

# The Meanings of “The Child” for Married Couples in Benin

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## Abstract

The high fertility rate observed in Benin is perceived to be one of the causes of poverty within the population. In response, the reduction of births has been a political priority for the public authorities for several years and special emphasis has been placed on contraceptive promotion to encourage more couples to plan births. However, fertility rates remain extremely high and there is still a strong desire among married people for large families. According to current data, this high fertility rate can be explained because married people mistrust contraception for several reasons. Although relevant, this explanation is insufficient to fully understand all the factors driving this phenomenon in Benin. To understand the great desire for large families in Benin, we studied the meaning or significance of “the child” amongst married people. Through interviews with married people, we observed that the significance of having children is strongly rooted in the contextual realities of Benin. These results shed light on understanding high fertility rates among Beninese married couples. They also suggest that in Benin, the fertility reduction policy needs to go beyond simple contraceptive promotion by considering the frame of reference of married people regarding children.

## Keywords

Child, Meanings, Married Couples, Benin

## 1. Introduction

Benin has for decades experienced high demographic growth rates which are perceived as a human development problem. In this West African country, the average number of children per woman is 5.4 compared to 4.4 for Africa and 2.4 for the world (INSAE, 2019; Pison, 2019). According to Ahamidé et al. (2015), this demographic growth is out of sync with the country’s economic performance.

For this reason, the Beninese public authorities and development partners agree that the misalignment between demographic and economic growth is one of the causes of poverty amongst the population (INSAE, 2019; UNICEF-Bénin, 2016; PNUD-Bénin, 2015). In fact, 6 out of 10 Beninese are affected by multidimensional poverty (PNUD-Bénin, 2015). Consequently, Beninese public authorities have made the control of demographic growth a political priority in poverty reduction strategies (FMI, 2011). For example, the budgeted action plan 2014-2018 for the repositioning of family planning in Benin shows the political will to promote “responsible fertility” as favorable in the fight against poverty (ministère de la santé, 2013). The accompanying 2014-2018 plan aimed to attain by 2018 a contraceptive prevalence rate of 20% amongst married women aged 15 - 49. However, the 2018 Demographic and Health Survey shows that only 12% of women aged 15 - 49 living in union use so-called modern contraception (INSAE, 2019). In addition, the survey shows that 94% of births occurring during the five years preceding the survey were desired and that the average ideal number of children remains very high, i.e., 5.4 and 7.8 respectively for women and men in union. This reflects a strong value to have children among married people, contrary to the government’s desire to promote small families. Analyzing these data, one may wonder why married Beninese couples are so attracted to children? According to Charton et al. (2009: p. 211) “the desire for a child is part of a complex mechanism because the child is assigned different functions according to societies, individuals and life situations” (Charton et al., 2009). In fact, in most Western societies, the desire for a child is often linked to personal happiness, the desire to give and receive love (Langdrige et al., 2000; Charton & Lévy, 2017; Van Balen & Inhorn, 2002). On the other hand, social and economic reasons underlie the desire for children in other regions of the world (Van Balen & Inhorn, 2002). What are the real reasons for wanting a child in Benin? To better understand the reasons behind the desire for large families among married people, this study aims to identify the meaning and significance they attribute to children. To do this, I ask the following research question: what significance do married people in Benin give to the child?

The results of this research would enable Beninese public authorities to understand the factors driving high fertility within families and to improve the country’s demographic policy. This is because an effective fertility reduction policy requires understanding the social and cultural roles of the child and above all proposing alternative measures for parents (Van Balen & Bos, 2009; Hoffman et al., 1978; Hoffman, 1975).

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Type of Study

To answer the research question, I carry out a phenomenological qualitative study. This type of research makes it possible to build knowledge from the content of consciousness and the experiences of the participants (Giorgi, 2012; Van

Manen, 1997; Charmillot & Seferdjeli, 2002).

## 2.2. Participants: Profiles and Selection Method

The people who participated in this research are women and men aged 18 and over living as a married couple. Their participation in the study is voluntary. Only one-person was recruited per couple without their conjugal partner being aware of their participation in the study. This measure aimed to guarantee freedom of speech for women in the Beninese context where fertility decisions are the responsibility of men. The data used to write this article are part of a large survey on the social representation of the child, medical contraception, abortion as well as the factors influencing the negotiation of contraceptive use in married couples. So, this is a study that touches the privacy of participants and requires action to make all participants feel comfortable speaking.

