

THE VALUE OF CHILDREN FOR PARENTS IN

KWAHU, GHANA

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1. Questions and Problems

The 1974 World Population Conference in Bucharest revealed that representatives of African and Latin American countries held quite different views about optimum population growth from those of Europe and North America. The former proved to be rather pronatalistic while the latter were clearly in favour of limiting the present rate of population growth.

How do we account for these different points of view? According to some, the explanation must be sought in the political sphere: countries of the third world attribute their slim influence on world politics to their numerical weakness and expect that a rapid increase of their population will alter this situation. Conversely, they say, Western countries regard the mushrooming populations in the developing countries as a threat to their present position of power and for that reason start exporting family planning techniques. Often, however, these political motivations are concealed behind a cloak of discussions about the economic problems. Western countries argue that the present situation of economic stagnation in developing countries is due to the unrelenting growth of their populations. In response these countries say that they need a larger population to exploit the resources and possibilities of their lands.

These problems have been the topic of many political and also scientific debates. Does Africa really need family planning or is

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it an artificial need created by Western powers? Some Dutch social scientists, for example, have argued that the family planning assistance which has been undertaken by the Dutch government in developing countries "does not extend the boundaries of what is to be regarded as beneficial to safeguarding the position of the Netherlands in the world" (Gans, et al, 1974:99), so they call family planning help "a contraceptive to revolution". A Dutch demographer writes, "The fact that the demographic solution is emphasized so strongly must be seen as one of the many attempts by the West and some reigning elites in Africa itself to maintain their influential position and counter-act radical changes" (de Jonge, 1971: 128, my translation). An American anthropologist is more cautious when he writes... "exporting propaganda techniques for "zero population growth" or consulting on how to "weaken" the family is much cheaper than providing significant development assistance or establishing fairer prices for imported products" (Polgar, 1972:210).

These views seem to imply that family planning is something alien to the wants of the people themselves. De Jonge, who carried out field-work among the Nyakyusa in Tanzania, concludes that a rapid increase of population will not harm economic progress among the Nyakyusa, on the contrary, "For the poor farmers a large family and many children have more positive than negative consequences" (de Jonge, 1974:69). A similar sound has been heard in Ghana from Nyarko (1971) who rejects the idea that the population explosion is the major factor responsible for the lack of economic development in the country. Nyarko holds that in the socio-cultural context of Ghana a large number of children is advantageous for economic progress. Children are indispensable in the house and on the farm and their presence increases the parents readiness to save. Under-population, he says, is rather an impediment to development. If family planning was really advantageous to the economy of a country "France would be the richest country in the world by now, for she has practised it longest; the Netherlands would also be the poorest

in Europe, for it has the highest population growth rate (1971:166). A similar view is defended by the hierarchy of the Catholic church who state that no population problem exists in Ghana and that "Organized family planning therefore seems to be uncalled for" (Statement of the Catholic Hierarchy of Ghana on family planning, 15 November, 1972).

But what do ordinary people think about having children? For example, do politicians adequately represent the ideas of ordinary people? It does not seem likely that the people are being influenced in their fertility behaviour by national-economic or by political considerations. So-called KAP-surveys (knowledge, attitude and practice) have produced numerous studies which reveal that people in developing countries are favourably disposed towards the practice of birth control, but critics have argued that these studies have often been extremely deceptive (cf. Figa-Talamanca, 1972; Jongmans and Claessen, 1974: passim). Many respondents to KAP-interviews pretended to have a very positive attitude towards a small family and the practice of birth control but actual behaviour was not in accordance with their expressed views.

In Ghana a KAP-survey was carried out at the urban and rural level in the years 1965-1966 (Pool, 1970^a; 1970^b, 1973). The reported practice of birthcontrol was extremely low but the proportion of women who had considered it was highest "among Christian, educated urban women from Southern tribes who are geographically mobile and in non-traditional types of conjugal unions" (1970^a; 227). The interest in limiting fertility and the actual practice of birthcontrol seem to be higher among the urban elites, as was shown by Caldwell (1968) in his study of elite couples in Ghana's four biggest towns. More recently attitudes towards family size and/or the practice of contraception have been investigated by Oppong for some socio-economic groups; e.g. University students (Oppong, 1974^a, n.d.) junior civil servants

(1974^b) and nurses (1975^a). In a separate paper reviewing studies of parenthood in Ghana, Oppong reaches the conclusion that in all social strata having children is "increasingly being viewed and experienced as entailing serious problems both economic and social." (1975^b:10).

