he’s intelligent. The things that he tells me to do, it’s not bad, I accept, and that’s that’”. He expressed concern that a wife who had some education (what he called “half-literate”) would question his authority and want to have a say in the affairs of the household. Some men perceive very little benefit to having educated wives who will challenge their authority while still demanding for their full contribution to household finances. Paul’s case seems extreme, however, as most students felt that it was important that their ideal mates have some education,

particularly enough that they could speak proper French and gain some of the personality traits associated with sophistication.

What was not acceptable to men, however, was the idea of marrying women who had higher degrees than what they had attained. In particular, they worried that women who were more successful (either academically or financially) would try to dominate their households and not respectfully submit to their husbands' authority. Bledsoe's (1990) study of marriage patterns among educated women in Sierra Leone found that families often felt that an "educated woman will be an arrogant wife who disobeys her husband" (83). My research suggests that a similar sentiment is felt among Beninese families. Female students recognized this as well, and noted that perhaps they were not compatible. As Jocelyne explained, "men naturally have an internal desire to dominate women. And so men look for women that they can manipulate, that they can dominate. And intellectual women just aren't going to allow that." Female students also described educated women as "emancipated" from the household chores that their husbands expect them to do, especially if they have secured good jobs after graduation. As Ramatou-lai put it, "when a woman is an intellectual, she is free. She can choose not to make dinner if she is tired when she gets home from work. Men are scared of that, they are really scared."

While the comments of Ramatou-lai and other students seem to suggest that being intellectuals allows women freedom from household tasks, most Beninese women hire people to take care of the home if they have enough money.⁷⁰ In light of that, I suggest that it is not the

⁷⁰ The practice continues to be common, despite complaints that domestics from northern Benin are getting harder to find. I once listened to a conversation between two women who were both looking to find domestics to help care for their children and homes. They were commenting that "before" it was much easier and cheaper to get a girl, and one would just have to pay her family a small amount of money, bring them a few cases of beverages, and perhaps send gifts back once a year. Now, however, families in the North are not as willing to send their girls down to Cotonou, and my friends speculated that it was because all of the girls were going to school.

fact that educated wives may not cook dinner for their husbands that Ramatou-lai thinks scares the men, but rather, it is the fact that women will reject the wishes of their husbands and will not submit to their requests.

Despite the concerns that both sexes felt toward marriage among educated individuals, it is still an important institution in contemporary Beninese society, and unmarried adults are looked on unfavorably by society (Falen 2011). The age of first marriage for men in Benin is typically older than that for women, partially because men require capital in order to perform the ceremonies required for marriage. But women in particular are encouraged to marry before they get “too old.” One afternoon on campus, Rose and I had a conversation about the family home when she mentioned that a girl could not live at home forever. “I’m female and I’ve got to get married before too late, right?” Our conversation turned to marriage prospects and the possibility of marrying a man who did not have a university degree. She said the kind of man who would accept a wife with more education was “rare. Before, to find that kind of guy would be really, really rare. Because men, when you start to say that you can’t do this or that, then they say ‘oh, it’s because you’re an intellectual. It’s because you have a higher level of schooling than I do.’ And then each time that it happens there will be some problems between you two. It’s because...” and here she became silent for a few minutes and reflected. “It’s seriously a problem. So there will not even... I don’t know. They just won’t be on the same page. I sincerely want to marry someone who has at least their bac or the same degree as I do.” Rose’s hesitation and the frustration I could see on her face was repeated in many interviews with female students at the university.

The comments made by male students indicate that, for the most part, they do not desire

Fathers thought that they could hold on to their daughters for longer and wait until they had a few years of schooling, and then they would be able to ask higher prices.

marriage partners who have the same levels of education as they do, and certainly do not want wives who have more education than they do. Their comments are consistent with the intention of female students who expressed desires for husbands who had more education than they did. As Sandrine put it, “I want someone who has the same degree as I do, if not higher. It’s not because I want to be dominated, but I want to have the same social standing as my husband. I have ambition, the big eye.” As the number of females entering university increases, it would be surprising if there were not shifts in the marriage patterns as well, as the standard of what is an acceptable level of education for a wife is elevated. My research suggests that the trend is already occurring, and interestingly, some students equated a man’s desire for an uneducated wife as antiquated. As Eric put it, “Before, to marry someone who hadn’t been to school at all was normal. But today it’s not the same thing. Everything has changed. We’re now at July 30th, 2010. I can’t say that I won’t marry someone who doesn’t have her bac or her BEPC. In the time of our grandparents, maybe, but life is different now.”

Gyimah’s (2009) study of higher education in Ghana argues that major structural changes, such as the push throughout the continent to increase women’s educational attainment, will fundamentally change the structure of families. Women have always had choices, but their economic independence and increased career choices in the past several decades has allowed them to exercise those choices more freely. In a bold move, Gyimah suggests that for the younger generation in Ghana, careers may become acceptable alternatives to marriage. He further suggests that the shift in marriage age among young women in Ghana is accompanying “ideational changes in contemporary Ghana where a woman’s status is not equated with her marital status and reproductive prowess” (469). If gender roles are socially constructed and are flexible, it serves to posit that an increase in the earning potential of women may allow them to

eschew marriage altogether in favor of having children with sexual partners of their own choosing. Because of the longstanding practice of polygyny, it is not at all uncommon for female-headed households to exist with varying levels of day-to-day interaction with fathers of the children. Successful women are able to hire domestics to care for their children, which gives them more time to focus on their careers, regardless of their marital status.

As Oyewumi (2000) argues, the category of wife in West Africa contains within it elements of subordination, and is a much less aspirational role than that of being a mother. I would argue that some of my female married friends in Benin truly do put up with their husbands' behavior simply because they do not wish to leave their children. If women are able to find employment that would allow them to support themselves as well as their children, there would be no need to continue relationships with the fathers of their children. By doing so, they may gain the autonomy that is typically afforded to middle-aged women who live independently of their husbands (Mandel 2004). These are all options open to the female students in this study, and the flexibility of family arrangements is beneficial to these women who are seen as less-than-desirable marriage partners by their male contemporaries at the university.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I analyzed the relationship between biological sex and hierarchical notions of power as they intersect with education in Benin. In doing so, I isolated several of the sites where notions of gender imbalance have been constructed, and the actors who have played parts in their construction. I argued that looking for friction also allows us to see the uncomfortable spaces that indicate change.

While formal education in Benin became associated primarily with the male sex during the colonial period and the period of early independence, the past 30 years have seen significant

gains in terms of gender parity. Closely linked to education are employment and status. By increasing the number of female students, competition for wage employment and resources has also increased. Male students expressed a sense of unfairness regarding the programs put into place to support female students, as well as post-graduation employment opportunities afforded to women.

A second area in which the notion of fairness arose was related to female sexuality on campus and the relationships between students and professors. I argued that both male and female students alike called on notions of unfairness with regard to those who had used their sexuality to obtain passing grades without doing requisite coursework. Unfortunately, it seems that regardless of the level of coercion on the part of the professors, the female students are being blamed for the liaisons.

Finally, I examined the friction felt when men contemplate the prospect of educated wives. Both male and female students indicated a preference that a man has at least the same degree as his wife, but preferably a higher-level degree. Due to the influx of female students at the tertiary level of education throughout Benin, this preference reduces the number of desirable partners for highly educated women.

Assie-Lumumba (2001), Kasente (2002), and others argue that despite claims of neutrality and equality, African institutions of higher education are “permeated with sexual and gender dynamics” (Mama 2003: 101). They place their arguments in terms of the gender imbalances among faculty and students, the continued lackluster response to sexual harassment and sexual corruption on campus, and the marginalization of females in the production of knowledge. My work expands on their bodies of work as I examine the significant increase in females on campus at UAC and the ambiguities inherent in their experiences. The women

attending UAC today grew up in households influenced by promises in the All Girls to School and EFA campaigns. Yet they have experienced friction between the messages of inclusion broadcast by NGOs and the exclusion that they may experience both now, and in the future. In Chapter Three I argued that education is thought of as a means of upward mobility and elevated status, and increased access for females has been a policy measure designed to reduce inequities in social life. In this chapter, however, I argued that simply increasing access is not enough. Female students face significant challenges that their male peers do not. Educational opportunities come with great cost, as the students' experiences with sexual harassment and resentment illustrate.

CHAPTER SIX: CODA

Education is essential to improving the “shared fortunes of the children...their health and that of their families, and the overall development potential of the countries where they live” (United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) 2009). Higher education, in turn, is essential in producing leaders who will be able to function in the global knowledge based economy (World Bank (WB) 2010). Those are the messages that have been promoted to Beninese families through numerous awareness campaigns designed to increase school enrollment. The messages have largely been well received, and Benin is on track to reach several of the Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goal (MDG) targets by 2015. In fact, Benin has already exceeded the EFA target of attaining Universal Primary Enrollment (UPE), which has had a cascading effect on enrollment at the secondary and tertiary levels. But my research suggests that targets and numbers do not provide an accurate picture of the success of education initiatives. These numbers must be interrogated to understand to what extent attending school leads to the improved outcomes that are lauded by development agencies. Is Benin’s educational system prepared for the influx of students? Beyond the educational system, is Benin’s formal economy able to accommodate the number of graduates that UAC and smaller, private institutions are producing? Are all students receiving an equal education, or are some students and their families more likely to reap the benefits?

