

**MATRICLAN PRIESTS AND FERTILITY AMONG THE YAKURR OF
SOUTHEASTERN NIGERIA**

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**Paper Prepared for the IUSSP XXIV General Population Conference (Session S23:
Value Orientations and Reproductive Behavior), Salvador, Brazil, 18-24 August,
2001.**

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Abstract

This paper examines the value orientations underlying reproductive behavior among the Yakurr of southeastern Nigeria. It describes the role of matriclan priests in unifying the sacred and profane worlds of this people and presents an argument for linking fertility outcomes with political economy. The paper shows that pronatalism constitutes the cultural theme of Yakurr society and, in the modern period, serves as a negotiating strategy within the plural ethnic environments of the Nigerian nation.

Introduction

Among the double unilineal Yakurr (also Yakö) of southeastern Nigeria, the role of matriclan priests (*B'ina*) is unique because it unifies the sacred and profane worlds of the people with regard to reproductive behavior. The primary function of these priests is to perpetuate matrilineal fertility through the organization of religion at communal and clan levels, but this function also entails wide-ranging political power. In other words, Yakurr theocracy is organized around the activities and personae of *B'ina* and the moral order is entrenched in deep political relations promoted by these priests as its culture bearers.

Although patriclan elders perform religious functions that complement those of the matriclan priests, their political influence is more limited. The role of the matriclan priests is more remarkable because from their sacerdotal authority is derived power to direct the cultural construction of spiritual reality and to impose ritually sanctioned controls over town-wide social, political, economic and moral behavior. In this way, they condition the reproductive motivation of their matrikin. The nature of their political authority inheres in the very structures of double unilineal descent, which is classic among the Yakurr in that while the patriclan is a corporate, localized, co-residential entity, matrilineal membership is dispersed. This residential principle is a key source of the moral authority of the priests and it is on this basis that, as a council, they exercise oligarchic control over the religio-political affairs of the people.

*The support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for a post-doctoral fellowship, administered through the Population Studies and Training Center (PSTC) and Anthropology Department of Brown University, is gratefully acknowledged. I am also grateful to David Kertzer, Nicholas Townsend and Marida Hollos for comments on an earlier draft of this paper but I remain solely responsible for the views contained in it.

Double descent has clear implications for political cohesion (Forde, 1950; Goody, 1957; Harris, 1962; Salami, 1999), but there is little information on the means by which this system affects fertility, or the manner in which theocratic leadership mediates that influence. As an ethnographic exploration of these connections, this paper contributes to a growing social science interest in the macro-micro factors affecting human reproductive behavior, their meso-level mediators, and the intangible symbolic universe in which structure and agency are embedded.

Despite a growing awareness of a need for a cultural perspective in fertility studies, not enough work is being done at the interface between demography and anthropology, where the main factors influencing the event converge (Kreager, 1982; Hammel, 1990, etc.). While there is considerable agreement that “more intensive use of anthropological insights can enlarge the contextual understanding of population processes as a social subsystem” (Kertzner and Fricke, 1997: 20), to date little empirical work of this sort has been conducted. Smith’s observation on the subject remains *apropos* to the effect that “this renewed emphasis in fertility theory on ‘cultural factors’ and cultural context of high fertility has not as yet had a great impact on fertility research” (Smith, 1989: 172).

More generally, as Szreter (1993: 903) has argued, “insufficient consideration has been given to the full range of alternative social science methodologies that are available for the study of fertility change”. Existing information on the complex ideational and institutional elements of sub-Saharan African (SSA) fertility is fragmentary, and often anecdotal. Not much is known of how people make sense of their interactions or how a polity produces, reproduces, and transmits its fertility norms and values across time and space. One result has been a tendency to pathologize high fertility in sub-Saharan Africa out of hand, or to attribute to it a sort of irrationality that has substance only as a Eurocentric construct. Systemic contradictions such as the conflict between community-level pronatalism and state-level antinatalism are left ignored; hence the idea of a participatory approach to fertility reduction (that is one involving action on the part of SSA communities and their leaders) becomes a contradiction in terms (Obono, forthcoming).

In the present paper, I examine the value orientations underpinning fertility among the Yakurr of the southeastern Nigerian, using Ugep (a.k.a. Umor) as a case study. I argue that the ideational contexts of reproductive behavior among this people are linked to historical conditions of pathological sterility and infant/child mortality. This holistic perspective locates fertility within the discourse of the anthropology of power (specifically the group interests of matriclan priests), and views it as a communal measure of political legitimacy. Although Ugep is undergoing urbanization processes and is seen by many observers to be “modernizing” rapidly, it yet retains an essential feature of its traditional identity, *viz.* its pronatalist worldview, as a response to the challenges it faces within the plural-ethnic contexts of Nigeria’s political economy. The repositioning of Yakurr pronatalism is a strategic response to a federal calculus in which population size is, or is perceived to be, a determinant of revenue/resource allocation.

Location of Yakurr Settlements

The Yakurr inhabit a territory that lies approximately between latitude 05⁰ 40' and 06⁰ 10' north and longitude 08⁰ and 08⁰ 50' east in the geographical center of the Cross River State, Nigeria. They live in five compact towns (Ugep, Ekori, Nko, Mkpani, and Idomi) situated 140 kilometers northwest of Calabar in the Yakurr local government area (LGA). The Yakurr are related by strong linguistic, affinal and historical ties established by a tradition of common origin and reinforced by frequent intermarriages and “a continual interchange of visitors and permanent migrants” (Forde, 1964: 3). Ugep is the largest of the settlements and is an area of high population density. Located at the southern end of the LGA, about 11.2 kilometers east of the Cross River, the town is a sprawling semi-urban concentration of five semi-autonomous divisions (Bikobiko, Ijiman, Ijom, Ikpakapit, and Ketabebe). It is the administrative headquarters of the Yakurr LGA.

