

# RETHINKING THE AFRICAN VALUE OF HIGH FERTILITY: THE YORÙBÁ FARMERS' EXAMPLE

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**Abstract:** African culture is implicated in the population dynamics of sub-Saharan Africa which is distinctly pro-fertile. However, there is a dearth of emic African demographic perspectives. In this light, the present article is a representation of demographic motivations of Yorùbá farmers' who are largely rural residents and "more traditional" in orientation. Their articulations underscore themes cum bases of challenging the African value of high fertility, including the burdensome conceptualisation of high fertility; an appreciation of negative effects of high fertility on individuals and society; and the construction of high fertility as a threat to reaping "child food" (*oúnje ọmọ*), among others. In the current social climate, traditional culture is altered, manipulated or reconstructed to suit changing realities, thereby vindicating the "culture by the people" as opposed to "culture for the people" approach to cultural understanding.

**Keywords:** *fertility, culture, Africa, population, farmers, Yorùbá, family planning, demographic research*

## Introduction

The population dynamics of Africa south of the Saharan is truly matchless. The exclusive pronatalist character of this region was long propounded, and it is said to underlie the conjectural forecast that fertility decline will not respond to levels of socio-economic standing as observed in other climes (Caldwell and Caldwell 1987, 1988; Caldwell, Orubuloye and Caldwell 1992). True to these conjectures, sub-Saharan Africa is the last region to encounter fertility transition and it has the highest total fertility rate (TFR) in the world. The United Nation's (2017) projection indicates that 40% of the global population will be African by the year 2100. This makes the region a major

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contributor to world population (Cleland and Machiyama 2017; Casterline et al. 2017; United Nations 2017).

A juxtaposition of demographic transition in sub-Saharan Africa with other developing regions' transition indicates, contrary to dictates of conventional demographic transition theory, that this transition was "earlier" in sub-Saharan Africa because her development was slower and lower at the onset of fertility transition (Bongaarts 2017). In addition, even after controlling for socio-economic development, preferred family size and fertility were consistently high in sub-Saharan Africa, leading Bongaarts (2017: 51) to conclude that there's an "Africa effect" in population dynamics of the region. "The Africa effect," in the words of Mbacké (2017: 331) "is sustained by a higher demand for children and lower use of modern contraception." Indeed, African population dynamics paves the way for its exceptionalism. Herbertsson, Orszag and Orszag (2000) examined the convergence in total fertility rates across all continents and concluded that these rates have been converging absolutely and conditionally, with the exception of Africa which was significantly different from the rest of the world. Cultural evolutionists also assert the converging culture of low fertility across cultures (Colleran 2016). De Silva and Tenreyro (2017) report that projections predict a stability in populations of all world regions by 2050 except for that of Africa. The African population is said to not stabilise until 2100—the time when total fertility rates will globally converge to 2 children per woman. Korotayev et al. (2016: 2) asserted that "tropical Africa is well-known to be lagging far behind the rest of the world in terms of completing its demographic transition and achieving replacement level fertility."

A major implication of these exceptional scenario is that African culture and mentality, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, is antithetical to modernisation and rationality. This is because the demographic transition theory, the tool par excellence of demography, dictates that fertility change responds to economic development and other characteristics, notably characteristic of rational, western neoliberal societies. There is always an inherent assumption that "development is the best contraceptive" (Berelson 1975: 13). Several scholars have faulted this assumption, and others have reported empirical evidence debunking this essence of demographic transition theory (see, for instance, Caldwell 1976; Bryant 2007; Hirschman 2001; Dyson 2010). Alternative explanations include the diffusion of innovations (Bongaarts 2017), a process

about the spread of new ideologies and behaviour in a population without regard for levels of economic development between societies (Ibid). Similarly, Babalola et al. (2015) posit that alterations in people's ideas, opinions and attitudes are important in fertility decline while expounding the notion of ideational change as a complement to conventional demographic transition theory. Europe's second demographic transition also featured ideational change (Lesthaeghe 2010).

The classic notion of economic determinism propounded by Karl Marx plays out glaringly in global demographic dynamics, but this is often poorly acknowledged by demographic transition theorists. The western cultural context, that produced the demographic transition theory, is a superstructure resulting from the liberal economic substructure that does not require high fertility except to expand markets and/or labour force (Caldwell 2007). This is in contrast to non-western contexts like West Africa where high fertility "was just as logical as highly controlled reproduction in industrial society" (Ibid. 3). This is because the West African economic substructure was based largely on family farming, where high fertility translated into increased labour and opportunities for greater economic returns. It would be unfair to expect that the demographic transition theory originating in the western cultural context takes adequate account of peculiarities outside its purview.

