Shifting boundaries of fertility change in Southwestern Nigeria *

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Abstract

Anthropologists and demographers rely on distinctive methodologies and forms of evidence even while they share a common interest in explaining fertility change. This paper proposes a cultural anthropological approach that focuses on the process whereby meanings associated with practices and things are reinterpreted over time. Using the image of shifting boundaries of kinship relations, it examines changing interpretations of three fundamental aspects of social life—family land, marriage, and foster parenthood—in the Ekiti area of Southwestern Nigeria which suggest an attenuation of the mutual obligations of extended kin. While these reinterpretations have moral associations that legitimate practices supporting fertility decline, political and economic uncertainty may counter this process.

> *Ojo ti won ba mu ile, ni won un mu gbe*
> The day you begin to cultivate land, then you will know the boundaries (Yoruba proverb)

In explaining processes of demographic change, it seems that a contribution could be made by anthropologists who investigate the logic of cultural practices and the transformation of associated meanings under changing social, economic, and political conditions. Yet there are difficulties in integrating anthropological and demographic perspectives. One recent approach to the study of fertility, which attempts to combine demographic research on fertility change with

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the specifics of anthropological explanation, has been termed by demographers 'micro-demographic analysis' (Caldwell, Hill and Hull 1988). While demographers and anthropologists may be interested in interdisciplinary approaches to events of mutual concern such as birth,

marriage, and death, they have distinctive disciplinary perspectives, both theoretical and methodological (see Bledsoe and Pison 1994), on these topics, which discourage collaborative work. Demographers often derive their conclusions from large-scale survey data and statistical analysis, focusing on isolating specific variables which can be statistically correlated, whereas anthropologists tend to support their own studies with detailed material acquired through personal, long-term field research, analysing particular phenomena within their broader cultural, social, political, and economic context. How to reconcile these differences in scale and in the evaluation of evidence is perhaps the most difficult question facing those interested in interdisciplinary approaches to these two fields today.

Part of the problem in formulating an interdisciplinary approach is that there are various schools of anthropology, each divided into several subdisciplines. Embedded within the various anthropological subdisciplines are distinctive interpretations of culture which have important implications for demographic applications. Carter (1988:164) classifies these definitions into two groups: conceptions of culture as a set of overarching ideals and beliefs at the societal level, external to human action, and conceptions of culture as a set of ideals and beliefs which are actively engaged by individuals and internal to individual human action. Carter argues, as will I, that culture is most usefully conceived as ideals and practices which inform human behaviour but are also shaped by human actions.

The difficulties of integrating an anthropological approach to demographic studies, then, are not just a problem of demographers and anthropologists sparring over theory and method (Caldwell, Caldwell and Caldwell 1987) but are also related to differences of perspective among anthropologists themselves. Intradisciplinary disagreements within anthropology, for example, whether it is a humanistic or scientific endeavour, as well as changing theoretical fashions, have made it difficult for even well-intentioned demographers to grasp exactly what demographic anthropology would entail. While the methodologies and analytical concerns of demography and anthropology differ considerably, there is a striking familiarity in some of the intradisciplinary squabbles—between those who argue over economic or biological or ideational explanations, for example—and lamentations over lack of theory. In their complaints and divisions, anthropologists and demographers share some common ground.

What follows is an attempt to formulate an anthropological approach which complements demographic research on fertility change based on field research in Southwest Nigeria and reflecting my own perspective as a cultural anthropologist. Specifically, I suggest an ethnographic focus on culture[1] as beliefs, practices, and things that not only structure individuals' and groups' sense of their world but which also provide the means for individual strategies of reinterpretation. Culture is viewed as part of a continual process in which the reproduction of structure— represented by prevailing social organization, institutions, and associated moral values—coexists along with practice, reflected in the re-evaluation and reconstruction of these structures. This conception of culture derives from the writings of sociologists such as Elias (1978), Schutz (1970), and Bourdieu (1977), and of anthropologists such as Beidelman (1986), Moore (1986), and Jackson (1989). For them, the pertinent questions are: what are the meanings and moral

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[1] The Latin root of the word 'culture', *colere,* means to inhabit a town or cultivated space, and refers to a range of human activities including ploughing, 'adorning the body, caring for and attending to friends and family, minding the gods, and upholding custom through the cultivation of correct moral and intellectual disciplines' (Jackson 1989:120). There are other anthropological interpretations of the word 'culture'; for summaries of others in a somewhat chronological order, see Hammel 1990:458-466.

valences associated with particular events, things, and practices? And by what processes do these interpretations change in specific historical, political, and economic contexts? These questions are important not only for clarifying the meaning of such general terms as 'modernization' and 'education'[2], often cited in explanations of fertility change, but also for addressing the concerns of those who argue that diffusionist explanations of fertility change do not adequately explain the process whereby local acceptance and incorporation of new ideas and practices occur in the first place (Kreager 1993).

The paper does not purport to be an exhaustive cultural analysis of all aspects of fertility change in an Ekiti Yoruba village in Southwestern Nigeria. Rather it suggests one approach to the study of fertility change that also relates to questions raised by demographers and anthropologists interested in cultural aspects of this process (Caldwell 1977b; Kreager 1986).

Cultural analysis of demographic change

According to Macfarlane (1978:48), 'anthropologists' main contribution [to demographic anthropology] is to show that beliefs and attitudes are fundamental and have a life of their own'. In his essay, 'A Theory of Culture for Demography', Hammel (1990) has taken up this point, proposing one such approach to the study of culture in demographic analysis. He suggests a particular interpretation of culture, one represented as 'a negotiated set of understandings' by social actors whose 'evaluative behaviour' is grounded in a set of more general social values and structures. Further:

> Emerging from the concept of culture as a transitory and negotiated set of understandings is the view that behavior is controlled by its own symbolizations. It is the evaluative behavior of actors, playing unceasing variations on themes provided by their current cultural stock [e.g., historical ideas concerning social organization, religious practice, marriage, etc.], that creates and recreates culture as a constantly modified and elaborated system of moral symbols (Hammel 1990:467).

