

Women's education and the demographic transition in Africa



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The theory of demographic transition evolved originally as an attempt to explain the demographic evolution in Western countries. The theory was not very specific about the role of factors underlying the passage from high levels of fertility and mortality to low fertility and mortality but, as Notestein (1953) pointed out in his seminal paper, the transition involved a complex process proceeding concurrently at various levels: social, cultural, economic and biological.

Amongst the socio-economic variables, one has been identified in almost all societies as characteristic of the demographic transition: parental education, and in particular the education of women. The educational level of brides has been demonstrated to be associated with their average first marriage age (UN 1983). Family size preferences and the use of birth control are associated with the education of both women and their husbands. Parental education has been closely related to the chances of child survival (Gille 1987). Although the findings vary in detail, partly owing to model specifications and the statistical approach used in individual studies, partly because of societal and cultural influences on the underlying relationships, there is no doubt that educational differences are significant in the demographic process.

Even low levels of schooling apparently suffice to contribute towards a demographic transition, though it is debatable whether the effect arises from changes in attitudes or because education furnishes people with new knowledge. Some demographers assert that given the poor quality of schools and teachers, especially in the rural areas of many developing countries, it is unlikely that a few years of primary schooling can provide the scientific information needed, for example, to alter personal health practices. Yet it appears that even a few years of a mother's school attendance furnish a positive relationship with her child's survival chances, and that this relationship holds good not only in countries with easily accessible effective health services, but also in those where the primary health care system is underdeveloped (Cleland and van Ginneken 1988; LeVine et al. 1994). Another possible avenue through which schooling and literacy acquired in childhood may affect later behaviour is through change in the way people see themselves and how they are perceived by others (Caldwell and Caldwell 1985). The first generation of mothers with education, whose parents made the revolutionary decision to send them to school, may be in the vanguard of a wider and more complex process in the transformation of the attitudes of whole communities, not only of individuals (Ewbank 1994).

There is another aspect of the effect of education on fertility: the effect of a child's opportunity to go to school on the parental assessment of the value of children. In his theory of fertility decline Caldwell (1982) developed a concept of intergenerational wealth flows which, *inter alia*, considers this aspect of the educational impact on fertility: the increasing costs of child-rearing and reduced availability of children's labour to supplement family income (Cleland and Wilson 1987).

The mechanisms through which educational differences affect the proximate variables and the ultimate outcome — postponement of marriage, reduced family size, improved child survival — remain unclear. Reviewing the discussion on how parental education affects child survival in contemporary developing countries, Caldwell (1994:224) noted that the mechanism whereby education is translated into improved life expectation for the child is far from demonstrated: ‘it is still hard to avoid the conclusion that the full exploration of the mechanisms, with the obtaining of clinching proof, has hardly begun’. The pathways through which education influences declines in fertility are even less explored, although the inverse relationship has been found in the demographic transition of many developed countries and observed in almost every developing country of Asia and Latin America. However, some countries of sub-Saharan Africa, which lag behind other developing countries especially in the fertility transition, appear to be an exception. It emerged, for instance, from the national rounds of the World Fertility Survey that most sub-Saharan countries portrayed a pronatalist culture with desired family size ranging between six and eight children (Okojie 1992). The levels of fertility continue to be comparatively high despite impressive expansion in women’s education, decline in infant and child mortality,

Table 1
Percentage distribution of married women by education in selected African countries

Age	Years of schooling			
	0	1-3	4-6	7+
NIGERIA				
15-19	70.4	3.7	19.6	6.3
20-24	63.6	7.7	18.4	10.3
25-29	72.2	6.5	14.9	6.4
30-34	78.6	5.9	11.4	4.1
35-39	82.8	5.3	9.0	2.8
40-44	88.7	4.6	5.1	1.6
45-49	92.7	3.1	3.6	0.7
GHANA				
15-19	48.0	5.3	8.3	38.8
20-24	37.2	3.9	9.3	49.6
25-29	46.3	3.4	9.6	40.7
30-34	64.0	3.5	9.4	23.2
35-39	75.9	2.4	8.4	13.3
40-44	79.4	2.7	8.6	9.3
45-49	87.6	2.1	2.5	7.8
CAMEROON				
15-19	40.1	9.2	38.9	11.8
20-24	35.4	9.5	41.2	13.9
25-29	50.2	8.9	29.7	11.3
30-34	71.1	5.2	18.1	5.6
35-39	79.8	6.4	10.7	3.2
40-44	88.6	5.4	4.4	1.6
45-49	92.0	4.9	2.6	0.5