The expositions of demographic transition theories including its alternatives leave the demographic literature with a major dearth of emic African demographic perspectives. The demographic literature is populated with anecdotal and proximate accounts of African experiences and positions. Although the exclusion of culture as a phenomenon is a general problem of demography (Kertzer 1997; Obono 2003; Hammel 1990; Bernardi 2007; Bachrach 2014), when African cultures are taken into account in demographic analysis, many cultural frameworks including the large family norm, polygyny, and the availability of a childcare structure in the extended family system are adjudged as enabling or promoting high fertility. Yet, as Hammel (1990) declared,

culture is a "fund or repertoire of behavior (culture as content) specific to actors in particular circumstances of time, place, and social position ... Their election of behaviors from the cultural repertoire is designed to achieve a balance between competing critics and to optimize the net social

morality of their position (culture as a negotiated set of understandings)” (1990: 474–475).

Hammel (1990: 466) further distinguished between “culture for the people and culture by the people.” Kertzner (1997) expounded this dichotomy as follows:

In the traditional model of culture for the people, behavior is viewed as the product of their culture, and hence understanding why people act as they do is simply a matter of identifying the cultural context into which they were born. By contrast, a conception of “culture by the people” emphasizes individual agency. Culture is viewed as providing a stock of symbols invested with moral weight that individuals manipulate; this manipulation in turn alters the stock of symbols and hence alters culture (1997: 145)

What Africans do or fail to do goes beyond the dictates of their culture. “Culture by the people” logically implies that morally weighted cultural materials are negotiated and manipulated based on needs and circumstances. This makes the African perspective to be inviolable and requires continuous investigation to document reasonings. The exceptionalism of African population dynamics is notably expressed from the western-oriented demographic literature. Although this literally promises no harm, it showcases a dearth of humanistic, ethnological interpretive endeavours which even raises concerns over the epidemiological imbalance. Hence, this study was designed to uncover African demographic motivations among the Yorùbá of southwestern Nigeria, while also considering gendered and generational idiosyncrasies. Farmers of this ethnic group are focused on because they represent a poorer segment of the population; they are largely rural residents and “more traditional” in outlook because they have remained farmers. They are therefore assumed, given conventional wisdom, to be more inclined to higher fertility.

## Research Methodology<sup>1</sup>

This article reports on a qualitative study bearing deep respect for the humanist school of thought in social research. The humanist, anti-positivist or interpretive tradition upholds human consciousness, internal nature of society, and advocates the idiographic nature of knowledge. In this view, the human mind is active in the construction of knowledge. People make sense of experiences and question existing knowledge in the light of new experiences. Moreover, historical and socio-cultural parameters pervade the construction of knowledge. People interpret and reinterpret their experiences cum constructions in the context of shared understandings, practices, language, etc. (Schwandt 2000). The Yorùbá people, inhabiting six states in southwestern Nigeria who share understandings, practices, language and other socio-historical attributes, constituted the study population of interest. Oyo and Osun States were selected while two rural communities, Ìgbòho and Gbòngán, were chosen from each state, respectively. Yorùbá farmers were primarily targeted. Farmers' livelihood has ethnic implications because Yorùbá people are traditionally farmers. In addition, those who have remained farmers in contemporary times can be assumed to be more "traditional" and therefore more reflective of an African rather than a globalising perspective. It was not difficult to gain entry to the selected rural communities. The leadership of the communities, including the foremost ruler, farmers' association, were very supportive and eased access to virtually all farmers of the community. Moreover, prospective participants were typically willing to participate. It was ensured that they met the inclusion criteria before they took part in the study. The inclusion criteria were being a farmer, Yorùbá, and willing to participate.

Data collection spanned the conduct of twelve focus group discussions (FGDs), which were to produce data in the context of social interaction, so that the production of consensual data was engendered. Three male and three female FGDs — one each among younger, middle-age and older generations were conducted in each community. Generations were defined

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1 Research ethics were considered in the planning and execution of this work. Participants were duly informed about the essence of the study and their help in answering the research questions was sought. They were informed that their answers would be treated anonymously, and that there was no expected risk in participating in the study. The study protocol was submitted to the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ibadan, Institutional Review Board for ethical approval and it was approved (assigned number UI/SSHREC/2018/0030).

as being younger than 29 years, 30–59 years old, and older than 60 years. Further, twenty-four in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted. In each study community, six IDIs were conducted among males and six among females— two from each generation. In addition, a total of eight key-informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted — four in each community, two among males and two among females — one each from middle-age and older generations. KIIs were conducted to access uncommon ethnological information from community leaders and *Ifá* priests (Babaláwo). One hundred and twenty-eight participants took part in the study. The question of what motivates Yorùbá farmers' fertility was the basic question that participants were asked. Every other question resulted from probing initial responses. Probes were to generate additional data and to elucidate participants' positions. Basic demographic information, including education, religion and marital status were collected from participants. The interviews and the focus group discussions were recorded on digital audio devices to guarantee valuable information would not be lost.