To contact the participants, health workers at the first level of the health system including midwives, nurses, and community health workers were called upon. More specifically, health professionals offered the study to people who come for consultation in health centres, while community relays did the same in their localities where they provide certain health services to the population. People contacted by health workers were encouraged to tell others about the study and those who were interested were put in touch with me.

A group of 30 people was recruited for the study. The recruitment process was based on the principle of theoretical saturation which is achieved when the collection of data no longer gives rise to new perspectives likely to shed more light on the subject under study (Pires, 1997). The people recruited reflected good sociological representativeness and came from various categories of women and men living as married couples in Benin. This research does not require statistical representativeness since the results of qualitative studies are not intended to be generalizable. However, I made sure that married women and men of different statuses participated in order to help build knowledge about the object of study. Their socio-demographic characteristics are presented in the following **Table 1**.

The numerical spread observed in the different socio-demographic categories was not intentional but rather reflects the difficulty of recruiting volunteers in certain categories because the study focuses on reproduction, that is to say the intimacy of couples.

Ethically, the study was approved by the Research Ethics Board for Student Projects Involving Humans (CERPE4). This is an institutional ethics committee of the Faculty of Human Sciences of the University of Quebec in Montreal. The ethics approval certificate number is 2138. In contrast, efforts to obtain ethical approval in Benin have not progressed. Indeed, when I should have submitted my request for ethics approval, the National Ethics Committee for Health Research was no longer receiving new submissions due to internal difficulties. The institutional ethics committee of the Institute of Applied Biomedical Sciences was also not functional because its renewed membership was not yet installed.

**Table 1.** Distribution of respondents according to their socio-demographic characteristics.

Characteristics		Sex	
		Women	Men
Number of respondents (30)		21	9
Place of residence	Urban	14	5
	Rural	7	4
Household type	Polygamous	5	4
	Monogamous	16	5
Attitude towards medical contraception	Rejection	14	7
	Approval	7	2
Number of children	≥4 children	11	7
	<4 children	10	2
Level of study	No education and primary level	11	4
	Secondary	6	2
	University	4	3
Religion	Christianity	12	7
	Islam	2	0
	Vodoun	7	2
Age	18 - 29 years	6	5
	30 - 39 years	11	1
	≥40 years	4	3

Consent of the participants was obtained in two ways. Literate participants signed the consent form after reading its contents. Illiterate participants provided recorded oral consent after the researcher explained to them the content of the consent form in their mother tongue, Fon. All participants were encouraged to ask questions about the content of the consent form. In addition, they were fully informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without justification and prejudice. Responses were provided to those with concerns.

The data collection tools i.e. the interview guide and the socio-demographic data questionnaire were tested and adjusted before the actual data collection phase. To do this, six people were recruited with the same ethical requirements and procedures as the study participants.

### 2.3. Data: Collection, Processing, and Analysis

I carried out the data collection with a research assistant experienced in collecting qualitative data. She was recruited to collect data from women while I interviewed men. This step was taken to strengthen women's freedom of speech for

the contextual reasons that I mentioned in the participant selection section. The research assistant has signed a confidentiality agreement and completed the Tri-Council Policy Statement 2 (2018) online training on the ethics of research involving humans. Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews conducted in French and the local Fon language and recorded on digital audio tape. The themes that were addressed are as follows: desire for a child or not and why, desire for a female child or not and why, desire for a male child or not and why, desire for an additional child or not and why, parenting roles (mother and father) in childcare and education and why, perceived satisfaction with parenting and why. The interviews, entirely transcribed by me, were the subject of a thematic analysis with the RQDA software. Thematic analysis consists of reducing and synthesizing the transcribed material into a certain number of themes which translate the essential information of the body of data (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2016). A theme is “a set of words making it possible to define what is discussed in the extract from the corresponding corpus while providing an indication of the content of the words” (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2016: p. 242). At the end of the thematic analysis, I identified several themes in the respondents’ discourse that highlight the meaning and significance of the child in general and of the female and male child in particular. These themes are presented and discussed in the next section.

### 3. Results and Discussion

Analysis of the respondents’ words shows that the child has both general meaning and specific meaning according to gender. First, I will introduce the general meaning and significance of the child and then the meaning by sex.

