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**VITAL CONJUNCTURES REVISITED –
GENDER IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY**

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Vital Conjunctures Revisited –
Gender in Times of Uncertainty

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Vital Conjunctures Revisited – Gender in Times of Uncertainty

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Vital conjunctures and the negotiation of future: rural girls between urban middle class households and early marriage

Erdmute Alber

1 Introduction

This paper connects my reflections on the concept of vital conjunctures, which has accompanied my research for a while, with the interpretation of empirical material from Benin, West Africa, collected in the framework of a larger collaborative research project on “African middle classes on the rise”.¹ My research focus within this framework is to investigate processes of social differentiation within kin-groups in the republic of Benin, and the impact of these differentiations on the future perspectives of the actors. The general argument and finding is that in the actual situation of rising socioeconomic differences, not only kin-groups are becoming more and more in-homogeneous, but also households.

In the following I first give an account of my understanding of Johnson-Hanks’ concept of vital conjunctures and then apply it to an extended case study from my research in Benin. I focus on the story of a rural Baatombu girl called Gloria, who was given to an urban middle class household of relatives in order to “help” working there². Although she wanted to stay in town, she had to leave the household after some years, and given into marriage to a young peasant man in the village. I analyze the case story by relating it to Johnson-Hank’s concept of vital conjuncture. However, somewhat different from her argument, I analyze my case story as an entanglement of different vital conjunctures of various people, who are negotiating different futures, not only the future of the girl Gloria but also their own. In my analysis I indicate how the potential of the concept of vital conjunctures as outlined by Johnson Hanks can be enlarged by adding further dimensions to the concept. In my conclusion I explain how these further layers of analysis relate to the dimension of time.

2 Vital conjunctures

In her seminal book “uncertain honors” (2005), as well as in the article “on the limits of life stages in Ethnography: Toward a Theory of Vital Conjunctures” (2002), to which I am referring

1 The research project “middle classes on the rise”, in which I am working together with anthropologists Lena Kroeker and Maike Voigt, as well as with sociologists Dieter Neubert and Florian Stoll, is part of a larger collaborative research project, namely the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies. I am deeply grateful for the financial support and intellectual input of that project and my colleagues in Bayreuth. See www.bayreuth-academy.uni-bayreuth.de/de/teilprojekt/mittelschichten_im_aufbruch/index.html

2 The expression “helping” translates a local way of naming the arrangement that rural and not enrolled girls are sent to urban households in order to do the domestic labor. In these arrangements, no salary is paid, but the household in which the girl is working is expected to “do something for her” as people name it: pay an apprenticeship or paying the dowry. Thus, “helping” means not-salaried work.

here, Johnson-Hanks introduces the *vital conjuncture* as her key concept. It is discussed as an alternative to the wide-spread and relatively old concept of *life stage* in the anthropology on the life course.

She developed the concept in order to better explain how young middle-class Beti women in Kamerun are “navigating” (Christiansen et al. 2006) through a childhood and youth in the context of complex normative expectations concerning the honor of young women. The main goal of these young women is to become honorable adults who fulfil, if any possible, the normative expectations of their society to successfully finishing proper schooling careers. This means, as Johnson-Hanks shows, that they have to postpone their mothering careers, since early motherhood is widely seen as a shame for educated girls. Convincingly Johnson-Hanks argues that the postponement of the mothering career, and therewith, the full achievement of the status of adults, does not have, as a consequence, in any case to abstain from sexuality – this seems neither to be possible nor realistic – but to take decisions in the case of pregnancy. Girls can carry the pregnancy and give the child after delivery to foster parents, so that they “return” from the status of motherhood back to the status of school-girls. Or they can decide to finish the pregnancy by an abortion. Or they can decide to keep the baby, and, thus, become mothers and maybe even wives. Johnson-Hanks’ point is that in light of these different modes of navigating between different options for the future, the concept of clear-cut life-stages, as for-seen in “classical” anthropology, is too static.