Data analysis commenced soon after data collection had begun. Data emersion was afforded as data were translated into English language, transcribed and read again and again. Data from each interview and group session were documented separately in Word documents. Transcripts were uploaded unto Nvivo software. Memos about thoughts, ideas, or questions were created in Nvivo. A word count was conducted to identify words most occurring in transcripts. This suggested concepts and ideas to look out for during coding. Data were coded inductively (based on data content), thereby engendering formal data organisation and the emergence of themes. Decontextualisation of data through excessive fragmentation was prevented. Emerged themes were identified and interpreted. In other words, the story accrued from the data are told in a cohesive manner. The influence of the data collection method (FGDs, IDIs, KIIs), sex (male, female) and generation (being < 29 years; 30-59 years old, and ≥ 60 years old) on the themes that had emerged were investigated. This influence was only quite noticeable along the generational line in the participants' representation of limitation to changing values attached to high fertility. Six themes indicating a transformation in pro-natal philosophy and prompting a rethink of the African values regarding

high fertility were accrued from the data.<sup>2</sup> One theme showcased a limitation to this change. These are discussed subsequently.

### **Change in Pro-Natal Orientation**

The current value ascribed to high fertility is tremendously different from what Africa is reputed for. This value has changed enormously. There was an overwhelming representation of this change in participants' expressions. Many of them felt it is wise to bear fewer children and some of them recounted personal experiences to buttress this changing value of high fertility. A key informant expressed this change by referring to having many children as a "mistake" in contemporary times:

Many of the children that were born into large families in the recent past have been able to learn from their fathers' mistakes. They now have few children and enjoy their small families. My own opinion is that having too many children is a terrible mistake to make in recent times (male, older generation).

The mammoth change in pro-natal orientation recorded in the data is a vindication of the "culture by the people" as opposed to the "culture for the people" approach to cultural understanding (Kertzner 1997). While cultural dictates like a large family norm and the extended family system may inherently promote high fertility, people are not necessarily thinking and acting in this direction if greater demands occasioned by high fertility are unfavourable to such dictates. No doubt, cultural structures may act as barriers to change. For instance, an in-depth interviewee stated that "the practice of not wanting to bear many children is rampant. Even the ones I bore were due to many complaints from my husband's family. Left to me, I would have had just two children but I have four" (female, middle-age generation). This participant is mirroring the patriarchal character of

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2 The socio-demographic profile of participants indicated that sex and generation were distributed evenly, in line with the expectations. A huge majority (93%) was married while the remaining were unmarried. Most participants (35.2%) were senior school certificate holders. A sizeable chunk (27.3%) had no formal education while 25.8% were primary school certificate holders. Tertiary education was achieved by 11.7% of participants. More than half (53.1%) of the participants were Muslims, 28.1% were adherents of Christianity while 18.8% were practitioners of the traditional religion. About two of every ten participants practice traditional religion, suggesting an enviable level of cultural survival among participants. This is proof that the target population was worth targeting after all. The mean age was 46.07±19.48.

Yorùbá society that places a great deal of power at the disposal of men and their families to decide about a wide range of issues for a couple, including reproductive decisions. However, the data show clearly that people are at least balancing their positions and their decisions based on cultural dictates and the need to survive in a real world. People are loosening the grip of the cultural environment to adapt to the current socio-economic environment which is unfavourable to high fertility. As Smith (2004: 223) aptly put it, “social transformations ... are reconfiguring the political-economic and cultural forces that shape demographic processes.”

### **Burdensome Conceptualisation of Increased Fertility**

Expressions of change in the value of high fertility incorporated the notion that childbearing and childcare have become burdensome. In very clear representations participants showcased that having children is a burden. Many of them situated their justifications within changing physical and financial needs of raising children while several others simply presented their positions as mentalities of the contemporary world, which is averse to higher numbers of children. Even participants of the older generation were supportive of the notion that increased fertility was burdensome. A key informant stated that “gone are the days of having many children. Today, things have changed. People always like to have two or three children in order to raise them well. The burden of raising children is high compared to what we went through” (male, older generation). The burdensome conceptualisation of increased fertility is a testimony to the fact that people are balancing and even manipulating their positions to suit current realities in which children bear no economic advantage but responsibilities. This supports Caldwell’s (1976) theory of wealth flows, which simply affirms that fertility responds to economic gains. Reaping economically from the increased or decreased fertility will make people increase or decrease their fertility, respectively. Farmer’s children hardly count as farm labour any longer (Ibrahim, forthcoming), so it is logical that increasing fertility is viewed as burdensome.

