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Descriptive Finding

**Interconnections among changing family
structure, childrearing and fertility behaviour
among the *Ogu*, Southwestern Nigeria:
A qualitative study**

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Table of Contents

1	Introduction	140
2	Background to the study	140
3	Source of data and method	143
4	Results	144
5	Conclusion	150
	References	153

**Interconnections among changing family structure, childrearing
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Onipede Wusu¹

Uche C. Isiugo-Abanihe²

Abstract

The interconnections of family transformation, childrearing and fertility behaviour are explored. Data were generated through nine focus groups organized among the *Ogu* and content analyzed. The analysis reveals that although the family system is still largely dominated by extended structure, the strong traditional kinship ties have begun to undergo serious strain. Child fostering and other means of spreading childrearing cost among relatives are fading out. Consequently, desired family size and ideal number of children in the society now gravitate to four children relative to over eight in the past. Given dwindling extended family resources for the support of a large number of its members, innovative reproductive behaviour is permeating the society, such as the adoption of family planning.

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1. Introduction

The traditional childrearing practices in Nigeria are communal within the context of the extended family system or lineage, and the costs of raising children are not borne solely by the biological parents. A close knit of relatives commonly shares the costs of rearing children, in terms of emotion, time, finance and other material support, since all children together comprise the strength of the lineage. Studies have indicated that the ubiquitous and cohesive nature of the extended family structure in traditional societies is the pillar supporting such childrearing practices (Fapohunda and Todaro 1988; Isiugo-Abanihe 1985; 1991). However, there are emerging indications of transformation in the African family, in response to general social, economic and political changes in different countries and societies (Wusu and Isiugo-Abanihe 2003; Ocholla-Ayayo 1997; Isiugo-Abanihe and Obono 1999).

In a similar vein fertility decline has been reported in many countries or regions within sub-Saharan Africa, which, in Nigeria, is more noticeable in the southern part of the country. For instance, Orubuloye *et al.* (1997), Orubuloye (1995) and Caldwell, Orubuloye and Caldwell (1992) report the emergence of some declines in fertility in the southwestern part of Nigeria. The National Population Commission (2000; 2004) has also corroborated this finding not only for southwestern Nigeria but also for the southeast. Could it be that fertility is declining in places where structural transformation of the family has necessitated significant changes in childrearing practices? This link has not been adequately explored in demographic and sociological literature in sub-Saharan Africa. It is against this background that this paper attempts an empirical examination of two interwoven questions. First, is the gradual erosion of traditional childrearing practices a concomitant of family structure transformation? And what are the implications of family structure transformation and the decline in traditional childrearing practices for fertility behaviour? These issues are examined using qualitative data collected among the *Ogu*, a sub-Yoruba ethnic group in southwestern Nigeria.

2. Background to the study

The extended family structure, which comprises generations of close relatives rather than a married couple and children, who live either in the same house or compound, and in a close and continuous relationship, dominate the sub-Saharan African society. Nukunya (1992: 47) observes that the extended family is a “social arrangement in which an individual has extensive reciprocal duties, obligations and responsibilities to his relations outside his nuclear family”. Within the framework of this family structure,

a series of childrearing practices are maintained. Right from birth, surrogate mothers, maybe either mother-in-laws or sister-in-laws from either the husband's or wife's family, make themselves available to assist in caring for the new born baby and the nursing mother (Fapohunda and Todaro 1988). This practice lessens the emotional burden that a nursing mother goes through during the early period of childrearing, and by extension, encourages high fertility goals in a society where more, rather fewer, children is perfectly rational.