In this final chapter I will first address the basic infrastructural stressors that increased social demand has put on the university system. Because there is a need for rapid ramp-up of facilities and materials that cannot be financed solely by fees and Benin’s national budget, Benin

is the recipient of direct aid from international lenders. I will examine the role that foreign aid plays in higher education, and critique the project assessment process. The low impact that such projects have on student experiences contributes to a general feeling between Beninese that corruption is rampant within Ministries, development agencies, and consultants. Structural challenges at the university are compounded by economic and social challenges for potential graduates. Although this study's primary focus is on current students, life after graduation was a common topic of conversation, especially for those who were in their last year at UAC. I discuss the impact of unemployment and the shrinking formal sector, and how that creates a fear of shame and humiliation among students who are not confident in their ability to find jobs after graduation. I also review the social distancing that some students experience with their families because of their education and their habitus. I then question whether the conditions in Benin are ripe for an "Arab Spring" type movement among the young, educated, disillusioned, and unemployed. Finally, I make policy recommendations that I believe are necessary in order to make higher education attainment a worthwhile endeavor for Benin's youth.

Infrastructural Deficiencies and Direct Aid

With enrollment increasing each year by the thousands, UAC has struggled to maintain an infrastructure that can support the higher number of students. Overcrowded lecture halls, insufficient laboratories, and ill-equipped libraries are often cited as impediments to proper learning. The Ministry of Higher Education has revealed that student enrollment is growing at a rate of 17 percent each year, and despite a six-fold increase in the number of classrooms,⁷¹ "the available facilities are not adequate to keep up with demand" (2008:8). Funding agency reports also highlight the need for improved facilities, and argue for their continued involvement in the

⁷¹ According to the report, the total number of classrooms, libraries, laboratories, workshops, and auditoriums rose from 58 in 1989 to 293 in 2008.

education sector (Hanushek and Woessmann 2007; Lewin 2008). Expressing disappointment in the results of the previous Ten-Year Plan for the Education Sector, Benin's Ministry of Higher Education revealed that, "democratic access of bacheliers and working students has caused an insolvent strong demand that has led to a growing shortage of academic and pedagogical infrastructures and their rapid degradation" (5). The problem becomes one of simple mathematics; the current infrastructure cannot support the number of students who pass the bac and qualify for higher education each year.⁷² A rapid rise in students has led to the hiring of less qualified instructors who have become "obstacles to the proper functioning" of the university (Benin 2008:8). Indeed, meeting and exceeding numerical enrollment targets has had the unfortunate effect of reducing the quality of education for many UAC students. Both the World Bank and Ministry of Higher Education agree that control mechanisms must be put into place to reduce the pressure on the university system in Benin (Lewin 2008; Benin 2008).

How have the "absence of control mechanisms" (Benin 2008:8) affected students at UAC? Agathe, a first-year student, expressed concern at the conditions under which she was expected to study, "I can't learn here, everything on campus is in disarray." Likewise Bruno, a first-year student in Modern Literature, described his frustrations with the library on campus, "there aren't enough books, and we can't even take them home to read." He, and other students, explained that their professors advised them to go to the bookstores in Cotonou to purchase the documents and books that they needed for class. Bruno then went on to explain, "but our parents, they don't understand the importance of these things [books and reading]. They don't know how to read. And also books are really expensive. The most important and necessary

⁷² In 2007/2008 UAC had an official capacity of 35,000 students, yet admitted 46,671. At current rates of enrollment, social demand for higher education is expected to reach nearly 200,000 students by the year 2015 (WB 2010).

books for us are too expensive. We cannot pay, but we need them.” According to the Ministry of Higher Education, there are over 46,000 books in the libraries at UAC and the Parakou campus. Yet a needs assessment report charged that there are very few books in the libraries, the majority of which are old copies of dissertations and master’s theses (Benin 2008).

Students often asked me to describe the facilities at my own university in the United States, the public Michigan State University. In contrast to the paucity of learning materials at UAC, the library collections at MSU include over 4,500,000 volumes, 33,000 magazine and journal subscriptions, 200,000 maps and 40,000 sound recordings (www.lib.msu.edu). The student body at MSU consists of less than 50,000 students in 2012, resulting in a ratio of 100 volumes per student, not counting the electronic resources that are easily accessed through wireless Internet access and the various computer labs on campus. In contrast, the 46,000 volumes in Benin’s national university system are at a ratio of less than one volume per student. In an unfortunate paradox, the streets on campus are lined with vendors selling secondhand textbooks from Europe. But these books do not necessarily speak to the students and their realities, as publishing in Benin is costly. African scholars have also spoken up about the challenges academics face to “produce good work under deplorable conditions” (Achebe and Teboh 2007:68). Producing knowledge is difficult when access to publishing is uneven, and when getting books published in Africa is vastly more expensive than it is in Europe or the United States.

Even if there were enough auditoriums, dormitories, and laboratories to accommodate all of the students at UAC, it still must operate within the confines of Benin’s infrastructure challenges. Unreliable water and electricity are common sources of frustration for residents in Benin, and the campus is not exempt from random cuts. “Last Monday I came to campus to do a

project,” Abed-Nego once told me, “I have friends who have laptops in their dorm rooms. I came here to work but as soon as I got on the computer the electricity went off... It came back on and I tried again, but it went off again. That happened four more times and I was obligated to just go back home. I didn’t get a thing done.” Indeed, the power was off at semi-regular intervals during my visits to campus. Similarly, there were times when fire trucks were brought to campus to provide water because it had been cut for over 24 hours.

Students also felt their education was too focused on theory at the expense of practice. This concern came primarily from students in the sciences like Desiré, a second-year student in Natural Sciences, who explained “over here we only get in the lab once a year. How can we compete for jobs when we don’t have practical knowledge?” Other students felt that even when they did get in the labs what they were learning was outdated, “here we haven’t had any new techniques [referring to biomedical analysis] for ten generations,” Ramatou-lai told me, “Over there [in the US] you learn both theory and practice, that’s not the case here.” Ramatou-lai, like many of the students, placed her university on a global hierarchy of institutions. She felt that she was not getting the same level of education as university students in the U.S. or Europe.

Indeed, the lack of qualified faculty members and large class size are both top of mind for the Ministry of Higher Education as well as funding agencies such as the WB. A report by the Ministry set a target to reduce the student/teacher ratio from 170 to 75 by the year 2015, and indicated that to do so would require recruiting 100 qualified faculty each year – a lofty goal.⁷³ For perspective, the student/teacher ratio at MSU is less than 20. When UAC students spoke of class size, learning materials, or quality of teaching, they felt that they were being asked to put

⁷³ Quality implies training and qualifications, a severe problem in Benin at the secondary level where just 33 percent of teachers have attained a minimum level of higher education; 17 percent of instructors at UAC are PhD holders (WB 2012).

up with conditions that Americans or Europeans would find intolerable. Heyneman (2004) found that high-income nations may invest up to 300 times more per student than low-income nations.

Despite earmarking over 20 percent of the entire education budget for higher education, expenditures exceed the tax income received each year and the gap continues to grow as higher education enrollment grows faster than the GDP. The situation at UAC mirrors that of many sub-Saharan African public universities who are also struggling to balance increasing numbers of students with deteriorating quality of education (Heyneman 2004; WB 2010). The figure below illustrates the situation in 36 African countries, including Benin, that are struggling with budget deficits related to higher education. One of the primary means of addressing these budget deficits is foreign direct aid and investment. Direct aid accounts for 2.8 million USD committed to Benin each year for Higher Education averaging 66 USD per student (WB 2010:98).⁷⁴

⁷⁴ In contrast, indirect aid for Beninese students studying abroad amounted to 13.6 million USD, at an average of 4,805 USD per student between the years of 2001-2006 (OECD 2009). This imbalance of funding may lead to brain drain, rather than to a circulation of skills between home and host countries.

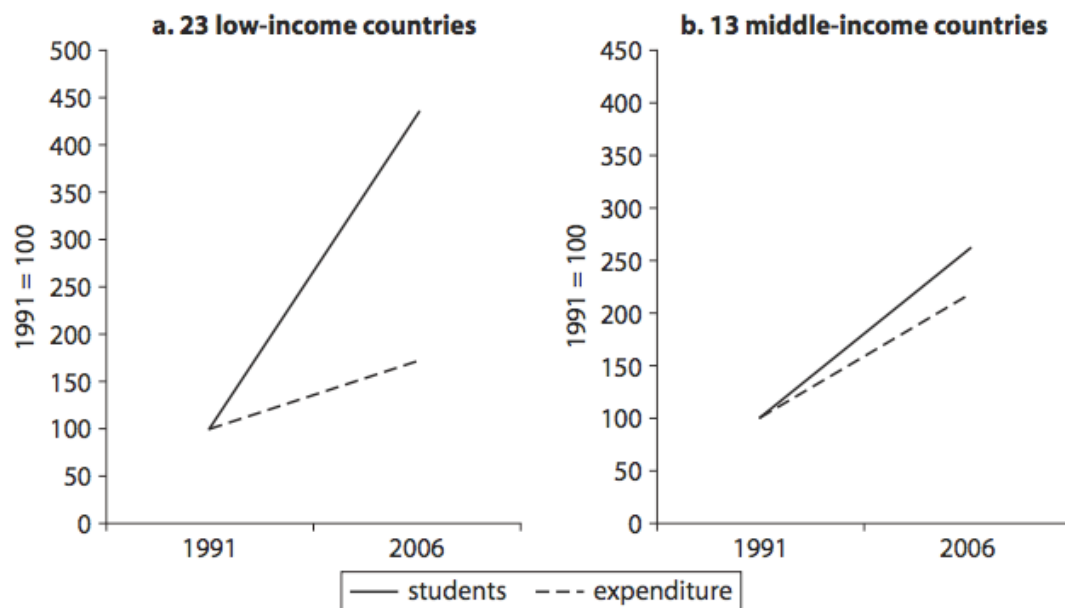


Figure 7: Change in the Number of Higher Education Students and Expenditure on Higher Education in Two Groups of African Countries, 1991-2006 (Source: WB 2010)