This conceptualisation is also a direct reflection of the fast-declining extended family system, in which economic and other cost of raising children is collectively shared. Wusu and Isiugo-Abanihe (2006) asserted as follows:



The traditional childrearing practices in Nigeria are communal within the context of the extended family system or lineage, and the costs of raising children are not borne solely by the biological parents. A close knit of relatives commonly shares the costs of rearing children, in terms of emotion, time, finance and other material support, since all children together comprise the strength of the lineage. Studies have indicated that the ubiquitous and cohesive nature of the extended family structure in traditional societies is the pillar supporting such childrearing practices. (2006: 142)

In agreement with the present study's findings, Wusu and Isiugo-Abanihe (2006: 139) reported that "child fostering and other means of spreading childrearing costs among relatives are fading out." Socio-cultural dynamics have changed tremendously and the African family system is no exception. Some group discussants stated that "considering the era we are now in, it is obvious that things have changed. Bearing and rearing children these days is a great burden. We no longer have the help of older family members" (female, younger generation). In another congruent instance, the anthropological report of Smith (2004) expressed that it was astonishing to find that the Igbo-speaking people of Southeastern Nigeria "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" (2004: 227). Smith (2004: 227) contended that these accounts showcase distinct population dynamics, "different from the dominant popular Western tropes that tend to depict fertility transition as part of a grand process of 'progress,' 'modernization,' and 'development.'" Indeed, traditional cultural positions are no longer the main motivator to increased fertility in the current social climate. Cultural enablers of high fertility are strongly disappearing in contemporary African society in general.

### **The Downside of High Fertility: Negative Effects of Increased Fertility on Individuals and Society**

The dangers high fertility poses to individuals and society also pervaded the cause of rethinking the African value of high fertility. Unsavoury human activities like taking to prostitution and to crime featured generously in

participants' representations of this danger. The danger originates from the inability of parents and guardians to take charge of the upkeep of children. An in-depth interviewee recounted his lived experience as follows:

I have seen many people who gave birth to many children without having any good source of income to take care of them, leaving the children to fend for themselves. Many of these children later became a nuisance to society. That's why I frown at people who do that because I question some of them why they had to bring those children to life only to make them thieves and prostitutes (male, middle-age generation).

Indeed, a high population size negatively impacts individuals and society. Bamgbose (2002: 569) asserted that "Nigeria has a large number of adolescents living and making a living on the streets ... the result is the proliferation of prostitution among the adolescents with its attendant problems." Nwokocha (2007: 58) similarly asserted that "commercial sex has become quite common in tertiary institutions in Nigeria and in particular universities to the extent that it is valued among a large number of students." In a similar fashion, Ajaegbu (2012: 316) expounded that "youths are disproportionately more likely to be perpetrators as well as victims of crime and violence... increasing population, and lack of policy initiatives and implementation to some extent encouraged criminal groups to thrive across Nigeria." Furthermore, scholars have expressed the conviction that the increasing population has created a huge gap in youth employment and has exacerbated social problems in Nigeria, including violence (Okafor 2011; Ajaegbu 2012; Adebayo 2013). Still, there seems to be no end in sight for these challenges. Balogun (2018) explains that the massive youth unemployment in Nigeria benefits little from Nigeria's National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) nor from entrepreneurship programmes embedded in the same scheme.

From the perspective of participants, the path out of the dangers posed by high fertility is to embrace low fertility. This underscores the changing value of high fertility. An in-depth interviewee stated that "bearing many children these days is synonymous to bearing them to suffer" (female, younger generation). A key informant also stated that "anyone who bears a few number of children will give all it takes to see them become responsible children who will not become wayward in years after. But for a person who bears many, this is quite impossible. Many of the children later on grow to become irresponsible and

wayward children” (female, middle-age generation). Indeed, the position that cultural dictates are scarcely the problem of African high fertility, at least in the current social climate, is accentuated by this finding recounting the participants’ understanding of the negative effects of increased fertility on both individuals and society. This is indeed a reversal of the once-sacrosanct social position ascribing great prestige to high fertility. In consonance with this conclusion, Smith (2004) underscored the dilemma confronting the average Nigerian with the economic challenges of raising a large family and the cultural environment favourable to creating such a family. In the report on his anthropological research among the people of southeastern Nigeria, Smith (2004: 221) contended 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.” Truly, the traditional value attached to high fertility is now a characteristic of historical Africa.