Source: World Fertility Survey data reported in Chimere-Dan (1993) and fairly rapid urbanization. What changes in fertility did occur there were largely the result of later marriage (Bailey and Serow 1991). On the other hand, in sub-Saharan Africa as in

other developing countries, mother's education markedly increases her children's chances of survival (UN 1985; Cleland and van Ginneken 1988).

Education reached women in many developing countries, including the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, comparatively recently. Demographic surveys and censuses taken in the early 1980s suggest that very small proportions of women aged 30 or 35 and over had primary education or were literate.

In the attempt to understand how the attitude toward sending girls to school, both of parents and the community at large, has changed and how these changes bring about a transformation of family formation and reproductive behaviour, we have turned to an unconventional source of information: the novel, together with a small sample of autobiographies. The approach has a precedent in *Victorian Families in Fact and Fiction* by Kane (1994). There she examined nineteenth-century literature, diaries and memoirs in an attempt to identify attitudes and behaviour which might have influenced the course of the demographic transition in Britain. Here we undertake similar examination using a sample of modern African writing from the Heinemann African Writers Series.

The use of such source materials has its limitations, and some of these are discussed in detail elsewhere (Kane 1994). Others relate specifically to the sample presented here. While a third of the books represented were originally published elsewhere, the rest received their first publication in the Heinemann African Writers Series. Even more than those which were reprinted in the Series, they therefore reflect the selection criteria of its editorial adviser, Chinua Achebe. It can be said, however, that Heinemann was amongst the first major publishers to promote African literature, and cast its net fairly widely in the effort to do so. Of those books first published elsewhere, all but a couple came from European, rather than African, publishing houses: in other words they were not written simply for a local market. In addition, all the books were written in English or French rather than in an African language. It was and remains the case that many African writers prefer to avoid local languages which imply a limited audience even within a single African country; nevertheless the use of English or French does confirm the fact that their work is that of a highly educated elite, and designed to appeal beyond the boundaries of their own societies. Despite these caveats, the evidence from these works is largely consistent, and suggests some remarkable similarities, as well as differences, amongst those influences on fertility and mortality change.

Descriptions of education in Victorian Britain suggest that it was of rather poor quality. Whether children learned in the village school, or even at expensive private establishments, they were unlikely to have acquired logical thought or reasoning. Certainly their schooling was not designed to encourage them to question established customs or to express individuality.

Those Africans first exposed to Western education seem to have received a similarly limited curriculum. Schools were 'poorly equipped, poorly housed and [had] limited aids' (Ngugi 1975). The syllabus offered by missionaries to the Shona before the 1930s seems to have been fairly typical. Children learned reading and writing and 'skilled trades such as carpentry, stonemasonry, bricklaying, shoe-making, blacksmithing and horticulture, while the Dominican nuns taught domestic science and child care' (Vambe 1972). Those who boarded were expected to be self-supporting: Odinga (1974) says of one school he attended that the children had to grind corn, cook their own meals, and go about three miles for water. At his next school he worked as a servant to one of the white teachers as well as, along with the other boys, cultivating a garden plot.

Moreover, 'appropriate' behaviour often seemed to be of greater importance than what the children learned. Ngugi (1977) describes Kenyan children in colonial times being lined up each day to salute the British flag. Peters (1971) writes of a prefect at the school gates,

assigned to check that the children wear shoes; without them they cannot attend. 'Those were the days when shoes had replaced books in importance'.

As in nineteenth century Britain, the teachers, recruited from former pupils of such establishments, were often of limited education themselves. Kenyatta (1979) noted their poor quality in Kenya, quoting from a 1937 report on higher education in East Africa that only a third of European women missionaries in Uganda had any professional training as teachers.

Even at the European school with the highest prestige in Kenya in the late 1950s, education left much to be desired. School atlases dated from 1904; pre-First World War geography texts still spoke of German East Africa. But there was a large and magnificent chapel, consecrated by the Archbishop of Canterbury, whose niece had been headmistress at the time.