This definition appears to merge the idea of culture-as- overarching-ideals at the societal level with that of culture-as-human- practice at the individual level, a dichotomy discussed by Carter (1988:164), through the incorporation of both general cultural ideals ('cultural stock') and individual 'evaluative behavior' (and presumably practices) into his analysis.

By defining and contextualizing 'the network of social actors directly involved in processes that have demographic import' Hammel (1990:468) seeks to bridge the gap between explanations which attribute demographic change to social structural factors and explanations which attribute demographic change to individual motivation. Hammel (1990:474) argues that these social networks may also be used to link individuals with wider regional and national level institutions which would allow for the integration of micro- and macro-level analysis within his model.[3] This

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[2] For example, Peel (1978) examines the Yoruba term *olaju,* most closely associated with Western notions of 'development' in order to understand local interpretations of this phenomenon.

[3] Just how these two levels of analysis would be conjoined is not made clear. His alternative to fieldwork (i.e., a study gleaned from survey data and ethnographic literature) used for the sort of micro-analysis he proposes, seems an unlikely substitute and is probably unworkable. Fricke (1986), for example, noted that certain household configurations only became clear to him after working in a village for several months; it is unlikely that these very culturally specific social units would be evident from survey data.

approach would optimally involve fieldwork, with emphasis on a few fine-grained case studies of the social networks of selected individuals, such as women who use contraceptives and their network of family, friends, and acquaintances. Once these networks were established, individuals could then be questioned about their evaluation of particular events or disputes related to demographic questions.

My own approach to demographic anthropology is similar to that taken by Hammel (1990), which focuses on 'culture as negotiated symbolic understanding', although I would stress that these 'understandings' are evident in people's everyday practices and use of things as well as in what they say, their 'intensely evaluative cloud of commentary' (Hammel 1990:467). The process whereby these mundane practices, things, and events, grounded in underlying social structure, are reinterpreted and associated with particular moral meanings over time (see Moore 1987) is at the heart of my conception of anthropological demography. This approach is better explained using material from my work on fertility change in rural Southwestern Nigeria.

Fertility change and shifting boundaries of kinship

Caldwell (1977a,b, 1982) has examined the ways that a particular form of social organization, the patrilineal descent group, has supported high fertility in Southwestern Nigeria. Having many children provides prestige and a sense of security in that one's patrilineage will continue in time. Many children provide domestic labour and potential financial assistance in old age and to a range of relations, linking kin groups[4] from whom social and economic support can be expected. Fertility will decline, it is argued, when the mutual claims of and obligations to patrilineal and matrilateral kin are restricted, and nuclear family bonds, between husband and wife, between parents and children, are strengthened (Caldwell 1977b:15).

Caldwell uses the metaphor of the breaking of a chain letter to characterize the crumbling of this system of mutual obligations of kin relations. In my own case, I use the metaphor of shifting boundaries to characterize this process of attenuation of kinship obligations and claims. In strengthening conjugal bonds, for example, the boundaries of parental claims on the behaviour of their children may be restricted. This shift in the boundaries of intergenerational authority is further supported by moral justification as when young people depict arranged marriage as 'unenlightened' behaviour. An examination of these processes of re-evaluation and the ways that people rationalize their behaviour is an important part of explaining fertility decline (Caldwell 1977b:16).

Further, examining the reinterpretations of these three aspects of social life, family land, arranged marriage, and foster-parenthood, in terms of boundaries stresses the interconnectedness of changing ideas and practices which should be viewed as 'composing a moving configuration rather than [as] a set of static variables' (Guyer 1994:239). Thus the idea that one should survey one's property and encompass it with walls is not unrelated, I suggest, to the idea of refusing to have one's children fostered. Furthermore, the processes whereby kinship boundaries and fertility are being reassessed, in turn, reflect wider political and economic forces (Greenhalgh 1990:87) in

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[4] The rather imprecise term, kin, is used here to refer to both patrilineal (through one's father) and matrilateral (through one's mother) family relations.

contemporary Nigeria which cannot be ignored. The ways that present-day political and economic uncertainty intersects with these processes are discussed at the paper's close.

The Ekiti village study

This paper on the boundaries of kinship relations and on fertility change derives from a study conducted in one Ekiti Yoruba village located northeast of Ado-Ekiti in Ondo State from June 1991 to April 1992, with follow-up visits in October 1993 and December 1994. At the time of the census survey in 1991, approximately 3,500 inhabitants permanently resided in the village, these numbers being bolstered during holiday periods. The village has various modern improvements, including infrastructure for piped water and electricity, three primary schools, one secondary school, a post office, a police station, a maternity clinic, a town hall, a new community bank, and a hospital, jointly constructed with a neighbouring town.

At present, men are predominantly farmers and women are traders although many today combine this work with semi-skilled occupations such as carpentry and hairdressing, practised on a part-time basis. Many Ekiti women and men have some secondary education and those with secondary school certificates or higher education may be employed in local schools and government offices in nearby towns. Although relatively isolated in the past, the village is now located along a paved federal highway, facilitating villagers' travel throughout the area and to urban centres elsewhere in Nigeria. Thus while this Ekiti village has its own distinctive history, it nonetheless is representative of villages of comparable size and location in the Ekiti area more generally.

The study began with a village-wide household census and map preparation, followed by a series of open-ended interviews of 70 women (aged 15-39) and 66 men (aged 20-44) selected by age and availability, on attitudes toward family planning and government population policies, use of birth control methods, and associated health concerns. These interviews were later followed with a fertility survey of 300 women and 302 men and open-ended questionnaires based on particular topics such as child-fostering and burial practice. More information on methodologies used and study results is given elsewhere (Renne 1993a,b,c, 1995, 1996a).

From the census and initial interviews, I was able to identify several local events and practices that seemed to highlight change, suggesting that 'some pattern of local replication [was] being broken' (Moore 1987:730). Changes associated with three primary aspects of social life—land, marriage, and parenthood—implied the sort of break with the past that Moore had in mind. The first change concerned family houses and houseplots, in particular, a shift from transfers of family houseplots among kin to cash-based transactions among non-kin. This change is reflected in new patterns of houseplot boundary markings (Renne 1995).