### **Increased Fertility as a Threat to Reaping the Fruits of Parenthood**

Increased fertility was represented by several participants as a threat to reaping benefits from children in the future. In a large proportion, people are (re-)constructing high fertility as a threat to reaping the fruits of parenthood. Some group discussants represented this threat by concurring that “if one does not give birth to many children and raises them properly, as few as they are, one would benefit from them at old age” (female, younger generation). An in-depth interviewee went as far as stating that people who bear children successively without caring for them adequately “will be cursed by their children in the future, they [such parents] stand to gain nothing from them [the children] eventually” (male, younger generation). A key informant buttressed this curse-related and enemy-like tendency of parent-child relationships in the following passage:

A person that does not take care of his children finds trouble. Such a person is considered unfortunate because he had just brought them to this world to suffer for nothing. Those are the kinds of people who become enemies with their children because the children will not grow up to consider the parents as their responsibility. It makes sense to simply have the number of children that one can adequately cater for (male, middle-age generation)

An in-depth interviewee even suggested a kind of symmetrical relationship between caring and reaping from children in a bid to justify that increased fertility threatens the chances of benefitting from children. According to her, “any living soul who gives birth to children but does not take care of them, cannot benefit from them. And the more the children, the less the ability to take care of them” (female, middle-age generation). This reported threat is a very interesting finding, which reveals the participants’ insecurities regarding one of the basic elements of Yorùbá childbearing expectations: *óúnje ọmọ* (“child food”). The phenomenon is well engrained in Yorùbá culture and virtually every parent looks forward to reaping benefits from their children. “Child food” includes but idiomatically goes beyond what is required for the sustenance to include properties — landed and otherwise. The average grown child also looks forward to fulfilling this role to his or her parents and the family at large. It is, therefore, instructive to find that participants are pessimistic about the prospects of obtaining *óúnje ọmọ* in the context of high fertility. High fertility is constructed as a threat to raising children properly and this in turn thwarts the potential of reaping benefits from children. Adeniyi-Ogunyankin collected qualitative data among women in Ibadan, southwestern Nigeria, to study gender and aging in the context of increasing neo-liberalism in Nigeria’s urban political economy. Adeniyi-Ogunyankin (2012) reported that:

The older women in the low-income group experience a greater degree of financial insecurity. Not only do some of these women struggle to make ends meet to maintain themselves, they are also under mounting pressure to provide for their grown children, as well as grandchildren ... The poorer older women connected the high unemployment rates to their experiences of an increased financial burden as well as to the denial of their rights to *jeun omo*. *Jeun omo*, in Yoruba literally means that one will eat the child’s food. This means that parents reap the reward of taking care of their child, once the child is financially secure and able to ensure his/her parent’s well-being (2012: 31–33).

Although Adeniyi-Ogunyankin (2012) constructed the problem of a dwindling *óúnje ọmọ* in the context of neo-liberalism, the present study and its findings are demographic in character. All the same, both sets of findings have accentuated the challenge of insecure financial standing. In the present

study, this challenge serves to refine prospects of *oúnje omọ* in particular and promotes change in the pro-natal orientation towards low fertility in general.

### **Extolling Family Planning**

Positive attitudes towards family planning were pervasively articulated among participants as part of their representations of the prevailing change in attitudes towards increased fertility. Many participants expressed the idea that family planning is consonant with elements of Yorùbá traditional culture. This is understandable considering that there are traditional, charm-related methods of contraception. An in-depth interviewee shared her lived experience while extolling family planning by stating that “our culture does not forbid child-spacing and family planning practices even though Yorùbá people love children. It is to ensure that the children given birth to are well trained and become successful in life. During our own time, we were not exposed to this practice so we give birth to as many children as possible” (female, older generation). Another older participant gave “her blessing” to users of family planning. According to her, “people now engage in child-spacing and family planning methods, whereas we were ignorant of this then. For those who engage in it, we of the older generation are not against them because we understand that it is meant to enable them to make effective use of their resources to take proper care of their children” (female, older generation). Some group discussants underscored the prevailing positive attitude towards family planning and sang the following song in chorus:

*Fètò sọmọ lóri mẹrin o (2×)*  
*Ìjọba ti lóun ò lẹkọ́ọ̀ ọ̀fẹ́ mọ́*  
*Fètò sọmọ lóri mẹrin o (2×)*  
*Ìjọba ti lóun ò níwòsàn ọ̀fẹ́ mọ́*  
*Fètò sọmọ lóri mẹrin (2×)*  
*Oúnjẹ ti léwó, gààrí ti léwó*  
*Gbogbo bímọ bímọ, ẹ̀fètò sọmọ bíbí*  
*Fètò sọmọ lóri mẹrin (2×)*

Stop giving birth after four children (2×)  
Because the government no longer has free education  
When you have four children, stop giving birth (2×)  
The government has stopped free healthcare

When you have four children, stop giving birth (2×)  
Prices of foodstuff have increased  
All mothers stop child-birth  
Stop giving birth after four children (2×)

The song showcases predominant mental states concerning family planning among the people. Family planning is construed as a way out of the challenges that high fertility affords. Group discussants expounded the song as follows:

What this song means is that the government has stopped free healthcare. Many women lose their wombs while some die of uncontrollable blood flows during childbirth. But when we give birth to a few children, we will not have these problems (female, younger generation).