In later years, when educational standards had improved, the syllabus remained far from relevant. Ngugi (1977) described a strike at a Kenyan secondary school where the boys were lectured in

scouting, England, Cambridge and the history of the world from Celtic times to the birth of the new nations in Africa and Asia... We wanted to be taught African literature, African history, for we wanted to know ourselves better. Why should ourselves be reflected in white snows, spring flowers fluttering on icy lakes?

Another boy, from the same 'good' school, pitied a friend who had only been to a Gikuyu school, now burned by the British for sedition. When his friend talked of Chaka and other African heroes

I wanted to tell him about the true and correct history: the Celts, the Anglo-Saxons, the Danes and Vikings, William the Conqueror, Drake, Hawkins, Wilberforce, Nelson, Napoleon and all these real heroes of history. But then I thought he would not understand secondary school history... (Ngugi 1975).

The same author also suggested that, post-Independence, education in village schools deteriorated, as the best African teachers were creamed off into what had been Asian and European schools.

From such accounts, it seems unlikely that schooling offered many Africans an extensive scientific perspective, or significant intellectual resources, any more than it had offered a new world view to Victorian children in England.

In addition, missionaries provided most of the African schools, as the clergy had organized many of the schools in England, and religious education is a prominent feature of descriptions of both. Without exception, African writers saw religion and education as being intertwined: 'From the very beginning, religion and education went hand-in-hand' (Achebe 1964). In Britain, however, religious teaching upheld and attempted to reinforce existing societal values. In Africa, Christianity was seen as presenting explicit challenges to them.

One such challenge was the emphasis on the individual; upon personal development and personal salvation. Kenyatta (1979) argued that Gikuyu education was concerned with social and personal relationships, training

in beliefs and customs necessary to the self-maintenance of the tribe and interrelation with the neighbouring tribes...European educationalists have not realised the importance of this teaching, and the result has been that the children who have been taught under European influence have almost forgotten or disregarded the Gikuyu customary law of behaviour.

Customary laws of behaviour, however, were often at variance with Christian doctrines. Polygamy, premarital sex and circumcision were particularly contentious issues frequently mentioned by African writers. While Christianity stood, in Europe, for the traditional establishment and radical Victorians frequently challenged it, the Church itself was, in Africa,

the radical alternative. African Christianity implied non-conformity and innovation, and set parent against child, elders against converts and the old ways against change.

The new converts were full of zeal; they came to believe that what was in their people was evil. Every custom was a sin. Every belief held by the people was called superstition, the work of the Devil...Christ was on their side, so they went through the hills, treading on the sacred places and throwing away the meat that had been sacrificed to Ngai under the Mugumo (Ngugi 1975).

Many parents were reluctant to send their children to school, for that reason amongst others.

In the beginning, only orphans, foster children, poor nieces and nephews and never the favourite sons were sent, for the villagers distrusted the pressure on them to send their children out of the home and away from herding the animals; and the more alert objected to the way the Christian missions taught... for they could see that the children at the mission would grow up to despise Luo ways (Odinga 1974).

Education went even further than erecting a new religion and challenging customary ways. The entire belief-system of African societies and the relationship of people to the world around them were undermined by

the fatal meeting between the native and the alien...The native was grazing cattle, dreaming of warriorship, of making the soil yield to the power of his hands, slowly through a mixture of magic and work bending nature's laws to his intentions. In the evening he would dance...in celebration or he would pray and sacrifice to propitiate nature. Yes: the native was still afraid of nature (Ngugi 1977).

In Victorian Britain, too, attempts to propitiate nature by ritual and magic had been undermined by the growth of knowledge about the causes of sickness and other calamities. Contemporary writers suggested that the spread of schooling played a powerful role in the reduction of superstition and the inculcation of basic principles of hygiene, which in turn led to reductions in mortality. Such a connection is explicit in one Yoruba novel (Aluko 1971). Joshua thinks the village church school is a childish institution 'where teachers taught the children to do silly things like physical training, and to believe sillier things yet, like guineaworm and dysentery being caused by drinking water from brooks'. He does not want to send another son to school: 'who will fetch the water for me on the farm? Who will make the fire for roasting the yams?' But his son dreams of a future in which

pupils teach their parents what Teacher teaches them at school - that guineaworm comes of bad water and tapeworm of bad meat, that dirt is the great enemy in the house and that cleanliness is of God and is next to godliness...