The second change concerned the demise of arranged marriage evidenced by the present-day disregard for premarital virginity (Renne 1993b, 1996b). This change is related to beliefs about the relationship between virginity and fertility, which in turn reflect ideas about paternal control of women's bodies and marriage.

The third change centred on the practice of child-fostering and the belief held by some younger villagers that birth parents are best suited to raise their children (Renne 1993a). Conflating close blood ties with moral parenthood, it appears that more diffuse definitions of shared blood among extended kin are being altered in favour of more restrictive definitions of closeness of kin.

To investigate these changes in more detail, follow-up surveys of houseplot transfers, of premarital virginity, and of child-fostering were carried out, providing quantitative data on these topics. Qualitative information was obtained from involved individuals who were questioned for their explanations of what had happened. This approach would not preclude the study of social networks as suggested by Hammel (1990). However, the ways that individuals support their 'ongoing contests and conflicts and competitions and the efforts to prevent, suppress, or repress these' (Moore 1987:730) would also be stressed. I am particularly interested in the ways that different social actors (e.g., young and old, women and men, farmers and government officials), who may have different stakes in what is represented as 'orderly' social relations, evaluate these events and explain their actions. Their different representations, which in turn help to define the moral high ground, may be used to justify their particular positions relating to fertility behaviour. These distinctive interpretations and their association with shifting boundaries of kinship and of houseplots, virginity, and child-fostering are examined in more detail in the following sections.

Shifting boundaries of houseplots and patrilineal obligations

In this rural Ekiti village, land is held communally, with particular patrilineages in control of certain allotted portions of both farm and village land. Access to land for farms and for family houses depends on ties with kin, a situation supporting the mutual obligations of extended family members. Men's practice of building a house on family land in the village reinforces this connection of patrilineage with land. The house is then occupied by a man's sons and their wives and increasing numbers of children, representing the social ideal of patrilineal continuity in time and expansion in space. The importance of the large patrilineal house peopled by many descendants and other kin would seem to be, as Olusanya (1989:89) has suggested, one of the primary supports for high fertility in the Ekiti Yoruba area.

The word for house in the Ekiti dialect is *ule* which may also be translated as compound, referring to the physical structure of the building itself. Traditionally, Ekiti Yoruba houses are square or rectangular structures with a central corridor, surrounded by individual rooms each with its own doors and locks which open into this general space. The word *ule* (house) also suggests a core group of people who claim membership by virtue of patrilineal descent from a common ancestor as well as other residents within the compound who may or may not be related to this core group. Barber (1991:155) has observed that the social obligations of co-residents associated with attendance at various rituals are critically important because they constitute a sense of 'one's "people" and without a solid background of people one is socially non-existent'.

Several villagers expressed this fear of social non-existence and their need for descendants, particularly sons, in terms of the empty house, described by one 26-year-old Ekiti man who wants six children:

> My problem is so transparent in that I am the only son for my parents. As a result of this, I want some boys so that our house foundation can be laid on rocky land. We can have more men in our house because no matter how rich the female children may be, they will tilt their wealth more to their husbands' houses than to their father's house. I don't want our house to become desolate.

Implicit in the image of the abandoned, desolate house is the idea of the individual in society without social support and identity. Thus the house is a place to live but it also the site of the social reproduction of the patrilineage.

The ideal of a house headed by a man and his subsequent male descendants as well as a preference for virilocal residence after marriage has been reinforced by practices which symbolically represent patrilineal continuity, as in the burial of the dead and in childbirth procedures. Until the 1940s with the advent of maternity hospitals and clinics in the area (Ekiti Division Files 1945), rural Ekiti women gave birth to children in their homes. At present, the majority of village women go to the local maternity clinic or hospitals in neighbouring towns.[5] This shift to non-home birth is also reflected in the demise of another traditional practice, the burial of the placenta and umbilical cord in the proximity of the child's father's house (Verger 1973). While it is not clear when this practice ceased (perhaps around the time women began attending maternity clinics), according to one woman herbalist-diviner:

> The umbilical cord that is cut would be given to the woman who gave birth to the baby or her husband before. We usually put it inside an *apadi* (pot), then would dig the ground as if it were a corpse and gently bury it there.

Yet if the practices of home childbirth and the burial of patrilineal substance—the placenta and umbilical cord—near the family house have disappeared, the practice of burying the dead in its proximity has not.[6] In rural Ekiti villages, houses themselves serve as a sort of family monument, where the family name may be inscribed above the doorway and the bodies of the deceased owner of a house, his wives, and their male children are often buried near the house. Their graves are covered with a cement slab with the name and date of the burial written on top. This material evidence—the house, graves, and formerly, placentas and umbilical cords—of the births and deaths of family members reflects traditional religious beliefs about the cyclical nature of birth and rebirth. In the houses were buried the bodies of ancestors, who might potentially intervene for the well-being of household members, and whose spirits might be reborn in a child (Eades 1980:122) born in the house.

However, the continuing practice of home burial also emphasizes the importance of a physical association of descendant generations with particular plots of land, serving as material evidence of people's right to build and reside there. Indeed, the concern with ancestral spirits is at present less persuasive for many villagers who have converted to Christianity and Islam. Their concern with building and maintaining a family house has as much or more to do with male descendants who will inherit a house, perpetuate its founder's name by their presence and importantly, help to maintain or extend claims to land. Thus the cultural importance of the house as the symbolic embodiment of a social group, the patrilineage, also coincides with the economic consideration that a viable house with relatives buried within can be critical in establishing claims to family land.

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[5] For example, of the 33 survey women who gave birth in 1991, only 15 per cent (n=5) gave birth to children in their houses. Eighty-two per cent (n=27) of those who gave birth that year did so in local maternity clinics and hospitals.

[6] Of the 283 occupied houses surveyed in the village census, 58 per cent have visible graves present, usually as part of the front porch of the house.