In a related sense, various ways of child fostering exist among relatives and non-relatives - but child fostering among members of kinship group is more predominant in Nigeria. Within the ambit of fostering, children are transferred from their biological homes to other homes - the homes of uncles, aunts, cousins, etc., - where they are raised has been a very common practice (Isiugo-Abanihe 1985). The strong family ties existing among brothers, sisters, cousins, etc., even when they are married, facilitate this transfer and sharing of children. It was a common practice for childrearing costs to be totally transferred or shared within the extended family system through this traditional mechanism. Again, through this common practice, couples are encouraged to pursue high fertility goals since the emotional, material and financial cost of raising children are shared or nearly completely transferred to others. Within this system, young men sometimes get married and keep their wives and children back at home while maintaining a separate home in the city where they work. It was therefore mandatory for extended family members to share the burden (or cost) of sustaining such a woman (regarded as a wife to all in the family) and her children.

An important element of the extended family structure is polygyny, with men being encouraged to marry two or more women at the same time. Both co-residential polygyny and serial-monogamy are common practices in Nigeria (National Population Commission 1998). Couples in polygynous homes typically maintain separate purse and consequently share childrearing cost disproportionately, women often being made to bear more of the cost of raising and caring for children. Because men are not the main bearers of the cost of their reproductive action, even though they are the main beneficiaries, a large family size is seen as desirable. Maybe this account for persistent high fertility in the country since men dominate reproductive decision-making (Isiugo-Abanihe 1994; 2003)

Nigeria is still largely an agrarian economy, and owing to low level of technology prevailing in agriculture and the communal land tenure in practice, especially in the rural areas, emphasis has been strongly on large family size (Orubuloye 1995). In most cultures only male children are allowed to share in family land holdings within the context of the extended family structure and communal ownership of land. Since farming is central to economic life, the most economically rewarding reproductive goal a couple could pursue is a large family size, ideally with many male children. Against

this backdrop couples dread barrenness, and until a “good” number of male children are born, extended family members exert pressure, which may culminate in the man marrying another wife (Wusu 2001). Of course, emphasis was on quantity and not quality of children; raising children who are to engage in farm work would not be as expensive as giving them quality education. Understandably, therefore, fertility desires in a traditional agrarian society, as in most societies in Nigeria, have been quite high and the adoption of birth control measures minimal.

Being a patriarchal society, African men enjoy supremacy over decision-making on important issues, including reproductive health, in the family (Isiugo-Abanihe 1994; 2003). In the extended family system, close ties exist between men (husbands) and their parents as well as with other relatives such that men, in conjunction with their parents, take most family decisions (Babalola 1991). As observed by Orubuloye (1995:140) “in much of Nigerian society, the great majority of people still live in extended families either with or in close proximity to relatives”; a wife moving into such a home at marriage remains the stranger among the close kin group. This facilitates stronger influence of relatives on the life and decision of husbands. Given the fact that in the society there is a strong cultural urge to maintain the lineage and leave behind offspring, pressure is often mounted on couples to reject family planning and have as many children as naturally possible (Ainsworth 1996; Caldwell and Caldwell 2000). In fact, some elderly members of the extended family go to the extent of inducing fear in couples to the effect that a woman who limits birth may suffer certain health hazards for inability to born all the babies in her womb (Bankole 2000). Such traditional beliefs and values that are usually inculcated from childhood promote the adoption of pronatalist reproductive goals, which, in part, may account for high fertility in the country.

The foregoing demonstrates the interconnections among the extended family structure, childrearing and fertility behaviour. It suggests that reproductive motivations are predicated upon the interface between the strong kinship ties that has prevailed in the region and its effect on the traditional childrearing practices. Clearly, however, the family in the sub-Saharan Africa has been in a state of flux for some time, the general changes on course in the continent are taking their toll on the institution, especially on its structure (Adepoju 1997). The ongoing structural transformation in the family is expected to exert some influence on childrearing practices and consequently on fertility behaviour. Hence, this paper explores whether the fertility decline reported for southwestern Nigeria could be explained in terms of the interface between the changing family structure and childrearing practices.

