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# Contradictions in Nigeria's Fertility Transition: The Burdens and Benefits of Having People

DANIEL JORDAN SMITH

ASSESSMENTS OF GLOBAL fertility trends indicate that the pace of transition to lower fertility in developing countries has been faster than predicted in some of the more pessimistic scenarios presented in previous decades (Casterline 2001; UN Population Division 2003). According to current data, sub-Saharan Africa remains the region with the highest levels of fertility, but even there the pace of decline appears to be faster than many analysts had predicted. Fairly substantial changes in countries like Kenya and Zimbabwe suggest that high-fertility regimes in sub-Saharan Africa may be relegated to history in the not too distant future (Kirk and Pillet 1998). But whether African fertility will decline as quickly from moderate to low levels as it has from very high to moderate levels remains uncertain. In Nigeria, the pace of fertility decline has been relatively slow, especially given the country's considerable economic resources and human capital (National Population Commission 2000; Renne 2003). Nigerians in their reproductive years are making fertility decisions that will determine the country's demographic momentum for the next few decades. While analyses of census data and large-scale surveys provide information about trends and permit inferences about the kinds of variables that affect people's fertility behavior, they tell us little about the experiences of people who are having children in the midst of Africa's apparent fertility transition. This article presents an ethnographic account and an anthropological analysis of the contradictory pressures that Nigerians face as they decide how many children to have.

Using data collected through several years of ethnographic research in Igbo-speaking southeastern Nigeria, I contend that Nigerians today must navigate a paradoxical political-economic and cultural landscape wherein they face powerful pressures both to limit their fertility and to have large families. Among people of reproductive age in southeastern Nigeria, includ-

ing those who are not yet married, ideals of a "planned" family in which fertility is consciously limited are typically stated as "at least four children." From a demographic perspective, a decline in the total fertility rate (TFR) in Nigeria to 4.0 would itself be a significant reduction, as the 1999 Demographic and Health Survey pegged the national TFR at 5.15 (National Population Commission 2000). How rapidly Nigeria's TFR will fall to 4.0, and from there how quickly it will move toward replacement-level fertility and possibly below it (as is assumed, for example, in the United Nations' "low variant" projections), remain unknown. The demographic implication of the ethnographic data I present in this article is that the recent declines to moderate levels of fertility may not quickly or easily be followed by declines to replacement-level fertility.

But my goal here is not to make claims or predictions about the pace or ultimate outcome of Nigeria's fertility transition. Rather, the aim is to shed light on the social and cultural processes that shape Nigerians' experiences of fertility decline. The article builds on the work of anthropologists such as Caroline Bledsoe (Bledsoe 2002; Bledsoe et al. 1994; Bledsoe and Banja 1997; Bledsoe, Banja, and Hill 1998) and Elisha Renne (Renne 1993, 2002, 2003) and anthropologically oriented demographers like John Caldwell (Caldwell and Caldwell 1987; Caldwell, Orubuloye, and Caldwell 1992). These authors have provided convincing evidence and arguments for the salience of kinship and other social structural and cultural factors in shaping West African fertility values and behaviors.

While much of the literature in anthropology and demography describes economic, social, and cultural forces that both drive and constrain fertility transition in Africa, the ways in which competing pressures affect the lives of people in the midst of these transitions are not well documented. Nigerians experience fertility transition paradoxically, simultaneously acknowledging the potential benefits of smaller numbers of children while lamenting the pressures to curtail fertility. I argue that these contradictions are best explained by examining the intertwining of kinship and patron-clientism, and specifically by understanding how processes of kin-based patronage are being undermined and reconfigured in response to rapid social change.

The experience of fertility transition as contradiction is manifest in the ways Nigerians express understandings of the social processes that shape their fertility behavior. People perceive pressures to limit fertility as related to economic hardship, but also link having fewer children to economic development and progress. The seeming paradox that fertility transition is driven by perceptions of hardship yet is also part of economic development is recognized in demography (van de Walle and Foster 1990; Caldwell, Orubuloye, and Caldwell 1992: 229, 233, 236–237), but has not been adequately addressed ethnographically. People who are having children do not conceptualize what they are doing in the language or formulas of de-

mography. From an anthropological point of view, important questions are: (1) how do people participating in Nigeria's fertility transition perceive what they are doing? and (2) what can be learned from approaching fertility transition from an ethnographic perspective?