A quite unique survey was carried out by Molnos (1968) among school pupils in three East African countries. Molnos recorded some spectacular changes in their attitudes to children compared to traditional views. Some of her data are presented in Tables 1, 2, and 5 further below.

This paper is an attempt to present information about what people in a rural area think about having children. The views of both adults and school pupils will be studied.

It is relevant to present first some information about the demographic situation of Ghana and of Kwahu in particular. Ghana's total population is about 8.6 million which is about 84 inhabitants per square mile, a rather low density if we compare it to the United Kingdom (593 per square mile). Ghana's crude birth rate is estimated at 47 and its current rate of growth at 2.5, which means that if the growth continues at the same rate Ghana's population will be doubled in 28 years. Central Kwahu, where our research was conducted, is a rather densely populated area and its fertility rates rank amongst the highest in the country. The completed fertility rate of Kwahu is estimated at 6.6 (Gaisie, 1969:40)

2. The research⁽¹⁾

The greater part of the research on which this paper is based took place in 1973 in a Kwahu town. Three samples of adults were interviewed about marriage, family life, fertility and birthcontrol. They were 100 men, 179 women of child-bearing ages and 42 members of a lineage. With regard to the lineage, extensive participant observation was carried out. Quantitative data in this paper, however, will only pertain to the first two samples. The women were interviewed

during their visits to a child welfare clinic after a preliminary investigation had suggested that this group of women did not constitute a biased sample of the total female population of that age-category⁽²⁾. The male respondents were selected by means of quota-sampling during visits to the doctor and in town. A comparison with the 1970 census results proved later that the proportion of educated respondents (male and female) was above the average number of educated people in Kwahu as a whole.

Apart from the adults, 432 pupils of middle schools (Form 4)⁽³⁾ and secondary schools (Form 2) in the same town and in some neighbouring towns were approached for information. They were submitted to a test of uncompleted sentences according to the procedure of Molnos. A detailed account of the methodological problems in applying this technique can be found in Molnos, 1968:27-37. Some of the sentences dealt with fertility and will be discussed here. As most pupils are between 14 and 17 years of age one may wonder what the relevance is of their ideas about having children. After all, one might say, they are not in a situation in which they are confronted with problems concerning children. This objection is not entirely correct. School pupils are frequently faced with problems of pregnancy and childbirth (cf. Bleek, n.d.a.) Even more important is the fact that school pupils are in a position to appreciate the value of children to parents from the viewpoint of child. It is to be expected that they are able to present a reliable picture of the meaning of children on the basis of their own experiences as children.

Finally, it may be asked whether school pupils are not a privileged group and therefore constitute a biased sample. This is true to some extent so we must bear in mind that the ideas expressed by them are ideas of school pupils and not necessarily of adolescents in general. On the other hand, it must be noted that school attendance is fairly general nowadays. In the area where the research was conducted 70 per cent of the population between 15 and 24 years of age had been to

school or were still attending school. The attendance rate of females is, however, considerably lower than that of males (population Census of Ghana, 1970).

3. Traditional views

Early ethnographies of African societies emphasize that fertility was considered as one of the most important human values. The desire for children was unlimited. A famous case in point is the experiences of the Reining who in the early fifties asked Haya women in Tanzania how many children they would like to have. Reining writes that such a question was meaningless to many of them because children were gifts from God. Some answered "as many as possible" and others mentioned an implausibly high number.

Formerly the situation was probably the same in the Kwahu town where the research was carried out. Old respondents told me that in the olden days life was much cheaper because there was plenty of food. Children took part in the production process and looked after their parents when they became old. The more children the better. Moreover, a large number of children enhanced the parent's social esteem. The same old respondents claimed that no form of birth limitation existed in the past. Methods of contraception were not known and induced abortion was not practised. Infanticide was only applied to deformed children who would bring misfortune to the community if they were allowed to stay alive. The fact that an interval of two or more years usually elapsed between successive births was, therefore, not the result of conscious planning but rather of prolonged lactation causing a long period of post-natal amenorrhoea (cf. Bleek, n.d.b.)

4. "Many children"

The present younger generation has quite different thoughts about the merits of having many children. That which in the past was considered a blessing and wealth is now seen more as a burden. In the tests of uncompleted sentences two sentences referred to a large family:

7.

(a) A man with many children.....

(b) A woman with many children.....

The majority of pupils spontaneously associated these two sentences with negative thoughts (predominantly: financial burden) and only a minority completed the sentences in a positive way. The results are given in Tables 1 and 2. For the purposes of comparison we have added data which were collected by Molnos in East Africa between 1965 and 1967.