The Yakurr Descent System

Double-unilineal descent (also duolineal descent or double descent) is an anthropological rarity. Forms of this system exist among some groups of Australian Aborigines and in Dutch Guiana, and a number of other societies listed by Murdock

(1940), but the classic examples are found in Africa. Within this continent, double descent has been reported among the Ashanti Ntoro, Gã, and Fanti of Ghana (Herskovits, 1937) and the LoDagaba (Goody, 1956; 1957). It also exists among the Nyaro and Tullishi societies in the Nuba Hills of Sudan (Nadel, 1947; 1950), the Herero of southwest Africa/Namibia and Botswana (Schapera, 1945) and, tentatively, among the Kunama of western Eritrea (Nadel, 1950). Others include the Ovimbundu (McCulloch, 1952), the Chamba Daka at Gandole (Goody, 1961), the Chamba Lamja of the borders of Cameroon and northern Nigeria (Meek, 1931: 395-6), the Mbembe of Cross River State (Harris, 1962) and the Ohaffia of southern Nigeria (Forde and Jones, 1950; Uchendu, 1965). Worldwide, however, the Yakurr of southeastern Nigeria are the best-known example of double-unilineal descent.

Daryll Forde was the first anthropologist to describe and analyze their double descent system. His contributions to our understanding of Yakurr social structure and organization took the form of several academic papers that were finally published as one volume in the *Yakö Studies* (1964). Before that, a series of articles (Forde, 1939a, 1939b, 1950, 1958a, 1958b) had “placed the double descent system firmly in the anthropological literature and made the Yakurr and the middle Cross River basin so well known for the unique features of its social structure” (Uchendu, 1997: 1). The Yakurr system of double descent organizes religion and government around principles of kinship. A description of this system is central to understanding Yakurr reproductive philosophy, which in turn enhances understanding of their reproductive behavior.

Double unilineal descent organizes social structure around two coextensive kinship groupings – the dispersed matrilineal (*lejimo*; pl. *ajimo*) and the corporate patrilineal (*kepun*, pl. *yepun*). These kinship groups exert a degree of control over the reproductive behaviors of their members. A recent survey shows that both types of lineage are regarded as influencing people’s desire to have children, with 55.9% of 581 ever-married women believing that the *ajimo* exert more influence on people’s desire to bear children, and 44.1% believing that the *yepun* were more influential. Reproductive motivation among the Yakurr is rooted in lineage authority and its relationships with town-level political processes.

This brief description of duolineal descent is meant to indicate the basis of both the political order and pronatalism in descent ideology. The Yakurr model of traditional governance is a gerontocratic type of theocracy. Priestly elders rule. These priest-chiefs¹ perform collective rituals that are believed to engender population increase in the *ajimo* and *yepun*. Simultaneous membership in these complementary kin corporations is implied by double descent, but it is the sociopolitical order that has developed around this descent ideology that obligates members to conform to oligarchic rule. On the one hand, weekly patriclan and matriclan meetings serve as conduits for the transmission of native ideology and the sustenance of the pronatalist philosophy which holds that *lesou* (populousness) in the lineage is a sign of vitality and a measure of its peace and prosperity. On the other hand, the ubiquity of the matriclan priests and their “aura of otherworldliness” (Salami, 2000) are constant visual reminders of the community’s ethos.

Population Growth (1935-2000)

In the decades since the Forde studies, the population of Yakurr settlements has increased dramatically from “about 20,000 persons” in 1935 (Forde, 1950: 286) to a projected estimate of over 300,000 at the tail end of the 1970s (Ubi, 1981: 16; Iwara, 1991: 169). The Yakurr are described as “an extraordinary concentration of people scarcely found anywhere else in the State” (Iwara, 1991: 169), and reputed to be “by far the largest ethnic group situated between the Efiks (Calabar) at the Atlantic coast board and the ‘Ogojas’ at the northern limits of the Cross River State of Nigeria” (Ubi, 1981: 16). One account suggests that Ugep is “the most densely populated settlement in West Africa” (*The Post Express*, September 27, 1999: 6). Despite these observations, four out of the five Yakurr settlements (Ugep, Nko, Mkpani and Idomi) were completely omitted from the *Final Results of the 1991 Census* (Nigeria, 1998)².

¹The terms “matriclan priests”, “*B’ina*”, and “priest-chiefs” are used interchangeably throughout the text. The word “*B’ina*” is the local term for “priests”. The qualification “matriclan” emphasizes the origination of political authority in matrilineal descent ideology and is in line with Forde’s original usage of the phrase (Forde, 1939a, 1939b, 1950, 1958a, 1958b, 1964, 1968, etc.). The term “priest-chiefs” (Salami, 1999) stresses the dual ritual and political functions of the priests. In my usage, however, the sequence denotes prioritization – the derivation of political authority from sacerdotal power.

²Suffice it to say the official government figure of 134,772 (Nigeria, 1992; 1998) is an estimate of a division of Ekori.