Of course, people's feelings about their fertility and the state of their society's political economy are not necessarily the best (and certainly not the only) criteria by which to evaluate what is happening. As some of the evidence below suggests, rising expectations about education and living standards, and relative individual independence from kin and community networks, change the criteria for what counts as hardship. But the experiences and perceptions of the people who produce the demographic trends we seek to understand are surely an important form of data, and they raise interesting theoretical questions about the social context of fertility transition.

The main theoretical argument advanced in this article is that the fertility behavior of Nigerians must be understood in the context of the ways that children, parenthood, family, and kinship are inextricably intertwined with how Nigerians navigate a political economy organized around patron-clientism. Patron-client social networks are an essential, indeed virtually irreplaceable, resource for advancing individual and collective interests in Nigerian society (Joseph 1987; Chabal and Daloz 1999; Smith 2001a). Further, having children is the mechanism for the biological and social reproduction of kinship networks. Without doubt, social transformations, such as the movement toward a less agriculturally based economy, formal education, urbanization, and exposure to globally circulating ideas about individuality, marriage, and family, are reconfiguring the political-economic and cultural forces that shape demographic processes. Some of these changes pose threats to and create resentments over structures of patron-clientism. But even as Nigerians increasingly value educational investment in children, as they resent some of the inequalities associated with patronage and resist some of the pressures to share resources with extended family, and as they develop ideals of marriage and family formation that conflict with the traditional models, they face simultaneous pressures to stay connected to their larger kinship groups and communities of origin (Berry 1985; Trager 2001; Gugler 2002; Renne 2003).

## Setting and social context

With an estimated population of some 127 million in 2004, Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa. The Igbo-speaking people of the south-east are one of more than 250 ethnic groups within Nigeria's cultural landscape. Along with the Hausa of the north and the Yoruba of the southwest, the Igbo are one of the three largest groups, numbering more than 15 million. In many ways, the Igbo case is ideal for exploring the contradictions of

relatively high fertility in areas of sub-Saharan Africa that are most modernized. By multiple measures, southeastern Nigeria is a society in rapid transition. The structure of the economy is changing, as few families, even in rural areas, subsist exclusively through agriculture. Urbanization is increasing and rates of rural-to-urban migration are high. Formal education is highly valued and pursued; almost all Igbo children attend primary school and the majority go on to secondary school.

In popular contemporary discourse, as well as in the historical and anthropological literature, Igbo people are renowned for their receptivity to change (Ottenberg 1959; Uchendu 1965). Given this reputation and the current economic situation, one might expect that Igbos would be in the vanguard of Nigeria's and Africa's fertility transition. Yet the Igbo continue to value large numbers of children, even as they find high fertility difficult to manage. The total fertility rate in the Igbo-dominated southeast is still 4.5 births per woman (National Population Commission 2000: 36–37). The region is one of the most densely populated places in sub-Saharan Africa: in cities, towns, and rural communities, population pressure is palpable.

In the semirural community where I have conducted research since 1995, the contradictions of rapid social transformation and persistent high fertility are manifest. Almost all households are involved in trade, small business, or nearby urban employment, as well as farming. More than 90 percent of households have sent migrants to Nigeria's cities, and more than three-quarters of adult men and women resident in the community have themselves lived at least a year in a city. Almost all children finish primary school, and about 60 percent begin secondary school. Yet results from sample surveys in the community show an estimated TFR above 5.0 (Smith 1999). Even among the youngest married couples, desired completed fertility exceeds four children.

My research site is Ubakala, a community of 11 villages and approximately 20,000 people spread over roughly 24 square miles. While still partly rural, the community bears the marks of being just a few miles from the town of Umuahia. The services of the state and commodities of the wider Nigerian economy are readily available. Apumiri, the commercial and service center of the community, is the seat of the local government and has a permanent market with several dozen small shops that sell almost every necessity (and many luxuries) that people might need or desire. Most houses are connected to Nigeria's somewhat unreliable national electricity grid. While there is no municipal water supply, in 2003 cellular phone service was extended to parts of the community. Local taxis and mini-buses regularly ply the old road between Ubakala and Umuahia, and public and private vehicles constantly traverse the newer expressway, easily linking Ubakala with the rest of Nigeria.