3. Source of data and method

The study was carried out among the *Ogu*. The *Ogu* constitutes the *Egun* speaking people of south western Nigeria. They are found mainly in two populous states in the country: Lagos and Ogun states; they also constitute about 40 percent of the population of the Republic of Benin and are found in Togo as well. The present study was carried out in Lagos state. Although the *Ogu* share numerous cultural traits with the Yoruba in Nigeria, they maintain separate dialect and trace their origin to the Republic of Benin, whereas the Yoruba trace theirs to Ile-ife in Osun state, the cradle of Yoruba culture. The choice of the *Ogu* as the setting of this study was informed by the fact that documented demographic information based on empirical research about the group is scanty (even though it is one of the major ethnic groups in West Africa). Yet the rapid social transformation taking place among them presents them as an ideal location for far reaching demographic enquiry.

The data used in the preparation of this paper was part of the doctoral research of the first author. Nine focus group discussions (FGDs) were organized in the study setting, four with men and five among their female counterparts. Nine focus groups were considered adequate because the study population is largely homogeneous; having more groups was of little utility. Each of the FGD comprised between seven and nine participants. Among the issues discussed in the sessions are the nature and magnitude of changes taking place in the family structure, family size desires, family planning and childrearing practices.

On the average, the discussions lasted for 45 minutes. The researcher acted as the facilitator, while a field assistant played the role of note taker. Although notes were taken, the focus group discussions were tape recorded. The taped version of the discussions was transcribed and content analyzed. The analysis involved first, categorizing the data with respect to the research objectives; subsequently, the categories were examined for relationships among different categories. The apparent relationships were then tested by searching through for alternative explanations and the intensity of mention or opinion on an issue. Striking expressions were also noted and are cited here or reproduced verbatim to buttress the discussions. Some of the direct quotations have been edited to enhance readability and comprehension among readers who are not conversant with 'pidgin or broken' English which is commonly used in urban areas.

4. Results

There was a consensus in all the focus group discussions that the *Ogu* family has been undergoing significant changes. The strong kinship tie that had helped to sustain the extended family structure is steadily growing weaker. There is a gradual weakening of the cord binding the extended family systems, and an increasing shift to the nuclear family, comprising a man, his wife and their children, even in rural settings. Although the typical extended family system is still predominant, nevertheless, the strength of kinship ties is weakening and obvious changes are on course in terms of interpersonal relations among members of kin group. A participant in one of the groups organized in the rural areas remarked:

Of course, changes are gradually taking place in family structure, the major source is modern civilization. Emphasis is gradually shifting to couple and their children, although uncles, aunts and grand parents remain members of the larger family of which the couple is considered a part. (A man from Ijotun, Aged 35)

Another man corroborated this statement:

Family structure has been changing over the years. The reasons include increase in urbanization and employment opportunities outside the extended family. However, most of those who have left for the urban centre maintain regular contact with extended family members back home. (A man from Ijotun, Aged 40).

Views similar to the two above were commonly expressed in all the groups

A striking indicator of the declining emotional bonding within the extended family, which has also facilitated the transformation, is the reduction of the number of urban men who would now leave their wives and children with extended family members in the village. Indeed, emotional bonding within the extended family has transformed into conjugal bonding between a man and his wife, and young couples now prefer to start their separate homes, usually away from their parents, especially in cities and large towns. Given below are the comments of a woman and a man in the focus group discussions on the demise of this cultural practice:

These days, young ladies dislike living among their husbands' extended family members. So they opt for separate nuclear apartment. This is a new phenomenon here. (A woman from Itohun, aged 45)

The practice whereby a man keeps his wife with the extended family in the village while he works in the city is now outdated mainly because it encourages promiscuity. Now a man wants to live with his wife away from the extended family, which removes interference by members of the family. (A man from Iyafin, aged 50)