“Rather than a clear threshold into female adulthood, here motherhood is a loosely bounded, fluid status. (...) Beti women who have borne children are not necessarily mothers, at least not all the time. Motherhood, instead, constitutes a temporary social status, an agent position that can be inhabited in specific forms of social action. (...) „Life stages“ emerge only as the result of institutional projects; their coherence should be an object, rather than an assumption, of ethnographic inquiry.” (Johnson-Hanks 2002: 866)

Johnson-Hanks’ key argument in rejecting the idea of clear-cut life-stages is, thus, that even such a seemingly clear defined status as motherhood that is imagined to designate a clear-cut line between youth and adulthood, appears to be fluid. She refers to other authors such as Goody and Bledsoe who already challenged the idea of motherhood as being so unambiguous as the classical literature argued.³

One could add other authors who have also questioned the idea that motherhood is the central criteria to make a woman an adult. One of the most impressive works on the fluidity of the category of motherhood is Mette Line Ringstedt’s (2007) article on the collisions on life courses among Tanzanian female teenagers. Ringstedt analyzes teenage motherhood in urban Tanzania with a special focus on the inter-generational negotiations between the young mothers and the grandmothers, and mentions a variety of strategies for the young women to include the grandmothers into the responsibility for the children. Some of these grandmothers refuse to help her daughters to care for the children. They argue that they are still too young to become grandmothers. Some of the teenagers, in contrast, are arguing that they are still too young for being responsible for children. Nevertheless, some of the teenage-mothers make their mothers to become the mothers of the children. Others are just neglecting the children by leaving them at home when going to bars and clubs at night. Doing so, the girls are traversing

3 See Goody 1982, Bledsoe 1980, Bledsoe and Uche Isingo-Abanike 1989, Bledsoe and Brandon 1992

back the borderline between adulthood and youth in order to become, again, childless youngsters. But, in this process, not only they are traversing fluid boundaries in their life-course, but also their mothers who are traversing the fluid line of becoming elders by accepting the status of grandmothers. Very much in line with Johnson-Hanks and referring to her, Ringsted argues that even such a seemingly unambiguous category as motherhood can be reversible in so far that after leaving their children, the young women return being teenagers, as if they have never had the experience of giving birth.

Even if at first sight Ringsted and Johnson-Hanks are arguing in the same way, there are nevertheless two meaningful differences. While Johnson-Hanks speaks about the fluidity of motherhood, Ringsted is even more radical by mentioning its reversibility. Even if a concrete life-stage is meant to be achieved later in the life-course, persons who have already achieved that stage could return to the previous one.⁴

The second difference between both author's argumentation concerns the persons involved: While Johnson-Hanks is focusing on individuals and their trajectories in their own life-courses, Ringsted focusses on the inter-generational entanglements and on the way how transitions in the life-course are affected by the inter-generational relations. She shows that the refusal or achievement of motherhood by teenage girls does not only influence their own status but also the position of others, especially the status of the grandmothers. Ringsted's chapter therefore impressively demonstrates that an anthropology of the life course should not be limited by focusing solely on individuals. Rather, it must take the inner- and inter-generational relations into consideration, because not only the position of one single person is at stake but the position of various people. I will come back to this point.

Johnson-Hank's central focus, however, is not the intergenerational entanglements but the phase or zone in which transformations in lives occur, the "vital conjunctures". She defines the concept as follows:

"The analytic concept of the vital conjuncture refers to a socially structured zone of possibility that emerges around specific periods of potential transformation in a life or lives. It is a temporary configuration of possible change, a duration of uncertainty and potential."
(2002: 871)

What is highly relevant and convincing of this concept and its definition is the notion of uncertainty and potential which is linked to an idea about future making. The relevant frame of any vital conjuncture, she argues, is the "contingent and anticipated future". In her own words:

"The social consequences of life events lie in the kinds of potential futures that they can be mobilized to authorize. Giving birth for the first time is not a standardized transition into female adulthood but, rather, a nexus of potential social futures: a vital conjuncture."
(2002: 871)

With this definition, Johnson-Hanks opens up a perspective on processes of timing in the life course that highlight a relatively simple fact, nevertheless often neglected in the literature. It is the fact that people are acting, in any moment of their life, not only on the basis of their know-

4 See also Häberlein, 2015 who demonstrates the same for old age in northern Togo. Rituals, and afterwards the very old people become younger.

ledge and experience referring to the past, but also in relation to an envisaged future which is, at the same time, unknown and contingent. Johnson-Hanks is therefore right when she criticizes the structurally and somewhat static oriented life-stage literature which takes the succession of life-stages for granted, and which seemingly suggests that every person's life is following the order of clear-cut life-stages. In contrast to that idea, Johnson-Hanks is emphasizing the fact that in every moment of their lives, people do not know what the future brings to them. However, it is the "potential social futures" Johnson-Hanks mentions in her definition, which are the basis for the actions and decisions made and taken during a vital conjuncture.