Formerly, the boundaries of Yakurr territories were unproblematic. Today, they are the basis for land-related conflicts, intensifying within the last decades of the twentieth century as population growth was accelerated through decreasing mortality, sustained high fertility, in-migration and increased return migration as a result of work force rationalization of the Nigerian economy under structural adjustment. As early as the 1930s, the Yakurr responded to the effects of increasing population pressure on residential areas by spatial re-distribution. According to Forde, “When, as is increasingly common, dwelling areas in the village become fully occupied, the pressure is relieved by building hamlets (sing. *kowu*) on the nearest tract of farming land belonging to the group and within half a mile from the village” (1950: 286-8). This tendency continued. Population increase is now such that Forde’s “hamlets” have developed into large semi-autonomous divisions, a good example of which is Ketabebe in Ugep.

The Cosmological Setting of Sub-Saharan African Societies

The behavioral processes leading up to and accompanying human reproduction in SSA societies take place within a regime of the sacred. Throughout the sub-region, these processes are rich with ritual texture and symbolic significance. Human fertility is a strong signifier of social status. Numerous children are seen as a safeguard against the vagaries of childhood mortality and an attractive investment in old-age security. The challenge posed by SSA fertility to demographic theorizing is how to integrate it with other aspects of human behavior, or how to render high fertility as “rational” behavior within the context of the peoples’ ecological, technological, political, economic, cosmological and emotional spaces.

A little over 10 years ago, the Caldwells argued that the persistence of high fertility in the sub-region, despite so many years of program intervention, could neither be explained by the ineffectiveness of family planning programs nor the absence of socioeconomic development (Caldwell and Caldwell, 1987). Rather, they maintained, “the explanation lies largely in a religious belief system and an accompanying social structure that have accorded both spiritual and economic rewards to high marital fertility” (567), or “reasons [which] are cultural and have much to do with a religious belief system that operates to sustain high fertility” (409). Writing in this vein, Ocholla-Ayayo (1997)

argued that in sub-Saharan Africa, “cultural factors have [a] strong propensity to affect, modify, resist or even promote fertility” (4). In these senses, the gap between knowledge/availability of family planning services and actual practice (the KAP-gap) results from divesting fertility of its charged cosmological meaning, or the failure to investigate “the sacred character of procreation” (Simons, 1980: 135).

In rural eastern Nigeria, some investigators have established that numerous children are popularly seen as the fulfillment of God’s will and a sign of a harmonious relationship with the ancestors (Ukaegbu, 1979). Certain local customs attest to the tremendous cultural significance attached to high marital fertility. One such ceremony among the Mbaise-Igbo culminates in the induction of women who had borne 10 children or more into an exclusive women’s association whose membership enjoys special social privileges that are not available to women with fewer children (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1994). Among the Yakurr, infertile post-menopausal women are obliged to join a group known as *Kekon*. Such institutions and practices demonstrate the centrality of fertility to what Forde described as “the spiritual economy” of the ethnic communities of southeastern Nigeria (Forde, 1958b).

In “Religio-Cultural Issues in Population Growth in Nigeria”, Ejizu (1990) stressed that “human life and fertility are the most primary values around which other values pivot” (6). “Indigenous cosmological values”, he argued, “clearly facilitate and reinforce the high rate of human fertility ... [and] universal and early marriage ... among the different Nigerian groups is rooted in people’s belief in high marital fertility and is reinforced by certain religious forms” (8). Supporting evidence for this is provided by Isiugo-Abanihe (1994), who found that “individual fertility behavior takes place within the context of complex social organization and under the influence of multiple social, cultural and ideological realities” (1994: 237). His argument for attributing “the persistence of high fertility, or the relative lack of change in fertility behavior, [to] the cultural context in which childbearing decisions are made or procreation takes place” (237) is very compelling. It reinforces the view that “belief in ancestral spirits which regulate fertility is a notable feature of the cosmological systems of sub-Saharan African peoples” (Obono, 1995: 26).

To fully grasp the ideational contexts of Yakurr fertility requires a perspective that seeks to establish that “demographic behavior is part of a larger, more complex system of behavioral patterns, learned as part of the general repertoire of behavior in a social group” (Hammel, 1990: 499). The accuracy of such models of demographic behavior will be enhanced if they “follow more closely the cultural conventions and categories that order people’s own understanding and use of these institutions” (Kreager, 1982: 237). The puzzle of rationality is solved phenomenologically once a relationship between ethnic ideology and reproductive motivation/behavior is established. Such a strategy would inevitably interrogate existing epistemologies of rationality by demonstrating that this attribute, or capacity, is always exercisable within matrices of choices and specifying (or *fixing*) its course a priori is not always desirable.

Beliefs, *B’ina* and Reproductive Behavior

At the center of Yakurr cosmological ideas are deities and divinities whose beneficence consists in promoting fecundity among women. These are the *ase* and *ndet* concerning whom there is an extensive discussion below. At the human core of the pantheon are the priests who organize their worship. It is around the ritual activities of *B’ina* (matriclan priests) that the entire political process revolves. They are the unifiers of shrine and state, which in orthodox Western thought are polar ends of an existential continuum and, in secular humanism, irreconcilable within a single political frame of reference.

