

Mate Selection and Marital Fertility: The Case of The Yorubas in the Rural Areas

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INTRODUCTION

The study of marriage is one of the most interesting aspects of the Demography of the Yorubas. Among this ethnic group, the institution of marriage is not only universal, but it has for a long time been interwoven with the prevailing socio-cultural and economic systems of the society. In most societies, the process of marriage begins essentially with the choice of a marriage partner. The choice is not left exclusively in the hands of the two individuals principally concerned. In this regard, the influence of parents cannot be over-emphasized. Many parents will force or threaten to withdraw financial support if their children refused to comply with their choice. Also, the choice of marriage partner has a wider aspect of an alliance between groups of kins (Orubuloye, 1987; Bolaji, 1984; Caldwell et al., 1983). However, the extent of involvement of the family in the choice of marriage partner differs from one culture to the other. In some cases, it depends on the kinship pattern and the degree of traditionality. But it is important to note that among the Yorubas, irrespective of the kinship pattern, endogenous marriages are not permitted nor condoned.

In the traditional Yoruba society, most marriages were arranged by the parents on both sides. The importance of the family in the selection of marriage partners in the traditional Yoruba society is reflected in the statement by Bolaji (1984) that "marriage partners were in those days of yore, chosen by the families of the young ones concerned". Specifically, two forms of arranged marriage were common among the Yorubas. One was the betrothal of a girl before she was born. Orubuloye (1987) observed that betrothal of an unborn baby, with the hope that the outcome of the pregnancy would be a girl was a common practice among the Yorubas. Immediately the child is born and turns out to be a girl, the family that was considered to be respectable and worthy in character will be invited and allowed to visit the parents. Such

arrangement was usually made on behalf of a single man. Gifts were brought to the parents of the girl, until she was old enough to be taken away in marriage. Secondly, several years before reaching puberty, a girl could be given in marriage to a man older than her; sometimes old enough to be her father. Quite often, the girl might not be aware of this arrangement for a long time. The third category of mate selection now prevalent among the Yorubas is the one in which individual concerned personally chose their own mate. This may not be unconnected with the increased pace of modernization whereby emphasis are shifting from extended family ties, which formally existed in most of the rural areas, to nucleation. Therefore, the family involvement in mate selection may be diminishing.

It is not an easy task to draw a line of demarcation between types of mate selection, based solely on whether the family was involved or not. To this extent, it has been suggested that the various forms of mate selection that are observed across cultures, be perceived as a continuum rather than a dichotomy (Rindfuss and Morgan, 1988).

Finally, marital choice has been recognised as a stepping stone to marriage and family formation. Therefore, extensive studies have been carried out along this area in the urban Nigeria (Fadipe, 1970; Bolaji, 1984; Oyeneye, 1986; Orubuloye, 1987; Feyisetan and Bankole, 1991). However, a peep into what is happening in the rural areas, which is of equal importance, has not been examined. This explains why this paper considers an examination of the relevance of mate selection to marital fertility in rural communities an appropriate thing to do at the moment. The paper examines if and how mode of selecting a marriage partner relates to marital fertility in selected rural communities among the Yoruba ethnic group. It also examines if and how far mate selection process has been influenced by western ideas (most especially education and modernisation).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

An overriding feature of family arranged marriages in the traditional Nigerian societies, is the contraction of union early in life. This is to say that women with family choice partners tend to marry much earlier than those with individual choice partners. Child marriage or contraction of union at very young ages may influence fertility (Feyisetan and Bankole, 1991). This is based on the fact that marriage is the socially sanctioned context within which childbearing can take place. In this regard, the duration of exposure to procreation related sexual intercourse in societies without clear numerically preconceived family size depends on how early in life marriage was contracted. Early marriage has also been found to have implications for fertility levels in societies where many women stop child bearing only when they approach menopause or their age mates are stopping child bearing. Thus it has been put forward as a proposition that the earlier the contraction of union, the longer the duration of exposure to procreation related sexual activities and consequently, the larger the completed family size.