#### 3.1. General Meaning of the Child for Respondents

- Child: the means of transmitting tangible and intangible heritage to the next generation

Almost unanimously, the respondents define the child as the protector of the material and non-material goods of their family. According to their discourse, the child is the center of gravity of the family and balances the family past and future. In other words, the child symbolizes the bridge between the past and the future of the family and must pass on the heritage of ancestors to descendants’ Therefore, renouncing procreation means choosing to break the chain of transmission and therefore family memory. In the eyes of the respondents, this constitutes a serious breach in many respects. Similar perspectives are observed in some Chinese communities and described by Héritier as follows:

*“The ultimate non-filial act is to have no descendants’ since it is a crime against the ancestors and celibacy by choice represents the ultimate form of perversity” (Héritier, 1985: pp. 10-12).*

And from this vision of reproduction, the author concludes that:

*“Not to pass on life is to break a chain of which no one is the ultimate out-*

*come, and it is also to deny yourself access to the status of being an ancestor [...]. Thus, the desire for a child is above all an eminently social desire for fulfillment—projected through a descendent who will preserve the memory of the dead [...] Duty to those who came before is therefore also a duty to oneself, who is an ancestor to come”.*

Likewise, respondents claim the duty to pass on the material, cultural and religious heritage for which they are responsible, and they are convinced that having a baby is the only way to achieve this. To support his desire for an additional child, a man in his forties tells me:

*“Yes, I want to have more children. I am a dignitary of the Atchinan deity [...] and need a young child to replace me when I get old” [Male, 44 years old].*

This motivation shows how the social drivers of fertility can sometimes be very distant from the concerns about health and financial benefits that are put forward in contraceptive promotion. In fact, when discussing parental roles, this respondent talks about the difficulties of his household in these words:

*“[...] I am not satisfied with my role as a father because I lack the means to ensure the well-being of my children and my wife” [Male, 44].*

Thus, one would expect this man to work to avoid new births in his household. However, he wants to continue procreation into old age when he will pass on to a young child the religious traditions inherited from his father, another connection with the ancestors. All things considered; the respondent’s attitude suggests that his awareness of the transmission of religious memory wins out over any other factors driving fertility. The attachment to the transmission of Voodoo beliefs and rites that forms the basis of his desire for a child is not an isolated phenomenon. Among Haitian vodoun followers, the transmission of religious knowledge is inherited and therefore constitutes a duty of loyalty to the ancestors (Régulus, 2012). Also, several ethnographic works examining totemist practices in Africa confirm the sacredness of attachment to ancestral memory and the lineage transmission of religious culture (Adler, 1998). Therefore, the duty of fidelity to the clan and the hereditary transmission of knowledge implicitly requires procreation, hence the desire for a child.

On the other hand, we find that the desire to secure material goods is also a factor in reproduction. To be convinced, let us refer to this excerpt from a respondent’s words.

*“[...] Boys command respect because of their natural authority. The family cannot extort your possessions in front of your boys. Boys have higher authority. And it is reassuring for parents in old age” [Female, 29 years old].*

These comments establish a direct link between procreation and the transmission of material heritage while betraying the preference for the male child, whom respondents deem more suitable for the role of preserving family property. Other authors also find in several countries of Southeast Asia that the transmission of goods constitutes a great motivation for the desire for children, especially of the male sex (Das gupta et al., 2003). In addition, it should be noted that if we contextualize the discourse, making procreation a tool for the protection of ma-

terial goods makes sense in Benin. For example, for years land has become an object of struggle at the intersection of interests of the rampant land mafia, the corrupt local administrations that plunder private estates and of intra-family inheritance disputes. The fraudulent sale of the estates of others, the multiple sales of the same estate, the reclamation of plots acquired by sale etc... are common occurrences (Akpinfa, 2006; Ballo et al., 2016) in a context where the land management laws and related court decisions are often not respected (Akpinfa, 2006; Andretta, 2016). Elsewhere, similar facts have justified the desire for a child, especially a male child, as this author indicates:

*“A more materialistic approach has... highlighted the advantageous social role of boys in the family... On a larger scale, the role of men in the defense of the community (village, clan, caste, etc.) or that of society as a whole appears to be a crucial feature, particularly in countries where social groups are subject to conflict. The role of boys is particularly important where state or market institutions like the police... or the defense of property rights are weak” (Guilmoto, 2015: p. 227).*

Finally, the desire for social perpetuity through the transmission of the patronym or family name also influences the desire for a child among the respondents. All insist on the duty to procreate to ensure the legacy of the family, especially the surname. Several life stories reveal the sacrifices the respondents can make to make it a reality. A woman in her forties explains, through the excerpt below, how she managed to double her fertility intention:

*“Before, I was married to another man. With him, we had four children. First three girls and then I wanted to stop childbearing. But people told me you have to have a fourth because you don't have a boy. So, I had another pregnancy, and it was a girl. I wanted to stay with him (the husband) and to stop with four children, but life together was not going well, and I had to leave his home. With my new husband, I had a first child, a boy. I cannot leave him alone among his blood brothers because my second husband was polygamous before our marriage” [Female, 37 years old]*

Another respondent recounts her similar experience. Before her marriage, this woman was betting on having four children. The rest of the story clearly explains what happened:

*“It's important to have boys [...]. In my case, I have only one boy after making four girls. At the time, I was the laughingstock of everyone. Everyone criticizes me for only giving birth to girls. And it stuck to my skin like a new name. My husband and his whole family harassed me. And thank goodness I finally gave birth to a boy. I see that my husband has preferential treatment towards the boy” [Woman, 35]*

These excerpts underline the desire for a male child, the purpose of which is not explicit in their words. However, this overwhelming desire to have boys is legitimized by the popular social practice in Benin of patrilineality in which descent is passed on through the paternal side of the family and patrilocality in which married couples live with or close to the husband's family. Although both

women have achieved their own fertility intentions, those around them are not satisfied. In clear terms, bringing many girls into the world does not meet most of the social expectations of reproduction in the Beninese context. This assertion is supported by arguments from other respondents.

*“It’s good to have boys because they make the family name permanent. The boys ensure the succession and maintain the family name” [Male, 40 years old]*

*“[...] It is through the child that we are remembered after our death. But it is the boys who ensure the succession. They are the ones who perpetuate the family name. It is through boys that the family tree develops. These are the boys who truly represent us if we are no longer there. And if we have secrets to share about family and home, it’s the boys that we confide in” [Male, 35 years old]*

Obviously, the cross-checking of these discourses shows that succession and the desire to perpetuate the family through the surname constitute major motivations for the desire of a child among the respondents. Overall, the respondents consider that the child is the guarantor of family legacy in all its forms. Mahmud’s speech in a study exploring perceptions of infertility among Nigerians perfectly sums up respondents’ state of mind about the child. Here is how Mahmud, 44, concludes his view of the child in his interview with the researchers:

*“I shall conclude by saying, whosoever does not have a child throughout his lifetime, it is as if God has never created him. Because the moment he dies, everything concerning him also dies” (Ibisomi & Mudege, 2013).*

This statement by Mahmud making the child and transmission of heritage two inseparable realities, reflects the words of the people interviewed during this study. I can therefore conclude that for the respondents the child is the means of transmitting the tangible and intangible heritage of the family.

- Child: the guarantor of glorious funerals for deceased parents

By explaining the reasons that justify their desire to procreate, some respondents symbolize the child as being the guarantor of the parents’ funerals. In most African societies, funeral ceremonies are times of social exhibition (Barou & Navarro, 2007; Degorce, 2010). For example, a study shows that in Bamileke culture in Cameroon, funerals are the subject of sumptuous celebrations which mark family and social positions (Kuipou, 2015). Among the Fon of Benin, the same phenomenon is described in these terms:

*“We note in the Fon environment a progressive degeneration of the funeral rite which, from its symbolism, leads to real occasions for ostentation and exhibitionism. [...] The body is deposited, for several weeks, in the morgue [...] on the day of the funeral, the body is furnished with luxurious objects such as necklaces, and beautiful clothes. The body is exhibited with excessive decorum. The luxury of the coffin, the profusion of wreaths, the tile or marble of the tomb, the ‘great food’, the alcoholic libations, the spectacular manifestations are characteristics of the funeral as it is currently organized among the Fon” (Tingbé-Azalou, 1993: p. 66).*

For this, the desire to benefit from funeral rites in accordance with social expectations is a major motivation for the desire for a child reflected in the words of the respondents. They further argue that the solemnity and luxury required for funeral rites are only guaranteed in the presence of the biological children of the deceased. The following excerpt gives an idea of the scope of this argument.