At the structural level, the rule of the priest-chiefs is based on matrilineal dispersal. Although individual priests have no formal authority in patrilineal clans to which they do not belong, in practice duo-lineal membership provides a means of exerting influence on virtually all patrilineal clans to the extent that they have matrilines in their territory. Moreover, the priests enjoy a high degree of cooperation and consensus among themselves, which promotes political cohesion and safeguards their own interests as an oligarchic council. They constitute a moral/legal court, impose fines, and can ostracize people by declaring them incommunicado and their property taboo. Their ritual functions and political capacities are inseparable and encompass human reproduction, peace, and economic prosperity. Their most important prayers are for fertility increase among

matrikin, as well as wealth and peace in the realm. This function is what constitutes fertility into a communal measure of their political legitimacy. Were sudden decelerations of the population growth rate to occur, the moral authority of the priests would decline. The theocratic premises of social organization would be redundant.

Prayers for fertility, peace and prosperity go hand in hand, often literally. In a focus group discussion (FGD), one matriclan priest claimed that peace and fertility have a coterminous relationship. Having numerous children is identified with protection of the territory during war, and this gives rise to the saying *lesou leta otoba* (a large population is more powerful than a machete), a theme to which I shall return in due course.

We seek many children so that our enemies will not overwhelm us, and so that *wofai* [peace] will come. Peace is what we want. We seek peace in order to have numerous children, because without peace, children will not be borne to you. It is so (FGD with matriclan priests, 12th February 1998).

The emphasis on the value of children is strong. Apart from constituting a form of material wealth, children are desirable in themselves. They are appreciated as rational investments in future security and unique sources of personal accomplishment and satisfaction. As one priest put it, “despite our poverty, our children are our wealth. They bring us joy and happiness. There is nothing better than children”.

Although the majority of the surveyed people consider themselves as poor, within the context of their reproductive philosophy, there is yet a deep sense of satisfaction and fulfillment that is said to come from having children. Men who have many children are accorded much respect in the patrilineage because they are seen as potentially wealthy and powerful persons. In a society where land is a primary form/source of wealth, numerous children are seen by 77% of our male sample as a means of acquiring more land, political power and social prestige. In modern society, banks and other financial institutions prefer land as collateral for loans or credit extension. Occasionally, the police require proof of land ownership (e.g. a Certificate of Occupancy) as surety for bail. These “modern” tendencies reinforce the value of land and, to the rural peasantry, highlight the importance of high fertility. But a caveat must be inserted here against a utilitarian view that reverses this observation to read that people have numerous children *in order* to have more hands on the farm. There is no evidence that this particular type of consciousness exists in Ugep.

While having numerous children may be instrumental to the size of land one gets under the lineage-based tenure system, there are competing criteria to be considered. Variations in historical patterns of arrival and settlement have implications for the amount of land that lineages own. While earlier settlers might tend to have more land, there are some patrilineages that, for any number of reasons, own much less land. The utilitarian argument runs into trouble both from its lack of attention to this detail and the fact that the amount of land owned is not correlated with mean lineal fertility. I am presently conducting an investigation of the expected relationships, but a cursory examination of fertility patterns in the study area shows that fertility does not vary with size of land at the lineage level. This may be due in part to growing diversification of the Ugep economy, and the increasing role of education and income (not fertility) as determinants of the size of land owned. Given the diversity of factors, it is essential to take the entire *Weltanschauung* of the community into account.

The significance of Yakurr theocracy lies in its historical relationship, causal or otherwise, with crises of a demographic and political nature. The *B'ina* interviews point strongly to the possibility of a causal sequence.

Ina Odjokobi:

Our forefathers sought to increase how many we were in the town by worshipping these traditional deities. Now that we have overcome our infertility, we have to worship them the more, so that we do not return to those former times.

In other words, the priests maintained that Yakurr women historically suffered from a high incidence of sterility, miscarriage and neonatal mortality, a view confirmed by Forde (1964: 274). A pronatalist ideology, backed by ritual observances, would appear to be a rational communal choice in a world that was perceived to be threatening the people's collective survival. The formal identification of political authority with this worldview is a measure of the seriousness with which the historical situation was perceived.

The interlinkages among historical pathological sterility, cosmology, descent ideology, and a pronatalist polity are so intricate that no one element can be fully explained without reference to the others. Their interconnections are among the most fascinating features of Yakurr society. The belief system helps explain the unique forms of social control, the interfaces between rites of passage and rites of intensification, the

special nature of the system of mores and their connection with kinship idioms and filial piety. The relationship between human fertility and political economy are thus comprehensive, intricate and inseparable. The cosmological, ideational, social demographic and institutional elements of Yakurr social life exist on a balance of social and spiritual forces that find expression in the political system. Their cross-penetration is such that the social and spiritual are radically transformed versions of each other; the social is spiritual and *vice versa*.

Next to *Obase Woden* (the Almighty God), who occupies a *sui generis* position among the pantheon of Yakurr deities, there are three main classes of spiritual beings: the ancestors, *ase* (sing. *yose*) and *ndet* (sing. *edet*). In theory, *Obase Woden* is at the top of the spiritual hierarchy, in both a physical and political sense. The open skies are his abode. All other spiritual entities are agencies of his will or extensions and manifestations of his power. Omnipotence, omnipresence and omniscience are ascribed to him. His transcendence is matched only by a strong sense of his immanence. Despite his all-powerful rule, however, few ceremonies revolve around him.