Houseplot land is acquired for the building of houses from older members of the patrilineage who control land in certain areas of the village.[7] Once land has been allocated and a house built, the house owner, generally a male of the patrilineage, his descendants, and other kin, friends, tenants, etc. may reside there in perpetuity. Tenure of the plot on which the house is built, however, refers only to use rights as the land continues to belong to the patrilineage. Houseplots with abandoned, collapsed houses which are not immediately rebuilt revert to the patrilineage.

This lack of finiteness in houseplot ownership in time is also reflected in space, specifically in the negotiability of houseplot boundaries, often marked by impermanent things such as plants or broken pots (Table 1). The practice of shared patrilineal land without permanent, well-defined houseplot boundaries represents the ideal of generous sharing among kin, reflected in the non-remunerative partitioning of land as well as the practical strategy of potential expansion for land claims (Lloyd 1962:87). The moral ideal of kin sharing resources and helping one another without the use of impersonal money continues to be expressed in one man's remark regarding houseplot boundaries: 'There are no boundary marks since this land belongs to family'.

However, despite the continuing practice of unmarked houseplot boundaries and transfer of land through family ties, there is also the sense, as one villager put it, that 'Now everything is cash'. At present, houseplot land, particularly choice sites adjoining the main road, may be acquired from non-family members with cash. Such transactions, however, are a relatively recent occurrence, with 75 per cent having taken place within the last 20 years; they are also relatively uncommon. Only 13 per cent (n=43) of the 333 recorded houseplot transactions in the village include cash payments for land whereas 49 per cent (n=162) of transactions consist of the division of family land (Renne 1995). Nonetheless, these cash-based transactions represent a significant change in the way that houseplots are acquired in this Ekiti village.

Not surprisingly, the shift in types of houseplot transaction, from those made between kin and those made with cash, is also reflected in changes in boundary markings, from impermanent markers to those cast in concrete in the form of walls. People who have paid cash to acquire houseplots may also get land surveyed and then erect survey pillars at the four corners (Table 1). Indeed, houseplots transacted with cash are more frequently surveyed than non-cash family land houseplots. These changes suggest a tendency toward the commoditization of houseplots, undermining the idea of the family house built on a shared, unbounded space.

Table 1
Land boundaries and surveys by land transaction types

Type of boundary	Type of transaction					
	Cash		Family		Not family	
	%	No	%	No	%	No
Trees						

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[7] Another type of houseplot transfer common in the village but not discussed here was non-cash transactions between non-patrilineal kin and friends (see Table 2) that nonetheless required some expense as things such as cases of beer, kola, and metal sheeting might be required (see Renne 1995).

Lapa lapa, etc. [a]	2	1	15	25	10	13
Porogun [b]		--	7	11	10	13
Other kola, etc.	5	2	9	15	16	21
Total	7	3	31	51	36	47
Non-traditional markers						
Pillars	30	13	7	12	8	10
Walled	28	12	1	2	3	4
Pegged	5	2	3	5	3	4
Total	63	27	11	19	14	18
Roads, paths, etc.	9	4	12	20	9	11
Stones		--	1	2	3	4
Four holes at corners		--		--	3	4
Bottles, ashes	2	1	1	1	2	2
Neighbouring houses	5	2	4	6	5	6
House to boundary	2	1		--	1	1
Swept area		--	1	1	3	4
Nothing	5	2	28	45	17	22
Data missing	7	3	11	17	7	9
Surveyed						
Yes	60	26	19	31	10	13
No	33	14	74	120	83	106
Data missing	7	3	7	11	7	9
TOTAL	100	43	100	162	100	128

[a] *Lapa lapa* trees [*Jatropha curca]* as well as *ajekobale* ('witches do not land on it') [*Croton amabilis]*, *alabose*, and *odan* [*Ficus thornigiri]* trees were commonly mentioned.

[b] *Porogun* trees [*Dracaena fragrans]* are 'often planted in fetish groves' Abraham 1962:551. See also Abraham 1962:622 for use of *porogun* in rituals associated with the thunder deity, Shango. The use of this plant suggests that spiritual protection was more important than permanence of bourdary markers.

Thus village land formerly reserved for family members and clients to bolster the standing of the patrilineage is being alienated, at least temporarily,through the use of impersonal cash, suggesting an attenuation of mutual obligations of patrilineal and matrilateral relations, reflected as well in the reification of houseplot boundaries. Several of these cash-transacted houseplots have been acquired by villagers living elsewhere, often in major urban centres such as Lagos or Akure, who build houses to fulfil expectations that they have an ancestral home for their retirement and also for use as a source of rental income. These houseplot sales take place between fellow villagers who are unrelated, the buyer negotiating with representatives of the family who own the

plot. The use of cash in these transactions implies an impersonality that would make it morally inappropriate in land agreements between family members. Some villagers have taken issue with this practice, notably village chiefs, who have decided to ban cash houseplot transactions, saying they discourage outsiders from building houses because of the additional expense thus inhibiting village expansion. It is also possible, however, that these chiefs believe that their roles in arbitrating land transactions will be undermined by cash. Despite this decision, it seems doubtful that well-sited houseplots acquired from non-family members will not include cash in future transactions. For example, I was told of a recent instance of a man offering a houseplot to another for cash; the latter was told that the cash part of the transaction should be hidden.

Thus while rural Ekiti villagers continue to build family houses and bear children to perpetuate the family name, upholding the moral ideal of patrilineal continuity, they are also constituting very different arrangements regarding family houses, village land tenure, and houseplot boundaries in practice which ultimately may contribute both to a diminution of the importance of the patrilineage in land acquisition and to fertility change.

Shifting boundaries of bodies and the demise of arranged marriage

If the house is the site of reproduction of the social group, the patrilineage, then women's bodies are the sites of reproduction of individual members of the patrilineage. While the lack of boundaries of houseplots in the past reflected the ideal of openness among sharing kin, the boundaries restricting entry of outsiders, particularly potential affines, into the house proper and their access to women of the house have, until recently, been closely guarded. The importance of these boundaries was accentuated both by the sometimes elaborate archways adorning the doorways of Ekiti Yoruba houses and by the songs and gifts that celebrated the virginity of new brides.[8]

In the past, a father's[9] authority over members of his house-compound—his wives and their children, his sons and their children, etc.—was reinforced by an ideology of patrilineal descent and was represented in everyday ways by the power of the *baale* (father of the house) over the passage of people though a central front door *(oju ile),* both controlling and protecting inhabitants on 'the inside' from 'the outside'. Thus, a prospective suitor or his family soliciting an arranged marriage would be 'screened' by a young woman's father. The girl would act in certain prescribed ways as one older woman explained:

> In the past if a girl is given to a man and the man comes to greet her in the house, the girl will be hidden. If the girl was seeing him off, she will turn her back to him.