Paramount among the principles that organize social life in Ubakala is kinship, specifically the importance of lineal descent as the basis for indi-

vidual and group identity. People use ideas of lineal descent and kinship to create and maintain relationships of duty and obligation that govern morality and behavior. Individuals regularly feel pressure to assist relatives with support for education, facilitate migration, find employment, or set up a small business. Yet these relationships of reciprocal obligation are increasingly strained, as the patron–client aspects of kinship are marked by greater inequality owing to a changing economy and the fact that massive rural-to-urban migration has created vastly different levels of opportunities and outcomes. Indeed, the breadth of people’s obligations to kin and community of origin is frequently contested, and the nature and consequences of these changes are at the heart of the paradoxes of Nigeria’s fertility transition.

## Methods

I collected the ethnographic data used in this article during 20 months of continuous fieldwork in Ubakala from 1995 to 1997, and in shorter stints of summer research (typically about two months annually) in 1998 and 2000–2003. In-depth interviews and participant observation were the primary research methods. Over the past eight years I have conducted multiple in-depth interviews with 20 married men and 20 married women in Ubakala, ten married Ubakala migrant men and ten married Ubakala migrant women in the northern Nigerian city of Kano, and 24 adolescent and unmarried young adults in both the rural community and in urban settings. While the scope of these interviews has been wide-ranging, in all of them I spoke extensively with my informants about their fertility decisions and intentions. Further, because the intertwining of kinship, patron–clientism, and inequality has been a primary research focus, I have discussed with these informants in great detail the connections they perceive between processes of social change and their perceptions and behaviors with regard to fertility and family.

I have supplemented ethnographic research with a number of sample surveys, including interviews with 235 married women and their husbands in one village in Ubakala in 1997, and interviews with 431 household heads and their spouses, randomly selected from each of the 11 villages in Ubakala in 2001. In addition, in 1996 I conducted sample surveys of 420 students at a local university and of 775 secondary school students from 19 regional secondary schools. Finally, I interviewed all 121 Ubakala migrant household heads (and their spouses if present) in Kano in 2002. Each of these surveys was undertaken for a different purpose. But the data from all of them suggest that the issues I examine are salient in the broader population from which my informants were selected. Specifically, the survey data confirm that people experience contradictory pressures with regard to fertility, with almost all respondents expressing desires for four or more children while recognizing powerful pressures to limit fertility.

Participant observation provides a revealing window through which to perceive why and in what contexts people experience these contradictory pressures. My fieldwork has included attending social events where cultural norms about family and fertility are collectively expressed, renegotiated, and reproduced (e.g., weddings, child-naming ceremonies, burials). I have also accompanied people throughout the chores and pleasures of everyday life, where gossip, arguments, rumors, prayers, and jokes reveal the connections between social context and the beliefs and behaviors that produce demographic outcomes. In addition, 15 families have been the focus of intensive interviewing and participant observation over the entire period, and information about these families forms the basis of my most detailed knowledge about people's experiences and understandings of family and fertility. In this article, I select a few brief examples to illustrate common patterns.

### Having people: Kinship and patronage

To understand how people experience fertility transition as contradiction, it is necessary to explain how social transformations simultaneously undermine some of the ways that Nigerians traditionally relied on "having people" and produce new contexts where reliance on social networks rooted in kinship and community of origin remains essential for access to social resources, even when those resources are modern ones like education, urban employment, or business opportunities (Joseph 1987; Berry 1989; Smith 2001a).

Social networks, including kinship networks, are often hierarchical: navigating Nigeria's political economy depends upon social ties of patron-clientism (Barnes 1986; Joseph 1987; Chabal and Daloz 1999). Animating the contradictions Nigerians face with regard to fertility are three intertwining aspects of kinship: (1) the continuing importance of kin-based social networks for access to social resources (Berry 1989; Smith 2001a); (2) the changing (and more inequitable) face of kin and community structures (Trager 2001; Renne 2003); and (3) the growing resentment people feel about the exacerbation of inequalities that characterize networks of kinship and patronage (Watts 1992; Bastian 1993; Nwankwo 1999; Smith 2001b).