The next sections show that Yakurr religion provides the supernatural elements of an elaborate political apparatus developed to safeguard fundamental social requirements. Who are the ancestors and what/who are *ase* and *ndet* around whom so much sociopolitical activities revolve? Are they symbolic reflections of such *functional prerequisites* as recruitment in a society that once was on the brink of demographic atrophy? Are articles of faith means by which society's deepest concerns and its collective consciences are codified and represented, or *spoken of*? Are they mirrors of fears? Do these deities hold the keys not only to salvation, but also to an historical analysis of the demographic conditions under which their worship was first inspired? How far can this anthropomorphic argument be pursued? Below is a brief but critical look at the central elements of the Yakurr belief system towards establishing the integral place of these entities, and what they symbolize, in Yakurr reproductive philosophy.

Ancestors and Mma Esekpa

The veneration of ancestors is typical of many sub-Saharan African societies. Among the Yakurr, it is instrumental to the maintenance of societal norms and the

political system that grants expression to those norms. Ancestors occupy the position of emissaries from the *ndet* to lineage members, although they occasionally act in their own capacity, visiting divine punishment on deviants and offering protection to crops and shielding from personal harm all those who honor the gods and live peaceably with their neighbors.

The concentration of ancestor veneration at the patriclan level induces patrilineal loyalty to town-wide authority through recognition of the matrilineal ties of the ancestor. The community is motivated to conform to societal values and to appreciate the fact that having numerous children promotes one's personal chances of being immortalized, and remembered by the living. To this extent, ancestor veneration promotes the stability of the lineage system and the inherent morality of the status quo upon which it is founded. While there are no formal beatification or canonization ceremonies, the transformation of the worthy dead into lineage ancestors is part of ongoing dialogical processes within the lineage and between it and the rest of the town. The social identity of a given patriclan may be established on the virtue, valor, or glorified villainy of its most famous or infamous ancestor.

Ancestresses are not prominent in the Yakurr belief system, a fact that suggests that gender relations exist even within the spiritual community. The only ancestress of note is Mma Esekpa, a legendary figure in Yakurr mythology, who is said to have been the first *Obol Lupon* (Town Leader) of Ugep and to have placed a benediction of prosperity and populousness upon its people. It is difficult to establish her historicity, but the detailed nature of the oral tradition surrounding her strongly suggests that she had a historical existence. The priests insist that Mma Esekpa reveals herself to them and other people in dreams and visions, especially at times of danger or war. She is the most celebrated of the ancestors, but the myth contains the presumption that women are unsuitable for high ritual and political office. According to local lore, she disappeared after invoking powerful pronatalist blessings. On the occasion in question, she was offering sacrifices bending down (in her capacity as *Obol Lupon*), without realising that "her back was exposed". One of the *B'ina* drew her attention to her "exposure" in this form, much to her chagrin. She demurely covered herself, concluded her prayers, and disappeared from their midst, never to be seen physically again.

Ase

Ase (sing. *yose*) are fertility spirits associated with particular matrilineal clans (*ajimo*) and are at the center of the religious organization of fertility among the Yakurr. Belief in these fertility spirits is nucleus of traditional Yakurr religion. As shown in Table 1 below, there are 11 *ase* to 22 *ajimo* in Ugep society³.

Table 1: *Ajimo* (Matrilineal Clans) and *Ase* of Ugep

| Number | <i>Ajimo</i> | <i>Ase</i> |
|--------|--------------|---------------|
| 1. | Yabol | Odjokobi |
| 2. | Yakunkunebol | Odjokobi |
| 3. | Yakpolo | Odjokobi |
| 4. | Yabaye | Otalikumo |
| 5. | Yabono | Otalikumo |
| 6. | Yanali | Otalikumo |
| 7. | Yakamafe | Ntanakotan |
| 8. | Yayali | Atewa |
| 9. | Yatiyomo | Atewa |
| 10. | Yakangkang | Atewa |
| 11. | Yaboletete | Esukpa |
| 12. | Yatebo | Esukpa |
| 13. | Yasenibol | Okalefon |
| 14. | Yakoibol | Kukpatu |
| 15. | Yakpambol | Obol Ene |
| 16. | Yawambol | Obol Ene |
| 17. | Yajeni | Obol Ene |
| 18. | Yapuni | Otabelusana |
| 19. | Yajokpolo | Otabelusana |
| 20. | Yabong | Osenawekakong |
| 21. | Yakumiko | Osenawekakong |
| 22. | Yanyor | Obete Edet |

³The discrepancy between the number of matrilineal clans recorded by Forde (i.e. 23) and that recorded by Table 1 (i.e. 22) is not problematic, but reflects ritual and political changes over time (see Forde, 1964: 105). The number of matrilineal clans during Forde's time has reduced through fusion, a process that was taking place even back then. Due to the rapid emergence of outlying hamlets, spatial and political reconfigurations occur frequently. Space is constantly being renegotiated. Since Forde's investigations, the *Yakunkunebol* have carved themselves out as a distinct matrilineal unit although, as Table 1 shows, they are still affiliated to *Yose Odjokobi*. It is through that priesthood that this matrilineal clan may produce an *Obol Lupon*. Only *ajimo* associated with *Odjokobi* may produce the *ina* of *Odjokobi*, who is automatically *Obol Lupon* (Leader of the Town), regarded as *primus inter pares* among the priest-chiefs, but in reality much more powerful. Unlike other *ase*, *Odjokobi* is seen as the common *yose* of the entire town. It is said to be "the first shrine that the Yakurr possessed" (Ubi, 1981: 117), and to have been brought by them from 'Akpa -- the ancestral settlement from which the Yakurr migrated to their present location (Obono, 2000: 16ff).