To conclude this part of introducing my understanding of the vital conjunctures concept, I would like to mention *three points* to which I will come back in my analysis and conclusion: The very importance of the concept of vital conjunctures does, *firstly, not lie so much in its criticism of the concept of the life-stage*. Drawing on Ringsted's idea about the reversibility of the stages, I am arguing that one *could* preserve the concept of the life-stages if one does not take them as concrete, in-avoidable and, thereby, mechanical steps in the lives of individuals. Rather, one should take them firstly as normative ideas about a "right" and ordered life-course specific to any society. I assume that any society has shared ideas about how a "normal" life-course should be, and the life-stages are part of this assumption about an ordered life. Of course, social change has an impact not only on the "real" life trajectories of people but also on the ideas about the life-course and the life-stages. Johnson-Hanks, herself presents us a good example for these changes: she argues that it is expected from educated young women to start their mothering careers later on.

These shared assumptions about how life should be are indicators for life-stages, as normative ideas, not as lived practice. Therefore, I would *keep the idea of life-stages* and even argue that the fluidity of the stages such as motherhood that Johnson-Hanks states, is based on a normative understanding of life-stages. Assuming fluidity between two stages nevertheless implies that there is an idea about these stages. In this regard, I would also like to refer to the "father" of anthropological research on life-stages, Arnold van Gennep (2005), who had already focused on the "in-between" of two life-stages, namely the rites de passages and the liminal phase in which the crossing of the border is accompanied by rituals of impeding and delaying, steps of returning and so on. The boundary between two life-stages has always been a dynamic one, even in the view of the authors cited by Johnson-Hanks.

Secondly, and here I refer again to Ringsted, vital conjunctures as well as life trajectories should not be understood only with the perspective on individuals but also with regard to the entanglements within the webs of kinship, the inter-generational relations and maybe even the different but interacting vital conjunctures of different people. It is not a single person that makes herself a mother, but her parents, siblings, in-laws and others who are regarding her as a mother by expecting a certain behavior, or by addressing her as mother and, thus, maybe preventing her from escaping to fulfil the expectations. And, becoming a mother does always have consequences on the life-course of others: not only the men who become fathers at the same time, but on the mothers who become grand-mothers, the sisters becoming aunts, and so on.

And *thirdly*, the very strong point of the concept of the vital conjuncture lies in its reference to the future making, which is relevant at any point of the life course, but especially in those moments of uncertainty and potential when future making takes place with all the consequences. I come back to these three points in the context of the story of Gloria, to which I am turning now.

3 Negotiating girls' futures in Benin

Benin is one of the countries with the highest population growth. Currently, there is an annual growth of 2, 7 percent. It is a country with an enormous internal migration rate that causes, among others, an accelerating urbanization process. Actually, about 45 % of the population is living in the cities, and the migration rates from the countryside to the cities are continuing. Cotonou, for instance, has grown from about 70.000 habitants in 1960 to about a million in 2010. World Bank statistics indicate that about 18 % of the population from Benin are part of the middle classes, and about 51 % are living in poverty. This has increased from 35 % in 2009 to now.⁵

What I want to point out with this rough outline is to give a background for my observations on the micro level, that while economic differences within the country are rising, so do the differences within kin groups. It has become very normal that brothers are living in very different circumstances – one brother as analphabet and peasant, the other as middle-class officer. In a situation of these mentioned rising inner-familiar differences, it has become an everyday practice that richer parts of the family take the children of poorer parts, or that poorer members of the family are hosted in the households of richer family members. This involves various conflicts, some of which can be illustrated by the story of Gloria.

I came to know Gloria⁶ in 2010, when I realized field research in the village of Tebo, northern Benin. One of my close friends, Kora, told me that he had, some years before, engaged a girl from a neighboring village for his foster son MamMam. Among the Baatombu child fostering is a very wide spread pattern, many rural children are growing up with foster parents. (Alber 2003, Alber 2014) When he recently went to her family asking if his son's wedding could now take place, he was told that the girl had been sent to Cotonou where she was still working. Therefore he should wait a little more time. Now he was worrying if the wedding would still take place. As he had invested in the girl and he felt obliged to give a wife to his foster son, he was really concerned about the wedding. The issue was even more serious for him since MamMam – with the financial help of his biological mother – had already taken another wife by himself with whom he was living since some month.

