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Uncertain Honor: Modern Motherhood in an African Crisis

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The book, in the preface, opens with how the author obtained permission from a Catholic priest in Beti, southern Cameroon, to carry out an anthropological study of the people. The author was interested in studying development problems. In development circles it is the causal links between education and child bearing that receive most attention. Viewing the politics of girls' education, the author argues that mechanical models of causation (e.g., more education = lower fertility) have done us more harm than good.

The field research on which this book is based began in 1996 with a two-month tour of Southwest Cameroon's villages and secondary schools. It was followed by a survey in January-August 1998, primarily to study schoolgirls.

The research relies heavily on structured methods of data collection: class-room observations, time use surveys, a demographic life history survey, and interviews.

In the introduction, the author reiterates the inverse correlation between women's schooling and their fertility, but stresses that little is known about the causes or mechanism of that correlation. This uncertainty constitutes the demographic dilemma which gave impetus to writing this book.

The book sought to focus on why educated Cameroonian women wait so long to bear their first child and how they achieve this delay. Second, the book sought to unravel the mystery of coming of age for girls in southern Cameroon (i.e., how to become a Beti woman). It addressed the question of how womanhood been transformed by the social forces of school, church and economic underdevelopment. This book demonstrates how the answers to these questions, apparently so discrete, are deeply intertwined.

Three arguments are put forward in the book. First, among Beti women it is entry into the social category of 'mother' rather than the biological event of giving birth that women seek to regulate.

Second, the educated Beti women discipline their reproductive lives not only before conception, but also during pregnancy and after delivery through deliberate delays using abstinence to prevent pregnancy, delaying complete gestation of pregnancy through abortion and delaying social motherhood by giving up certain children to essentially permanent fostering.

Third, building on the ethnographic case study the author proposes recognition of certain milestones or vital conjunctures that surround the three moments of child bearing: conception,

pregnancy and birth.

The author points out that although educated women, in most countries, do indeed have fewer children than do less-educated women, they do so in differing ways and to different degrees. This variation in manner and degrees is even clearer when we turn from total fertility rates to age-specific rates. The Cameroonian pattern shows that educated women are restraining their child-bearing at all ages, and presumably all parities, in relation to women with no schooling. The fact that educated Cameroonian women bear fewer children at all ages than do the uneducated implies that the explanation of the rates must be based on a broad social understanding of reproductive practice.

The researcher recounts the colonial heritage of Cameroon, the role of Catholic schools in training youths, the family structure—especially in the use of polygyny order to get extra hands (wives and children) to work on the farms—the advent of political independence in 1960/61, the economic buoyancy up to the 1980s, and the economic crises that negatively affected various segments of the society.

The book proposes that Beti women educated in Catholic schools navigate family formation processes in reference to a local system of honour—similar to what Hammel has called a ‘moral economy’. They bear their first children late because the social conjunctures they will accept as conditions for honorable childbearing come together slowly. Through the criteria for selection of the girls who attend Catholic secondary schools and the school system, educated women acquire schemata of honorability focused on a normative core of life-history events in which marriage and childbearing follow the establishment of a career.

Disciplined timing is thus the key to honorable childbearing for women of the educated Beti elite.

Nearly every woman interviewed longed for marriage to legitimate birth and thus honorable motherhood.

On page 243 of the book, the impression that women cooking food outside the domestic compound for sale to others are sexually promiscuous among the Bangante is neither upheld among Beti women nor inferable among any other Africa tribe. What propels women to sell food or other wares on the road is the burning desire to ameliorate poverty, not sexual promiscuity.

While Beti society expects early commencement of child bearing among girls (before age 20), educated women are able to postpone through ‘new’ forms of reproductive practice. The book has been able to broaden our understanding of actualization of fertility desire among Beti women of Cameroon. Similar anthropological studies should be replicated in other societies in order to deepen the explanations for certain demographic phenomenon.