Each *yose* is embodied in “a miscellaneous set of cult objects, including decorated skulls, figurines, helices and penannular rings of brass and copper and various pots, which are kept in a miniature house in the compound of the priest and arranged on an adjacent open-air altar at public rituals” (Forde 1950: 314). It consists of “a varied collection of objects: clay mounds sometimes sculpted and painted to represent a human head, bronze manillas and helices, pottery flasks and bowls, and a flat slab on which a white chalk paste was prepared for smearing on the face or breast of the participants to convey the blessings of the fetish” (Forde, 1964: 262). There is no special pattern in which the various *ase* are arranged, and the arrangement varies from one *yose* to another.

The association of double descent systems with “short genealogical memories...[or] genealogies of limited depth” (Harris, 1962: 86), however, makes it difficult to periodize the historical relationship between the religious belief system and the demographic regime. But there can be no doubt that the mortality conditions were worrisome. Forde’s sample of the marital histories of Ugep women in the 1930s “confirmed the high incidence of sterility, miscarriage, and neo-natal death” (Forde, 1964: 274). In addition, “the respect accorded to a woman both as a wife and as a member of her matrilineage, and the prestige of a man within his patrilineage and clan, depended so greatly on their having children, that deep and frequent anxiety concerning the hazards of pregnancy and childbirth existed among the Yakö” (p. 274).

It is my view that this “deep and frequent anxiety” was a driving force behind the emergence of the *ase*. The oral tradition suggests a sequence in which the felt-need for fertility occurred *prior* to the search for spiritual solutions. Explaining how the people first came by *Odjokobi* (the premier fertility spirit), its priest noted that “*Odjokobi* itself was found by the wife of a former *Obol Lupon* who went to the stream to pray to the water spirits for the *peace, prosperity and fertility* of her matriclan [Emphases mine]. *Odjokobi* was what came out of the stream in answer to her prayers” (*Obol Lupon*, 22nd November, 1997; pers. comm.).

Without a doubt, it is unconventional to derive historical sequences from oral sources, but in a situation where genealogical memory is short and there are no historical demographic records, the early profiles of settlements can tentatively be reconstructed in

this way. If the events narrated by oral tradition occur in a given sequence, there may be much sense in treating those events as such. For the *B'ina*, therefore,

The truth is that in the days gone by, our mothers had bad wombs. No matter how hard the men tried, the women could not conceive. If they became pregnant at all, it would result in a stillbirth or the child would die in infancy (FGD with Matriclan Priests, 12th February, 1998).

The biotechnology for dealing with the problem was non-existent, or ineffective if it was. The community was faced with possible extermination through an inability to reproduce itself, or at least its leaders were anxious in this regard. The recourse to the supernatural was inevitable. According to the priests:

Our fathers were very wise in those days.... They went into the forests and searched in both neighboring and far communities to see if they could find something for their women. Sometimes they brought back *yakpata* [idols made of carved wood] which they had bought from other villages. At other times, the things that would be used to prepare the *yose* would be revealed to them in dreams (FGD with Matriclan Priests, 12th February, 1998).

Each matriclan sought out its own *yose* and as part of an ongoing process of ritual information sharing, a theocratic regime emerged, which transformed the need to produce children into the cultural theme of society⁴. A careful reading of the sequencing of events in the historical narrative suggests that pronatalism arose in Yakurr society as a response to widespread sterility. In this context, the gods (*ase* and *ndet*) are symbols that represent both the “anxiety” over sterility and the hope that it could be overcome. This theme is a cultural category for explaining institutional-level arrangements in Yakurr society and their interfaces with individual reproductive motivation. Pronatalism is rooted both in historical reproductive motivation and, as the next sections will show, modern political attitudes. It is also expressed on a daily basis in the adages of the people, the most popular one being *lesou leta otoa* (a large population is more powerful than a machete).

⁴Alternatively, where matrilineal sterility was high, affected members purchased young girls from neighboring Igbo traders in Abakiliki. Known as *yafoli* (sing. *ofoli*), these young girls were bought by a class of indigenous merchants known as *yasu* (sing. *osu*) who benefited from oil trade on the Ediba River starting from the 1930s. The girls were accorded rights as wives of the purchasers and their offspring had full inheritance rights. The most commonly expressed reason for this practice was to promote matrilineal fertility. Male *yafoli* were hardly ever purchased at all. Although *kefoli* (the practice of acquiring *yafoli*) ended in the late 1960s, offspring of these transactions are identifiable today.

In terms of invocation, the *ase* were regarded as:

sentient and sympathetic beings, capable of conferring benefits not only on members of the associated matrilineal clans, but on the people of the village as a whole and associated within it. The nature of these benefits was also explicit, namely, *material well-being through the fertility of crops*, protection against outbreaks of fire, *the continuity and growth of the people through the birth of children*, *internal social harmony by disposing people to peaceful conduct*, the destruction of anti-social persons especially those practicing witchcraft or sorcery, and particularly the frustration of such attempts by visiting strangers (Forde, 1964: 263-4). [Emphases mine].

The importance of *ase* in the belief system and reproductive behavior of the Yakurr lies in their association with a collective anxiety generated by problematic births and conceptions in the early demographic history of the people. The *ase* are products of a concerted search for a religious technology that would promote societal recruitment and group perpetuation. The ideology and social institutions of the Yakurr point to this contention with sterility, miscarriage and a high incidence of infant mortality. Situating reproductive behavior within these historical and demographic contexts relativizes rationality, and frees it from the predilection to see it as a quintessentially Euro-American attribute, manifested in birth control or stopping behavior. This reductionist contra-cultural notion of people as rational utility maximizers has been criticized as “unsatisfactory, for maximization is too time-consuming and complex to be a workable cognitive modus operandi” (Greenhalgh, 1995, 19). When placed within more dynamic and fluid historical demographic contexts, the absurdity of Yakurr pronatalism disappears and its rationality becomes better understood. Rationality is a relative concept, always linked to the specific goals that are pursued by people and the reasons they have for pursuing them. In the next section, we briefly examine the place of *ndet* in Yakurr reproductive ideology.