*“It is important to have children because of the day you are going to die because the funerals of infertile people are botched. A sterile person who dies today can be buried that night. But if she has children, they will drop her off in the morgue and take time to organize her funeral. No family can do this to a deceased person if they are not their biological children [...]” [Woman, 29 years old]*

In this excerpt, the respondent explicitly links the possibility of being buried with dignity to reproduction. The same phenomenon is observed in other African and Asian regions and is reported by an author in the excerpt below:

*“In many societies, a woman is not considered and designated as such until she has procreated. Otherwise, even married, she is still considered and treated as a girl who never left childhood and, after her death, she will be buried without honor in the children’s cemetery; this is the case among the Samo [...] to be honored after one’s death, therefore supposes having fulfilled one’s duty of procreation and having had a viable descent which, transmitting the life received, allows the ancestors to continue to exist” (Héritier, 1985: p. 11).*

Likewise, another study reveals that in Madagascar, women and men who have died childless are deprived of the rituals intended to confer on the deceased the status of ancestor (Jaovelo-Dzao, 1996). Therefore, these dead do not enter the temple of deified ancestors and their memory is forgotten in the world of the living. Also, a number of ethnographic works reveal in many African societies that the death of adults triggers a ritual process at the end of which the deceased is supposed to detach himself from the world of the living to join the ancestors (De Latour, 1996). These rites take place in two stages and include burial ceremonies and funeral arrangements. These constitute moments of social exhibition and the squandering of wealth (Barou & Navarro, 2007). In Côte d’Ivoire, for example, solidarity funds have been set up in companies to enable employees to mobilize the resources necessary for the organization of funerals (Gnabéli, 1996). In Benin, where the phenomenon is excessively expanding, the parents of the deceased can go into debt to exhibit the luxury suitable for the occasion (Noret, 2010). In the collective consciousness, this ritualized funeral extravaganza is associated with a certain image of the child who is seen as the guarantor of the lavish funeral. Thus, the child means the guarantor of a large funeral for the respondents.

- Child: old age insurance for the elderly

For almost all the respondents, one of the main reasons for childbearing is that the child is old age insurance. They say they chose to procreate because children provide elderly parents with bodily and health care, food and financial support. Studies from a variety of socio-economic strata show that in low-income

countries, children have economic value in terms of supporting the elderly (Hoffman & Hoffman, 1996). Also, a wide range of studies on the social and cultural consequences of childlessness in poor countries, especially in Africa and Asia, show that people who have not had children are excluded, stigmatized and do not benefit from 'economic and emotional support during old age' (Van Balen & Bos, 2009). According to respondents, the fate of these childless elderly people is preventable when they reproduce.

*"[...] My boy was the top of his class lately. I was very proud of it. This is my retirement that I am preparing like this. My children will take care of me in my old age"* [Woman, 29]

It appears in this declaration that children constitute a "social safety net" in old age. This social function of children is so ingrained in the consciousness of respondents that no one imagines an old age deprived of a child. This suggests that choosing not to reproduce is to willingly give up this coverage in old age. Moreover, in a comparative study, researchers see that the value of the child for comfort and esteem is very high in low-income countries with high fertility and kinship systems based on lineage; and negligible in rich, low fertility countries with a public social insurance system (Nauck & Klaus, 2007). In other words, reproduction is far from being a selfless act in low-income countries with no real social insurance systems. The child plays an important role in the protection of elderly parents as it appears in the following interview excerpt:

*"I want to have children [...]. We are called to grow old. Old age is unhappy if you don't have children. Imagine a person aging without children. What will become of her?"* [Woman, 28 years old]

The use of reproduction in this materialistic perspective, centered on the quest for a dignified and happy old age, leads me to say that the child also means old age insurance for the respondents.

- Child: a barrier against aggressions in old age

I noticed in the interviews that respondents also define the child as a shield against aggression towards elderly parents. A study carried out among elderly people of various socio-demographic profiles shows a feeling of insecurity and the desire to guard against aggressive acts (Kimber et al., 2018). Other studies also reveal that elderly people are victims of various abuses including sexual and physical assault (Beaulieu & Lussier-Therrien, 2016; Berg et al., 2014). Assault is facilitated by several risk factors including social isolation (OMS, 2008). Consequently, social ostracism towards childless people in a context of increasing violence against the elderly, gives meaning to the respondents' desire to procreate as the respondents testify in the following extracts:

*"If someone decides to harm your physical integrity and remembers your boy's presence, they will recant. The boy embodies a certain security in the house"* [Male, 39 years old].

*"If you have a boy in the family, if people want to talk to you as a family, they will think a few times before they say things because they are going to say to each other, her boy is there"* [Female, 32 years old].

From the above, I conclude that for the respondents, the child means protection against aggression towards the elderly.