Once arrangements had been made between this man and the prospective bride's father, annual payments of yams *(isu obutan)* and labour *(owe* or *ebese)* were given to the father. This process culminated in the payment of bridewealth, *idano,* which was timed to take place after the appearance of menarche. The veiled bride would then be taken from her father's house, outside, to

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[8] As Douglas (1973:98-99) has noted:
> Interest in [the body's] apertures depends on the preoccupation with social exits and entrances, escape routes and invasions. If there were no concern to preserve social boundaries, I would not expect to find concern with bodily boundaries.

[9] The Yoruba sense of the word father *(baba)* is classificatory; it refers to the oldest patrilineal male in the house but may also refer to all men of that generation, including junior brothers and male cousins.

her husband's house where her entry through the doorway was marked in various ritual ways.[10] Later in the evening, she was uncovered both literally and figuratively by her husband, after which a bloodied white virginity cloth was publicly displayed. The cloth would then be taken to the bride's family house, marking the successful conclusion of her family's control of her sexuality. She was thereafter 'covered' by members of her husband's household who awaited her first child which was expected to arrive shortly.

The idea of the protected threshold-doorway of a house, referred to as the *oju ile,* literally 'eye of the house', is linguistically related to the vaginal threshold, the *oju ara,* 'eye of the body', with its covering, the *ibale* (hymen), protecting the passageway between the inside *(inu,* womb) and the outside *(aiye,* world). A house's front doorway represents the opening between inner domestic and outer public space, just as the vaginal opening distinguishes between inner and outer domains. The Yoruba phrase for womb, *ile omo* (house or room of the child), further reinforces this association between houses and female bodies (see Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995), both of which may be perceived as structures which protect those within from outside dangers. Indeed, the *ibale*-hymen, a thick red film within the vagina, was described by one traditional healer as 'a sort of internal security system'. This representation of protection and vulnerability associated with covered thresholds and with the inside and outside of houses and bodies corresponded with the power of fathers to regulate the passage between these two spaces, reflecting prevailing relations of intergenerational authority.

However, the ability of fathers to exert such authority was undermined during the colonial period. With the introduction of a colonial court system and procedures for divorce (through repayment of bridewealth) in the late 1920s and other changes in the political economy such as cash-cropping, the system of arranged marriages was undermined (Lloyd 1968; Caldwell, Orubuloye and Caldwell 1991). The attendance of young girls in primary school in the late 1950s also contributed to new ways of establishing marital relations that had important consequences for intergenerational relations. Eventually what occurred during the late 1960s was a pattern whereby young women moved to their husbands' houses after developing sexual relations with the future husbands, often after becoming pregnant. In some cases, it came to be the pending child that cemented these relationships rather than bridewealth payment or other preliminary marital exchanges.

Table 2
Early sexual experience of rural Ekiti women, Ages 35-70+ (percentages, numbers in parentheses)

Age group	Arranged marriage		Virgin when married [a]		Ever divorced		Pregnant when married		Virginity increases fertility		Virginity causes disease	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes [b]	No
35-39	--	100	--	100	--	c	c	c	c	--	25	75
(n=4)		(4)		(4)		(2)	(1)	(1)	(2)		(1)	(3)
40-49	12	88	63	37	12	88	67	33	50	50	12	88

[10] In Ekiti, a bride's feet were washed before entering and she was given a broken calabash to step on, the number of resulting pieces indicating the number of her future children (Oguntuyi 1979:19).

(n=8)	(1)	(7)	(5)	(3)	(1)	(7)	(2)	(1)	(4)	(4)	(1)	(7)
50-59	71	29	100	--	29	71	--	--	86	14	--	100
(n=7)	(5)	(2)	(7)	(2)	(5)	(6)	(1)	(7)				
60-69	85	15	100	--	31	69	--	--	77	23	--	100
(n=13)	(11)	(2)	(13)	(4)	(9)	(10)	(3)	(13)				
70+	67	33	100	--	33	67	--	--	100	--	--	100
(n=6)	(4)	(2)	(6)	(2)	(4)	(6)	(6)					
TOTAL	55	45	82	18	c	c	c	c	c	c	5	95
(n=38)	(21)	(17)	(31)	(7)	(9)	(27)	(3)	(2)	(28)	(8)	(2)	(36)

a Virgin when moving to husband's house; if no, pregnant column indicates whether woman was pregnant before she moved. b In both cases, the disease mentioned was epilepsy (*warapa*). c Data missing.

As these relations of authority of fathers over marriage have changed during the colonial period, more informal and fluid formulations of conjugal relations have developed (Guyer 1994:231). For some, the choice of a spouse depended to some extent on ideals of love and sexual compatibility, thus potentially contributing the closer conjugal relations that may support fertility decline.

This change in elders' authority over arranged marriages was reflected in a reinterpretation of virginity in general, and of that bodily boundary, the hymen, in particular. In the past, all young women who moved to their husbands' houses were said to be virgins.[11] However the importance of virginity *(ibale)* rested as much on ideas about fertility (Boddy 1989:55) as on a woman's chastity being a point of pride for her husband and a bride's family (Olusanya 1969:15; Fadipe 1970:66; Caldwell et al. 1991). Many believed that if a woman met her husband a virgin, she would immediately become pregnant. Two related ideas supported this claim: women who were virgins had not 'spoiled' themselves (i.e., their fertility) through socially unsanctioned sexual liaisons; and immediate fecundity was related to social and moral behaviour. Thus young women had a certain interest in remaining virgins as they were not only socially rewarded for this behaviour by their families and by their husbands, but also because they believed that they would be biologically rewarded, by immediate pregnancy.