Yet projects designed to address the needs of higher education have had little impact on the academic sector as a whole, and have been criticized for being poorly coordinated and managed (Brossard and Foko 2008). One example of such projects is titled “Education Project III” which was funded by the African Development Bank in 1997 and was intended to train instructors and improve scientific faculties and laboratories. The establishment of these educational facilities was “analyzed as capable of enabling the youths to undertake, individually or through cooperatives, income-generating activities that would improve their living conditions” (Annex 3). But the project, which ended six years behind schedule and a staggering 733 percent over-budget, did not achieve the stated objectives. Just over half of the number of planned classrooms and laboratories were completed, and teacher training did not result in lower repetition rates among students. Yet the project was given a satisfactory overall performance

rating of 2.85 out of 4.⁷⁵ The ratings scale shown below, used by the African Development Bank, does not allow for an unsatisfactory rating. Using this type of project review matrix, it is impossible for a project to be unsuccessful (Hurley, et al. 2011).

Table 4: Rating Scale and Corresponding Assessments (Source: ADB 2011)

SCORE	EXPLANATION
4	Highly satisfactory - Perfect implementation, no fault
3	Satisfactory – Most of the objectives are achieved, despite some shortcomings
2	Average - Project partly successful. Almost as many outcomes as shortcomings
1	Average - Project partly successful. Almost as many outcomes as shortcomings
N/A	Not applicable

How are projects that do not reach objectives or goals able to obtain satisfactory review ratings? In the above case, the assessment of each segment of the project was weighted according to the proportion of proposal costs, and therefore delivering books or equipment enhanced the overall rating of the project (equipment alone made up nearly 50 percent of the proposal budget).⁷⁶ Conversely, the training component of the proposal budget was just over 8 percent; a failure to execute proper training did not significantly effect the project assessment. Adequate classrooms and learning materials are certainly important to students, as noted in their comments in the previous section. Yet without properly trained instructors how might students be expected to “improve their living conditions” through income-generating activities?

Development agencies focus on objectives and results that are measurable and

⁷⁵ An analysis of EFA/FTI projects found that the structure of project reviews is overly technical and the rating system is not useful because of inconsistencies (as an example, a rating of 3 was positive in some assessment and negative in others). In the case of the above project, the distribution of teaching aids and laboratory equipment by the French company Pierron Education and the Bank’s assessments of itself were all given scores of 4, which raised the overall project score.

⁷⁶ Total cost of books, learning materials, and scientific equipment that were supplied by French companies Pierron Education and Editions Nathan equalled nearly 11 million USD.

quantifiable, and infrastructure projects are popular means of disbursing aid. A major concern among a coalition of community based NGOs working on education in EFA/FTI countries is the “new trend to gradually neglect the quality imperative of EFA in favour of purely statistical or economy-oriented approaches to education with an emphasis on access” (Watkins 2009: 63). Ferguson (2006) argues that a focus on inputs that can be easily interjected allows the development community to ignore more complicated issues such as corruption, worldwide unemployment of highly educated youth, and low wages. If education projects systematically fail to reach their objectives, why do the projects continue to be conceptualized, proposed, and funded? In the spirit of Ferguson, what do education projects do besides failing to help poor people?

A common perception among Beninese involved in education (whether they are parents, teachers, or administrators) is that much of the financial assistance from donors is circumvented and ends up in the pockets of *fonctionnaires* (civil servants) (Fichtner 2009). Fichtner’s analysis of reforms under the NPE (New Study Programmes) introduced by USAID in 1999 highlights the complexities of educational policy-making and transnational interventions. Fichtner’s study revealed that some educators and students’ parents referred to entire sections of Porto Novo (Benin’s capital) as the *NPE Quartier*, citing the number of large homes that had been built by individuals who worked on the project. Misuse of funds is exacerbated by the temptations that arise when donors stipulate that money must be disbursed quickly in order to get the next installment of a large grant; in the past this has resulted in “equipment plans” whereby the ministry was “flooded” with cars, motorcycles, computers, and office furniture (Welmond 2002:100). Indeed, “financial use and misuse of education funds by African administrations is a very touchy subject...the lack of transparency in the management of education funds has been

severely criticized” (Watkins 2009: 51).

“The leaders in this country think too much about their own stomachs” [a metaphor for greed], a student named Romaric told me. He pointed at his chest and said in English, “I just want to be happy.” Romaric continued, “our leaders, our authorities they just love eating for themselves [another metaphor for greed] and they don’t think about the unemployment. It’s bad when you have a diploma and you can’t find work.” Romaric’s reference to the stomach is reminiscent of Bayart’s (1993) analysis of the ‘politics of the belly’ in post-colonial Africa in which informal political networks actively pursue wealth and power to the detriment of the general population. Students at UAC want to know when the corruption is going to end, when leaders will stop being greedy and taking care of themselves at the expense of others. Similarly, a second-year Geography student named Rose exhorted, “We [youth] are the Benin of tomorrow. If we don’t have a good attitude, and we are greedy, we risk destroying Benin. Benin is for all of us, not just for one person. Benin’s pocket is for Benin, for all Beninois and not just for one person and his/her friends.”

A significant portion of the students who came from lower SES households expressed concern about nepotism and corruption in the job market as well. Studies on youth unemployment in Sub-Saharan Africa have found that the search for formal wage labor is highly dependent on social and family networks (DIAL 2007). One afternoon Romaric and I had a conversation about his plans after graduation, and he seemed discouraged as he explained, “It’s serious when you have your diploma and you can’t find a job. If someone has their bac or their Associate’s degree and they can’t find anything to do [a job] but there is a younger person who hasn’t even taken his bac, they hold the position open until he has taken his bac. It’s Benin that is like that.” Again, a divergence occurred between students who came from families with

varying levels of SES. Those who could profit from their family's social capital were less likely to express concern about corruption and nepotism. It is likely that their families will utilize their social capital to obtain jobs for them when they graduate. Just as Yves was able to call upon his father's social capital to be given a *cabine*, even though he did not officially qualify for the aid, it is likely that Yves will be able to use his father's "long arms" to find a job in the medical field when he graduates. Students from wealthy families were also less likely to be critical of government and more likely to refer to themselves as the "future of Benin."

Literature on the effects of education on social mobility suggests that individuals from the middle classes are more likely to obtain upward mobility through education, while little movement – upward or downward – was found among students from upper and lower classes (Strudwick and Foster 1991; Gaztambide-Fernández and Howard 2012). My research indicates that the effects of education on social capital in the short-term, while students are in the liminal phase of "becoming something" may in fact be negated in the long-term if they are unable, or unwilling, to share their resources with others. Unless students themselves become seen as the ones with "long arms" who are able to bridge social gaps, the long-term effects of education on social capital and social mobility will be minimal for students and their families in Benin.

Inclusion and Exclusion in the Job Market

According to Ferguson (2006), education is positioned as a prerequisite for membership into contemporary global modernity – and all of the financial and social benefits that it is supposed to entail. Students and their families see education as a means of being included into political and economic conditions of life that signify modernity (McGrath et al. 1994). Yet the white-collar job market in Benin is already saturated; the WB estimates that there are currently 80,000 positions in what they call the "modern job market" but double that number of

individuals who have completed tertiary education (Debourou, et al 2008:23). Romaric is a student who left the Army to get his degree in hopes of finding employment. He described the job market as follows, “If they put out a job announcement in Benin, if it says that there are 100 openings, there can be 13,000 or 14,000 people who apply.” While his generalization is likely to be an exaggeration, it is true that unemployment for university graduates is significant at 25 percent. I argue that stories and rumors that circulate on campus, even if they are exaggerations, have an effect on the overall outlook of the student population.

In fact, recent work by Campante and Chor (2012) on the economic conditions in Arab Spring countries highlights the role that rumors played in the political upheavals, “the fact that the rumor [that the Tunisian street vendor who sparked the protests was a university graduate] gained such traction is revealing of the strong current of job-related discontent amongst university graduates in Tunisia” (174). Similarly, students at UAC spoke of work in the informal sector as largely undesirable, particularly low-status jobs such as *zem* driver, working at the port, or small-scale vending. As Estelle, a third-year student in Linguistics put it, “There are many graduates but few jobs. All we hear about are people who can’t find work. ‘I’ve got a degree in this but I do that. I drive a *zem*.’ We want to work and make money but we leave school and can’t find work. Therefore people take a job in anything, even if it is not what they learned in school. That’s how we see these intellectuals, they have their diplomas but they drive a *zem*, they work at the port. And all of that is because of the high unemployment. The price of unemployment is huge. It’s a shame.”