Africanist scholars have long noted that an individual's status and security depend greatly on his ability to control dependents (Goody 1971; Guyer 1993, 1995). Miers and Kopytoff (1977) coined the phrase "wealth in people," arguing that everyone in traditional Africa was bound in a system of rights and obligations. As d'Azevedo (1962) explained about the Gola in Liberia, every adult is a patron to lesser people and a client to a more powerful person. Berry (1985) and Bledsoe (1980) highlight the overlapping nature of the reciprocal obligations of kinship and the dynamics of patron-clientism. Bledsoe argues specifically that "kinspeople do enter into

relations that are best described as patron–client relations” (1980: 58). Berry’s account of class formation in southwestern Nigeria emphasizes the continued importance of kinship, even as access to the institutions of the state becomes essential for doing business successfully. In my own research, it became clear that Igbos gain access to the resources of the state and the wider economy through social networks of reciprocity and obligation that have their roots in the family, the lineage, and the local community.

Indeed, Igbos have many proverbs that emphasize the importance of “having people,” including two that translate literally into “somebody who has people has power” and “somebody who has people has wealth.” Such proverbs were doubtless coined in an era when economic well-being was grounded in a household or lineage system of production, tied principally to agriculture, and where political security depended upon the capacity to mobilize followers in local disputes and regional warfare. While a number of demographers have pointed out the durability of certain features of African social organization and the potential of these features to perpetuate high fertility (Caldwell and Caldwell 1987; Lesthaeghe 1989), much less attention has been paid in demographic accounts to how a “wealth in people” strategy is being transformed to suit current conditions. The enduring salience of these “wealth in people” proverbs in contemporary Nigeria reflects the continued importance of “having people” in a different kind of political economic context, offering clues to the sociological underpinnings of the present demographic situation.

### **The burdens of having people: Pressures to limit fertility**

Given the high fertility in the region when I began my research, I was surprised to find that the Igbo talked constantly about the pressures to have fewer children. The majority of married men and women in their childbearing years recognized and articulated the need to plan and limit the number of children they would have. Virtually all of the university and secondary students I interviewed spoke this way as well. Even a significant number of older people who had finished with their own childbearing expressed the view that their children should have fewer offspring. The recurrent and dominant view was that the main reasons to limit fertility were a bad economy, general hard times, and the burdens and expenses of trying to “train” children. I argue that these narratives of hardship show another side of social and demographic change, different from the dominant popular Western tropes that tend to depict fertility transition as part of a grand process of “progress,” “modernization,” and “development.”

Married Igbo men and women in their childbearing years commonly voiced the need to plan their families in the language of economic struggle.



The words of Chioma, a 27-year-old mother of three in Ubakala with a primary school education who runs a small commercial stall with her husband in the local market, were typical of scores of responses to questions about the motives for limiting fertility: "My husband and I cannot afford to have more than four children. The situation in Nigeria now is bad. Life is hard. It is not possible to support many children."<sup>1</sup> Kalu, a 42-year-old farmer with five children and a 35-year-old wife, said: "I have told my wife to do family planning. We cannot support any more children. Even those we have already will be difficult to train. Times are rough. A man cannot have so many children as before." Da Ihuoma, a 52-year-old woman who had eight births and has six living children, said about her first daughter, who was recently married: "I advised her to do family planning. She should not have more than four or five children. Nigeria is not like before. Everything is costly now. It is better to have a few children and train them well."

The idea that economic hardship necessitates family planning is reinforced by the media messages produced and disseminated by the national government and international donors. Numerous posters and radio and television advertisements in Nigeria promote family planning. They frequently depict large families as associated with poverty and small families as associated with wealth. One TV spot that ran regularly in the 1990s showed a haggard man trying to transport his poorly dressed wife and several ragged children on a bicycle. In the commercial, the bicycle crashed and the lesson promoted by the narrator was the need for family planning. Such images both mirror and bolster the popular conception that economic hardship is the primary motive to curtail fertility.

