At school, many students intended to marry only when they were in a position to provide for a wife and children. Where a student was the only member of his family to progress as far as grade twelve, and especially if he expected to gain a university degree, he anticipated having to provide for younger siblings’ upkeep and education. He also imagined that he would be required to give financial support to his parents and, on occasion, to various members of his and his wife’s family. Students recognized “real” manliness entailed becoming the “breadwinner.” The majority, expecting to proceed to tertiary education, anticipated that marriage would be postponed at least until around the age of thirty. Besides, in their late teens and early twenties, they considered themselves to be too immature for marriage, “still excited,” “too unstable.” An extended school career seemed to have persuaded them of their immaturity, so unlike their age-mates who had “failed” to get into secondary school and who by their early twenties were often married, especially those who lived in rural areas.¹

While students insisted they would not allow their parents to choose a wife for them, few thought they could go ahead with a marriage that their parents disapproved of. What the young men did not anticipate, though it became quite common, was that they would provide financial support for their wives-to-be, in some instances, for a number of years prior to marriage, setting up a relationship of dependence. Receiving such support during school or college training meant for a woman the acceptance of a sexual relationship. Without exception, marriage was tied to the idea of producing children as much for the men as for the women. In general, the young men expected to have a smaller number of children than their parents’ generation, citing the difficult economic circumstances facing Zambia in the 1980s and the greater financial demands of town— as opposed to village life.² Economic conditions also figured
in students’ rejection of polygamy, though many expressed the fear that jealous co-wives might make them sick with love potions or even try to poison them. Several students, like Promise and Hambayi, had polygamous fathers. Promise did not entirely rule out the possibility of becoming a polygamist in later life. His father brought a succession of women into the home, each of whom Promise had been required to acknowledge as his stepmother, after his parents’ divorce. Hambayi’s mother was the first of his father’s three wives. For many years there were only two. Hambayi recalled a happy childhood in which his two mothers got on well and jointly cared for his father’s thirteen children. Indeed it was his father’s co-wife who had cared for him in infancy and even given him his name. From his observation of his father’s married life, Hambayi commented, “The man in our tradition capitalizes. The husband receives ‘double services,’ his bath water is warmed by one or another wife and his food is often prepared by the two of them.” However, Hambayi recalled that when his father introduced a third, much younger wife, his mother became sad and withdrawn as she no longer attracted a major share of her husband’s attention.

**My Future Wife**

In the essays the students had written for me in senior secondary school in the 1980s on the topic of “My Future Wife,” certain common themes emerged. Apart from the need for her to be beautiful, that is “light-brown in complexion” and, if possible, to have “a triangular nose, like a European,” most students stressed that she must be “obedient.” She should be sufficiently educated to be able to contribute to household finances. The general opinion was that she should have at least completed grade twelve, though some said grade nine or ten would be sufficient. This would guarantee that she would be able to express herself properly and know how to deal with others. However, no student wanted a wife whose level of education surpassed his. Most stressed that their wives should value “African tradition,” and indeed be African; a wife should be respectful to her husband and to visitors, readily welcoming members of the man’s family when they came to stay. She should not resent the financial help her husband might give them. While most students said that ethnic group membership would not be an important factor, they almost all insisted that she would have to be a Christian. Many worried about having a troublesome or quarrelsome wife.