However, with the introduction of court divorce, the demise of arranged marriage, and attendance of young girls at school, virginity, instead of enhancing fertility through socially correct behaviour, came to be perceived as socially backward because it was associated with arranged marriage and as anti-social because attendance at social events and subsequent sexual forays were one way of finding a husband (see Guyer 1994:245). Like their educated male counterparts, young women who attended school were likely to disparage certain practices associated with a parochial past, preferring modern, 'enlightened' behaviour. Hiding in the house, away from the eyes let alone the arms of men, came to be considered 'anti-social' behaviour. Thus when young men pressed girlfriends and fiancees for premarital sexual relations, young women may have been inclined to concur not only for emotional reasons but in order to appear modern, rather than traditionally chaste.

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[11] There were ways around this ideal such as the use of packets of chicken's blood inserted in the vagina.

This transformation of the relationship between virginity, correct social behaviour and fertility is reflected in the recent association of virginity with certain diseases identified with infertility (see Renne 1993b). Thus changes in marital arrangements have led to a reversal of the moral evaluation of virginity that is also couched in terms of health, from something good for women's fertility to something bad. This change in the perception of virginity and what would seem to be an anatomical given, the hymen, underscores Laqueur's (1990:236) point that readings of the body are grounded in a particular social and historical context and 'must be regarded as a narrative of culture in anatomical disguise'.

However, this shift in the moral assessment of the hymen has not gone uncontested. Some older women viewed young women's exposure to Western education and freedom of movement with some ambivalence as may be seen in one woman's comments:

> Civilization has come and things have changed. Is it children who are 15 years old who have become pregnant and go to their husbands' houses without taking anything from him [i.e., bridewealth] who will be virgins? All this was caused by the school because they were exposed to immoral acts. And they will say they are going to school, they will just branch to their boyfriend's house which no one could do in the past.

Some Christian writers are also advising premarital chastity for reasons of bodily and spiritual purity, teachings that are having an effect on some younger village women who said they prefer to remain virgins until they are married. These debates over the moral assessment of virginity and marriage not only represent arguments over a new set of values relating to individual choice of spouses. They also reflect intergenerational contests over the grounds that legitimate such behaviour which also have implications for fertility change as when younger villagers attempt to circumvent parental pressures to have more children.

Shifting boundaries of child-fostering and ties of blood

Olusanya (1989:76) has referred to Yoruba elders as 'veritable props of prolific childbearing', in part because of their support for the ideal of large families. Elderly relatives may also have a practical interest in high fertility because they may want to foster a child for domestic help and companionship. Yet just as the edges of patrilineal obligation are being subtly altered through houseplot boundaries, and the diminished patriarchal authority in arranging daughters' marriages is reflected in the demise of virginity, so too the category of people deemed appropriate to raise children is being narrowed and redefined. But unlike the graphic boundary markers of survey posts and hymens, the boundaries of this change are not so obvious, reflected as they are in the perception of blood ties. Nonetheless, it appears that attitudes toward child-fostering are changing, which suggests a strengthening of parent-child bonds that may contribute to fertility decline.

In this Ekiti village, child-fostering, raising another's child as one's own (see Bledsoe and Isiugo-Abanihe 1989; Goody 1982), was quite common in the past. Of 115 foster-parents interviewed, 50 per cent had been fostered as children. Child-fostering was valued because it was believed that birth parents would not be sufficiently strict with their children to properly raise them, it furnished labour for elderly relatives, it provided a means for childrearing in cases of crisis, and it extended a child's kin connections, among other reasons.[12] It continues today

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[12] See Goody (1982) for a summary of different types and rationales for child-fostering in West Africa.

Table 3
Reason for child being fostered

Reason	Female (n=78)					Male (n=49)				
	0-4	5-9	10-14 %	15-19	Total	0-4	5-9	10-14 %	15-19	Total
Birth parent:										
Schooling	12	18	--	--	7	25	19	--	--	12
Died	12	13	9	31	14	8	--	17	56	17
Divorced	26	26	6	23	16	8	13	25	--	12
Travelled	12	9	3	--	5	--	--	8	--	2
Many children no money	26	4	6	8	8	8	6	8	--	6
Total	88	70	24	62	50	49	38	58	56	49
Foster parent:										
Needs help, company	12	13	53	15	31	34	25	42	22	31
Barren	--	--	6	--	2	--	6	--	--	2
Total	12	12	59	15	33	34	31	42	22	33
Foster child:										
Schooling discipline	--	4	6	23	8	17	31	--	--	14
Requests	--	13	11	--	9	--	--	--	22	4
Total	--	17	17	23	17	17	31	--	22	18
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
n	8	23	34	13	78	12	16	12	9	49

as many young Ekiti village children are sent to live with kin both within and outside the village. From a village-wide household survey, I found that child-fostering was common, with 19.2 per cent of children in the village (in late 1991) raised by foster-parents.

This relationship establishes ties of mutual obligation as children work for their foster parents and in turn, receive education, and discipline, and are able to extend their network of potential supporters. Children are also fostered because of parents' need for child-care (in case of divorce or because the children are being educated) or because elderly parents ask to raise foster children, often grandchildren, for their help and companionship. These two types of fostering, crisis fostering and old-age assistance, are the most common types found in the village today (Table 3).

However, there is some indication that the frequency of child-fostering may to be changing (Caldwell, Oruluboye and Caldwell 1992:227), with some younger villagers saying they will not have their own children fostered. Several younger women and men interviewed cited mistreatment and overwork as reasons why they preferred not to have their children fostered. Others cited the problems of leaving children in the hands of uneducated grandmothers who might not properly care for their charges (Renne 1993a). Further, the introduction of universal primary education and increasing cash-crop production have led to competition both for places in school and for farm labour. Some young people feel, on the basis of personal experience, that their own children's life chances will be jeopardized if they have to compete with the foster-parents' children.