Of course, implicit in the TV advertisements and, indeed, in the narratives of some of my informants, is the idea that planned, smaller families are a means to a more prosperous and modern lifestyle. Many informants who described economic hardship also talked about their fertility plans primarily in the language of training children, with the benefits of education being as important as the costs. This outlook is compatible with some of the established theories about the mechanisms that underlie fertility transition (Caldwell 1982). Chinwe, a 32-year-old mother of three, said: "My husband and I have agreed to have only four children so that we can train them well. It is better to have a few children who are educated than many who are not. That way they can find good jobs." Renne (2003) found similar views linking the value of education with the need for family planning, along with allusions to economic hardship, among Yoruba-speaking informants in her study of fertility and development in a rural southwestern Nigerian town. An older uneducated woman whom Renne interviewed said: "In the past, people used to give birth to about seven or eight children. But the question that worries me is what will they eat? Can we have children without giving them an education? This won't be appropriate" (Renne 2003: 11). Many Ni-

gerians conceptualize the benefits of smaller families in terms of progress and development, even as they also articulate the pressure to have fewer children in a language of hardship and struggle.

The forces that propel family planning and fertility decline are linked as well to ongoing changes in the structure of families, the scope of kinship obligations, and the character of patron–client relations. People’s sense of the increasing burden of raising children is explained also by the fact that people feel less able to rely on wide networks of kin and relationships of patron–clientism for help with their children’s upbringing and their immediate family’s welfare. Amos, a 46-year-old father of five, expressed sentiments I heard from numerous parents: “Who else will train my children? Five children are the most I can manage to train. Even this number is a struggle. I cannot look to anyone else to train my children for me. It is my responsibility.”

In Igbo society, the increasing inequality that characterizes patron–client relations and the tendency for people to try to narrow the scope of their kinship obligations are widely perceived tendencies (Bastian 1993; cf. Renne 2003 for the Yoruba). As clients, virtually everyone laments the failures of their kin and patrons to offer levels of assistance they would like to receive. Conversely, as patrons, nearly everyone laments the burdens imposed by kin and other clients who expect assistance. With regard to children and their training, these issues arise most readily in terms of providing for children’s education. In contrast to Western societies, Igbo parents still rely heavily on extended families in undertaking the responsibilities of childrearing. Nonetheless, the perception that training children costs more and that the burden for training children falls ever more narrowly on parents is a significant part of people’s experience of the pressures to limit fertility.

### **The benefits of having people: Pressures to maintain fertility**

Although information gleaned from surveys, in-depth interviews, and participant observation demonstrates that the Igbo are experiencing strong pressures to limit fertility, just as striking are the continued desires and pressures to have large numbers of children. Almost none of the married people in my samples indicated a desired fertility of less than four children, and even among secondary school and university students, the vast majority desired “four,” “four or five,” or “at least four.” In this section I present two brief case studies, one that illustrates the pressures to have at least four children and another that shows the continued salience of a “wealth in people” strategy for how Igbos think about their society, even when people’s goals and pursuits are decidedly modern. In Nigeria, as fertility decline takes shape, “having people” remains a dominant value and a rational strategy,

producing the contradictions that characterize people's experience of demographic transition.

### The long reach of "home people"

On the basis of the literature on migration, urbanization, and fertility, one would expect Ubakala natives who have migrated to and settled in urban areas to have lower fertility than their rural kin (Lee 1992; Brockerhoff and Yang 1994; Brockerhoff 1998). The sample of Ubakala migrants interviewed in Kano is too small to construct a reliable TFR, so it is impossible to compare statistically Ubakala migrants' fertility with that of people at place of origin. However, almost without doubt, in the Igbo context (and, arguably, in many African societies), the contradictory pressures to limit fertility and to have relatively large families extend across rural-urban boundaries. This is the case for several reasons. First, the vast majority of Igbo migrants maintain strong ties to their communities of origin, both through continued visits to "home" and because most Igbos participate in associations and networks of "home people" that are established in cities of destination (Smock 1971; Chukwuezi 2001; Gugler 2002). Second, most adults in the rural villages are themselves one-time migrants, making the definition of who is a migrant and who is not, or who is "rural" and who is "urban," complicated and ever-changing. As the case below illustrates, even those rural-to-urban migrants who appear most likely to be in the vanguard of the fertility transition are subject to pressures to continue to have large families.