As colonialism established its grip, however, education came to be seen as an essential strategy for acquiring, or countering, the power of the white man. Indeed, education was 'the White Man's magic' (Aluko 1971).

Schools grew up like mushrooms. Often a school was nothing more than a shed hurriedly thatched with grass. And there they stood, symbols of people's thirst for the white man's secret magic and power. Few wanted to live the white man's way, but all wanted this thing, this magic (Ngugi 1970).

By the 1920s, Odinga (1967) described anti-colonialist rallies as including, among their demands, 'We want better education'.

In the Cameroons, villagers beg to know what their only scholar member has learned, even if they will not understand it:

Tell us all the same....For us, you are the white man - you are the only person who can explain these mysteries to us. If you refuse, we've probably lost our only chance of ever being able to learn the white man's wisdom (Beti 1972).

Achebe (1970) described Ezeulu, worried by the coming of Europeans, sending a son to a church school to be his 'eyes'. Within a short time, increasing European intervention

reinforced the view which had been gaining ground that the best way to deal with the white man was to have a few people ...around who knew what the white men knew. As a result many people - some of them very important - began to send their children to school. Even Nwaka sent a son - the one who seemed least likely among his children to become a good farmer (Achebe 1963).

A later generation of Ezeulu's people formed a Union 'with the aim of collecting money to send some of their brighter young men to study in England' (Achebe 1963).

Nwaka, the conservative, was torn between the need to acquire an educated and hence powerful family member and his more immediate need for help on the farm; hence his decision to send the least useful son to school. Aluko's (1971) Joshua had, as we saw earlier, made a similar decision to spread his options, educating one son but not another because then who would fetch the water or roast the yams? The immediate opportunity cost to the parents of schooling was also noted in Victorian English literature.

The desire to learn the white man's wisdom or magic in order to stand up to him is not dissimilar from the desire of the Victorian working class for an education which would enable them to challenge their traditional rulers. The nineteenth century elite found the political clubs and literary institutes which grew up among the newly-literate profoundly threatening; Odinga (1974) claimed that 'the government was initially suspicious of mission schools for encouraging people to model themselves on the whites - become jumped-up Englishmen'. Indeed, *Victorian Families in Fact and Fiction* recognized that similar fears operated in both cases: fears of a challenge to the *status quo* of power.

After the failure of the Shona rising of 1896 in Zimbabwe, the people lost faith in the ancestors upon whose power and goodwill they had relied for victory. So most parents

encouraged their sons and daughters not only to be baptised but also to attend school at the Mission. The children responded beyond the wildest expectation of the Jesuit fathers. The classrooms and the Church filled up with young people of both sexes, who were willing to make a break with their tribal past in order to attain the bright new world which Christianity held out to them (Vambe 1972).

The bright new world offered amazing possibilities. Both adults and children of Achebe's Umuofia enrolled in the school which Mr Brown built (together with a little hospital) after he persuaded them that without education, outsiders would come to rule them.

It was not long before the people began to say that the white man's medicine was quick in working. Mr Brown's school produced quick results. A few months in it were enough to make one a court messenger or even a court clerk. Those who stayed longer became teachers; and from Umuofia labourers went forth into the Lord's vineyard... (Achebe 1964).

But for those who did go on to further education, the sky was the limit. A young man dreamt of 'a world that would soon be mine. With a degree in Economics and Commerce, any job in most firms was within my grasp. Houses...cars...shares...land in the settled areas...' (Ngugi 1975).

A university degree was the philosopher's stone. It transmuted a third-class clerk on one hundred and fifty a year into a senior Civil Servant on five hundred and seventy, with car

and luxuriously furnished quarters at nominal rent. And the disparity in salary and amenities did not tell even half the story. To occupy a 'European' post was second only to actually being a European. It raised a man from the masses to the elite... (Achebe 1963).