The participants' exaltation of family planning is apposite. They generally had approving things to say about it. Some aptly recognised that family planning is even cultural and was practiced to enable child spacing for optimal child well-being and survival (Mbacke 1994). The *fètò sòmọ lóri mērin* song is very instructive. The song appears to have originated in the 1980s when the Nigerian government introduced structural adjustment policies. The quintessence of the policy was "government withdrawal of subsidies for health and education, as part of the conditionality provisions of loans from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund" (Obono 2003: 104). The neo-liberal demands of these international bodies (Adeniyi-Ogunyankin 2012) created deep-seated economic challenges at the level of the individual, culminating in palpable social changes in society. Obono (2003) even opined that the marginal reduction of fertility rates can be attributed to these harsh economic circumstances. Hence, it is understandable that the song underscored the government's indifference to health and education costs of raising children: "*fètò sòmọ lóri mērin, ijọba ti loun ò lẹkọọ ọfẹ mọ, ijọba ti loun ò níwòsàn ọfẹ mọ*" (stop giving birth after four children, the government no longer has free education, the government has stopped free healthcare). Another significant feature of the song is the representation of four children as the ideal fertility. Hence, the song is connected with the Nigerian government's policy recommending four children per woman (Federal Ministry of Health 1988). Bankole (1995: 322) aptly asserted that there is a "growing tendency in Nigeria to regard a family of four children as ideal." This policy has been criticised for failing to take account of cultural differentials across the diverse

ethnic groups that make up the Nigerian state (Obono 2003). Taking this into account would have maximised the chance of reducing fertility because some ethnic groups were ripe for a sharper reduction in fertility rates, but other groups were not. Moreover, an ideal fertility of four children is still far from replacement fertility of 2.1,<sup>3</sup> which seems rather ideal and more effective in ushering in the demographic dividend. Hence, the song discussed has showcased the embracement of family planning among participants but not the ideal fertility for a highly fertile country such as Nigeria, which is in dire need of sharper fertility reduction. Nevertheless, the song showcases the growing acceptance of family planning in Nigeria as a whole and in the southwest in particular. The Nigerian Demographic and Health Surveys (NDHS) indicate that percentage of married women aged between 15–49 years who use any method of contraception has increased from 6.0% in 1990, to 12.6% in 2003, 14.6% in 2008, 15.1% in 2013 and 16.6% in 2018 (National Population Commission, 2018). The latest Nigerian DHS (Ibid.) show that the total demand for family planning (for limiting and spacing children) among currently married Nigerian women is 35.5%, the southwest region has the highest, which is 57.4%. Thus, the growing acceptability of family planning is indeed manifest.

### **Civilisation as a Precursor of Changing the Value of Increased Fertility**

Civilisation was implicated by several participants as ushering in changing values attached to high fertility. Civilisation was coded as those alterations in social patterns that affect phenomena like agricultural economy, technology, rapid urbanisation, formal education, and acquaintance with western individualised culture with its attendant permissiveness towards individual aspirations. From the perspective of some group discussants, civilisation is antonymous with doing things in line with customs and traditions, which were the practices of ancient times devoid of classical technological accomplishments that characterise the modern world. The group discussants asserted that

truly, things have changed. This present world is not like the former [the olden days] because of civilisation. It is the era of modern technology.

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3 Replacement fertility is to simply have two children; it is the level of fertility at which a population exactly replaces itself from one generation to the next.

Based on what we were told, our forefathers' era was a dark age era where things were done in line with customs and tradition. But today, it is the era of civilisation because many things which we were brought up with are no more in this current world (female, older generation)

In the words of another participant, “civilisation has changed the game,” “people now give birth to the numbers of children they can afford quality education and also cater for their needs” (in-depth interviewee, male, middle-age generation). Further, civilisation featured in portraying people who give birth to several children as not being good thinkers, because current society is a “jet era” in which children are no longer constructed as constituting wealth (male, younger generation). The civilisation hypothesis as featured in the data is a taken-for-granted explanation afforded by colonial history and the current wave of globalisation. Ibrahim and Jegede (2017) also report that participants in their study among the Yorùbá pervasively cited civilisation as engendering changing attitudes towards body size. Yorùbá culture and traditions have undergone tremendous changes owing to westernisation and colonisation (Lawal 2001; Omobowale 2008). The idea of civilisation-induced social changes is apposite, a truism, and a mentality that has come to stay in contemporary Yorùbá society.