The couple Chima and Oluchi reside in Kano, the largest city in northern Nigeria, with a population of several million. They have lived there since before they married—almost 15 years. Chima sells motorcycle spare parts in one of Kano's sprawling markets, and Oluchi teaches in a government primary school. At the time I met them Chima was 36 years old, Oluchi was 32. They had two sons and a daughter, ranging in age from five to 11. Both Chima and Oluchi hail from Ubakala, though from different villages. They met in Kano through mutual friends who were also from Ubakala. When they decided to marry, Chima went home to initiate marriage negotiations with Oluchi's family. They completed their traditional wedding ceremony in Ubakala about 12 years ago.

Many rural-to-urban migrants marry someone from their place of origin and almost all go through the traditional wedding ceremony. But Chima and Oluchi were also modern by many standards. They had a modern courtship, including sex before marriage. They saw themselves as "in love" when they decided to marry. They had hoped to have a Christian wedding ceremony, in addition to the traditional rituals, but could not afford to do so. They share a single household budget, sleep in the same room every night, and discuss many family decisions jointly, especially those regarding their

children. Each of these aspects represents a change from patterns prevailing in their parents' generation. At the time I began interviewing them, Oluchi had been using an IUD for about four years. At first Chima objected strongly, saying that it was a sign of promiscuity and that they were not finished having children. But Oluchi prevailed, mostly because Chima agreed they could not afford to have more children yet—especially since Chima's youngest brother was living with them in Kano, and Chima was sponsoring him in secondary school. Their own children were advancing in school as well. Providing a good education for them was the couple's most important ambition.

Chima and Oluchi typically return to Ubakala a couple of times a year. Ubakala is a long and, by local standards, expensive 15-hour bus ride from Kano. On trips "home" Chima and Oluchi sometimes travel together; more often they go individually, so that one of them can carry out household and work responsibilities in Kano. In addition to their regular visits home, they also receive guests from home in their Kano flat. Besides the movement back and forth between Kano and Ubakala, there is a substantial community of "home people" in Kano. Ubakala migrants in the city regularly get together—formally to make decisions about Kano migrants' contributions to community projects and important events at home in Ubakala, informally to exchange news and gossip and use one another as messengers and resources.

Even in Kano, Chima and Oluchi remain subject to the watchful eyes of members of their community. Among the aspects of their lives under the closest surveillance is their fertility. At the time I began to get to know them, some of their relatives back home were concerned that there had been no children since the third one, some five years earlier. Those concerns filtered back and forth between Kano and Ubakala, and were sometimes voiced to Chima and Oluchi by a subtle hint or even a bold question. Eventually "the village" came to their door in the form of Chima's mother. Chima said:

One evening my mother arrived from the village unexpectedly. We were afraid that something bad had happened at home—that someone had died. But my mother assured us there was no emergency at home. The next morning she revealed that "the problem" which brought her to Kano was here. When I said I did not know what she meant, she said she and others were troubled that nothing had happened for five years. She had come to recommend we return home to visit a diviner. When I told her we were intentionally not having children and that Oluchi was using an IUD, my mother was shocked. She condemned the practice and blamed Oluchi. How could we stop after only three kids, she asked. What was Oluchi after?

Implied in Chima's mother's words and tone was an accusation that Oluchi was responsible for the situation, not just because she was using an

IUD, but perhaps also because her own ambitions were interfering with her "duty" to produce a proper number of children. Indeed, it became clear through further discussions that Chima's mother might even have been implying that Oluchi was using some kind of witchcraft or magical medicine to avoid another pregnancy. Oluchi was troubled by her mother-in-law's accusations, and she lamented the long reach of her extended family:

In our culture your marriage and your children are not simply your business. They are the business of the whole extended family and the whole village. Don't you see how my mother-in-law came all the way here to complain about me? My husband has not said so, but I know he will soon demand another child.