Ndet

The *ndet* (sing. *edet*) are “a collection of objects, again mostly pottery vessels, but sometimes including curiously shaped stones or carved wooden figures (*yakpata*, sing. *okpata*), often placed in a miniature house” (Forde, 1964: 270). Ordinarily, they specialize in a wide range of functions covering all of life’s basic exigencies. They have

the capacity to cure diseases like cholera and smallpox, protect crops in the field, detect crime, expose sorcery and witchcraft, and inflict offenders with madness and epilepsy. Prominent *ndet* in Ugep include *Ekpe Edet* and *Edet Lopon*.

The *epundet* (pl. *yepundet*) is a “low mound of small boulders surmounted by some chalk stained pots, usually set in the shade of a tree” (Forde, 1964: 51). It is the symbol of the patriclan’s ritual unity. The *epundet* (*kepun* + *edet*) is consulted for the expiation of ritual offences such as murder, incest, or abortion that would otherwise injure the prosperity or fertility of the *kepun*. They may be approached for pregnancy-related rites, such as *kukpol* (the ceremony of female circumcision, held as one of the last rites of marriage). Through the *yepundet*, the religious life of the people is localized at the patrilineage level. Every *kepun* (patriclan) has an *epundet* associated with it, “a low mound of small boulders surmounted by some chalk-stained pots, usually set in the shade of a tree” (Forde 1964: 51). Through their worship, the rule of the matriclan priests is harmonized with the political leadership of the elders of the patriclans.

In addition to the *yepundet*, there are numerous *ndet* which are also regularly propitiated for reasons of fertility. Married women rely on the *ndet* in, or in the vicinity of, their husband’s compound for protection and help in childbearing rather than their natal *ndet*. The rules of exogamy, matrilineal dispersal and a patrilocal post-marital residence make this inevitable. The pressure on a woman to bear children is more likely to come from her husband’s patrikin, among whom she resides.

There is a special class of *ndet*, known as *mmanamadet* [(*yoman* = birth) + *edet*], that are associated with patrilineal fertility. *Mmanamanadet* (sing. *emanamanadet*) are usually in the care of healers and diviners known as *yabono* (sing. *obono*). The most celebrated of this class of *ndet* is *Edet Etoutou*. The ritual head of *Edet Etoutou* is the *Oblansin*, always a male. Sacrifices to this dreaded deity are conducted only when an *Oblansin* dies and another is to be selected. As in the case of *Odjokobi*, *Edet Etoutou* is not considered the *edet* of any one patrilineage, but of the entire town. It is believed that young girls become pregnant in unprecedented numbers whenever the *Edet Etoutou* ceremonies are held. Informants swear this has been their experience through the years.

The last time prior to this investigation that sacrifices were offered to this deity was in 1995 and, according to focus group discussants, “there were pregnancies

everywhere”. The discussants were male age-grade leaders (50–55 years). In their view, the function of *Edet Etoutou* is to confer peace since this has implications for childbearing. In their words:

Even the old people believe that peace between a couple will promote pregnancy. We think so too, but what is there is that if there is peace, couples will have more sex and that will increase their fertility. A couple may be biologically able to conceive, but if there is too much strife between them, conception will elude that marriage (FGD with Age Grade Leaders, 8th April, 1998).

The foregoing shows that the cultural theme of Yakurr society finds expression at both lineage and town levels, facilitated by the double descent system. What the *ase* do for the matrilineages, the *yepundet* and *mmanamanadet* do for the patrilineages, although some *ndet* hardly ever survive the structural circumstances that gave rise to them. Those “produced” to meet specific needs cease to exist once the structures for those needs and fears disappeared. As an example, farm-paths on the outskirts of the town used to be a zone of *ndet* because it was essential to dissuade yam thefts in the barns (*nkpo*). As cash cropping became intensified, the *nkpo* system came to an end and the guard deities ceased to exist. The end of the *nkpo* system of yam storage, as well as the worship system that was related to it, attests to the circumstantial nature of Yakurr beliefs and indicates the possibility that fundamental changes to mortality conditions and the political economy will bring an end to pronatalism.

Conclusions

In this paper, I proposed pronatalism as the cultural theme of Yakurr society for two reasons. First, it is a product of history, in that it originated in the multiple demographic crises of early settlement. Secondly, pronatalism is currently being deployed as a strategy within an increasingly competitive Nigerian polity. A cultural theme is “a principle recurrent in a number of domains, tacit or explicit, and serving as a relationship among subsystems of cultural meaning” (Spradley, 1980: 141). When Morris Opler first introduced this concept to the social sciences, he proposed it as “a postulate or position, declared or implied, and usually controlling behavior or stimulating activity, which is tacitly approved or openly promoted in a society” (Opler, 1945: 198). Examining cultures in terms of their themes is a useful way of identifying their patterns

of behavior and providing explanations for these. Every society has a central or governing idea of how the world is constituted, and of people's place in and out of that construction.