### **Continuity in the Pro-Natal Orientation**

Despite dominant expressions of change in the value of high fertility among participants, it could also be noted that a fringe of participants resisted this change. The overwhelming majority of participants expressing the traditional pro-natal orientation were older. Some group discussants situated their resistance around divinity and stated that “it is up to God to makes us fertile and He helps one in taking care of one’s children. There are situations where a parent of twenty children finds it easy to look after them while another parent of one finds it difficult to look after a child. So, it is God’s doing” (male, older generation). This divinity-centered resistance to change — the idea that God decides fertility and takes care of children, so man need not bother about limiting birth for whatever reason — is peculiar to justifications among the Yorùbá. Yorùbá people feature divinity greatly in their socio-communal life. For instance, they tremendously attribute their profile to their *orí*, literally head, idiomatically “the divinity controlling fate” (Awolalu 1973: 84). Ibrahim (2019) also reported that divinity enables Yorùbá farmers to be optimistic



about their livelihood. Hence, divinity marginally has a resistive function in changing the value of high fertility among the people.

Apart from the concept of divinity, the need for future security, which children typically provide, was expressed pervasively among resisting participants. Resistance to change in pro-fertile orientation was therefore also centred around the need for future financial security. Some group discussants were of the opinion that if they continued to consider the burden of raising children, they would not do the needful. Accordingly,

our children are the ones who would take care of us when we are old. All we need to do is ask God to help us in taking care of them. Our future matters when it comes to child-bearing (female, middle-age generation).

In an overview of persisting high fertility in sub-Saharan Africa, Mbacké (2017: 332) posited that high fertility is a “rational response to current socioeconomic conditions and the weakness of the support typically provided by well-functioning states in terms of security and other basic services.” The successive failure of governments in developing an economically secure society is indeed a motivating resistance to changing values of high fertility. Hence, the need for financial security is a notable factor in creating resistance to changes in valuing high fertility.

The fringe of participants expressing resistance to the changing value of high fertility among the Yorùbá also identified western education negatively and a barrier to high fertility. This is because formally educated people are reputed for being prone to jettisoning traditional culture. A key informant asserted that “western education affects the Yorùbá people negatively by making people to have a smaller number of children. Western education came with the culture of the colonialists, which relegated our own culture of having many children to the background” (male, older generation). Incidentally, the western education which is ordinarily perceived as an advantage of southern Nigeria was also portrayed in the negative in this instance just quoted. Still, a younger participant situated her resistance along the difficulty of breaking away from an accustomed tradition of high fertility. Being born and raised in large families was fingered as predisposing to wanting to live in large families.

The fear of child-mortality is another reason for motivating resistance to the changing value of increased fertility. An in-depth interviewee stated

that “death can strike down a child or three at a time... so, it is better to have them in large numbers” (male, older generation). The Yorùbá people traditionally say *ká bí tìkú fúkú, ká bí tàrùn fàrùn* (bear children for death and bear children for disease). In essence, this participant reflected an age-old social challenge in Yorùbá society in particular. This challenge is still persistent but has been substantially reduced. Shapiro and Tenikue (2017) report that in rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa that experience a decline in fertility, reduced mortality is responsible for 35% of this decline. The 2008, 2013 and 2019 Nigerian Demographic and Health Surveys (NDHS) indicate that the Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) reduced sharply between 2008 and 2013, from 87 to 69 per 1,000 live births. Between 2013 and 2018, it reduced marginally from 69 to 67. The total fertility rate (TFR) reduced from 5.7 in 2008 to 5.5 in 2013 and 5.3 in 2018 (National Population Commission 2009, 2014, 2019). These reductions show an inherent link between child mortality and fertility reduction, although not at the same rate. Thus, it is understandable that the resistance to fertility change will centre around child mortality, as demonstrated by the participant in question. Indeed, there is a noticeable measure of cultural survival that undermines the changing value attached to high fertility, the sources of which are plentiful but unpopular in contemporary Yorùbá society.

Inter-ethnic dynamics was another factor motivating continuity in the extant pro-fertile orientation. A key informant was strongly in favour of high fertility and saw the absence of this as a threat to Yorùbá society, especially considering that the Yorùbá counterparts, the Hausa, are reputed for high fertility. He argued as follows:

If the Yorùbá race continue to limit the number of children they have, this may threaten our continued existence as a race. The Hausa people have lots of children and their population is always on the higher side. This gives them the chance to claim more lands and win elections. Both the culture and Islamic religion of Hausa people concurrently encourage having many children. I really wonder when the Yorùbá will use their heads and bear children like their ancestors did. I look forward to a time when Yorùbá people will stop these limited children mentality, to a time when we match up with the childbirth rate of the Hausa/Fulani (male, older generation).