Another aspect of the structural changes taking place in the family, suggesting divergence from extended family system, is the emergence of single-parent or lone-parent households. First, there is now a group of urban women who remain unmarried, but have children from their lovers. Marriage is no longer universal in contemporary *Ogu* society, and the number of single-parent families is large and growing. Lone-parent households also result from divorce and separation, which are becoming common phenomena, especially in the urban areas. Many women in this category fail to remarry, but maintain headship of their households comprising own children and perhaps some relatives. Thirdly, the traditional practice of widow inheritance is on the decline, as most men are no longer willing to inherit the wife (wives) and children of their deceased brother. This is an important factor accounting for the rising number of single parents in the society. From the group discussions, it was understood that most of the single parents were widowed. In the past the society maintained a social mechanism where women who lost their spouses were easily reabsorbed into the family life through wife inheritance. But now such internal arrangement that was predicated upon strong kin group ties is being undermined. In contemporary *Ogu* society, women who lose their husbands prefer to remain single and raise their children. This is a fall-out of the weakening extended family ties in the community. A male participant in one of the FGDs organized in the rural area articulated a commonly heard view:

Changes are taking place in the family. Single parenthood is emerging even in this area, and this has not been part of our culture. Some women now live alone, and even bear children without being legally married. Women whose husbands have died refuse to be inherited. This could not happen here in the past. (A man from Iyafin, aged 42)

Another variant of the view was given by a woman from Badagry Township:

Single parents now exist here, but it is not an acceptable practice in this society. It is the bye-product of urbanization, and women employment. Some Women feel they can make it on their own because they own their own money. (A woman from Badagry, aged 45).

The foregoing indicates that the *Ogu* family structure is undergoing significant changes and that the strong family cohesion that prevailed in the past is weakening. The participants explained these changes in terms of the impressive influence of western education, urbanization, industrialization and employment outside the extended family. The Commonly expressed views given below highlight the factors that are responsible for the ongoing family transformation.

Changes in the family structure can be traced to the impact of education and formal occupation that separate a couple from the extended family. Western civilization and women liberalization movements are also crucial causes of the changes. (A man from Badagry, aged 48)

Compound family is no longer common because of urbanization and industrialization. Couples now stay away from their extended families to maintain their own nuclear families. However, such couples still visit extended family members regularly. (A woman from Badagry, aged 45)

Obviously the consensus emanating from this study is that the *Ogu* family structure is changing. However, the traditional extended family system has not been radically replaced by the nuclear family system; rather the hitherto strong family ties have been going through strain at various degrees. Therefore, a pertinent question is whether these changes have affected childrearing practices among the *Ogu*? As pointed out earlier, the cost of childbearing and rearing was typically spread among kin group members. However, both male and female participants in the FGDs acknowledged that the practice is no longer generally tenable, and not consistent with modern realities.

Extended family members no longer see the assistance they render to relatives in child rearing as an obligation. This suggests that the various mechanisms by which kin group members support childrearing within the extended family system, such as child fostering and family contributions, is on the decline. Also the level and duration of care

and support given by close relatives, such as mother-in-laws, when a baby is born is on decline as well; where such assistance is given, the period is considerably shorter than what obtained previously. Perhaps this accounts for the high patronage of crèche and day care centers by working class mothers. The remarks made by male participants in the FGD organized in Badagry Township buttress this observation:

The support that extended family members give in childrearing is no longer a common practice. With this, large family size is quite expensive to maintain. (A man aged 55)

Spreading the cost of child training among extended family members was a very common practice. But these days it is fading out, it is not popular again. (A man aged 53)

At the same time, the traditional view that children are blessing from God, who also makes provision for them, is becoming unpopular in contemporary *Ogu* society. It may be assumed that such notions were rooted in shared responsibility for childrearing that was operational in the extended family system. Throughout the FGDs, the views below were generally heard:

Our parents believed that God is the source of children, and therefore always provides means for their upbringing. Some people still hold to this view today but it is no longer a general norm. (A man from Badagry, aged 48)

In the past women indulge in bearing children without check, believing that the means of training them would come from various sources in the larger family, but that belief is not acceptable these days. (A woman aged 45)