The Yakurr idea of fertility is located within a philosophical discourse of prosperity, conceived of in trilateral terms encompassing childbirth (*yoman*), personal/domestic/communal peace and tranquility (*wofai*), and wealth (*keyu*). These terms are usually prioritized in that way. *Yoman* gives rise to *lesou* (populousness) at the collective level (family/household, lineage, clan, *lopon*). *Wofai* (literally, that which is cool) is manifested in intrapersonal and interpersonal peace. From one's inner peace flows peaceful spousal, lineal, and communal relations and the absence of war with neighboring communities, connoting overall health and wellbeing. *Keyu* is the material aspect of Yakurr reproductive philosophy.

The philosophy itself is embodied in the adage *lesou leta otoa* (a large population is more powerful than a machete), which is an instantly recognisable summary of Yakurr pronatalism. According to the *Obol Lupon* (Town Leader) of Ugep and Paramount Ruler of the Yakurr, "That phrase [*lokurr jima*] is a way our forefathers had of communicating their deeply-felt belief in the supremacy of human numbers. For our people, nothing is greater than that". Expatiating, he reasoned that "the phrase *lesou leta otoa* is very meaningful and captures the essence of our way of life. That is why we have so many *ndet* and pray to them". Rhetorically, he asks, "Why would we have so many *mmanamanadet* [fertility deities] if we did not believe in the superior benefit of human numbers? Our religion is based on the need to bear children, for our wives to be fertile and have many children. That is our role".

In the focus group discussion with matriclan priests, further clarification was sought on this pronatalist worldview. On the continued relevance of the adage, the priests explained that "It is even today, more than at any other time, that the saying *lesou leta otoa* is relevant to us. This goes to show the wisdom of our forefathers. They could see very far. Look at how government finds it difficult to neglect us, unlike all those little communities you pass on your way to this town. It is because we are so many".

The adage has the undertones of a war cliché that probably dates to a time when inter-communal conflicts and frequent migrations decimated a population already held in check by pestilence and sterility. It uncovers the historical and demographic antecedents of the Yakurr “spiritual economy”. The underlying question is, if a people are “pronatalist”, what are the material sources of their pronatalism? If the polity is theocratic, what links exist between it and earlier demographic regimes? Oral tradition and a sample of marital histories in the 1930s suggest that Yakurr pronatalism originates from a high historical incidence of pathological sterility, miscarriage and infant and child mortality, on the one hand, and a set of religious beliefs and practices to counteract these, on the other. Pronatalism became a basic moral and philosophical impulse in the community, a shared response to the material conditions and threats of life. When placed within the context of a divine economy, the mechanisms by which local ideology influences fertility become more apparent.

The present Yakurr case study shows that the influence of beliefs on reproductive behavior is quite extensive and the institutional means of protecting that influence very intricate. The choice of what to believe and how to act is deeply rooted in the cultural reward system, making conformity to fertility norms and values very rational. Although Nigeria has formulated a population policy that undermines pronatalism, its state system simultaneously generates complex forces that support it. The nature of tax relief ensures that the take-home pay of workers with fewer children is less than that of workers with more children. In federal establishments, including universities, where housing is scarce, workers with more children are placed on the priority list for accommodation. Larger houses are reserved for them as well. Such policies and practices ironically place citizens who comply with the antinatalist recommendations of the policy at a disadvantage. The contradictions in the political economy indicate the endurance of pronatalist attitudes even among policy formulators and blur the distinction between the *laissez-faire* state (and its antinatalist pretensions) and the openly pronatalist communities.

Through the dynamics of Nigerian federalism, the ideology of *lesou* (populousness) has entered the calculus of the modern political economy, insinuating itself on reproductive motivation and the political attitudes of the Yakurr people. The argument of the priests that government cannot overlook Ugep (“unlike all those little

communities you pass on your way to this town”) because of its numbers shows how central population size is perceived to be in the distribution of national resources. Accordingly, the priests find validation in continued high fertility and see contraception as not only misguided, but retrogressive.

Ugep society, on which the study was based, is typical of many Nigerian towns in that it constitutes a mosaic of continuity and change. While there is a perceptible shift from subsistence farming to cash cropping in the agricultural sector, beliefs underlying the agrarian economy have not undergone change. Although traditional folkways have been exposed to the ideological implications of the free market system, the struggle for ethnic identity in a multicultural state system has promoted a cultural renaissance that is based on old ethnic practices. New forces of production have altered the harmony between agriculture and the economic, political and social environments. Colonial and post-colonial missionary activities and increasing educational opportunities, especially for women, have interfered with the pronatalist import of the traditional religion, but the level of illiteracy among the priests has insulated them from these changes.

In modern Ugep society, the combination of these foreign political, economic and religious forces holds manifold implications for the mode and consequences of religious expression. Among the more educated, the notion of family as a physically and spiritually *extended* and everlasting institution, linked to the past and present by beneficent ancestors, is gradually being replaced with a version that is universal, otherworldly, couple-oriented and individualistic. Some of these factors appear to be weakening the individual's dependence on the extended family for material, emotional, and spiritual support and to diminish the quality of the communal experience. On the other hand, other factors reinforce an ethnic renaissance, based on old religious values, as a negotiating strategy within the pluralism that is the central issue of national politics. As a result of the state's ideological ambivalence and its multi-ethnic contradictions, the matriclan priests of Yakurr society re-strategize and reposition pronatalism as a response to the challenges of Nigeria's plural-ethnic political economy.

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