- Child: a human being's most important "achievement"

Among respondents, the discourse on children is constructed in such a way as to make them the ultimate "achievement" of human beings. Respondents do not seem to conceive of human life apart from reproduction. This vision of the child is discussed in interviews with strong and even stereotypical statements. For example,

"[...] *whatever the wealth of a person, without children, his wealth is worth nothing. Without children, we have no value [...]*" [Male, 24 years old].

To add to the comments of the previous respondent, another said:

"*In life, if you don't have kids, you're nothing even if you're the richest in the world because money can't do everything. The child is more important than anything in life because no one can buy a child with money. Even if you adopted a child with money, that child will one day ask for its own mother. So, an adopted child is not the equivalent of a biological child*" [Female, 37 years old].

This dogmatic vision of the child contrasts with other research findings. In the West, for example, becoming a parent is one life option among many others [12]. Analysis of discussions in online forums around the infertility of non-parents by choice reveals that procreation is one of life's many possibilities (De Pierrepont & Lévy, 2017) as reflected in the following excerpts:

"*A bigger house... better cars, not having to protect dangerous/fragile things (to refer to the children). To have beautiful things, antiques, works of art*" [Man's opinion].

"*I love my husband and our relationship. I don't want this dynamic to be screwed up with a child*" [Woman's opinion].

These non-parents by choice justify the choice of voluntary childlessness with arguments specific to their frames of reference. But this choice cannot be understood among the people I interviewed. One of them demonstrates this in the excerpt below:

"[...] *If a person gets married and does not think about having children, he must have a disturbance at his level. A married person must have children*". [Female, 26 years old].

In short, respondents also define the child as the most important achievement in the life of a woman or a man.

- Child: the means of acquiring social respect and achieving femininity

Some respondents used the word "honor" to describe what the child means to them. They believe that the child is an "object" of glory and social respect for parents, especially women. Moreover, this image of the child is found more in female discourse. In this vein, a study on the value of the child among Iranian women shows that parenthood has contributed enormously to the strengthening of their social position at the community level (Akbar, 1998). The following excerpts from my interviews show how the child constitutes a means of acquiring respect according to the respondents:

“[...] *if you have a child, you are respected more than people who do not have children. It is an honor to have children*” [Female, 31]

“*If you are a woman without children, those around you do not consider you ... It is obligatory for a woman to have children. It's for her honor*” [Female, 35].

“[...] *Women who give birth have a dignity that is lacking in women who do not have children* [female, 23]”.

Beyond this meaning of the child, some respondents also describe the reproductive act as a means of achieving their femininity. And this image of the child is more powerful in women than in men. Indeed, motherhood is the most important function of Beninese women (Fourn, 2011). It is through reproduction that she justifies her femininity as evidenced by the words of this mother:

“[...] *A woman who does not give birth becomes the laughingstock of everyone. She has no peace. Without children, a woman is worth nothing*”.

It should be noted that this essentialization of women for reproduction is not limited to Benin. Hindu women confided in a study in India that reproduction is the prerequisite for becoming a complete woman in their context and that giving birth to a boy is the ultimate act of achieving this femininity (Dufour, 2017). Other studies from South Africa, India and Tanzania show that infertile people, especially women, experience social isolation, disrespect, or both (Dyer et al., 2002; Widge, 2005; Hollos et al., 2008).

All in all, the child is a means of acquiring social respect and achieving femininity according to the respondents.

- Child defined as a potential problem.

In addition to what is described above, the analysis of the data brings to light another meaning of the child. Here the respondents state that the child also symbolizes problems. This meaning of the child is based on the difficulties associated with parenthood. Many respondents expressed concern about the hope placed in the reproductive act as a social safety net for older people. These fears lead them to symbolize the child as a problem. This problem encompasses a variety of potential situations ranging from dropping out of school and parricide to abandoning elderly parents and selling off family assets. Respondents' fear of parenthood comes to the fore because a study shows that parenthood is the most important variable associated with problems such as dropping out of school, teenage pregnancy, drug addiction and juvenile crime (Hoghughi, 1998). Likewise, children develop an unstable personality with problems associated with upbringing and social relations as they grow up in families characterized by poor parenting skills (Hoghughi & Speight, 1998). In contrast, paternal involvement with adolescents increases their level of education and reduces the risks of drug addiction and delinquency among young people (Harris et al., 1998). Despite this, many parents play their roles without any support (Poole, 2003). The following excerpts show how the child symbolizes a problem according to the respondents:

“[...] *Teenage girls can become recalcitrant, get pregnant and become a problem for parents...*” [female, 28].

