Together with Prof. Beverly Strassmann, I investigate what drives religious conversion in a rural Malian population. The Dogon of Mali practice three religions: the local Dogon religion, Islam, and Christianity. Since the 1940s, participation in the traditional religion has been decreasing in favor of Islam which has become the dominant religion in the community. Catholic and Protestant missions established local churches around the same time that have attracted members away from the Dogon religion on a minor scale. Since most conversion has been out of, rather than into, the Dogon religion, we asked: given the father practiced the Dogon religion, what drives his son to adopt a new religion in adulthood?

We test two hypotheses: (1) sons of poorer fathers were more likely to convert to Christianity and sons of wealthier fathers were more likely to stay with the Dogon religion or convert to Islam and (2) sons of monogamous fathers were more likely to convert to Christianity than sons of polygynous fathers. The first hypothesis is based on the Dogon themselves, who reported that Christianity was attractive to poorer individuals. The second hypothesis is premised in the fact that Christianity is alone among the religions in Mali whose doctrines specify monogamous marriage. With the help of Prof. Kerby Shedden, we use multinomial logistic regression with general estimating equations using father’s wealth and father’s number of wives as predictor variables and the son’s religion (Dogon, Islam, Christianity) as the outcome variable for n = 570 father-son pairs to test these hypotheses. We adjust for the son’s village of residence and decade of birth.

Our main finding is that as a man’s father becomes wealthier, he is less likely to convert Christianity, which is true whether Dogon or Muslim sons are used as the reference category. A one unit increase in father’s wealth (one SD of population wealth) decreases the odds a son will convert to Christianity by around half; this effect is marginally higher comparing Christians to Muslims (0.57) than Christians to Dogon. The wealth effects are highly significant, with P values below 0.0001. Father’s number of wives does not influence what religion his son adopts for any pairwise comparison. We attribute the former finding to the fewer expenses associated with Christianity compared to Islam and the Dogon religion in this community and the latter to either a lack of relationship in father’s and son’s number of wives, the inability of religion to impose a real impediment in taking on another wife, or a combination of both the above explanations. Our results suggest that in the Dogon, conversion often serves the interest of the convert and that the benefits of conversion are important on an individual, rather than group level.
Mosque in Dogon country. Picture credits: Beverly Strassmann.