Studies suggest that up to 90 percent of the youth who are employed in Cotonou are participating in the informal sector (DIAL 2008), which has been estimated to make up 95 percent of Benin’s economy (Bierschenk 2009). In fact, Bierschenk suggests that Benin has the

“largest informal sector of 27 African and Latin American countries for which comparable data exist” (338). As shown in the graph below, since the year 1990 Benin’s GDP growth rate has remained steady at an average of three percent growth per year, in contrast to the extreme peaks and valleys that characterized the 30 years after independence. Yet the growth is in the informal sector rather than the formal sector (Bierschenk 2009).

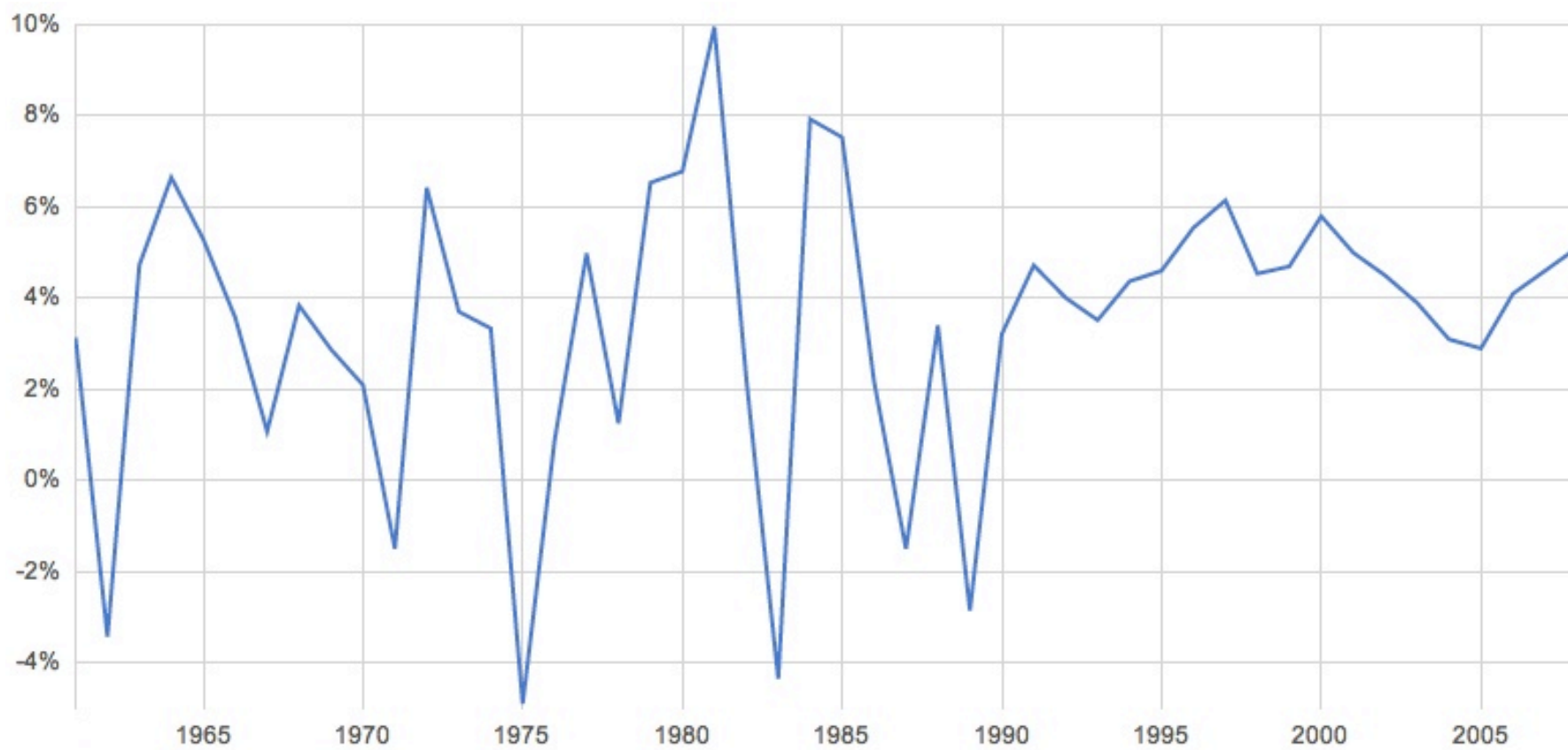


Figure 8: Benin GDP Growth Rate 1960-2011 (Source WB 2011)

There are disadvantages to participation in the informal sector, including obligatory payoffs to police officers and bureaucrats, or the risk of having an unlicensed business destroyed or taken apart. During my research period in Benin I witnessed countless small kiosks that were taken apart by representatives of the police during eradication campaigns. As shown in the photo below, the street on which I lived in Cotonou was a boulevard with a moderate sized sand median populated by vendors each Monday through Saturday.



Figure 9: Participants in Benin's Informal Economy (photo by author)

I frequented these shops when I returned from the campus to eat, drink, and visit with the proprietors. One day my friend Blanche, who sells beans and *gari*, told me that she would not be bringing food the following day, and that she did not expect many of the vendors to be around either. When I asked her why she explained that the police would be coming around the area to

do their inspections. If they came, she told me, they would take her pots and pans, throw her smaller items on the ground, and break everything that they could. Because her business is unregistered, and she does not have a permit for the kiosk, she relies on giving small bribes to officials so that she is warned when an inspection will occur. Blanche considers it a necessary business expense, and although she would rather not pay, she does not have a choice because the permits required to have a “legitimate” business are out of her reach financially.⁷⁷

The public destruction of illegal shops and kiosks and hassling of *ambulants* (like the shoe repairman described in Chapter Four) speaks to the low social status that positions in the informal economy entail. In fact, when Natacha and I originally interviewed the students at UAC, an overwhelming majority of them gave their father’s profession but not their mother’s. Agathe, a first-year student from a village near Ouidah, said “nothing, my mother doesn’t do anything.” When Natacha pressed her, however, she admitted that her mother produced and sold palm-oil, which is a labor-intensive, income generating activity. A few days later when Katrine (my adoptive aunt) and I were eating lunch, I asked her why the students said that their mothers did not work. “*Travaille*,” she explained, “means that you work in an office. You have to go to a place of work. The people on the street,” and here she gestured down to Blanche and a used-clothes vendor, “do not work. They just do a little something to get by.” A person’s profession is an important part of the equation in terms of social status. Working in an office, particularly one with air-conditioning, seems to be the pinnacle of success to the participants in this study.

Unfortunately, possessing a university degree is not a guarantee that an applicant will be considered for a position. A common perception among UAC students is that less qualified

⁷⁷ In a study of 185 world economies, Benin ranked 176th in terms of ease of doing business. The cost for starting a business (including notarizing an instrument of incorporation and filing the documents with the *Centre des Formalités des Entreprises*) is over 480,000 FCFA, which is 126 percent of income per capita (IFC and WB 2012 at www.doingbusiness.org).

individuals, even those without degrees, are sometimes hired because of their family connections, contributing to the higher rates of unemployment for university graduates.

The low social status of participating in the informal economy runs counter to the high expectations of students' families. Parents who put forth the effort to send their children to university expect those children to find employment, and when they do not, "it worries them," as Romaric told me. As explained to me by one of the professors at UAC during an earlier research visit, "They [unemployed graduates] are embarrassed, they are ashamed to return to the village and stay there while unemployed. And for good reason, because everyone knows that they left, that they got their high diplomas, and that they went to the university to get their even higher diplomas, and the villagers cannot understand that after all of those years and that success, that they can come back to live in the village" (Interview with Jerome Iroko 2005). Similarly, Paul explained his classmates' concerns about unemployment, "For them [the family] you have finished university and you are an intellectual. Even if you are not working they don't get it. You are unemployed, that's it? It's difficult for them to understand that there are graduates who can't get a job. In the past if you got your diploma you got a job. Because those who have worked hard, and who have learned something, they've got to try to put it into practice. For them [the family] those who have learned a trade must exercise it."

Studies have found that graduates of higher education from the most disadvantaged backgrounds face the greatest difficulties in the labor market compared to their peers (Furlong and Cartmel 2005). Among the participants in this study, students who come from lower SES families and did not receive scholarships were twice as likely to be enrolled in the free or low-fee departments (such as Modern Literature, Geography, Foreign Languages) as students from high SES families. Unfortunately, those are the same departments that are associated with higher

levels of post-graduation unemployment (WB 2010).⁷⁸ Families who have given up the most, in terms of putting together financial resources or having fewer children at home to help with tasks, may expect more reciprocity than what the students may be able to provide upon graduation. Hounkpe (2009:323) argues, “the social achievement of the child sent to school is to the advantage of the entire lineage,” but my research suggests that the students whose families depend most upon their success are skeptical of their own ability to repay their debts. My research suggests that it is just those students, the ones who are not *boursiers* and come from less well-off families, who are more likely to feel pressure from their extended families to contribute once they graduate. These students expressed anxiety about their upcoming obligations, and about their potential inability to fulfill them.