When I asked whether she wanted another child, Oluchi said she was not sure. Both Oluchi and Chima had told me before Chima's mother's visit that they might still have more children, but clearly the visit increased the family pressure. While this incident may appear familiar in Western eyes as a version of a dominant or nagging mother-in-law, in the Igbo case Chima's mother represents a much wider collective interest in a couple's fertility. She gave concrete voice to a concern about the couple's fertility that manifested itself in local gossip, rumor, and speculation, some of which I heard myself in both Ubakala and Kano.

Chima and Oluchi shared the widespread belief that a couple should have at least four children. But as urban dwellers they felt pressures to limit fertility, and they had the knowledge, access, and experience with contraceptives to limit their family size. In the end, they had a fourth child less than 18 months after Chima's mother's visit. Despite her earlier statement, Oluchi ultimately described the decision to have a fourth child as a decision made jointly with her husband. No matter how one accounts for the decision, the visit of Chima's mother clearly gave voice to continued collective beliefs about the importance of relatively high fertility.

### **Kinship, patronage, and access to education**

The reasons that Igbo continue to value and have large numbers of children are multiple. In interviews, when asked why they wanted "at least four" children, people voiced a number of rationales, including: the love of children; the need to have at least one son; the risk of mortality; the importance of having children to perpetuate one's name, lineage, legacy, and community; the benefits of having enough children to ensure a diverse set of prospects for one's offspring, with the hope that investment in at least some of them would pay off; and the need to have children who would help provide assistance in old age. Each of these responses represents a rationale that has been well

documented in the demographic literature, both with regard to how it serves as a prop for high fertility and in terms of how weakening in a particular rationale helps explain fertility decline (van de Walle and Foster 1990). But very striking in the interviews and observations of people's daily lives was the continued importance of "having people" as the means through which individuals, families, and communities gain access to social resources in an economic context based on patron–client ties.

The case described below is one of many examples of how my informants relied on networks of patronage, rooted in a moral economy tied to kinship, in order to get access to social resources, even those resources most associated with modernization, development, and fertility transition itself. An example related to education is significant because it demonstrates the paradoxes of Nigeria's fertility transition most clearly. Education is one of the most common and powerful variables used by demographers to explain fertility decline (Cleland and Rodríguez 1988; van de Walle and Foster 1990). Further, as the evidence presented above clearly shows, the importance and costs of education are closely associated in the minds of the Igbo with the pressures to lower fertility. The following account of a young girl's route to secondary school is typical of how Igbos negotiate and manage their networks of social relationships—especially networks of kinship—in order to access opportunities for modern education.

The couple Samuel and Nneoma were nearby neighbors of mine during my fieldwork in Ubakala. As is typical in Ubakala, they combined multiple economic endeavors to make a living. They both farmed, but in addition Nneoma sold drinks from a small shop in the market, and Samuel used his carpentry skills to find occasional work on local construction projects. They had two boys and two girls, who ranged from ages three to ten when I arrived for fieldwork in 1995. As neighbors and informants they were familiar with my research, and they knew that in 1996 I was conducting interviews in all the local secondary schools. When their eldest daughter, Ezimma, completed primary school, Samuel and Nneoma had aspirations that she would be admitted to a selective secondary school run by the federal government.

Ezimma scored adequately on her admissions test, but not well enough to gain entrance to the prestigious school her parents wanted her to attend. Because of the friendship I had with Samuel and Nneoma, they approached me for help. They thought I might have some influence with the principal at the federal school to help Ezimma gain admission despite her scores. They also knew my niece had entered the federal school that year, and they assumed (wrongly) that I had been instrumental in her admission. In the event, I did approach the principal about Ezimma, but I was told her score was simply too low. The principal said Ezimma would not qualify for the best local state school, much less for the federal school.

I know that many students in Nigeria are admitted to secondary schools and universities, even when they are not officially qualified, as a consequence of the influence of their parents or other patrons. Indeed, although I turned out to be an ineffective patron for Ezimma, her eventual admission to her second choice, the best local state-run secondary school, for which she was also officially unqualified, was made possible through the intervention of a more effective patron. Nneoma's brother-in-law did what I could not. He was connected politically to an influential local politician and managed to persuade him to request a favor from the school's principal. Ezimma's admission to the better school was possible only because of this kinship-based connection.

