

Hidden prostitution? Understanding “Bizi” within the contemporary transactional sex and HIV prevention programs in Cote d’Ivoire

Ramatou Ouedraogo, African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC)

Background

Côte d’Ivoire has one of the highest prevalence rates of HIV in West Africa: it is estimated at 3.7% compared to 0.8 for Burkina Faso or 1.6 for Ghana (‘AIDSinfo | UNAIDS’, 2017). Abidjan, the capital, records 5.1%. As in all countries, the epidemic is concentrated among "key populations" with 12.2% for Sex workers and 12.3 for Men having Sex with Men (MSM) (‘AIDSinfo | UNAIDS’, 2017). Also, CAP surveys highlight risky sexual practices among the "key populations" such as non-systematic condom use and a low ability to refuse unprotected sex for a better price among Sex Workers (Enda-Sante, 2014).

While there are programs for sex workers running in Cote d’Ivoire, observable gaps in these SRH interventions have been observed. The country, and Abidjan in particular, are experiencing new forms of transactional sex labelled *Bizi*. While the channels established by HIV response mechanism refers to them or target them as “prostitutes” or “PS” (sex professional), students, pupils, hairdressers, waitresses, salesgirls, among others, who "manage the Bizi" often do not identify themselves in this category, and are therefore considered as “un-shown”, “hidden” or “un-official” prostitutes. Therefore, they become a *hard-to-reach* population for HIV prevention programs, as opposed to the conventional sex workers, whose dominant figures are the "toutous" in brothels and the “streetwalkers” along avenues. This population constitutes de facto bottlenecks in HIV eradication efforts that the country is engaged in as per the global objectives (UNAIDS, 2014).

In a context where the plurality and complexity of transactional sex have been highlighted by various studies (Broqua & Deschamps, 2014; Kouassi, 1986; Tabet & Contreras, 2005; Zelizer, 2000), and in the continuation of reflections on the *Mbaraan* practice in Senegal (Adjamagbo & Koné, 2013; Foley & Drame, 2013; Fouquet, 2012), this paper contributes to the categorization of contemporary transactional sex in Côte d’Ivoire through the example of *Bizi*.

Drawn on an anthropology of "social meanings of sexual acts" (Bozon, 1999), the paper aims to document the modus operandi of this practice, as well as the rationales that underlie it. Previous and recent research has shown the importance of intimate transactions in the circulation and (re)distribution of financial resources within conjugal, extramarital and premarital relationships in Abidjan (Koenig, 2016; Le Pape & Vidal, 1984, 1987). Following these studies, this paper will analyze the interactional and transactional dynamics of these intimate exchanges through the prism of the socio-economic transformations of recent decades (economic and emotional precarity,

lengthening of the youth phase, generalization of new information and communication technologies, etc.) (Antoine, Lelièvre, & GRAB, 2006; Antoine, Razafindrakoto, & Roubaud, 2012; Bréda, Deridder, & Laurent, 2013).

Methods

This ethnography study was carried out between August 2016 and January 2017 in Abidjan as part of a research program funded by the European Research Council (ERC Consolidator Grant 617930). The approach included observations in bars, “maquis”, hairdresser's salon, markets and brothels as part of an NGO's outreach activities in Yopougon, Koumassi and Port-Bouet. These observations allowed me to document the interactions between young women, the NGO peer educators, “managers” and clients, and also to recruit 11 young women doing *Bizi* and five young women self-identifying themselves as “PS” for future interviews. After initial recruitment, I exchanged contact information with all participants and cultivated personal relationships. This relationship-building helped to build trust to overcome the sensitivity and taboo surrounding the issue, and allowing them to speak of their experience and practice. In-depth interviews and informal discussions were then conducted in French, Dioula or English. The loosely structured interviews were conducted to get as close as possible to an informal discussion guided by the priorities of participants. I first asked general questions about their life, family, school or work, etc.. Then, questions focused on their presence in the place where we first met, their relationship with their partner(s), transactions in these relationship, their rationale and strategies, among others. The material thus collected was rich in the personal, familial, socio-economic, and romantic events which drive the practices and rationales with regards to *Bizi*.

These interviews were supplemented by informal interviews with two bar's managers.

The transcripts and field notes were analyzed using an inductive content analysis approach. I first identified the key themes and illustrative quotes by reading each of the transcripts and fields notes and highlighting each theme with specific color. I then analyzed these themes and discussed with the existing literature.

Ethical approval was obtained from Cote d'Ivoire's National Committee on Research Ethics. Informed written or verbal consent to participate in the study was obtained from all informants.

Results

The data show a differentiation between the mechanism and rationale of the “PS” (also called “Toutou”) and the “Géreuse de *Bizi*” (literally manager of *Bizi*) as highlighted in table 1.

Table 1: *Differentiation between ‘Toutou’ and ‘Geureuse de Bizi*

Toutou

Géreuse de Bizi

Etymology	The term "toutou" is the French form of the English expression "two two", which itself is a translation of "two pences two shillings", representing in the past the pass-price for a prostitute ¹	Bizi is a derivation of business, and refers to the fact of making money, getting gifts, or achieving important things through romantic/sexual relationships
Actors	-Women mostly foreign and/or English speakers (Nigeria, Liberia, Ghana, Togo...) -Sex partners called "clients"	-Mostly Ivorian women, ordinary girls (pupils, students, shopkeepers, waitresses, hairdressers, etc.) -Sex partners called : boyfriends, "pointeur" "pigeons", "guru"
Spaces	Brothels, streets,...	Common spaces: "maquis", bar, events (weddings, baptisms, etc.), internet, swimming pool...
Modus operandi	-Waiting by the studio's door, and motioning the "client": " honey comes "; -Salary with fixed amount -Sometimes regular costumers	- Arrange to attract attention and be pursued by "pointeur", or be included in the repertoire of "managers" that establish contact with "guru", "pigeons", "pointeurs", etc. - Sexual acts at home when she lives alone, hotel, home of the "pointeur"... - Gifts with or without acts and before or after acts - Retention to build a pool of potential husbands - Use of internet, mobile phone, social networks (Facebook, WhatsApp...)
Aim	Financial	-Financial -Potential husbands -Social achievement: get a job, get a visa, valuable status in the family and social network....