“[...] *If the boys have nothing, they squander the property of the parents. It can happen that boys want the death of their parents to inherit their property. In short, boys can create problems for you because they are called to live in the same house with you*” [Male, 30].

These excerpts clearly reveal that the child is defined as a potential problem. And this is another picture of the symbolism of the child among the respondents.

Beyond these general reflections about the meaning and significance of the child, analysing the themes shows that some of them specifically describe the girl or boy. I am therefore now going to highlight the meaning and significance of the girl and the boy according to the discourse.

### 3.2. Specific Meaning of the Child by Sex

Analysis of the snippets coded in the themes reveals a gendered meaning of the child with the social expectations of respondents towards the child varying depending on gender.

- Meaning of the female child

The analysis of the coded verbatim comments shows that for the topic of old age insurance, the respondents insist on the importance of having female children. Let us remember that this meaning of child old-age insurance emerges from intergenerational solidarity reflected in the economic and emotional support of children to elderly parents. This is because Benin does not have a real social protection policy for the elderly. Thus, the child provides a measure of social protection covering the vital needs of parents during old age. On this subject, the respondents are unequivocal. It is the female child who embodies the hope of meeting these expectations among the elderly because daughters are more outgoing and show more generosity, empathy and understanding. The dedication of women to their parents in old age has been noted in several social contexts. For example, 70% of carers for the elderly in France are women (Dutheil, 2001). In Senegal, support for elderly parents is characterized by greater involvement by girls than boys (Gning, 2017).

This meaning of girls is deeply rooted in the discourse of the respondents. The words of a 50-year-old man who is father of a large family illustrate the situation well. The man is a staunch defender of the importance of boys in a family. He cannot imagine his life apart from male children. And yet, it is with a condescending air that he talks about his boys when we ask him the reasons behind his desire for a male child:

*“I wish I had more girls than boys because in adulthood boys always complain about not having enough money. They rarely give me any money. Boys don’t spend enough on parents because they have their problems too. They take care of their homes. But there are advantages to having boys...”*

When I next question him on the motives for his desire for a female child, the man sat up in his chair, recomposed his posture and said with contagious pride:

*“There are a lot of advantages to having daughters. My daughters will feed me, help me wash my clothes, draw water for me and sweep my room. [...] At my call, my daughters are going to run to come and see me. This is not the case with the boys who go about their business. Girls are more empathetic towards parents. If my daughters are married to wealthy men, they will give me whatever I want”.*

Almost all the respondents perceive the girl in the same way:

*“It’s an advantage to have daughters [...]. Everyone knows that girls support parents better than boys. When a girl is born, you are not always happy, including the husband, but in the end, it is the girl who is more advantageous than the boy because of her attention to the parents’ place. Girls very often think of their parents, boys don’t” [female, 31].*

*“Girls are more empathetic to parents than boys. For example, even married girls are very concerned about the welfare of parents regarding food needs. But for boys, looking after parents in old age is not the first instinct” [Male, 30].*

*“I want to have girls because girls love parents more than boys. If a parent calls their daughter and boy to solve a problem, the girl will intervene faster than the boy” [Female, 32 years old].*

Considering these comments, it is rather the girl who means old-age insurance for respondents.

- Meaning of the male child

In the discourse, extracts coded in themes such as protector of family legacy and defender of parents that define the boy. This meaning is probably based on patrilocal residence and the patrilineal mode of inheritance that is prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa. For example, in rural Senegal, the residence is always patrilocal insofar as the married man takes up residence with his parents so that his wife helps them (Randall & Mondain, 2014). Another study shows that Asian parents favor the birth of boys because of patrilocal norms dictating the cohabitation of men with their elderly parents (Ebenstein, 2014). Also, the transmission of family legacy is generally patrilineal in nature in many cultural contexts (Groppi & Fine, 1998; Timtchueng, 2011). These sociological realities, in particular the co-residence of elderly parents and their sons, as well as the patrilineal rules of transmission of property have undoubtedly shaped the meaning of the male child as can be seen in the following remarks:

*“Boys are a guarantee for the preservation of the family heritage. In fact, it is the boys who perpetuate the surname. They get married and have children and the family gets bigger. It is the boys who take the lead in the event of family disputes and solve the problems” [Woman, 23 years old].*

*“Children are a safeguard against aggression towards parents. The children dissuade those around us who would be tempted to insult us for fear of facing the anger of our children” [Woman, 55 years old].*

These words make it clear that the male child means both the security of the elderly parents and the protection of the family heritage.

