Population and Culture

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VI. POPULATION AND CULTURE

The focus of this talk will be whether and how the culture of a people plays a significant role in its perception of population issues. I come from Nigeria. Among the southwestern Yoruba people of Nigeria, there is a saying that typifies the place of children in the scheme of society. It is debated that if one is asked to make a choice between money, a child, or health, which of these will be most important. The expected response is that one would pick health first, followed by a child and then money. The order of ranking is significant. It shows the perception that if one is in good health, then other things, such as having a child or money can accompany it. But this is contested by those who argue that the child is the most important of all. They say, one who has a child or children is happy and can easily be in good health. In addition, children are considered potential sources of wealth, directly or indirectly. In any event, the debate would generally center on whether having children is more or less important than having money or wealth.

What I intend to describe is the almost overwhelming importance of having children in a culture where a childless couple is considered almost cursed. In consideration of the important things of life, children take a central and dominating role. This is not peculiar to the Yorubas or even to Nigeria. I have lived for fairly long periods of time in two other African countries, and I have travelled and worked in

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291
several other countries in Africa where a similar emphasis is placed on having children. My wife has three children, yet my grandmother continues to ask when we are going to have others. The number of children a couple has is sometimes seen as a way of demonstrating virility and fertility. Many polygamists argue they are obliged to have many wives because a certain wife could not have more children or could not have children quickly enough. In addition to the social arguments, many say that business reasons or the position of the husband (as king, chief or father figure in the community) make having many wives imperative and unavoidable.

Let us look at another cultural dimension of this issue. Once again, I shall give you a personal example. My elder sister has six female children. The only reason she had six was because she and her husband kept hoping the next one would be a male child. So they went on and on. I still ask them jokingly to give it another shot as the next one will be a boy! I shall not be surprised if on return home to Nigeria I find my sister is pregnant with a “final attempt” to have a male child.

It is not just that children are important, there is a hierarchy of importance—a male child is generally seen as being more important than a female one. In the past, the size of the farmland a man could cultivate depended on the number of farmhands or male children he could put on the job. Moreover, male children were considered as capable of perpetuating the family whereas the female ones would end up in another man’s (the husband’s) house and might be completely integrated into their husband’s families.

There have been, and continue to be, many changes and modifications of these views and attitudes. Culture is hardly ever static anywhere. What is in question is the rate at which changes come about, and how much the changes affect the current situation for better or for worse. Sometimes these changes are very slow and come about in response to external and internal influence. In my society, where there is no official welfare for the poor or the aged and where family bonds are very important, especially between parents and their children, the emphasis on having children will continue to be important in the foreseeable future. Many parents have children and do everything they can for these children with the hope that when they (the parents) become old and unable to provide for themselves, the children will in turn provide for and take care of them.

“Children are the wealth of tomorrow,” is a popular adage. It is even believed that the more children there are, the better the chances of one of them becoming successful in future. It is a random optimization of “resources” which comes about in a situation of uncertainty.
I would also like to point out that the fact that most of the countries with the highest infant mortality rate also have the highest fertility rate confirms the intuitive correlation I see between the two indicators. According to the United Nations, population growth rates are affected by trends in mortality rates. Population growth in most African countries and Western Asia is projected at three percent in the year 2000, while in most of the developed countries, it is expected to be lower than one percent. As a matter of fact, South and East Asia as well as Latin American countries will have a population growth rate of about 1.5 percent for the same period.¹

If one sees only a slight possibility of one out of five children surviving, then chances are that one will opt to have many children to ensure that at least a few of them survive to become adults. And especially if these children are the social and economic investment of the future of the family, there is even a more compelling reason to have many children to guarantee future returns.

By contrast, in the industrialized countries, several factors discourage having children or at least having many children. The decreasing dependence on family for welfare and social care, coupled with the self-reliance that comes with economic empowerment are some of them. Less time is available for the extended and immediate family in view of competing economic interests and the structure of social and economic relationships in the society. In the cities, for many families, the ability to afford day care for children and the increasing amount of time necessary to commute affect the decision to have children and the number of children a family can support. Definitely, the culture in the industrialized countries—where it is "sexy" to have two children or only one, or perhaps none—is an end product of the various socio-economic factors of the recent times.