Table 1: Associations by pupils to: "A man with many children" (percentages only.)

	Kwahu, 1973 (N= 97)	East Africa, 1966 (N= 618)
negative	57	38
ambivalent	26	28
positive	10	30
unclear	7	4
total	100	100

Table 2: Associations by pupils to: "A woman with many children" (percentages only.).

	Kwahu, 1973 (N= 96)	East Africa, 1966 N= 671)
negative	53	21
ambivalent	14	22
positive	19	49
unclear	14	8
total	100	100

If we analyze the content of the associations we see that most pupils think of the financial problems created by a large family. A few examples are cited below: the first three refer to a man, the last two to a woman, with many children.

- does not have money to look after them and the children will bring trouble to the man.
- is always as poor as a churchmouse.
- spends a lot of money because he has to send them to school, buy clothing for them and give them good accommodation to keep them in a healthy state.
- she always goes to farm for food because she wants her children to eat; she does not want them to be hungry.
- always looks very thin and she does not have money to look after them.

Only a small number of pupils wrote that a man/woman with many children is well off because the children help him/her with everything. That proportion is 5 per cent whereas the proportion of pupils emphasizing the opposite is 66 per cent (see Table 3). It is also significant that no pupil associates "many children" with a high social status of the parents, and, finally, the idea that a large family will bring security in the future is practically absent. This means that the three most commonly heard reasons for high fertility in an African context no longer occur among the school-going generation in the towns where the research was conducted. Those motives were: economic assistance, future security and social status. It should further be noted that there were no significant differences between the answers of male and female pupils. Differences in the associations to a man and a woman with many children were not great either. The only variation worth mentioning is that women with many children are more often associated with something good and with psychological problems connected with the upbringing of children (see Table 3.) It suggests that mothers are more involved with the emotional problems of a large family than are fathers (cf. Oppong, 1975^b).

Table 3: Distribution of associations by pupils to
 "A man/woman with many children" (percentages only).

	a man with many children (N=90)	a woman with many children (N=82)	total (N=172)
must work very hard to get money, food, clothes, to send them to school, etc.	75	55	59
general worries about upbringing	6	16	10
other negative	--	2	1
ambivalent/neutral	9	6	15
children will help/support	4	6	5
other positive	6	15	10
total	100	100	100

Interviews with adults confirmed that social esteem is now associated with the ability to look after one's children rather than to merely having many children. If somebody has few children and he is able to take good care of them, then he is respected, but somebody with many children who is not able to look after them is regarded as a failure and a fool. Most admired, however, is the one who is financially able to take care of a large number of children. It might seem that the old value returns here but that is probably not the case; the admiration is not so much directed towards a man's sexual potency or a woman's fecundity but rather to the fact that a person who is able to fend for so many children is apparently very rich.

Both the school pupils and the adults seem to view a large family as a threat to one's financial position. Moreover, another idea has established itself, namely that one child climbing to a high

financial position offers more security to parents than a large number of children lingering in the rural areas. (cf. Caldwell, 1965).

5. "No children"

The objections to a large family do not imply, however, that the value of the child in general has been devalued. School pupils were asked to complete two sentences referring to childlessness:

(a) A man without children.....

(b) A woman without children.....

The answers showed that the pupils still considered childlessness as one of the greatest misfortunes that can befall any body. The negative associations to childlessness surpassed those to "many children" (see Table 4 and 5: data from East Africa have been included).

Table 4: Associations by pupils to: "A man without children"
(percentages only.)

	Kwahu, 1973 (N=92)	East Africa, 1966 (N=671)
negative	77	69
ambivalent	2	5
positive	4	16
unclear	16	9
total	99	99

Table 5: Associations by pupils to: "A woman without children"
(percentages only)

	Kwahu, 1973 (N=102)	East Africa, 1966 (N=628)
negative	62	88
ambivalent	6	2
positive	6	2
unclear	24	6
total	100	100

Further content analysis of the answers reveals that for both men and women "having children" is a primary condition for human happiness. The pupils write that a woman without children is always sad and lonely:

-she is never happy in her life.

-is always sad about her barrenness because maybe her friends have children and she does not

-is always crying because she has not any son or daughter.

Another problem for such a woman is that she has no one to help her with her numerous domestic activities or run little errands for her.

-is always unhappy because she thinks that she will not get any child to be sent or to buy something for her.

-feels sad because at times when she sends a child the child may think that she is not his mother so he doesn't go.

Furthermore, a childless woman lives under heavy social pressure.