Early contraction of marriage union may also determine a woman's level of education before marriage since it may end the aspirations of many young women to further their education. For instance, in Northern Nigeria, young girls are withdrawn from schools in order to be married. Thus a relationship has been established between age and attainable years of schooling. An average Nigerian woman who married at the age of 15 could only attain a maximum of nine years of formal schooling before marriage since she was expected to start schooling at the age of six years. Furthermore, the practice of betrothal is usually associated with large age difference between spouses and early contraction of marital union may also deny women of prenuptial working experience (Feyisetan and Bankole, 1991).

A woman's level of education before marriage, which may be determined by age at marriage, may also influence marital fertility in a number of ways. High levels of prenuptial education may be a very important factor in reducing fertility by (i) increasing knowledge and efficient use of contraception; (ii) increasing prestige in the family with an added advantage

of being able to take part in family decision making, especially those related to fertility; (iii) providing premarital and postnuptial employment opportunities which may increase personal economic aspirations.

The extent to which couples interact freely depends to a very large extent on how much they see each other as partners. For instance, in the traditional Yoruba society, the man is regarded as the master of the house, while the wife is made subservient to her husband (Fadipe, 1970). She is regarded as subordinate, under the indisputable control of the husband who is the father of the house (Bolaji, 1984). Her problem become more compounded if she is much younger than the husband and she has more "senior wives" who have precedence over her. Therefore, the level of interaction between spouses can be dictated by the age difference between them.

In these situations, when very young wives usually find it difficult to interact freely with their much older husbands or challenge their decision, it is not uncommon to find husband's decisions (including fertility desires) prevailing most of the time. If women's fertility desires are lower than their husband's, a small age difference between spouses may lead to decrease in fertility through a freer level of interaction. On the other hand, large age differences may be associated with lower average number of births per woman if very young women are married to much older men who, because they already have many children from earlier marriages, are not so much interested in having many additional children from the "new" wives. Such men marry either for prestige or to have young wives who, they believe, could provide "tender" care for them at old age (Feyisetan and Togunde, 1988). The predominance of either of the above contrasting effects will go a long way in determining the pattern of association between age difference between spouse and number of children per woman, at any point in time. Since age difference between spouses tends to differ significantly according to mode of mate selection, we intend to examine its impact on the reproductive behaviour of the women.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Data for this study were collected from two typical rural communities in Osun State. These

are Okebode and Iloba in Osun State, Nigeria. Owing to lack of data base from which to draw the sample, a pilot survey was conducted on the total population and the number of houses in each of the two rural locations selected for the study. This survey revealed an average of 11.2 persons per house. This figure was used to estimate the population of each of the villages at about 2,217 and 2,014, respectively. Random sampling technique was used in the selection of the 403 eligible women that were successfully interviewed thus representing about 10 percent of the total population. To really bring out the distinction between men and women's opinion on the question of arranged marriage, similar questions on arranged marriage were directed at 200 married men randomly selected from the population. The analyses in this study were based on these samples.

The study recognises the necessity to differentiate forms of mate selection by identifying the individual or a group of individuals who made the initial move in the selection of the marriage partner and whose choice eventually prevailed. Therefore the question asked relates to how the union began. Was the initial move made by at least one of the individuals directly concerned? Was the union arranged and if so who made the initial move about the selection of "right" partner and whose choice eventually prevailed? Or, was the initial move and the eventual choice of the "right" partner an exclusive prerogative of the kin group (or of the immediate family members)? This approach paves way for a distinction between individually controlled marriages and arranged marriages. The timing of the formation of marriage unions depends to a very large extent on the mode of control of mate selection.

To examine the relationship between mate selection and fertility, some sets of test variables are identified. One of these is religion, which is considered to be the priority in both marital fertility and mate selection. Others include: education, age difference between spouses and the positions of women in polygynous unions. Information was collected through formal interviewing. The statistical analysis and method of reporting the findings were mainly descriptive, using percentages and mean number of children ever born by ever-married women.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-Economic Background of Respondents

Table 1 shows the distributions of women in the two groups according to demographic and socio-economic characteristics. The table shows that the two groups of women differ according to certain demographic and socio-economic characteristics. Panel 1 of the table shows that majority of the respondents fall in the age group 35-44 years. On the average, women in family choice marriages are 16.88 years older than those in individual choice marriages. The table shows that there is an inverse relationship between level of education and the two groups of mate selection. For women who had family choice marriage, this distribution indicates a declining authority of the family as educational attainment increases. The higher percentages reported for women who had no formal schooling in both groups reflect low level of education of the inhabitants. Majority of women with higher level of education must have migrated to urban areas in search of job opportunities or to further their studies. Panel three of the table shows that Christian women had more opportunity to choose their marriage partners than women in other religious groups.