In contemporary *Ogu* society, childrearing cost rests largely on the biological parents. Given the declining importance of the contribution of the extended family members, the emerging situation is that those who take reproductive decisions now increasingly bear the greater part of the consequence in terms of monetary, material and emotional cost. The apparent decline in the rate of child fostering implies that biological parents bear the greater proportion of the emotional stress involved in childrearing, which may be a stimulus for fertility decline. The comments of the following female participants in the FGDs are typical of the views of the people on the emerging childrearing practices:

Nowadays parents are expected to bear the cost of training their children. Gone are the days when relatives helped one to train one's children (A woman from Badagry, aged 40)

Now childrearing responsibilities rest on the oars of both man and woman who are the biological parents. The implication is that they will try to limit the number of their children to their ability (A woman from Badagry, aged 42)

The practice of spreading childrearing cost is declining, these days it is difficult to foster in or out children, so biological parents solely bear the cost of training their own children. (A woman from Badagry, aged 45)

Child training practice is now changing. These days, biological parents bear the greater proportion of the cost of training their children. Couples are now on their own, so they better think twice before having children. (A woman from Ijotun, aged 45)

The emerging childrearing practices that are directly or indirectly related to the changes ensuing in the family system are expected to be exerting significant influence on fertility behaviour in the *Ogu* community. In the first instance, since biological parents now take fuller charge of raising their children, it appears childrearing value may be changing, with a growing emphasis on quality training for children rather than quantity of children. Makinwa-Adebusoye (1991) made a similar observation more than a decade ago, namely, that parent's educational aspiration for their children was rising in sub-Saharan Africa. The FGDs reveal a consensus with respect to the increasing emphasis on child quality rather than the numbers of children per se. Participants were of the view that if quality child training and upbringing should be achieved, there must be adjustments in reproductive health attitudes and goals. The popular view was that large family size is likely to hamper attainment of quality training for children. This belief has given rise to smaller family size goals among a large and growing number of couples, who now regard a family size of four as ideal as against eight in the past. The following expressions are extracts from the FGD to buttress this observation:

People should have the number of children they can adequately cater for. It is not proper to have so many children that we cannot give quality training. (A man from Badagry, aged 42)

If you bear too many children you cannot give them quality training. Therefore having between two or four children will be adequate considering present socio-economic conditions. (A man from Badagry, aged 60)

Because of the increase in the cost of childcare, men are now frowning at polygynous marriages. They now cooperate with their respective wives to achieve proper child training. (A woman from Iyafin, aged 35)

In view of the rising cost of living in the country due to the downturn in the economic fortunes, the cost of childrearing has been rising over the years. Because of the high burden of paying school fees and maintaining other child care costs, at a time that members of the extended family are increasingly unwilling to assist one another, many couples are becoming demographic innovators through increasing contraceptive use. Three FGD participants comment:

In these days it is quite difficult for anybody to have large family size because people now emphasize quality childrearing as well as improved standard of living for themselves, which they believe large family size can hinder. (A man from Ijotun, aged 38)

The desire to give quality training to children and the need for improved standards of living in the face of modern economic realities necessitates the use of contraceptives everywhere. (A woman from Badagry, aged 40)

Childrearing is changing; parents are becoming conscious of family planning due to the reality of a strong emotional and material expenditure on children in view of the need for quality training for them. (A woman from Badagry, aged 45)

In particular, the changing emphasis on child quality, coupled with the decline in extended family support with respect to childrearing, is promoting the adoption of innovative fertility behaviour in the study population. It is important to mention that men are not left out in the demographic innovation sweeping through the population. In the past men were considered the main barrier to the use of contraceptive by women in the country (Orubuloye 1995). It is insightful to note that participants in the focus group

discussions unanimously acknowledged that only very few men still oppose the use of contraceptives by their wives. In fact, most men we talked to in this study have used and are currently using some family planning methods, and encourage their spouses to do so. The extracts from the FGDs given below underscores this observation:

Nowadays most husbands encourage their wives to practice family planning methods in view of the harsh economic climate in the country. (A man from Badagry, aged 50)

