

Religious conversion in the Dogon of Mali is motivated by individual interests not cultural group selection

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“Human behavioral ecology” (HBE) seeks to understand the ways in which individuals pursue their genetic interests by aspiring toward proximate goals like power, status, and wealth. In the absence of contraception and socially imposed monogamy, these goals are expected to translate into increased reproduction. “Cultural group selection” (CGS) seeks to understand the spread of norms that cause groups that are more cooperative to outcompete groups that are less cooperative. The spread of religion is often cited as support for CGS. However, quantitative data are required to determine whether the mechanism for the spread of religion is best described by HBE or CGS. To date such fine-tuned, individual-level data have been lacking. We studied a Dogon community on the Bandiagara Escarpment to test the alternative hypotheses that religious conversion is (1) the result of individual behavior (HBE), or (2) group behavior (CGS). The data are from the years 2000 to 2008 when 55% of Dogon sons ($n = 570$) in our study left the indigenous religion of their fathers and converted to Islam or Christianity. We found that individuals in the same patrilineages and villages made divergent choices resulting in religious diversity instead of homogeneity in cultural groups. Moreover, religious preferences were predicted by individual circumstances rather than by group membership. Poorer men were more likely than wealthy men to choose Christianity, which was the religion that required the fewest monetary expenses. Wealthier men retained the indigenous religion of their fathers or converted to Islam; these two religions entailed similar expenses and were locally and regionally more powerful. By paying more for their religion, wealthier men accessed the benefits of wider systems of indirect reciprocity. Our findings support the hypothesis that conversion is an individual-level choice shaped by the interests of the convert; they conflict with predictions from CGS theory.