The differentiation and categorization is done through a (re)appropriation of romantic and gender norms as described by one of the respondents:

¹ Description done by Goli Kouassi in his book titled "La prostitution en Afrique: un cas, Abidjan (Nouvelles Editions africaines, 1986)

"The prostitute sells herself, while I accept gifts from men who are dating me. It is normal when a man dates you that he supports you (...). In addition to that, in my mind I tell myself that he may one day be my husband". (Student in a training centre, 22 years old)

Beyond sex and its remuneration, the *Bizi* involves a game of seduction (through the spaces and modalities in which it takes place, as well as the tools mobilized) in which young women as "subjects" embrace love and gender codes to succeed socially and complete their transition to adulthood.

In a context of affective and economic precariousness, the young women engaged in *Bizi* and interviewed in this study are engaged in a game of seduction consisting in attracting attention, ensuring systematic "support" not to lose in the change (Koenig, 2016), setting up a pool of potential husbands, etc., while dissociating oneself from the socially reproved "prostitute".

Also, the differentiation and categorization in regard to conventional prostitution is based on a logic of preservation of the intimacy within the public sphere. Indeed, with HIV and sexual and reproductive health programs, sexual intimacy is increasingly moving into the public sphere, and the *Bizi* mechanism enables the young women engaged in this practice to have control over this part of intimacy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the *Bizi* engages young women in interaction with intermediaries called "managers" or "good tantes" who by their presence feed the *Bizi* mechanism and build with them an elder-cadet relationship of dependence and domination. In short, these sexual transactions are intertwined in a broader set of intimate exchanges involving different actors (young women, their partners, intermediaries, and families), constraints (e. g. obligation for young women to contribute to the family's expenses for instances), life goals and expectations.

Ultimately, this mechanism wraps the *Bizi* in a socially acceptable layer, which justifies that it is not considered as prostitution and that it is "hidden" only for interventions seeking or targeting prostitutes.

References

- Adjamagbo, A., & Koné, P. A. (2013). Situations relationnelles et gestion des grossesses non prévues à Dakar. *Population*, Vol. 68(1), 67–96.
- AIDSinfo | UNAIDS. (2017). Retrieved 5 July 2019, from <https://aidsinfo.unaids.org/>
- Antoine, P., Lelièvre, E., & GRAB. (2006). *Etats flous et trajectoires complexes: Observation, modélisation, interprétation*. Paris: INED.
- Antoine, P., Razafindrakoto, M., & Roubaud, F. (2012). Contraints de rester jeunes? Évolution de l'insertion dans trois capitales africaines: Dakar, Yaoundé, Antananarivo. *Autrepart*, (18), 17–36.

- Bozon, M. (1999). Les significations sociales des actes sexuels. *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 128(1), 3–23. <https://doi.org/10.3406/arss.1999.3288>
- Bréda, C., Deridder, M., & Laurent, P.-J. (2013). *Modernité insécurisée: Anthropologie des conséquences de la mondialisation*. Editions L'Harmattan.
- Broqua, C., & Deschamps, C. (Eds.). (2014). *L'échange économique-sexuel*. Paris: Éd. EHESS.
- Enda-Sante. (2014). *Rapport IBBS sur HSH à Abidjan, Agboville, Bouaké, Gagnoa, San Pédro, Abidjan*. Abidjan: Enda-Sante.
- Foley, E. E., & Drame, F. M. (2013). Mbaraan and the shifting political economy of sex in urban Senegal. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 15(2), 121–134. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2012.744849>
- Fouquet, T. (2012). De la prostitution clandestine aux désirs de l'Ailleurs : Une « ethnographie de l'extraversion » à Dakar. *Politique africaine*, (107), 102–123.
- Koenig, B. (2016). Amour, ruse et érotisme dans les transactions intimes de jeunes de la ville d'Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire). *Recherches féministes*, 29(2), 63–85. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1038721ar>
- Kouassi, G. (1986). *La prostitution en Afrique: Un cas, Abidjan*. Nouvelles Editions africaines.
- Le Pape, M., & Vidal, C. (1984). LIBÉRALISME ET VÉCUS SEXUELS A ABIDJAN. *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie*, 76, 111–118. Retrieved from JSTOR.
- Le Pape, M., & Vidal, C. (1987). L'école à tout prix. *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 70(1), 64–73. <https://doi.org/10.3406/arss.1987.2394>
- Tabet, P., & Contreras, J. (2005). *La grande arnaque : Sexualité des femmes et échange économique-sexuel*. Paris: Editions L'Harmattan.
- UNAIDS. (2014). *Fast-Track - Ending the AIDS epidemic by 2030*. Retrieved from https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/documents/2014/JC2686_WAD2014report
- Zelizer, V. A. (2000). The Purchase of Intimacy. *Law & Social Inquiry*, 25(3), 817–848. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-4469.2000.tb00162.x>