In Victorian Britain, education seems very often to have been linked with the scientific mastery of nature through a range of trades and professions. African writers much more frequently describe it as a path to Government service. As a young Tanzanian character remarks, 'Why, even new-born babies are government officers...' (Palangyo 1970). In part, such a difference may simply reflect the international growth of bureaucracy, and of government or quasi-government control over many aspects of industry in a planned economy. Nevertheless, the contrast is striking. Only one character, Wanja's first boyfriend, sounds like a hero in a Victorian novel:

He talked about Uhuru. He said there would be increased chances, especially for poor people. Therefore he was going to work very hard: go to a secondary school... university... engineering. Yes, he was going to be an engineer... his ambition was to build a bridge over a road or over a river....It felt good (Ngugi 1977).

Concentration on Government service — and teaching — may explain another divergence from the nineteenth century British pattern. In Victorian England, education was seen as offering social advance. However, the Victorians were very conscious that social mobility was a two-way process: people were almost as likely to fall as to rise. African writers, however, have seen education as a guarantee of permanent advancement in security, comfort and status; though unemployment may have changed the perspective amongst today's writers. As such a guarantee, education may have been a factor in deferring a fertility transition. Whereas in Victorian England, such advancement was precarious and the gains could be threatened by a large and demanding family, African confidence in a secure Government post implied no similar considerations.

The gulf between those with, and those without, education is stark.

When Gaciru... failed her CPE at the village school, there was nothing else for her except to join her mother in carrying out the day-to-day drudgery that was the common feature of village life.... She felt bitter that many fools had managed to climb up the ladder that took one to that bridge which separated the green pastures from the rest of the land...Her life in her mother's hut was not happy, either. The old woman was too possessive and did not seem to value what Gaciru had learned at school. Many times Gaciru wanted to put into practice some of the things she had learned to do in her domestic science classes but her mother would not let her (Njau 1978).

As an educational failure, Gaciru did not have the credibility to challenge her mother's ways.

Those who had an education acquired a status outside the boundaries of traditional society. Even Aluko's Joshua, whom we saw believed school a childish institution, thought that 'the teacher's great learning had put him on a considerably higher plane than the village folk' (Aluko 1971). Mezda despite failing his baccalaureate is welcomed back to his family village as a man who has been at school since he was a child, and 'Today he sits on the same benches as the sons of white men'. As a result, he is feted and given tributes of animals. He is even given a wife, although 'in the village, economics, law and tradition gave benefits to age — As a result, in Kala a woman is an infallible sign of male prosperity' (Beti 1972).

Besides social mobility, education implied physical mobility. Those who progressed from primary school had to leave home.

They formed a miserable floating population, these kids: lodged with distant relatives who happened to live near the school, underfed, scrawny, bullied all day by ignorant monitors. The books in front of them presented a universe which had nothing in common

with the one they knew: they battled endlessly with the unknown, astonished and desperate and terrified (Beti 1972).

Those who survived often became alienated from their families and homes, like Hassan, whose

father had, for him, been like someone already dead - ever since the day he had sent him away to the English school in Maadi sometime after his mother's death....During the time away from him spent with foreign tutors his childhood quickly died, his love for his father froze, and he became a sophisticated man not greatly concerned with the emotions, subordinating everything to rational standards ...Today, after the death of his father, his link with the rest of his relations would no doubt be cut and he would remain without roots (Rifaat 1983).

In any event, the careers which education offered took them far away from their villages and offered them a new urban environment, as had also happened in Victorian Britain. Far away from parents or other traditional sources of social pressures to conform, individuals could experiment with new behaviour. Western education promised 'a freedom which tribal Chishawasha did not allow; it offered them a chance to realise their unfulfilled hopes' (Vambe 1972). Among other things, the status and mobility of education undermined the authority of parents and elders.

Of all her family she was the only one who had completed her 'O' levels, and she never failed to rub in this fact. She walked around with her nose in the air; illiterate relatives were beneath her greeting... her mother seemed bemused by her education. At her own home Neo was waited on hand and foot... (Head 1983).

A young man about to leave his village for university fears his father 'though sometimes he wondered why he feared him. He ought to have rebelled like the other educated young men'. Like Mezda, incidentally, he is seen as a great marriage prospect (Ngugi 1975). A young woman who goes to work in Lagos under the care of her aunt marries secretly and her aunt is deeply offended.

It is a slight and nothing else. What do I know? I didn't go to school. If I had gone to school, you would not have treated me in this way (Nwapa 1983).