#### 4. Conclusion

Our data shows that the child represents many things for respondents. The words used in the speech to describe the child make him an indispensable and almost angelic social object. And in this angelic symbolism, we identify meanings of the child at the confluence of the will to conform to a social order and the desire to possess an “object” from an essentially materialistic perspective. Also, this symbolism of meaning of the child reveals that their portrait varies considerably depending on the sex. Thus, boys embody the power essential to the physical security of elderly parents and the hope of perpetuating the family heritage, while girls symbolize the humanist figure necessary for a better life for the elderly in a social context where they are marginalized in the political agenda. This gendered meaning of the child leads married people to desire children of both sexes. Thus, several respondents had to exceed their fertility intentions to have a female or male child. However, much research shows that by strengthening the decision-making power of women, particularly through education, it would be possible to reduce fertility. In fact, it is common knowledge that women’s education is negatively associated with fertility. However, this measure risks being ineffective in Benin where procreation constitutes a strategy for mitigating the risks linked to the weakness of the State in terms of social protection, security, and protection of private assets, particularly property. For this reason, I suggest that the State consider the data of this research to adjust its demographic and poverty reduction policy instead of focusing only on contraceptive promotion, the objectives of which are very out of step with social factors driving procreation in Benin.

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#### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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## Annex 1: Socio-Demographic Data Form

Questionnaire to be completed by the respondent or administered to him/her.

Important notice: Please note that your answers will be kept strictly confidential!

1. Gender:

a) Male

b) Female

2. Place of residence

a) Name of the city or village: ..... (Specify name)

b) Name of Neighborhood: ..... (Specify name)

3. Religion

Check only one answer among the following!

a) Christianity

b) Islam

c) Traditional religion

d) Atheism

e) Others  ..... (specify religion)

4. What job do you do for a living? .....

5. What is the job / job of your spouse? .....

6. What is your level of education?

Check only one answer among the following:

a) Never attended school

b) Primary

c) Secondary

d) Higher education (University or others...)

7. What is your spouse's level of education?

Check only one answer among the following:

a) Never attended school

b) Primary

c) Secondary

d) Higher education (University or others...)

8. How old are you? ..... (Specify age)

9. How old is your spouse .....? (Specify the age)

10. How long have you been living as a couple with your partner? .....

(Specify the year)

11. What type of union do you live in?

Check one answer.

a) Monogamous union

b) Polygamous union

12. Before your marriage, did you wish to have any child (ren) in your life?

a) Yes

b) No

13. How many children would you like to have? ..... (Specify the

number)

- a) Specify the number of children of each sex you want.
  - b) Number of girls: ..... (Specify the number)
  - c) Number of boys: ..... (Specify the number)
  - d) Having children according to providence (God's will)
14. How many children do you have now? ..... (specify the number)  
Specify how many children of each sex you have.
- a) Number of girls: ..... (Specify number)
  - b) Number of boys: ..... (Specify the number)
15. At what age did you have your first child? .....
16. Are you pregnant or is your partner pregnant? ...  
Check one answer a) Yes  b) No
- a) If yes, is your current pregnancy desired? ..... i) Yes  ii) No
  - b) If no, was your last pregnancy desired? ... i) Yes  ii) No

## Annex 2: Interview Guide

Theme: Desire for child, family life

1. You say that before your marriage you wanted to have (or not to have) child (ren), could you tell me why this wish?
2. You also say that before your marriage you wished to have (or not to have) one or more male child (ren). Could you tell me why did you have this wish?
3. You also say that before your marriage you wished to have (or not to have) one or more female children. Could you tell me why did you have this wish?
4. Currently, you had more (or less) children than you wanted before marriage, could you tell me why?
5. Would you like to have another child? ..... a) Yes  b) No   
If yes, why?  
If not, why?
6. In your opinion, who should take care of the maintenance of the children in terms of expenses, social education, and other care in a couple and why?
7. In your opinion, what specific roles should the father and mother play in the maintenance and education of children and why?
8. What role do you concretely play in the education and maintenance of your children and why?
9. Are you satisfied with the role you play in the education or maintenance of your children? ..... a) Yes  b) No   
If yes, why?  
If not, why?