She is suspected of being a witch who has killed her own children

(either before or after they were born), or having led an immoral life as a result of which God has punished her with barrenness.

Some think that she has caught a venereal disease by her promiscuous way of living.

-is very bad woman because God has given her some children but she has killed all of them.

-is said to have been flirting with men during her early days and may have gonorrhea so that she cannot bring forth.

Finally, some say that a woman without children is not a complete woman because she is missing something essential to womanhood, namely children. The pupils make use here of a number of proverbial sayings which are very likely derived from common parlance.

-is like a tree without fruits

-is like soup without salt and is always fond of any child she meets. She always struggles to get one.

Those who find a positive value in a childless woman remark that she is rich and remains beautiful and that she has plenty of time for herself.

The associations with "a man without children" correspond to some extent with those to a childless woman but there are some significant differences, which will be discussed below. Table 6 shows that a man without children is generally considered as an unhappy and lonely man. He has no child to perform small services, he is incomplete and is liable to social ridicule because he is suspected of sexual impotence. Another negative point is that he has no child to bury him when he dies. Children are absolutely essential in order for a man to live a happy and dignified life and to die in a respectable way.

Table 6: Distribution of associations by pupils to
"A man/woman without children" (percentages only).

	a man without children (N=81)	a woman without children (N=77)	total (N=158)
has no one to help	30	30	30
is unhappy, sad, lonely	20	36	28
is incomplete	22	8	16
under social pressure	10	12	11
other negative	14	6	10
positive	5	8	6
total	101	100	101

Table 6 suggests that for a mother the value of children lies more in the sphere of affection than for a father, whereas the idea of completeness is brought up more in connection with the father than with the mother. Perhaps, we may, with some simplification, conclude that having children tends to be associated more with prestige for a man and with emotional values for a woman.

Another point which needs clarification is the fact that almost one third of the pupils mention the aspect of help given by children. It shows that children are still regarded in terms of utility. In the previous section we have seen that having many children is hardly considered by anyone as an economic advantage but

now it seems that having no children is nevertheless seen as some kind of economic disadvantage. However, it is not entirely correct to speak of economic disadvantage, because the associations of the pupils refer to a much wider reality. Children in Kwahu, and in the whole of Ghana, perform innumerable small services with which adults do not want to waste their time, or which lie beneath their dignity. For example, children go for water, collect firewood, buy kerosine, take food to their fathers who live in another house, or send messages to their relatives or neighbours. Most of these activities can hardly be said to have economic value but it cannot be doubted that adults, particularly men, are greatly troubled if there is no child who can perform these chores for them. If there are children in a house, but they are not a man's own children (or, we may as well add, his sister's children), he will find it difficult to exercise authority over them, as the pupils clearly state (see above).

In conclusion, people want to have some children but not many. The absence of children renders a marriage and life in general meaningless. Children have retained their high value provided they do not become too numerous. As soon as their number becomes too large they lose their positive value and negative thoughts start to prevail.

6. The ideal number

Up to now we have only spoken about "many" and "not" children, but how many children is seen as the ideal? The topic of "ideal family size" must be handled with utmost caution. Reining's experience in the 1950's still occurs nowadays. For many respondents the question "How many children would you like to have" is a senseless, perhaps even an improper, question. Children are gifts from God so man has no say in the matter. Besides, for elderly respondents with a complete family, the question is preposterous. If, nevertheless, they are prepared to give a sensible answer to this "foolish" question, they are likely to mention the number of children which they actually have. I have attempted to exclude this type of answer as much as

possible from Table 7. Another problem which has played tricks on many a KAP-survey is the tendency of the respondents not to give their own opinion if they have one at all but the interviewer's. If, for example, the interviewer is obviously a representative of a family planning organization they will attempt to satisfy him by mentioning a small number of children as their ideal.

It is, therefore, with considerable hesitation that I present the following data and I am aware that they have limited value. At most they are rough indicators of how people theoretically think about number of children, but they certainly have no predictive power.

Table 7: Ideal family size in three samples
(percentages only)

Ideal number of children	males (N=80)	females (N=147)	pupils (N=72)
2	-	1	3
3	4	5	1
4	32.5	33	36
5	5	5	15
6	37.5	47	32
7	21	10	13
total	100	101	100
mean ideal number of children	5.6	5.3	5.2

The concentration of answers on 4 and 6 children and the high degree of congruence between the three samples is noteworthy. The explanation of the preference for 4 and 6 must be sought in the fact that they are even numbers allowing for an equal number of boys and girls. The interviews revealed that there is no preference for either sex, as exists, for example, in India.