If what constitutes being a good parent is being redefined by young parents, children are believed to have changing expectations as well. Foster-children may cause family problems with their accusations of maltreatment. Unlike children in the past who were fostered to maintain family connections and to strengthen their own or their parents' social network, foster-children are now perceived as possibly jeopardizing these ties. Paradoxically, in order to maintain the tradition of good family relations, it may be better for children to be raised by their biological parents as one man explained:

> Because no matter whatever you spend on any other child they will not value it. From my own personal experience I have come to understand that even if I have to help any family I will decide that such a child will have to live at his or her parents'. If it is school fees you want me to take care of, I will send the money to the parents, let the child stay with them. Because...I've come to understand that bringing children of other people in your house, taking care of them, at last you will be blamed for it...

While this man's decision to send money rather than foster a child may not be common, the substitution of cash for kinship relations is becoming evident in other areas as in houseplot transactions discussed above. Despite the expectations of trust and the mutual support of extended family members, the realities of some villagers' experiences either as foster children or as foster parents has led them to the conclusion that fostering is not always beneficial. For some, like one secondary school girl who remarked 'A real parent will care better for the child', the 'real' (biological) parent is the best parent.

The meaning of blood and the morality of parenthood

This shift in the moral assessment of foster-parenthood may be related to changing notions about blood relations as well. For example, some people felt that foster-child mistreatment can be overcome by biological closeness, expressed in terms of blood by one 40-year old man:

> If my child is with my mother, I will have no cause to fear, she will know that **her own blood** has the child and she will care for the child as she will care for me. But if a child is given out to another person outside one's immediate home or family, it may be dangerous.

Several people who saw positive advantages in child-fostering said that they would only have their children fostered by close blood relations. The conflation of emotional closeness with blood and the idea that it is best to have one's children fostered by blood relations was supported by foster-parents' remarks. The range of relationships of foster-parents to foster-children reflected this preference for close kinship relationships in the village. Fostering parents were most often grandparents, raising the children of their own sons and daughters. Only one child was fostered by a person who was not kin-related. This pattern was common in the past as well, at least in the rural Ekiti Yoruba area (see Renne 1993a).

What appears to be changing is that some people are taking these blood restrictions even further, stressing the importance of biological parents to the exclusion of all other blood relations. Several people maintained that no one could care for a child like the child's own parents. Exactly how people have developed these attitudes about child-rearing remains to be more specifically investigated. School reading material, the media, and church teachings have surely contributed to these changing attitudes generally (Caldwell 1977a:101-103). It is also possible that biology classes teaching human genetics and the inheritance of blood types, for example, have had some

influence on people's thinking. I did not ask specific questions about how blood relations are formed so I cannot say whether this is actually the case. However, answers to questions about the formation of children in a woman's body made it clear that there has been some reassessment of bodily processes influenced by Western education among educated young men and women. For example, several young men cited Western genetic explanations of procreation, mentioning X and Y chromosomes, as well as sperm and eggs. It is possible that these Western biological models of human relationships may be influencing young people's perceptions of kinship as much as primary school materials depicting the nuclear family (Caldwell 1977b:15) and instruction in English using kinship terms that stress these roles (Goody 1990:132).

Thus, unlike the past, when fostering was considered to be good—helping others who in turn help you, and disciplining children—it is now being reassessed by some as bad. Biological parents, because of their closely shared blood, say that they are able to strike the best balance in terms of discipline and affection in child-rearing. This reassessment may affect fertility as people who say they do not want to have their children fostered limit their numbers to ensure that they do not need to do so, as one man explained:

> This is one of the reasons why I said I want just four children. I don't need to give any of them out. I should be able to finance their needs.

The decision not to have children fostered is held to be the morally correct one by some younger villagers even while their elders may make contrary claims.

Discussion

The changes of houseplot transactions, of parental authority over marriage, and of child-fostering suggest that the mutual obligations toward a wide group of patrilineal and matrilateral kin are being attenuated in favour of a more restricted group in rural Ekiti. The shifting boundaries of houseplots, virgin bodies, and blood ties concretely illustrate the ways that family land, marriage, and parenthood are being redefined. These changes evoke different shades of moral meanings which help to justify new types of behaviour such as offering family land to non-kin for cash, practising premarital sexual activity, and refusing to have children fostered, thus setting the stage for fertility decline. However if this opting out of the system of mutual obligations is taking place, there are countervailing tendencies, political, cultural, and economic, which are undermining this process in contemporary Nigeria.

In the case of a shift toward cash-based houseplot transfers in rural Ekiti, federal government policy, in particular the Nigerian Land Use Act instituted in 1978 to regularize land transactions, discourages cash-based transactions ('sale') of rural land (Francis 1984:9). Further, while local government officials can issue documents certifying rights of occupancy on family land plots, the procedure involves long hours, heavy expenses, and considerable uncertainty (Myers 1990).

It should not be surprising, then, that Ekiti villagers have chosen to ignore this Act altogether (Renne 1995). Land transactions involving cash are not documented nor are they reported to local government officials for certification. Rather than relying on the contradictory practices set forth in the Land Use Act, people view their security in rural land ownership as resting on local assertions of customary tenure, preferably supported by well-educated children who will have the political and economic clout to look after land claims. This behaviour is also reinforced by a continuing sense that communal ownership of land is morally preferable to cash-based, individual

ownership. However, one need not be a nostalgic traditionalist to see how present-day uncertainty regarding rural land transfer supports this ideology, even while it is being undermined in practice.

In the case of the decline of virginity and parental authority over the marriage, it is not necessarily the case that this weakening of parental interference and privileging of modern ideals of romantic love in the choice of a spouse will lead to closer conjugal relations among couples and more nucleated families. Under the present economic and political situation in Nigeria, Ekiti village women may use their sexual freedom to broaden their ties to several men and their kinship networks through children in an attempt to enhance their economic security (Guyer 1994:250). This practice is referred to as 'polyandrous motherhood', stressing lateral ties of obligation created through children rather than lineal ties created through marriage; it remains unclear how widespread the practice is and whether this strategy will ultimately work for women (Guyer 1994:223). In the short term, however, it supports high fertility.