Some days later I talked with MamMam himself, who also told me that he was waiting for the wife his (foster)-father had promised to give him in marriage. Curious about the girl and the whole story, I asked my friends from Tebo to give me the telephone number of the family the girl was living with. On my next visit to Benin, in 2011, I got the number and called the man who had brought the girl to Cotonou and for whom she was working. His name was Gunu. When I gained his confidence and made sure that I did not only contact him in order to take the girl back to the village, he invited me into his house where he was living with his wife, two small children and the girl, Gloria.

Gunu was a professional soldier, somebody who had left the village – and, therewith, a whole style of life, as he told us openly – with relatively few formal educational skills, but with the strong will to become an urban citizen, a member of the middle class. Therefore, he envisaged climbing the social ladder in the army. He never regretted this choice. When I met him in Cotonou, he was just back from a stay of nine months in Ivory Coast, as a member of the UN peace-keeping forces. He immediately started talking about Gloria, because this matter

5 See <http://liportal.giz.de/benin/wirtschaft-entwicklung> (download 24.1.2016), www.indexmundi.com/g/g.aspx?v=24&c=bn&l=de (download 24.1.2016) <http://countrymeters.info/de/Benin> (download 24.1.16)

6 All names in this text are anonymized.

discomposed him, as he told me. Since some weeks, he was regularly called by the villagers and asked to send her back. However, he did not plan to send her back. He had taken her to Cotonou in order to pay her an apprenticeship and not to let her go into a marriage with a villager. I asked him to explain how and why he took her to Cotonou. Gunu answered that as he was often absent and as his wife was working as well, he had been looking, after the birth of the second child, for somebody who could take the first child to school. Firstly, he had wanted to take his youngest sister, who was still living with the peasant parents, from the village to Cotonou. His idea was to enroll her together with his child. However, as his parents refused, and, even more problematic, as in the school of his own child, the class his sister should attend was missing, started looking for another girl from the village, one which did never attend to school. He wanted to let her care for the children, and then, when grown up a bit, to pay an apprenticeship for her. Therefore he asked his brother to send him such a girl. Gloria was a girl from his own village, a relative, the daughter of divorced parents who had grown up with an aunt who had already before sent her to a foster family for some time. The aunt had given the girl to Gunu's brother who sent her to him. Now they were repeatedly calling him and asking to send her back, because she should marry somebody. He, by contrast, found that a stupid idea, the girl did not want to return to the village, she had already learnt French, why should one send her back to the backward-oriented peasants? When he had told to the girl that he wanted to send her home, he finally told us, she had started crying.

On the same evening I visited the family at home. Gunu was sitting in the sitting room, together with one of his children and Gloria. I asked him if I could talk with her alone, and he agreed. Our conversation was difficult, since she was very shy. She told me that she had left the village three years before without knowing any word in French which she had now learned here, in Cotonou. The family was good to her, the work was not too hard, and her future plan was to make an apprenticeship. However, that did not depend on her alone, she told me, and she did not want to return to the village. The conversation was short and very shy. Then Gunu asked her to buy drinks for all of us. When she returned and we had the drinks, together with Gloria – a fact that made clear that her status in the household was more the position of a kin than the position of a domestic worker – she lost a bit of her timidity. Together with the son of the family we were watching a photo album of the family, in there, some pictures of Gloria, in the same clothes as the children of the family. This, again, is a sign that she was seen at least partly as a member of the family and not only an outside worker.

After this first encounter with Gloria in the context of Gunu's urban household, I planned to visit Gloria's rural relatives in the neighboring village of Tebo. I travelled to the north of the country and spent a day in Tebo where I talked again with my friend Kora, who again, told me that he was impatiently waiting for the return of the girl from Cotonou because he wanted to organize the marriage for his foster son. Then I went to Gloria's village, which took me two hours by car, since the road was very bad and a big detour had to be made. Arriving there, I first met Gunu's brother who told me, to my astonishment, that Gloria had already been back from Cotonou. Indeed, he told us, Gunu had wanted to keep her in Cotonou, but as Gloria's family had insisted to send her back, he had to accept that. After that, I went to the family where she was living. The brother of Gloria's foster mother was the head of the compound. He openly told me he had sent her to Cotonou, and now, as she was back, he was very satisfied. For, the dowry she had taken from Cotonou was much bigger than the ordinary dowries that village girls take from their family when being sent into marriage. He frankly told me that even if somebody had wanted to keep her in Cotonou, this has never been the plan of Gloria's family. Finally, I had

a short meeting with an again very shy Gloria. It was difficulty to get the permission from her uncle to talk alone with me. She only stated in a very shy manner that she did not know why Gunu had sent her back. Maybe, she said, he was not satisfied with her work. I asked if she would now marry in the village. "What could I do?" she answered.