In general, girls had less access to the coveted status and opportunity which education provided. Wanja the barmaid in *Petals of Blood* (Ngugi 1977) says

boys were always more confident about the future than us girls. It was as if we knew that no matter what efforts we put into our own studies, our road led to the kitchen and the bedroom.

Seduction and pregnancy made Wanja a school dropout.

A similar possibility made Dehinwa's father reluctant to invest in her education, even though he had sent all his sons abroad to complete their schooling: 'He said he wasn't sending any girl to England only to go and get herself pregnant within three months' (Soyinka 1972).

But lack of education might make a girl less attractive as a marriage prospect amongst the new elite. John the prospective university student does not want to marry his pregnant lover Wamuhu because — besides being unacceptable to his parents — she comes of a traditional family, is circumcised and only reached Standard IV. Nevertheless,

there was none who could equal her and no girl in the village had any pretence to any higher standard of education. Women's education was very low. Perhaps that was why so many Africans went 'away' and came back married.

Some were ambivalent about the advantages of educating girls. Theresa and Ntanya fall in love and decide to get married and till the land. 'We won't get rich but we won't starve. We'll raise a family and send our children to school'. But she tells Ntanya's friend James, an educated ex-Government official,

my next assignment is to get you a good girl, a healthy girl from Kachawanga, not these school urchins that you educated men talk about... but a girl who can fling a hoe from sunrise to sunset... (Palangyo 1970).

Marriage, in every account, revolves around children. Indeed, it always had. Vambe's aunt Josephine became pregnant while married under tribal law, but not yet in church. His grandmother was delighted: what would have happened had they been married as Christians and one turned out to be incapable of producing children?

What grandmother was saying was simply this: among our people the birth of a child was the only binding factor in a marriage, almost the only reason for getting married at all (Vambe 1972).

But not everybody who gets pregnant is in a position to marry. In addition to Ngugi's schoolgirl Wanja, many other have abortions. For example, Obi, the young Nigerian whose overseas education was paid for by local subscription, is forbidden to marry his girlfriend because she comes from a taboo family; she has an abortion from which she almost dies.

Occasionally, adoption is an alternative, as it is for Ruheni's Jane. This young woman then begins to use the Pill, but the doctor has told her it may interfere with her blood pressure. 'Every time I swallow one I feel my heart beating hard. You are correct, Doctor, these pills interfere with the heart'. She gives them up. Meanwhile, others in her circle are about to marry:

'Eunice, do you know what will happen next Saturday?'

'I will become your wife. You will become my husband'.

'Are we all set for it?'

'Yes'.

'No. Have you thrown away all your pills?'

'Oh dear, oh dear'.

She delved into her handbag and pulled them out. She threw them on the charcoal burner. They burned rather reluctantly... (Ruheni 1975).

The association between contraception and the unmarried is also reflected by Mrs Faseyi, a spirited old woman, who asks one of her son's friends if he is married.

'No'.

'But you have children perhaps?'

'None'.

'Well, you needn't look so virtuous. You probably knew what to do. Too many young men don't or they simply don't care' (Soyinka 1972).

In nineteenth century Britain, too, references to birth control are usually associated with premarital or extra-marital sex, and *Victorian Families in Fact and Fiction* suggested that the connotations of immorality were among the reasons for the slow acceptance of contraception

in the wider community. It was also suggested that radical advocates of birth control were unlikely to appeal to a newly-expanded and respectable middle-class. In addition, early advocates of birth control were often extremely critical of every method except their own preferred choice; the plethora of adverse comments about the various contraceptives might well have influenced potential users.

Rather similar factors may have retarded the spread of birth control in Africa. For traditionalists, the connection with immorality would have intensified the fear of a further foreign contribution to the decline in tribal behaviour. Christian-educated Africans would have imbibed church attitudes to contraception which varied from complete hostility in Catholics to discreet endorsement by the Methodists. It was not until 1958 that the Church of England gave unequivocal support to family planning (Leathard 1980). In a period of anti-colonialist nation-building, practices advocated by foreigners and a few foreign-educated doctors were unlikely to be any more acceptable to the average African than the messages of Francis Place would have been to Mr Pooter (Kane 1994). Widespread publicity about possible ill-effects of particular contraceptives may well have deterred many women from using any method.