The stress over future employment is exacerbated by the notion that some students have internalized, which is that they have “become something” and are socially elevated from their family members. Some students have internalized the notion that their education is incompatible with large segments of Beninese society, particularly those who live in rural areas. Yet as illustrated in Ferguson’s 2006 study, villagers want to be “modern” too. They see students possessing some of the qualifications that might help them make money, obtain better living conditions, and be more at ease. But when students refer to themselves as “civilized” and villagers as “ignorant” they have effectively socially separated themselves from members of their extended families. This in turn limits the impact that they could have on their family by transmitting cultural and social capital to their siblings, cousins, and other age-mates. The tendency of some students to pull away from their families is further complicated by the “state of *bo*” in which some students feel that they are targets of *la sorcellerie* because of their academic

⁷⁸ A current debate in global education centers on the usefulness (or uselessness) of college degrees in the humanities and liberal arts.

accomplishments. As illustrated in Chapters Three and Four, many students use the common stories of sorcery attacks as reasons why they have cut off associations with their extended family members. This, too, has the effect of decreasing the transmission of cultural capital between family members.

Highly Educated Unemployed Youth – A Danger to Society or a Force for Change?

The parents of the next generation may not believe in what they see as empty promises of education initiatives and may keep their children from school. Even students who felt relatively secure about their own futures expressed concern about the overall long-term effects of high unemployment among educated youth. Paul explained that the problem would then spread to the next generation, “that [unemployment among graduates] could cause some parents who don’t see the big picture to take their kids out of school. Because they say, ‘You who have been to school, what have you become? You haven’t become anything. And you don’t even have a job.’” Sidonie, a second-year student in Juridical Sciences, said that the students have a responsibility to show their parents that sending them to school is a good thing, “when you go home, you need to educate your parents. Then they will want to send the others (younger siblings) to school. If he sees that school is not working for a child, he won’t send the others to school.”

Aboh (2006) argues that the limited job prospects for graduates may lead to an eventual decrease in enrollment among future generations; his study of female secondary students in Benin suggests that university students who had educated relatives who were unable to find jobs after graduation were more likely to drop out of school. Aboh asks, “How does one convince a girl to stay in school when she can see for herself that educated people have become hustlers while others, less educated are living and enjoying a decent life?” (2006:618). Joyce, a second-

year student at UAC, explained: “If you work you have lots of money and that’s what the people want. You are prominent in the family and even those who are elders will respect you. They give you a special place in the family. They respect you. Family relationships don’t depend on your level of instruction but on money.” For students like Joyce, education that does not result in employment is an empty promise.

Yet is the prospect of employment the only reason an individual should attend school? Are there other benefits, including critical thinking that justify the cost of educational attainment? Assié-Lumumba (2012) argues, “While individuals and families legitimately aim for employment at the end of the formal educational process, the supply of education should not be dictated solely by immediate availability of jobs...[H]ighly educated people who do not have jobs will ask the right questions and contribute to finding solutions” (2). As they reflected on their experiences at UAC, many of the students in this study felt comfortable asking the “right questions.” They are asking why they do not have proper facilities, why they must put up with sexual harassment in order to get passing grades and why they are looked over for employment when the children of bureaucrats are offered positions. They are asking questions beyond the university as well. As Madinatou said, “Benin is always spoken of as on the road to development. When are we going to arrive? We can’t always be on the road.”

Questioning authority and demanding change is nothing new for university students in Benin. In fact, Bierschenk (2009) describes Beninois students as (potential) elites who seek access to power and are critical of corruption among those who are currently seated. He draws our attention to radical criticism in the late 1980s that snowballed and developed its own momentum, “triggered by a series of scandals that increasingly eroded the moral legitimacy of the regime” (343). Student protests were instrumental in the transition of Kerekou’s Marxist-

Leninist regime to a multi-party democracy in 1990. Bierschenk notes the connection between Benin's political changes and those going on throughout the world during the same period - he implies that perhaps it was knowledge of what was happening in other places that "expanded the space of possibility and opportunity for future developments." In essence, news and stories of uprisings around the world affected an entire nation by expanding the realm of what was possible or impossible.

Benin is currently seen as one of the few democratic models in Africa (Bierschenk 2009) and over 90 percent of the respondents in the Afrobarometer research project reported voting in the 2007 presidential elections (Afrobarometer 2008). Being members of a democracy means that they also reserve the right to speak out when they do not agree with the direction that government is taking them, and nearly half of the Afrobarometer respondents indicated that they would attend a demonstration or protest march if they had the chance.⁷⁹ According to Sandrine, a fourth-year student in Anthropology, "The political situation in Benin is fragile. Beninese want to do everything that they see [outside]. And we say that the university is a republic within a republic, because there are so many of us here. Everything that happens outside of the university also happens here. There is insecurity in the university, just as there is in the city. Students are the ones who speak out the most when there is an election. We cannot speak about Benin without speaking of the university."

Will student frustrations lead to protests and riots as they have in countries throughout Northern Africa, Southern Europe, and the Middle East? Current conditions in Benin share characteristics with some of the nations that experienced the "Arab Spring" in the 2010-2011

⁷⁹ In fact, during my fieldwork a Ponzi scheme had fallen apart and caused serious financial repercussions throughout Benin. Benin's President Boni Yayi had previously appeared in public with the head of the scheme, which led to widespread protests during July 2010 and the ousting of two Ministry officials later that year.

period. What are those conditions? A prominent feature in all of the affected nations was high youth unemployment, particularly among educated youth. A second common condition was a general tendency to view the government and business as corrupt. A final feature was a sense of desperation and frustration among the populace as the disparity between a nation's rich and poor becomes more pronounced. Campante and Chor (2012) argue convincingly of the correlation between rapid expansion in access to education, poor labor market prospects, and high political involvement among youth. In fact, their research suggests that the conditions created when educated youth become involved in "political activities of a protest nature" (170) are useful indicators of political instability. Even if nepotism and social capital ensure that some students will find employment after graduation, unless something changes, the 2015 EFA and MDP targets will result in far more highly educated youth who are critical of corruption, of favoritism, and of social inequalities. The 2012 EFA Global Monitoring Report notes that simply increasing access to schooling is not enough, but that future efforts must give "young people a chance to acquire the right skills" for if not, "they risk perpetuating or worsening inequalities, losing opportunities for dynamic growth and fueling the kind of youth frustration that has boiled over into protest movements around the world" (EFA forthcoming NP).

But other practitioners argue that youth need to be seen, not as the core of urban Africa's problems, but as the "foundation for solutions" (Sommers 2003:12). There has been a call for policy that is inclusive, that will encourage governments in West Africa to "understand and learn how to constructively engage with young urbanites" (Sommers 2003:6). This generation deserves more so that they can be functionally competent, not just for individual social attainment, but as an "agency for collective social progress and national development" (Assie-Lumumba 2012:3). In the following section I lay out two recommendations based on

ethnographic research among UAC students and their families.

Policy Recommendations

Strong, enforced policy against sexual harassment

A joint evaluation of Benin's education sector (within the framework of the 2006-2015 plan) highlights issues such as gender parity in schools, but there is no mention of sexual harassment within the educational system (DANIDA and AFD 2012). A strong policy recommendation is for the UAC administration to take seriously the effects that sexual harassment by professors has on the entire student body, not just on those with whom they engage in sexual relationships. This is an issue that most students were vehement about. Sexual harassment and sexual corruption lead many students to lose faith in the merit-based system of grading. If some students are able to attain passing grades by having sexual relationships with professors, and others are failed because they withhold their sexuality, any advancement by classmates becomes suspect. Even male students, who did not have "the sex that the Profs covet," were not immune to harassment if they had a girlfriend who caught the eye of a professor. Students expressed little to no faith in the ability of the university to protect them from this type of corruption. The university needs to play a role in enforcing sexual harassment policy and creating a safe place for all students to learn.

Focus on skills relevant to both the informal and formal economies

The third goal of EFA is "youth and adult learning needs" to "ensure that all young people have the opportunity to acquire skills" (EFA 2012). EFA as a whole is shifting its focus from hitting access targets to an emphasis on educational quality and skills-acquisition. In a recent WB assessment, it was determined that tuition fees in the selected professional programs at UAC

“range from 104 to 225 percent of national income per capita, which would indicate that they are out of reach of most of the population” (WB 2010:67). Vocational courses generate 40 percent of the operating budget for UAC, yet 80 percent of the students are enrolled in the free, underfinanced disciplines. It is unrealistic to expect that all of the graduates from UAC will find employment in the formal sector, and thus the informal economy needs to be de-stigmatized so that students will see opportunity, rather than humiliation, if they participate.

Beninese youth are entrepreneurial, yet according to a WB report on higher education in Benin, “secondary-school graduates and university graduates are often perceived to have skills and dispositions that are not well suited to the informal job market” (WB 2012:2). There are areas of growth that are particularly suited to the skill-set that UAC students possess, including computer literacy, language-skills, and business acumen, all skills that are not inclusive of the fee-based professional and vocational programs. Education initiatives need to be more realistic in the expectations that they set for recipients (Clemens et al. 2004). Bangladesh, another country with a significant informal sector, has created a non-formal education policy designed to link the inner campus (classrooms) and outer campus (practices, or the market) as a means of “responding to local demands for products and services that can be marketed” (Islam et al. 2007:94). This policy has established closeness between education and the life-environment including carpentry, tailoring, welding, computing, machine repair, and poultry farming; participants in the inner and outer campuses become “change agents at the level of community” (Islam et al. 2007:94).