When I left the village and arrived back in Tebo, I was again astonished to find in Kora's compound some visitors: Gloria's household head together with some other men from her village. Immediately after my visit, they had left the village and walked the direct footpath to Tebo, so that they arrived before myself who had taken a lot of time in the bad road. They were shouting and disputing. What I understood from their many accusations was that my arrival was interpreted as an intention to make trouble and to disturb the planned wedding. Kora tried to explain that I was just an anthropologist who wanted to study kinship among the Baatombu, and assured them that the wedding would in any case take place. On the occasion of my next visit to Benin, in 2012, I met Gloria again. Now she was married and already pregnant, and lived in the new built house of MamMam, together with him and his other wife. So far the story of Gloria, which illustrates a quite typical conflict between rural and urban households in contemporary Benin. For a better understanding of its context, I give some general characteristics of urban Baatombu households like the one of Gunu one and their relation to the countryside, before analyzing the conflict more in detail.

Baatombu peasants are relatively wealthy peasants in Benin. The same is true for the urban households of Baatombu in Cotonou, the biggest city of the country. As the first Baatombu households were founded in the cities only after 1960, up to now most of them do still have strong exchange relations with the rural households of their parents, siblings or cousins. Still today many rural children and youngsters are leaving their villages in order to continue schooling, to go for an apprenticeship or just to work in the towns. In the big cities like Cotonou, many households consist of first-generation migrants from the rural areas. Such is the case for Gunu who was born in the village and left it in order to look for a different future, aspiring access to an urban middle-class life-style, and a free life, far from what he called during our meeting a "villagois" way of being.

What Gunu vividly expressed in our conversation is also a typical finding of my research: the rising socio-economic differences between close relatives go hand in hand with deep differences in the life-style, the future aspirations and the normative ideas about life trajectories. For many urban people, their rural relatives are backward people with quite distinct future aspirations. They argue that many villagers only want to marry their girls early whereas urban people mostly want their children to be in school and make careers as professionals,

However, despite and partly balancing these differences, many urban households are connected by modes of exchange with the households of their rural relatives. As Gunu's example shows, this is also the case for those Baatombu who have left the villages because they wanted to escape a "villager's life-style". One important and frequent mode of exchange between the rural and urban households is the exchange of minors, boys and girls, for several reasons. Almost all urban Baatombu households are hosting rural adolescents, often school children, students or apprentices. Many of them are also hosting young women or girls who are working in the domestic sphere. The forms of this practice have, however, changed.

When I started doing research in urban Baatombu households in 1999, 50 % of them employed minor girls as domestic workers, the majority of them being from other ethnic groups of northern Benin. Influenced by various campaigns against "child slavery", the age of the domestic workers has increased so that today, there are still many households employing an in-house domestic

worker, but normally girls or young women who are elder than 14 years.⁷ In the last 10 years, a new practice has become more and more common: the sending of un-schooled rural girls to urban households of relatives. I would see this practice as a new variation of the practice of child fostering which has been a very wide-spread way of parenting, maybe the most frequent form during the whole 20th century (Alber 2014). Some rules have been established such as the rule that the urban households have to pay an apprenticeship or the dowry for the girl. My research, including case studies such as the one presented here prove that the rules and norms of this new form of exchanging persons between households are still in flux and encompass many conflicts such as the conflict around Gloria. These conflicts, I argue, call for an extension of the concept of vital conjunctures as conceived by Johnson-Hanks.

My suggestion is that one could understand the presented case as an entanglement of vital conjunctures in the life course of different persons. Firstly, it was a vital conjuncture in the life of Gloria, during which a central decision about her future was taken. Should she continue in the town, make an apprenticeship, hopefully marry an urban young man and start a relatively late mothering career? In Benin, as in the Beti case of Cameroon described by Johnson-Hanks, following a school career or another formal education means a prolongation of childhood and youth and a relatively late motherhood. Or should she return to the village for a relatively early marriage with a peasant and mothering career? Different from the case stories presented by Johnson Hanks', in Gloria' case the decision was taken not so much by herself, but by others, her foster mother, her uncle, and by Gunu, her removed cousin who hosted her in his household in Cotonou. I have followed several similar case studies in which the decisions over the trajectories of girls, even if they had ideas and plans by themselves, were widely taken by other relatives. This is why I argue that the concept of the vital conjuncture requires, at least for the cases I know, the inclusion of a multitude of deciding and influencing persons, not only the person whose life course is at stake.