The colonial history of Nigeria is implicated in the distrustful relations that persist between the major ethnic groups of Nigeria. The 1914 amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates that currently make up the Nigerian state was not sought after by the people: it “did not result from pressure of any sort from Nigerian peoples but for reasons of administrative convenience” (Babalola 2019: 41). Babalola (2019: 42) continued:

one major implication of this policy of duality was that it did not encourage horizontal interactions among the peoples of these two separate areas. This was to later result in contemptuous, distrustful and antagonistic behaviour among the peoples that have been brought together in one large political unit.

In the pre-colonial and post-colonial era, Europeans interacted more in southern than in northern Nigeria. The southern Yorùbá people for instance imbibed more European ways of life than their northern counterparts. This translated into more acculturation on the part of the Yorùbá, which is reflected in the character of the Yorùbá. The Yorùbá people are typically more western-educated, more civilised and, in this context, more open to fertility change. Davis and Kalu-Nwiwu (2001) narrated the divisive tendency of uneven access to European education. According to them,

the colonial school system produced little common socialization among Nigeria’s regional ethnic groups. Instead, it propagated exclusivism. Rather than developing a sense of community, it enlarged the bases of difference. It engendered divisive sentiments of inferiority and superiority, as ethnic groups in the south with the overwhelming proportion of Western educated members disdained ethnic groups in the north for their relative lack of Western education (2001: 5).

The participant’s remark under consideration is a reflection of unsavory ethnic relations between the Yorùbá people of southern and the Hausa people of northern Nigeria. However, it goes beyond ethnic relations to reflect the insecurities of Yorùbá people with regard to the higher fertility rate of their northern counterparts. This is certainly an interesting issue warranting further study. The continuity as opposed to the enormous change in pro-natal orientation recorded during the data collection obviously represents limitations to the changing value of high fertility among Yorùbá farmers. Indeed, this is a firm indication that Yorùbá farmers in particular and Yorùbá

people in general still reckon with ancient elements of their culture and society. Older persons were more representative in this regard.

## Conclusion

It is well entrenched in the literature that especially in sub-Saharan Africa, pro-natalist culture has a strong reputation owing to cultural institutions that welcome high fertility and family planning programs that are typically weak (Caldwell, Orubuloye and Caldwell 1992; Caldwell and Caldwell 1995). However, the present study has clearly demonstrated that there are many reasons for prompting a rethink of traditional value of high fertility among the Yorùbá. Economic rationalism underlies the current change in fertility orientation, just as it informed the once-sacrosanct pro-fertile orientation of the people. This accentuates the limitations of the demographic transition theory, which ignores the economic production context in its narrowed expectation that fertility will decline when economic development is experienced. Indeed, the value of high fertility has dwindled tremendously among the people, vindicating the “culture by the people” as opposed to the “culture for the people” approach to cultural understanding. Yorùbá farmers’ current fertility orientation demonstrates that traditional culture is altered, manipulated or reconstructed to suit changing realities. The conceptualisation of increased fertility as a burden is a direct reflection of the fast-declining extended family system, in which economic and other costs of raising children are collectively shared. The participants’ understanding of the negative effects of increased fertility on both individuals and society is a reversal of the once-sacrosanct social position ascribing great prestige to high fertility. High fertility is constructed as a threat to raising children properly and this, in turn, thwarts the potential of benefitting from children. This threat serves to refine prospects of *óúnje ọmọ* (“child food”) in particular and promotes a change in pro-natal orientation towards low fertility in general. The *fètò sọmọ lóri méré*n song showcased the embracement of family planning among participants but not the truly ideal fertility for a highly fertile country like Nigeria, which is in dire need of sharper fertility reduction. The idea of civilisation-induced change in the value attached to high fertility is apposite, a truism and a mentality that has come to stay in contemporary Yorùbá society.

However, continuity as opposed to the enormous change in pro-natal orientation was also recorded among a fringe of participants. This is a firm

indication that Yorùbá farmers in particular and Yorùbá people in general still reckon with ancient elements of their culture and society. Indeed, there is a noticeable measure of cultural survival that undermines the changing value attached to high fertility, the sources of which are plentiful but unpopular in contemporary Yorùbá society. This resistance is reflected more among older persons. Divinity, the successive failure of governments in developing an economically secure society, and unsavory ethnic relations between the Yorùbá people of southern and the Hausa people of northern Nigeria are among the marginal factors motivating a resistance to changing values of high fertility. Indeed, cultural positions are hardly the core problem of African high fertility, at least in the current social climate.

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