Conclusion

Based on my research findings, there are three “promises” that families bought into that led some students to strive for higher education: (1) education is a means of upward mobility, (2)

educated people find employment suitable to their advanced skills and social status, (3) education is beneficial to the students, their families, and their country. My research suggests that the rhetoric of inclusion broadcast through *sensibilisations* rings hollow for the majority of students who come from families with lower socioeconomic status. The inconsistencies between the upward mobility and social status anticipated by students, and the stories that circulate about unemployed graduates create a certain tension on campus among students. Simply increasing access to schooling will not, in itself, level inequalities in society. Instead of creating family stability and upward mobility for the whole group, my research suggests that students who could have the most impact on their families' futures displayed a greater fear of letting their families down. A significant percentage of those students expressed concern regarding the ability of their extended family members to use supernatural measures because of jealousy. These students were also more likely to feel that their formal education served to disconnect them from their extended families than wealthier students.

Setting lofty enrollment targets has accomplished several things in Benin. First, it has stressed the current infrastructure to the point that quality is being severely compromised due to overcrowding, unqualified instructors, and insufficient facilities. Second, it has created a situation whereby Benin's formal educational system cannot function without significant financial input from the donor community. The case in Benin is similar to the analysis Ferguson (1994) put forward regarding "highly partial and interested interventions" in Lesotho (280) in which inequality had been rendered technical by development narratives that assert improving access or facilities would solve political and structural roots of poverty.

The effects have not all been negative, however. Young university women are challenging notions of male superiority; a majority of the women that participated in this study

felt that their educational qualifications could be used to back up their claims that they could “reason like a man” and change the role that they have in marriage. University educated women are also in a unique position to succeed in the informal economy as entrepreneurs. A number of the women in this study participated in family enterprises throughout their schooling, ranging from preparing palm oil, to aiding their mothers’ in commerce. More female students at UAC conduct commerce out of their *cabines* as a means of making extra spending money. Unlike many of their male peers, their pride has not prevented them from participating in the informal economy even as they have pursued the diplomas and degrees that may bring them an elevated social status. This flexibility puts them in a better position upon graduation because they can use their formal skills along with the skills and dispositions that are necessary to make a living in Benin today.

In this dissertation I have utilized grounded theory to understand the complicated social status that university students in Benin occupy. I entered the field with broad questions for the students: What is it like to be a student in a period of fantastic growth? How does education affect family relationships? How do students define family? As is the case for most qualitative research, the field and my positionality within it affected the direction of my research. The year 2010 marked the 50th anniversary of Benin’s independence, leading to a tendency among participants to reflect on history while planning their futures. A failed ponzi scheme rocked the nation, causing thousands to lose their savings, implicating members of government, and contributing to accusations of corruption. A friend and research participant died suddenly, leading to hundreds of conversations about jealousy and *la sorcellerie*. The academic year began three months late due to strikes over non-payment of scholarships and faculty salaries. Each of these events influenced the conversations, questions, and stories that my participants and I

exchanged during fieldwork. In turn, they affected the theories that I have used to understand the complexities of higher education in Benin.

Bourdieu's theories of habitus and the forms of capital have been extremely helpful in my analysis of studenthood at UAC. Using Bourdieu's framework of habitus allowed me to break down interview data and determine when students were speaking of their own personal experiences, or when they were speaking in general terms. I understand habitus to be a matrix that helps individuals make decisions based on their knowledge of past events and perceptions of future opportunities. Students at UAC have habitus influenced by several overlapping social fields – their families, their communities, and their academic institutions. Academic institutions are also one of the means by which students acquire cultural capital in the form of diplomas and degrees, as was seen by the immediate status accorded *bacheliers* in this study. The media and public nature of test results promotes the status of students who pass the bac and qualify for tertiary education. The university is also a physical place in which students can perform self-work by cultivating the distinction that they see proper for intellectuals. They are careful to speak “proper French,” to display the type of manners that are acceptable in the academic setting, and to use their powers of reasoning to show that they are “superior” to those who have not been to school. My research suggests some students have internalized the notion that only one form of cultural capital and distinction is acceptable for intellectuals, and have rejected the norms that are practiced among their extended families or community members.

Students who acquire cultural capital become members of a social network and are able to create financial capital from social relationships in the form of social capital. Those students who do not reject “the village” are able to code-switch between social situations and have an even greater network of influence and connections that they may call upon if in need. These

students are also able to transmit cultural capital to their extended family members if they choose, by participating in regular family interactions and aiding their younger siblings or relatives.

As I argued in Chapter Three, however, those students who “hoard” their social capital or who exhibit elitist behaviors may actively fear *sorcellerie* attacks from jealous or resentful relatives. This fear may be so strong that students cut off all communication with their extended family, and the transmission of cultural capital slows significantly. Students who wish to withdraw from family events, including ceremonies, are able to use their schooling as a legitimate reason to stay away.

In this dissertation I argue that liminality is a “process of becoming” in which ambiguity is a central feature. In the *cabines* students may practice roles of leadership and authority, and may boast of being “like the elders” in their family gatherings, regardless of how much they really participate in family discussions. The freedom that students experience on campus is often tempered by their experiences when they return to family homes; their time is no longer their own to control. Students at UAC often speak of education as a means of “becoming something” or “becoming someone” but that opportunity is often limited for those who have little social capital upon which they can rely to obtain a job after graduation. Liminality is not necessarily negative, however, as students who are able to vacillate between social fields attests. Being “betwixt and between” social roles allows students to modify their behavior to fit the appropriate context – especially for those who value both home training and academic scholarship.

Liminality and ambiguity are also helpful tools to understand the construction of gender as a social category in the academic field. In this dissertation I have examined the role that formal education has historically played in creating a social hierarchy based on a conflation of

biology with capability and power. To understand the educational environment as a gendered environment, I utilized Tsing's notion of "friction" to analyze shifts in power. The vast increase in female enrollment in all levels of education in Benin has caused friction as power associated with the production, and possession, of knowledge has become available to a larger segment of society. This increase suggests that marriage patterns and preferences in Benin are also likely to change in the coming decades.

Finally, I examined the complex relationship between global education initiatives, funding agencies, and states such as Benin. In order to obtain funding for a severely underfinanced education sector Benin has made concessions to shrink the public sector. In a paradoxical move, the same funding that will allow for more students (who hope to obtain wage labor upon graduation) has resulted in a shrinking formal sector, and increased unemployment among university graduates.

My dissertation contributes to the anthropology of education because it helps us understand the relationship between extended family and the experiences of higher education. My research suggests that family and student expectations must be managed and realistic regarding the benefits of education. *Sensibilisations* promoted by development agencies designed to hit access targets should be rethought. My research also suggests that the benefits of schooling throughout the society may improve if schooling is not portrayed as antithetical to "tradition" or the "village."

APPENDIX A

Appendix A: Aubin's Story
La Maison Familiale (The Family Home)

Annie and Aubin grew up in Abomey, a small city of approximately 75,000 people in southern Benin that is about a four-hour drive north of the Gulf of Guinea in West Africa. Like most Abomeans, they were proud of their ancestors who created the Dahomean empire, one of the most powerful kingdoms in West Africa from the 1600s to the late 1800s. Annie and Aubin's family home was not too far from the Royal Palaces, a 47 hectare property designated as a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage site, and served as a reminder of the strength of their ancestors.

In contrast to many of the other families in their *collectivité*,⁸⁰ Annie and Aubin's father had one wife and just four children. His choice may not have been appreciated by all of his peers,⁸¹ but his decision to have a small family was greatly appreciated by Annie, who felt that she was able to have a special relationship with him because she had so few siblings. Their father did not make a lot of money, but took good care of his family. Despite the fact that they were not rich, they happened to be one of the only families in the *collectivité* that had a television. As a result, in the evenings their living room was home to young people who wanted to watch TV. When Annie told me this, I could see the pride in her expression, and a little smile emerged as she said that was how she met Bienvenu, her husband. Bienvenu came from the line

⁸⁰ Collectivité is a home where extended family members live together.

⁸¹ Falen (2008) relates reasons why Beninois men prefer polygyny, including prestige, respect, and the ability to control multiple wives by playing on their jealousy. Falen cites a Fon expression that I have heard in my own research: "A man's children are not born of only one woman."

of King Glele, one of the last kings of the empire and a leader who actively fought the encroaching French occupation in the late 1800s. Their *collectivités* were located adjacent to one another, connected by a small doorway at the corner.

When Annie was in secondary school, Bienvenu left “the village,”⁸² to attend the University of Abomey-Calavi (UAC). Bienvenu and Annie saw each other when he came back to Abomey for ceremonies or for his school vacations, and he convinced her to come to the city once he graduated and found a job in Cotonou. They moved into a small house in a walled complex that held seven families. Like many husbands in Benin, he paid for her two-year *apprentissage* to be a *coiffeuse* (hairstylist). About one year after her arrival in Cotonou, Annie gave birth to Kevi, their son. She described this as a happy time in her life as she had become a mother and a wife.⁸³

L’ambiance qui est Bon pour les Etudiants (The Right Environment for Students)

When I returned to Benin in June 2008 as a graduate student, Annie and Bienvenu had a new baby named Sele, and Aubin had come to live with them, bringing the number of people in their one-bedroom house to five. Annie explained that her brother had attempted the bac twice before and had not passed (this is quite normal, as nearly 65 percent of students do not pass the bac each year). Annie had convinced her parents to let Aubin come live with her and Bienvenu because they could provide the right ambiance for him to study. In exchange, he would be able to help her and Bienvenu with their new baby. It would be a win-win situation. Aubin seemed excited to be living in the city, and during our visits he described why he was happy to have left

⁸² While Abomey can be classified as a city because of population density, it is referred to as “the village” by those who migrate to Cotonou and other urban centers.