The average ideal number of children, slightly more than 5, may seem high to (present) Western standards, but it does represent a decrease in comparison with traditional norms which recommend an unlimited number. It is only a few decades ago that a Kwahu woman was publicly honoured after the birth of her tenth child. Of course, we should keep in mind that the average ideal of 5 children probably refers to children who survive infancy whereas the "ten births" most likely included some children who died at a young age. The traditional attitude of having as many children as possible is probably connected with this very fact. Expressed attitudes about desired family size should, therefore, be seen in the context of prevailing child mortality rates. Gaisie (1975:28) estimates that in the Eastern region (where our research was conducted) child mortality is about 150 per 1,000 live births. This means that if the average ideal family size is 5.2 the ideal number of childbirths should be 6.1. Further, it is likely that the child mortality rate was considerably higher in the past. During his 1945 survey Fortes recorded a rate of 279 per thousand in a rural town of Asante (Fortes, 1954: 309-13), which seems to agree with my own findings. A diachronic view of four generations in one particular Kwahu lineage revealed that in no generation did the average number of children reaching adulthood exceed 4.3 per woman. These simple figures suggest that the average family size which is desired by contemporary Kwahu may be even higher than the actual family size which was achieved on the average in the past.

So if the expressed ideal family size were to have predictive value we might expect that, paradoxically enough, the completed families of today would be bigger than those of the past. Nevertheless, the expressed attitudes about the value and the ideal number of children call for some form of birth regulation.

Is there a tendency among the young to prefer smaller families? Table 8 seems to suggest that there is. Half of all respondents under the age of 30 prefer 4 children or less, while this proportion is only 15 per cent over the age of 30.

Table 8: Age of respondents and ideal number of children (percentages only; males and females combined)

Ideal number of children: . 4 or less		more than 4	total
age: -29	50	50	100 (N=147)
30-39	14	86	100 (N= 57)
40+	17	83	100 (N= 23)
total		38	62
df=2		x ² =27.57	p. .01
			100 (N=227)

However, the figures of Table 8 have less significance than one might think at first glance. In the first place, it is not clear whether the preference for a smaller family is a characteristic of a particular generation or only of an age-group. If the former is true we may indeed speak of a change but if the latter applies we are not dealing with a development in time but only with the fact that people at a young age desire a smaller family than at an older age when their actual number of children has already surpassed their former "ideal number". A second difficulty (to which we have already referred) is that the mentioning of an ideal number of children does not guarantee that the respondent will actually take measures to realise this "ideal". Factors which determine the use of contraception or repressive birth-control are quite different; not so much attitudes but rather situational factors (cf. Bleek, 1974).

7. Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to shed some light on the values that children have for parents in a rural area of Ghana. The study is limited to geographical terms but it seems likely that the data

apply to a large extent to most rural communities of southern Ghana, particularly to the Akan communities. The data indicate that the general pronatalistic ideal of the recent past no longer exists. School pupils proved to be very much aware that having many children implies a heavy burden on the parents and adult respondents preferred a number of children which they were able to look after. Having some children, however, remains a primary condition for happiness in life and childlessness is regarded as one of the most tragic misfortunes. It is difficult to ascertain exactly how many children people would like to have but our data suggest an average of slightly more than 5.

The information urges us to be cautious in stating that birth-control is an unwanted commodity imported by western countries. There may be a resistance to particular methods of birthcontrol but it is not likely that this resistance extends to birthcontrol in general. There is a clear desire not to have "many" children. To realise this desire some form of birthcontrol is bound to take place.

A question which may be raised is whether the expressed attitudes have not already been influenced by western propaganda, but such a view would clearly overestimate the impact of the present advertising campaign for family planning. A much more obvious explanation for the change in attitudes is the fact that life itself has undergone some drastic changes since the arrival of western education and a market economy. These developments have in turn changed the role and value of children.

Returning to the question in our opening paragraph, is family planning being imposed on Ghanaians by western powers who are looking after their own interests? This paper has shown that the need to have fewer children does not say, however, that the existence of such a need proves that the countries exporting family planning have noble motives for doing so.

Notes:

1. The research was financed by the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana. For the writing up of data I received a subsidy from the Netherlands. Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO). I am grateful to Klass de Jonge for his critical comments.
2. The proportion of women reporting attendance to the clinic was 77 per cent of all women with children below 5 years of age. Reasons that were advanced by women for not attending did not suggest that a particular section of the population absented itself. The only bias in selection was that women without children under 5 years of age were automatically excluded from the sample.
3. The middle school (8 years) is part of the elementary education.

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