However, the inclusion of the decision making of others alone would not yet explain the dynamics in the conflict. A central driving force in the conflict were Kora and his foster son MamMam who reclaimed the girl and the marriage. And here comes my second point: The conflict around the future of Gloria could as well be interpreted as a vital conjuncture for MamMam and his father Kora, and the intensity of the conflict was due to the fact that the decision over Gloria' future did also influence the decision making of the future of MamMam. In order to fully understanding what that means, one has to have a look on the construction of the life course and the life-stages for rural Baatombu boys and men.

As mentioned above, I am keeping the life-stage as a normative concept that explains how a society sees and values the different stages in the life of men and women. According to local norms, MamMam was in the right age to become an adult, and what he needed in order to realize this status was – in the rural perception – to get a wife from his father. Since MamMam had spent his whole childhood as Kora's foster son, he had the right of getting this wife and a proper marriage from Kora. Not providing his foster son with this rite de passage would be a shame for his foster father as well. There was even more social pressure on this matter, because MamMam had already taken an initiative to become an adult: He had married a girl by his own, and, thus started to transgress the border to full adulthood. Kora, thus felt even more obliged to give him the wife and to organize the marriage in which he had already invested by paying the bride price to the in-laws. Both of them did not have any idea that this could be challenged by

7 See also Alber 2004, 2011, 2014: 362 ff, Howard 2008.

the possibility that the girl could stay in Cotonou. But when I talked to them for the first time, I noticed that both were nervous because they knew that some of the girls who followed this new trend of staying for some time in the cities did not return to the villages.

It is the entanglement of these two vital conjunctures that created the dynamics of the conflict: On the one hand it concerned MamMam's growing adult according to local norms, with the related obligation of his foster father to provide him with the obligatory rites de passages. On the other hand, it was the vital conjuncture of Gloria's entry into adulthood—and the question if that should happen according to the new urban norms of late marriage after having firstly learned a profession, or to the rural norm of being early married and starting an early mothering career. In any case the conflict got its dynamics as a confrontation of different future concepts: futures for Gloria, for MamMam, but also for Gunu. If Gunu had refused the wish of his rural relatives to send the girl back, he would have risked spoiling his relations with his rural relatives, something that almost all urban Baatombu I know try to avoid.

4 Conclusion

In the light of the case stories, Johnson-Hanks (2005) is telling in her book, but also in the light of the story of Gloria, the concept of the vital conjuncture seems to be an excellent concept in order to understand critical points in the life courses. The *power* of this concept lies in the *weight* that it gives to the processes of future making and contingency in any critical situation on the life course.

Different from Johnson Hank's definition of the concept, however, I would add a further perspective on the whole bundle of social relations that are involved in *any vital conjuncture* and draw attention to the question concerning is the real decision maker: the person whose life course is at stake or others? My example shows that a vital conjuncture of one person does often influence and is often mutually *interwoven with the vital conjunctures of others*. It is not a girl alone that becomes a wife or mother and transgresses the fluid boundary between childhood and adulthood. At the same time, a boy may become a man and transgresses, as well, a line. Or a woman becomes a grandmother, as in the case referred to by Ringstedt.

Analyzing kinship is always a bit messy—since people are on the same time husbands, fathers, uncles and maybe grandfathers. Whatever they do, they are not only making decisions over their own, contingent life-course, but also over the lives, and life-stages of others.

I will conclude this reflection by drawing your attention to the work of the historian Tamara Hareven (1995, 1997) also a prominent researcher of the life-course. She is arguing that one has to distinguish three kinds of time that have to be taken into account: the individual time, the family time and the historical time. Her argument is that research on the life-course that takes these three dimensions of time into account lead to a dynamic understanding of the family and the permanent processes of societal change. Individual time is, for her, mainly an issue of modernity in which individuals are "allowed" to take personal, individual decisions—to migrate, to marry, to leave the household and so on. Family time, in contrast, means a collective timing, including collective decision-making over the right time when a man should marry or a ritual should be done.

Johnson-Hanks' concept of the vital conjuncture speaks vividly about the contingency of an individual's time. If this would be combined with the idea of what Hareven calls "family time", then, I fear, the concept would become much messier. It would become as messy as real life is.

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