⁸³ Although they had not been formally married, it is common for the birth of a child to symbolize a sort of common-law marriage for young people in Benin (Hountondji, personal communication, 2008).

the village. He loved the village, but there was always something he had to do for someone. Living in the *collectivité* meant that any of his elders could call on him to assist with tasks. While he had to help watch his sister's kids in Cotonou, it was still less than he would have had to do in Abomey. Yet Aubin also spoke of *l'individualisme* he experienced in the city. "Nobody greets like they do in the village. You don't know everyone. And I miss my friends."

By the time I returned one year later in May 2009, Aubin was getting ready to take the bac, which is only held once a year throughout the whole country. Annie, Bienvenu, and the whole family were very excited and supportive of Aubin. I saw him the day after the exam and he seemed hopeful, but nervous since he had already gone through the process twice before. Weeks went by before the results were posted on the walls of the school and announced on the radio. It was a joyous day as we learned that Aubin was a *bachelier*.

Attendre et Attendre (Waiting and Waiting)

When I returned to Cotonou in January 2010, Aubin was still living with Bienvenu and Annie (who was pregnant again) and waiting to start University. *La rentrée*, the official beginning of the academic year, had been scheduled for the past October but was delayed due to a strike. Faculty and staff at UAC were protesting budget cuts and salaries that were in arrears from the previous academic year. Aubin began to get impatient for the academic year to start. He had paid his dues by doing tasks around the house and helping out with the kids, even doing laundry for his brother-in-law (a task that was generally carried out by young girls). He was ready to begin living the academic life of an intellectual and told me that he was hoping to find someone to live with on campus.

As we waited out the months in limbo, I spent Wednesdays with Annie, Aubin, and the kids at their house in Akpakpa. Each week I too brought a salad and sauce, and Annie would

provide drinks and rice. There were times when Annie, Aubin, and I would talk as adults, and other times Annie would ask Aubin to take the kids out so that she and I could have some privacy, or she would ask him to do some laundry for the family. She expressed frustration that he was not able to start university, especially because she felt that he had so much potential. I also sensed that Annie considered it a personal success that she had helped Aubin pass the bac. When the strike was resolved in late February, we were all relieved. Aubin started looking in earnest for a place to stay with friends so that he would be nearer to the campus. In my mind, I also thought that he might want to relieve himself of the babysitting and laundry duties that he was subject to while staying with his sister.

In early March, classes started and Aubin took his place among the thousands of other first year students. He had agreed to participate in my study, and so from time to time we discussed his classes (which he described as very large and overcrowded) and whether he was going to be able to move closer to campus (he had said he really wanted to, but was not sure if he could find a place that he could afford). He also explained how he had adjusted to life in Cotonou, that he did not expect everyone to greet him like they did in the village, and that he got *habitué*. I still saw him on Wednesdays, but our visits were more brief. He would come back to Annie's place from his morning class, eat lunch quickly, and then head out the door - briefcase in hand - with a fellow student to study somewhere in town. It was obvious that the household dynamic was changing, and Annie told me that she was searching for a young domestic who could help her with the chores, especially since her pregnancy was advancing.

La Volonté de Dieu (God's Will)

On one of my visits to Annie and Bienvenu's home, I pulled up on a *zem* and saw that there was a large congregation of *motos* in the courtyard, along with several cars. While there

were usually any number of vehicles at their house, this was unusual, especially in the middle of the day on a Wednesday. I walked into the house and saw nearly ten of Bienvenu's relatives crowded into the living room. Annie was sitting on the couch opposite everyone, and as I walked in she said in a soft voice, "*Marcy, j'ai perdu mon pere*" [Marcy, I've lost my father]. It was a shock because he had not been ill, other than a few days earlier when he had passed out unexpectedly. We all sat in the salon and looked at one another; there were some condolences as visitors came and went over the course of a half an hour or so. Several times I heard Annie or Bienvenu say, "*C'était la volonté de Dieu*" (it was God's will). We drank Sodabi to calm our nerves. I brought Kevi on to my lap and just squeezed him, needing a place for the emotion to go, needing a release.

Annie journeyed up to Abomey to console her mother and brothers and to take part in family meetings regarding *la funeraillle* (the funeral ceremony) under the guidance of *Dah Semassoussi*, Annie's paternal uncle who is also a *Hunnon* (Vodun priest). The family decided to have the ceremony six weeks later so that there would be enough time to plan (and to raise the money needed to have a large funeral), and so that overseas guests could make travel arrangements. Most of the preparations would be done in the city, and Annie returned home to Cotonou after one week in Abomey. Annie's time was taken up with preparations for the ceremony - it was to be a large affair, with hundreds of guests, several disc jockeys, food and drinks for everyone. Annie explained that the family had decided that she should be the one in charge. Laughing, Annie told me, "*Je suis comme un homme*" because she was doing what a man in the family would normally have to do. Literature on gender roles in Africa sprung to my head, particularly Amadiume's (1987) descriptions of Nigerian funerals as occasions when

lineage daughters could express power over wives who had married into the family.⁸⁴ I could see how Amadiume and others would have felt outraged at the portrayal of African women as powerless beasts of burden. Annie was strong, powerful, and in command, and had been placed in that position despite the fact that she had an older brother.

Two weeks prior to the funeral, Bienvenu arranged a ceremony in which he and his family presented many gifts to Annie's family for the funeral, including cases of beer and soda, expensive Vlisco cloth for the body, several 25-kilo bags of rice, a chicken, and various smaller items. Once the gifts were unveiled, his friends and family gave money that would be presented to Annie's family on his behalf to offset some of the funeral costs. As each person raised his or her hand, the emcee called out his or her name and the amount of the donation. Larger contributions resulted in wild applause from the other guests. Immediately following the formal donations, a dance troupe performed, accompanied by music and singing. At certain times entire families would get up and dance as well, and then proceed to give the dancers money in appreciation of their performance. A friend sitting near me explained that the singers were acknowledging prestigious guests and their families, and it was customary for them to give money to the dancers and musicians during a performance. At the end of the night, rumors circulated that Bienvenu's ceremony raised over 500,000 FCFA. We all agreed that it was an impressive display.

La Funéraille (The Funeral Ceremony)

The actual funeral ceremony took place on Saturday, April 3, 2010. The close family went to the morgue at 6 a.m. to retrieve the body. Most of the women, Annie included, had not

⁸⁴ Achebe (2007) has also argued that Igbo women experience "positional/location" power which is "contingent on a woman's geographical location or position" (73). A woman has considerably more power when she is in her natal village. My research suggests that the same holds true in Benin.

slept at all the night before. While cooking in the courtyard, I heard the sound of singing and live music—it was the funeral processional making its way from the morgue to the family home. Family members walked along, carrying large pictures of the deceased, and Annie and her mother rode in the hearse with the casket. When the processional reached the family compound, the casket was placed inside a glass structure that sat in a large courtyard and was decorated with string lights and flowers. Annie’s mother sat on the ground outside of the structure to be greeted by family members; it was the only time in the two-month mourning period that she could leave her room.

After paying their respects, the invitees went to various large tents set up throughout the compound to eat, drink, and visit. In the tents there was no crying or signs of sadness, but rather a celebration of life, friends, and family. Annie explained that because her father was considered an elder, the funeral commemorated his life and the success he realized by raising his family.⁸⁵ Eventually I left with some of my former professors who were going back to Cotonou in a family car. The burial process was strictly for the intimate family, so I would not have been able to participate. Bienvenu’s younger brother Fabrice explained that Annie’s father was buried in the family home; young male members of the family broke up the concrete floor of the salon, dug the grave, and placed new concrete over the dirt while close family looked on.

Aubin as Tombé Malade (Aubin Fell Sick)

Aubin left the village on the Thursday after the funeral to go back to the campus for class. Right before he departed, he said he was not feeling well, but did not have any outward signs of illness. He called Annie in the village on Friday and said he was having trouble breathing.

⁸⁵ Geschiere (2005: 48) describes funerals that he attended in Cameroon in the 1970s as a “staggering mixture of mourning and merrymaking, of solidarity and aggression” and admits that they were one of the “most confusing experiences” of his early fieldwork.

Worried, she immediately took a taxi back with Kevi and Sele. They took Aubin to the hospital to be examined, but the doctors found nothing wrong with him and advised him to take some paracetamol, an over-the-counter pain reliever. Throughout the night, Aubin could not breathe if he lay down and had to sit up.

Sometime during the evening, Kevi began to cry out of the blue. He kept saying “Mahanta *Pardon*, Mahanta *Pardon*” (Mahanta is the title of the spiritual leader of Eckankar, the religion that Annie and Bienvenu practice). Annie said she did not know why he was saying that; it scared her, and she told him to stop crying. A little later, Aubin asked for the clothes that the dead wear. He wanted to put them on and get ready. This frightened and saddened Annie even more, and she snapped at him and told him she would hit him if he kept talking like that. In desperation Annie begged him to chant the *hu* (a form of prayer in the Eckankar faith), telling him that it was the only thing that might help him. But Aubin refused, as he had done in the past.

By Saturday, April 10 2010, Aubin was incoherent. According to Annie, he began saying the names of their ancestors and was making no sense. None of the medicine that he took seemed to help, and he complained of random pains all over his body. At about midnight on Saturday night, Aubin died in Annie and Bienvenu’s living room.