Finally, changing ideas about foster-parenthood also relate to the present economic situation in Nigeria. For example, the devaluation of the naira in 1987 has led to price increases in imported goods, food, and education, making it more expensive to raise one's own children, let alone another's. The combination of not wanting to have one's own children fostered and economic constraints on fostering seems to have an effect on the practice of child-fostering. Yet child-fostering still has considerable cogency in the Ekiti area, partly as a moral ideal and partly because electricity, pipe-borne water, and telephone services are not being provided, even when the infrastructure for such services is in place. On a visit to the village in December 1994, I was told that there had been no electricity in three months and no piped water in six. Children, fostered or otherwise, are still needed as substitutes for these services, carrying water or firewood. Indeed, many of the people who say they will not have their own child fostered because fostering is 'bad' still say they would foster another person's child. Child-fostering, then, serves as a strategy for coping with the economic difficulties of living in contemporary Nigeria even while it is being recast as an ethically ambiguous practice.

This economic and political uncertainty,[13] manifested in political crises, currency devaluation, university closings, teachers' strikes, and petrol shortages, undermines the process whereby mutual obligations are restricted to an ever-narrowing group of kin. Unlike the oil-boom days of the 1970s when Caldwell (1977b:25) could write that

> many forms of insecurity have been reduced by a host of changes stretching from modern health measures to a smaller chance of being destroyed by local disasters because of better communications, greater commercialization and a strong central government...

government support for basic infrastructure (Adepoju 1993) and health care has been declining (Popoola 1993) in recent years. Under such circumstances one needs to extend one's network of kin, not restrict it (Goody 1990:140). Indeed, Robertson (1991:39) argues that fertility decline is related to the availability of wider social and state institutional support for some of the costs of reproduction. Urban residents for whom some services such as electricity are still being maintained may be affected by the economic problem of maintaining social networks with declining income, and hence may limit fertility to some extent. However, rural villagers,

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[13] See Parkin (1978:139-140) who associated high fertility among the Luo people of Kenya with uncertainty both at the domestic and national political levels.

particularly where these services are not available and where their livelihood largely derives from agriculture, may see it in their interest to maintain extended family ties and obligations, as well as high fertility, even while processes are in place which weaken these ties.

Just how the present economic and political crisis will affect future fertility change in Ekiti is unclear. While younger village women and men said they wanted fewer children in 1992 (Renne 1993c) so that they could raise the number of children they could socially and economically 'cater for', it seems unlikely that reductions in fertility below four children per woman will occur in rural Ekiti at present. Rather, the effects of the processes of shifting boundaries of houseplots, bodies, and blood ties are more likely to be reflected in the behaviour of those who have left the village for the urban centres of Ado-Ekiti, Akure, and Lagos. Those building houses on cash-transacted land and putting up concrete walls often live away from the village, may or may not be married to a fellow villager, and are not likely to have their own children fostered by village grandmothers except in cases of crisis. Whether these people who are to a certain extent 'opting out of the system of mutual obligations' are having fewer children is a question that remains to be investigated. Nonetheless, for those remaining in the village, the deterioration of government services and need to rely on kin are a cautionary reminder that despite shifts which suggest social reorganization and cultural reinterpretation that may contribute to fertility decline, these local processes are also situated in larger political and economic contexts with which they interact.

Conclusion

The ideal of a strong patrilineage with a large family house peopled by many descendants, with fertile daughters whose marriages cement relations with other such lineages, and with the wherewithal and moral acumen to foster less fortunate children, represents what Bourdieu (1977:34) refers to as 'official kinship', an ideology that presents prevailing relations of kinship authority as the way that kinship is supposed to be. This essay has illustrated some of the 'practical strategies' (Bourdieu 1977:35) that some Ekiti villagers have employed to take advantage of new social, economic, and political opportunities and to make cultural sense of these changes. Thus certain practices associated with family houses, with women's bodies, and with blood ties reflect shifts in the boundaries of kin relations even while the ideals associated with a certain form of social organization, the patrilineage, persist. That these changes are taking place, suggesting an attenuation in the circle of kin for whom mutual obligations endure, does not diminish the power of these ideals which remain a source of moral inspiration even as they are sometimes used to justify more mundane personal ends. I have attempted to show how reinterpretations of the meaning of houseplots, virginity, and foster-parenthood reflect continuing contests over the representation of kinship ideals and the oscillation between the need to pursue personal interest and to present moral justification.

This paper also argues for an analysis of the construction and reinterpretation of symbolic meanings associated with particular practices and things into its approach to the study of fertility. A processual approach has the advantage of considering culture as somewhat more grounded in the specifics of what people do with and say about everyday things and practices associated with fertility. Further, it is not altogether unfamiliar to demographers who use things such as TV sets and earthen floors as symbols of wealth in survey questionnaires. These things are not unimportant (Elias 1978:117) for it is through such ordinary behaviour as the use of Sunlight Soap (Burke in press) or the gossip about using condoms (Watkins and Danzi 1992) or the lessons on genetics in secondary school classes (Delaney 1987) that individuals' strategies which undermine

prescribed institutional ideals can take place. If there is to be theory of fertility transition which accounts for shifts in what is considered 'within the calculus of conscious choice' (Coale 1973), it must be based on 'a careful description of the *underlying assumptions'* (Schutz 1970:56) about fertility. These assumptions may be examined as they are reflected in the local meanings associated with religious rituals and beliefs (Caldwell and Caldwell 1987) as well as in more mundane things and practices. It would then be possible to see how meanings attributed to these things and associated ideas about fertility appear to be changing.

If I have emphasized that a detailed ethnographic study of the construction and reinterpretation of meanings considered over time can illuminate fertility change, I do not mean to imply that specific studies of the economic and political aspects of fertility change should not be undertaken. Rather, the difficulty of encompassing these different perspectives within a single study suggests that collaborative research is necessary if such a multidisciplinary approach is to be successful. This paper has attempted to place the analysis of meaning and symbolic representation through the ethnographic study of everyday practices within the realm of possible anthropological approaches to fertility change and to outline the benefits of this perspective for demographic inquiry more generally.

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