One powerful short story, by the Egyptian–Lebanese writer Chedid (1983) does imply that there is a limit to the number of children who may be welcome even within marriage. The desperately poor mother of nine children feeds the wandering Hadji Osman, several times pilgrim to Mecca, whose ‘virtue was widely known...when he passed by, maladies disappeared, the growing crops took on a new vigour’. In gratitude, he wishes her Allah’s blessing and that she will be granted seven more children. She begs him to take the blessing back; he is bewildered.

Her face still buried in her hands, the woman shook her head from right to left, from left to right.

‘No! No! Enough! ...It is enough!’

All around, children metamorphosed into grasshoppers, bounded against her, encircled her, transformed her into a clod of earth, inert. Their hundreds of hands became claws, nettles twitching her clothes, tearing her flesh.

‘No. no!...I can’t endure any more!’

Hadji Osman refuses to take back the benediction, accusing her of blasphemy; she begs her husband to make the holy man understand. To her amazement, he backs her up; the neighbours come running and when the old man still refuses to take back his blessing, they beat him up and throw him out of the village.

The evidence gleaned from this limited selection of African novels concerning the pathways through which education may affect demographic variables reinforces the assumption that such pathways are complex. The school curricula, as described, seem unlikely in themselves to have had much direct influence in changing attitudes or behaviour, except possibly by inculcating the notion that cleanliness was next to godliness. Nevertheless, that one message alone might have had a role in the reduction of child mortality, especially when combined with the challenge which any schooling provided to the old belief systems of magic and ritual in which nature was always to be feared.

The immense prestige which education — even a small amount of schooling — is described as conferring made it possible for children to question the traditional beliefs and values of their parents or other elders and hence, perhaps, to introduce into the home what they had learned of nutrition and hygiene.

However, Christianity was so essentially entwined with education in Africa, as many writers pointed out, that the conflict was primarily between old beliefs and the new religion,

rather than between old and new ideas. Given that during the period described here the churches were largely hostile to contraception, their role in delaying its use may have been significant. In addition, birth control seems to have been associated with premarital or extramarital sex, perhaps undermining its acceptability in a 'respectable' relationship. Premarital sex is also seen partly as an outcome of education, which removes young people from their homes, or leads them to jobs away from those homes.

Marriage was as fundamental in Christian education as it had been in traditional life, but the process of acquiring an education and the ability to use that education to earn money may have delayed its timing, especially for girls. The books give an ambivalent view about the benefits of specifically female education: on the one hand, some parents fear that it will be wasted because the girl will become pregnant before marriage; on the other, an educated daughter might have better marriage prospects.

By contrast, there is virtual unanimity about the value of education, in terms of power, prestige and career path, for boys. Even those parents most troubled by the immediate opportunity cost of losing a worker on the farm are prepared to offer up at least one son on the altar of education. Such a hedging of bets, of course, implies the need for several children.

The unqualified optimism expressed here about the power of education to confer upward mobility and a secure future may also be significant in the comparatively slow African fertility transition; the possibility that the cost of children might retard or even overturn family progress is never expressed.

The use of literature to explore some of the factors which have a bearing on demographic mechanisms does, we believe, offer some insights into attitudes and behaviour, but it is of course partial and limited by the types of source material examined. We learnt surprisingly little about the links between parental education and health practices. In particular, there was no indication whether educated parents might recognize the importance of personal hygiene and precautions for the survival of their children; or whether better educated women might be more likely to detect illness earlier, initiate treatment and follow medical advice more readily. Neither did we learn whether educated couples had a view about ideal family size, let alone whether such a view was different from that of the less-educated. Chedid's North African villagers suggest that totally unregulated fertility may be unwelcome: further we cannot go.

However, this examination does reinforce the view that the pathways through which education affected fertility, in particular, are complex. While some of the outcomes of receiving an education in Africa which are depicted here could be expected to lead to fertility reductions, others had a tendency to reinforce traditional norms, at least in the short to medium terms. This similarly seems to have been the situation in nineteenth century Britain, but the factors which operated to accelerate or retard the transition did not necessarily work in the same direction in both societies. We suggest that further detailed studies of the effect of education in particular cultures are needed if the benefit of education — and especially the education of women — is to achieve its maximum potential.

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