The story of Ezimma's entrance to secondary school is typical of many parents' experiences. Igbos routinely rely on their kinship networks to facilitate attainment of educational goals. A child's transition from primary to secondary school and from secondary school to university (a rarer and more costly occurrence) is widely recognized as a time when one must mobilize networks of social support. When I lectured at a Nigerian university, I regularly witnessed professors deluged with requests from their kin and townsmen for help with discretionary admission. One of my close friends sat on the prestigious 15-member university council. Each council member was given five discretionary admissions to grant—no questions asked. This was considered one of the biggest perks of the office.

The widespread acceptance of formal education as a key credential in contemporary Nigeria has created costs and burdens for parents that seem to fit with conventional demographic models of fertility transition. But the Nigerian situation adds a contradictory twist. Access to secondary and higher education in Nigeria frequently depends on one's social connections. Ironically, the rise of education as a marker of modernization, while creating pressures that promote fertility decline, simultaneously solidifies Igbo notions that families can only succeed in the world by "having people."

## Conclusion

The idea that kinship-based patronage systems remain important, even as African societies "modernize" by many different measures (e.g., literacy, urbanization, democratization, and consumption), has received substantial attention in the social sciences, especially with regard to issues of politics and the state (Joseph 1987; Bayart 1993; Chabal and Daloz 1999; Smith 2001a), but remains relatively unexamined in the specific context of African fertility transitions (for an exception see Renne 2003). Most demographic accounts of African fertility that pay attention to "wealth in people" as part of the relevant political-economic, social, and cultural context of continued high fertility have adopted a static approach that equates kinship-based pa-

tron-clientism with tradition and resistance to change (Caldwell and Caldwell 1987; Lesthaeghe 1989). The findings here tell a different story. Ethnographic evidence from Igbo-speaking southeastern Nigeria suggests that social transitions propelling fertility decline are well underway. Rather than serving as resistance to such changes, a “wealth in people” strategy is adapting to them, albeit in ways that create contradictory pressures in people’s reproductive lives.

The Igbo in Nigeria have conflicting feelings about the breadth of their obligations to members of their extended family and community of origin. They resent and try to narrow their kinship obligations; yet they also realize that they cannot succeed if they jettison family and community ties altogether (Berry 1989; Smith 2001a; Renne 2003). The paradoxes that characterize kin and community ties in the context of contemporary social change have been well demonstrated in many African contexts (Geschiere and Gugler 1998; Gugler 2002). The continued practical advantages of “having people” in order to secure access to modern social resources help explain why relatively high fertility remains valued. Yet these same social forces are restructuring family and community life, straining kin relationships, and contributing to economic pressures that push people to have fewer children. The social changes taking place in Nigeria, exemplified particularly in increasing levels of education and high rates of rural-to-urban migration, are exacerbating inequality and constricting the networks of kin and community that people can depend on. These contradictory pressures contribute to people’s perceptions that economic constraints and hardship are compelling them to limit fertility, even as they continue to hold that they must not have too few children.

Although my aim here has not been to offer predictions about the pace and ultimate outcome of Nigeria’s fertility transition, ethnographic data suggest that demographic change may be neither as fast as expected by those who predict rapid progress to replacement-level fertility nor as slow as expected by scenarios that depict a stalled transition. A medium-variant trajectory that posits a TFR of 3.1 by 2025 and 2.2 by mid-century (UN Population Division 2003: 354–355), seems a reasonable prediction. As described persuasively by the Caldwells and others, a number of processes are underway to facilitate fertility transition in Nigeria and other parts of Africa. The mechanisms that drive African fertility transition may, in fact, unfold in ways that will be unique (van de Walle and Foster 1990; Caldwell, Orubuloye, and Caldwell 1992). But whether the decline will lead inexorably to low fertility remains an open question. The evidence and arguments presented here, based on study of an Igbo-speaking population in southeastern Nigeria, suggest that the outcome will depend to a significant extent on the continuation or diminishing of kinship-based patron-clientism in determining people’s access to social resources. While the changes un-



derway may result in an outcome that reinforces the conventional view that fertility transition is ultimately associated with modernization and development, ethnographic research makes it clear that, to the participants themselves, fertility decline is not always experienced as progress.

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## Notes

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1 All names are pseudonyms, and people's identities have been altered to preserve anonymity.

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