This brings us to a discussion of whether improvement in economic status leads to population control or reduction of fertility. I am aware that it is in vogue to point to Kerala,² India, where a people with a

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² The Kerala case is cited in several reports on population and development as one case where, among other things, the commitment of the government to population reduction has resulted in measurable reduction of poverty. United Nations, Global Outlook 2000: An Economic, Social and Environmental Perspective 205 (1990) “Morbidity levels and trends are influenced by many social, economic, and cultural factors, including policies and programmes outside the health sector. Economic development is usually associated with mortality decline, since improved economic conditions imply higher living standards and increased financial resources for health services. But low mortality levels have also been achieved in some low income
per capita income of $300 have a manageable, literate and healthy population. By widely-accepted standards, the people of Kerala are seen as having been able to attain some enviable level of development. This seems to confirm that poverty in a society does not have to lead to a huge population. I disagree.

Firstly, one cannot use an exception to validate a general norm. The Kerala example is only one of the few unusual cases in an overwhelming set of others that points in the opposite direction. All over the world, it is the case that poor societies have larger families, and the rich have smaller families. Besides, it is not clear that all sources of income to the people of Kerala have been taken into consideration to determine the per capita income. It would appear that a lot of non-financial "income" and transactions are involved in the relationship among the peoples of Kerala through the interactions between the inhabitants of the region and those who go abroad, especially to the rich Arab countries.

The historical trend in industrialized countries also confirms my position—large families have slowly given way to smaller ones as the health and socio-economic status in these countries improve. Of course, as I mentioned earlier on, there are other constraints in industrialized countries that favor smaller families. No wonder, therefore, that immigrants from poor developing countries tend to have smaller families when they are resident in industrialized countries. This is only a personal observation and not a result of any survey but I would encourage the confirmation of this view.

Some would argue that population control leads to improvement in socio-economic status. It is argued that in industrialized countries, reduction in population led to improved socio-economic status as resources become optimally spread among more manageable population. This is a difficult position to defend. What would be the motivation for a poor family with a high death rate of both children and adults to reduce its fertility? True, this family is caught in a vicious cycle of poverty begetting poverty by producing many infants who may die due to poor health care for both mother and infants. The child birth process and care for the children further impoverish the mother and family. But it is most unlikely that merely urging this mother to stop

countries where governments are committed to reducing mortality; China, Cuba, Sri Lanka, and the state of Keral in India are well known examples."

Also, "The women of Kerala are a special case by any standard. In one decade they have brought their birthrate down by almost two-thirds, and in thirty years have accomplished what it took a century for developed countries to achieve." EARTHWATCH, Mar.-Apr. 1993, at 20.
child bearing—without providing incentives in improved care and future prospects of a better life—can be sufficient or adequate.

I would argue that any population control program has to go hand in hand with programs for health care, economic improvement and general development. There is a need for education of women and men as a way to enhance the well-being of the society.

I would also like to mention, in closing, that it is erroneous to see the hunger and malnutrition and death as resulting from population increases. The sad images of Somalia, Sudan, and Ethiopia did not come merely from uncontrolled population; rather they resulted from major instability in the society. This disruption, which more often than not has direct or indirect political undercurrents, creates a situation in which people can no longer go about their daily lives. It creates a rupture in food-generation and food distribution such that most of the people, or a considerable group of people, do not have access to food. War, civil strife, and conflicts can very quickly disturb a fragile ecosystem and socio-political situation, resulting in serious, sometimes structural, shortages of food, health care, and family cohesion.

The management of hazards, postponement of death of infants and adults, and promotion of education as well as the health and socio-economic well-being of women and men are the more important components of any population control measures that can succeed in developing countries. Thank you.