In these days it is quite difficult for anybody to bear many children because things are not easy with respect to training them, therefore it is very important to use contraceptives. (A man from Itohun, aged 55)

Family planning is very important now because it is not good to bear children that we cannot cater for. There may be few men who oppose family planning; certainly it is because such men lack understanding. (A man from Badagry, aged 53)

5. Conclusion

Family system is an integral aspect of non-material culture and every culture possesses strong potential for transformation. Family system in most part of sub-Saharan Africa has been undergoing implicit and explicit transformations that can be traced to internal and external factors (Ochallo-Ayayo 1997). Significant structural changes are on course in the *Ogu* family. Although the extended structure remains predominant, with nuclear family units as an integral part of the larger extended system (Wusu and Isiugo-Abanihe 2003), the erstwhile strong family ties have been under considerable stress, especially in the past decade. There has been a gradual but consistent shift in emphasis, even though most people still consider the extended family as the ideal family. There has been a remarkable emotional and material emphasis and preference for the concerns of the immediate family - that is, a couple and their children. This is a reflection of the influence of the social, political and economic changes in the society on the family institution. Okediji *et al.* (1977) had since 1977 noted the possibility of this family transformation in Nigeria and Ghana.

The weakening bond among members of the kinship group culminates in a slow but steady erosion of certain traditional childrearing practices. Very crucial are the various mechanisms by which the costs of child training are shared among members of

the extended family. The tradition was predicated upon strong family ties binding members together, which on its part is a factor promoting high fertility goals among men. However, in view of the fact that such ties have been under intense strain for some time, the traditional safeguards and support systems have tended to give way in a modernizing society. For instance, various child-fostering practices no longer enjoy general acceptance in the communities, and the cost of raising children is becoming the sole responsibility of biological parents. At the same time, emphasis on child quality (rather than quantity) has now become a major goal that most parents pursue in order to make their children relevant in the emerging economy, with the ascendancy of commerce and industrialization. Perhaps, the current rising rate of child trafficking and child labour of various dimensions in the country is a fall-out of the inability of parents to solely bear the cost of raising and training their children in view of the declining assistance from relatives--an area demanding further exploration.

The structural changes taking place in the family, resulting to the gradual erosion of traditional social mechanism of spreading emotional, material and monetary costs of raising children, appears to have necessitated significant changes in fertility behaviour in the *Ogu* family. Innovative reproductive behaviours, such as the adoption of small family size norm and contraceptive use, are increasingly permeating the community. In view of the realization of the fact that large family size is likely to hamper quality child training, men do not just use modern contraceptives but encourage their spouses to adopt effective family planning methods in order to have only the number of children they can cater for. The emerging practice of planned or controlled fertility, common among men and women in the study area, is indicative of a change in couples' fertility motivation among the *Ogu*, which is a prerequisite for a sustained decline in marital fertility in the society at large.

The result suggests that if the ongoing structural transformation in the family is sustained, fertility decline would continue among the *Ogu*, which will engender the small family norm in the study population. Because the weakening family ties is making it difficult to share childrearing cost among members of the extended family, even men who were hitherto regarded as pronatalist are favourably disposed toward small family size. Thus an important barrier to fertility transition will likely give way as the family structure continues to change in the years ahead. More aggressive family planning programmes that include men may be required to promote sustained fertility transition in the study population.

It should be noted that this study is an exploratory attempt at highlighting the interconnections among the changing family structure, childrearing and fertility behaviour. The study suffers certain obvious limitations. Firstly, it was carried out among an ethnic group, as such the findings may not be representative of the country; there is the need for a nationwide study covering the major ethnic groups. Secondly,

because the study employed a purely qualitative approach using the FGD, the findings are certainly not generalizable. Nevertheless, the findings are insightful and future efforts are needed to go beyond this preliminary effort at re-integrating the family into the explanatory framework for fertility behaviour in sub-Saharan Africa.

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