Ce N’Etait pas une Mort Naturelle (It Was Not a Natural Death)

It was after Aubin’s death that accusations of sorcery started coming out, as they often do in Benin when there is a series of calamities or unexplained deaths (Evans-Pritchard 1937; Falen 2007; ter Haar 2007; Lemay-Boucher 2011). At 6 a.m. on the morning that Aubin died, I received a phone call from Annie in which she told me of his death. She and her aunt arrived at my apartment two hours later with their children. As they explained Aubin’s tragic death, Annie and her aunt began recounting suspicious behaviors, thinking about who would want harm to

come to the family. The discussion of *la sorcellerie* and who might be to blame seemed to take everyone's mind off of the actual death itself. I, too, got caught up in trying to figure out who was the most logical perpetrator.

Annie's older brother had been seen talking to a nefarious individual on the day of the funeral, and someone saw him take something from the other person's hand. What was it? Was it an instrument of evil? Was it something that he put into Aubin's food? Annie's older brother is often described as "sick" because he imbibes in alcohol and smokes cigarettes. He is viewed as weak—as a person who could be manipulated by someone who wished harm upon the family.

The wife of Annie's older brother was also called into question. Bad things started happening to the family when she moved in to the compound. Confused, I asked if they thought she was the one doing harm. I had not witnessed any tension between her and the rest of the family when we had all been together. Annie and Maman Huefa explained that Annie's sister-in-law was not likely *le sorcier*, but that she could be the indirect cause of the actions.⁸⁶ It was possible that someone in her family was an *azeto* (loosely translated as witch, this term is defined in Chapter Three) who was trying to harm her new family. I started to imagine what it would be like to be the sister-in-law. I wondered if she knew that family members were talking about her in this manner.

I asked Annie and her aunt why *Dah Semasoussi* could not have done anything, since he was a *Hunnon*. They told me that *la sorcellerie* is evil, and is more powerful than Vodun. If Annie's dad or Aubin had known that someone was trying to harm them, they could have asked *Dah Semasoussi* to call on one of the Vodun to protect them, but they did not know in time. Annie also said that Aubin could have been saved if he had chanted the *hu*, and that Eckankar

⁸⁶ In his forthcoming work, Falen notes that it is becoming more common for *azeto* to be able to attack people outside of their family by getting to *azeto* within the family.

was a protection. She told me she and her children would be especially vigilant about daily meditation now that they knew they were under attack.

Le Sorcier se Montre (The Sorcerer/Witch Shows Himself)

About a week after Aubin's death, Annie and I went to the hospital because she thought she was going into labor. As we waited in the hallway for the doctor, she told me that her father's older brother who had come from France for the funeral had died the day before. I had spoken to him the night before Annie's father's funeral; he was a very lively man, and did not seem sick. I simply could not believe it. How could so many calamities affect Annie's family in such a short period of time? Her father, brother, and uncle had all seemed to be in good health. I tried to figure out "rational" reasons for their deaths. In the early part of the year there had been a cholera outbreak in Abomey, but that was not the cause of any of the deaths. There was a part of me that wished that an autopsy had been performed on Aubin, just to know the "truth." And yet, he had gone to the doctor who had seen nothing. The real truth was that people in Annie's family were dying suddenly, with no physical explanation.

Annie then told me that the sorcerer had *shown himself*. I asked her to explain, and she said that the options had been narrowed down and everyone in the village knew that it was an older family member who had wanted to be *Dah*, but had been denied that title by the *Fá* messenger of the vodun (Zinzindohoue 2010), as related through the human intermediary, the *bokonon*. As a result, he has been trying to harm the close family members of the current *Dah* Semasoussi to exact revenge. The man was to be called before *Dah* for his trial. The result of the trial may be that he is imprisoned, or beaten. Annie seemed satisfied that it had become obvious who was causing the deaths, and yet no amount of retribution could bring back her brother and father, the two men she was closest to in her family.

In the weeks following Aubin's death, many of my neighbors and friends wanted to know what had happened to Annie's family, especially because she had been staying at my apartment. One night Katrine, Natacha, and I discussed the situation over dinner at my house. They felt it was likely poison that killed Annie's father and brother, and that someone was jealous of the money that Annie's family was able to raise for the funeral. They said that large ceremonies with grand displays of wealth are almost an invitation for sorcery, as they invite jealousy and envy from those who live nearby. Geschiere (2005:55) calls a funeral a "dangerous moment" where urban elites must come face to face with their extended family and "be assailed by all sorts of requests." The danger is two-fold: first, simply being perceived as better off financially or socially can exacerbate feelings of jealousy among associates – especially when one cannot fulfill all requests for aid; second, the closer physical proximity makes some forms of sorcery and/or poisoning easier. While Katrine and Natasha's explanations make sense for the attacks on Aubin and his uncle, they do not explain the death of Annie's father, which was the catalyst for the funeral itself. Annie's conclusion that it was envy because of a position of power seemed to make more sense to me. Both viewpoints, however, hinge on extreme jealousy as the motivation for sorcery attacks.

APPENDIX B

Table 5: Background Student Information 1

Name	Fee-Paying	Domicile	Male/Female	Scholarship	Mono/Poly (1)
Abed-Nego	Yes	Cabine	Male	No	P
Adolphe	Yes	Cabine	Male	Yes	M
Agathe	Yes	Rents	Female	No	P
Bruno	No	Family	Male	Yes	P
Cédrick	Yes	Cabine	Male	No	M
Celine	No	Cabine	Female	No	P
Eric	No	Rents	Male	Yes	P
Estelle	No	Cabine	Female	No	M
Geneviève	No	Rents	Female	No	P
Glèlè Venance	No	Family	Male	No	P
Gratien	Yes	Cabine	Male	No	M
H. Paul	No	Cabine	Male	Yes	P
Honorine	No	Rents	Female	No	M
Jocelyne	Yes	Cabine	Female	Yes	M
Joel	Yes	Cabine	Male	Yes	P
Joseph	No	Cabine	Male	Yes	M
Joyce	Yes	Cabine	Female	No	M
Laurentia	No	Cabine	Female	Yes	M
Madinatou	Yes	Family	Female	No	M
Ramatou-lai	Yes	Cabine	Female	Yes	P
Romarie	Yes	Cabine	Male	No	M
Rose	No	Cabine	Female	Yes	P
Sandrine L.	No	Cabine	Female	Yes	M
Sidonie	Yes	Rents	Female	No	P
Yves	Yes	Family	Male	No	P

(1) - Student from monogamous or polygamous family

Table 6: Background Student Information 2

Name	Anxiety (2)	Siblings	MM-MP (3)	Father	Mother
Abed-Nego	Yes	15	4	Trader	Seamstress
Adolphe	No	4	4	Farmer	Deceased
Agathe	No	16	4	Deceased	Housewife
Bruno	Yes	12	3	Businessman	Trader
Cédrick	No	3	3	Lawyer	Trader
Celine	No	18	8	Deceased	Housewife
Eric	Yes	11	4	Businessman	Trader
Estelle	No	7	7	Mechanic	Seamstress
Geneviève	Yes	19	7	Retired	Trader
Glèlè Venance	No	15	6	Retired	Housewife
Gratien	No	6	6	Driver	Housewife
H. Paul	No	16	5	Civil Servant	Trader
Honorine	Yes	5	5	Mechanic	Trader
Jocelyne	No	4	4	Driver	Trader
Joel	Yes	22	6	Entrepreneur	Trader
Joseph	Yes	6	6	Farmer	Housewife
Joyce	Yes	6	6	Trader	Housewife
Laurentia	No	5	5	Military Office	Trader
Madinatou	No	7	7	Entrepreneur	Trader
Ramatou-lai	No	11	7	Merchant	Merchant
Romaric	Yes	5	5	Military Office	Merchant
Rose	No	17	11	Police Officer	Trader
Sandrine L.	Yes	4	4	Civil Servant	Housewife
Sidonie	Yes	11	5	Teacher	Housewife
Yves	Yes	17	4	Police Officer	Trader

(2) - Student expressed anxiety in interviews

(3) - Même Mère - Même Père (siblings from same mother - father)

Table 7: Background Student Information 3

Name	Siblings at UAC	Jealousy (4)	SES	Cultural Capital
Abed-Nego	Yes	No	High	High
Adolphe	Yes	-	Low	Low
Agathe	Yes	Yes	Low	Low
Bruno	No	Yes	Medium	Low
Cédrick	No	No	High	High
Celine	No	-	Low	Low
Eric	Yes	No	Medium	High
Estelle	Yes	Yes	Low	Low
Geneviève	Yes	Yes	Low	Medium
Glèlè Venance	Yes	No	Medium	High
Gratien	Yes	Yes	Low	Low
H. Paul	No	Yes	Medium	Medium
Honorine	No	No	Medium	Medium
Jocelyne	No	Yes	Low	High
Joel	No	No	Medium	High
Joseph	No	No	Low	Low
Joyce	Yes	Yes	Medium	Low
Laurentia	No	No	High	High
Madinatou	Yes	Yes	Medium	Medium
Ramatou-lai	Yes	No	Medium	High
Romaric	No	Yes	Medium	Medium
Rose	Yes	No	High	High
Sandrine L.	No	No	Medium	High
Sidonie	Yes	No	Medium	Medium
Yves	Yes	No	High	High

(4) - Student mentioned jealousy in interviews

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