Panels 4, 5 and 6 of table 1 shows the distribution of ever-married women in the two groups according to marriage type and position in marriage. The table shows a significantly larger proportion of women with family choice marriage for those who undergo traditional type of marriage. This thus indicates that majority of the marriages initiated by the families are traditional. That a higher percentage of marriages initiated by the family are for first wives is an indication of the interest of family/relatives in first marriages (Orubuloye, 1987). The distribution reflects the importance of the payment of bridewealth in family choice marriage.

The average age difference between spouses in family choice marriage is significantly higher than that of individual choice marriages (Table 1). The averages of age differences between spouses are higher than the averages of 7.4 and 9.5 observed for women in individual and family choice marriages in urban Nigeria (Feyisetan and Bankole, 1991). However, the fact still remains that women in family choice marriages tend to marry much older men.

Table 1: Percentage distributions of women according to demographic and socio-economic characteristics

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Type of Mate Selection</i>		
	<i>Perso- nal (276)</i>	<i>Family (227)</i>	<i>Percent- age of all marriages that are family initiated</i>
Panel 1			
<i>Age Group</i>			
15-24	19.6	-	-
25-34	41.1	6.7	11.5
35-44	33.9	26.7	38.7
45-54	3.9	40.0	90.0
55+	1.8	26.6	88.8
Mean	32.18	49.06	
Panel 2			
<i>Level of Education</i>			
No Formal Schooling	58.9	53.3	42.1
Primary	30.4	33.4	46.9
Secondary	5.4	8.9	57.1
Post Secondary	5.3	4.4	40.0
Panel 3			
<i>Religion</i>			
Islam	7.1	4.4	33.3
Christianity	92.9	86.7	42.9
Others		8.9	100.0
Panel 4			
<i>Type of Marriage</i>			
Civil	33.9	2.2	5.0
Free Union*	46.4	13.3	18.8
Muslim	-	2.2	100.0
Traditional	19.6	82.2	77.1
Panel 5			
<i>Position in Marriage</i>			
First	76.8	46.7	32.8
Second	17.8	35.5	61.5
Third	3.9	17.8	80.0
Forth	1.7	-	-
Panel 6			
<i>Bride Wealth Paid?</i>			
Yes	48.2	88.9	59.7
Panel 7			
<i>Age Difference</i>			
0-4 years	5.4	4.4	5.0
5-9 years	23.2	15.6	19.8
10 and above	19.6	11.1	15.8
No idea	33.9	28.9	31.7
Mean	12.2	15.9	13.9
All Women	56	45	

* This refers to union with no formal consent of the parents

Opinion About Forms of Marriage

Table 2 shows the opinions of respondents about arranged marriage. Data in panel 1 shows that most men would prefer arranged marriage for their children for security purpose. This is to ensure a peaceful, successful and comfortable married life for their children. On the other hand, majority of the women would rather prefer arranged marriage, so that discreet inquiries could be made about their potential son-in-law or daughter-in-law. This is to make sure that there were no hereditary diseases in the kindred of the fathers or mothers. The inquiry was also extended to cover the moral and social qualities of both the fathers and mothers, and generally of other relatives on both sides. The distributions in the table reveal that civilization or

Table 2: Percentage distribution of men and women by opinion on arranged marriage

<i>Opinion</i>	<i>Male (N= 200)</i>	<i>Female (N= 403)</i>	<i>Both Sexes (N= 603)</i>
<i>Reason why Parents Wanted Arranged Marriage</i>			
Security	53.3	44.7	49.5
Prestige	17.2	4.3	11.4
Discreet inquiries	20.7	51.0	34.3
To preserve custom	8.6	-	4.8
<i>Reason for Change Away from Arranged Marriage</i>			
Civilization/Enlightenment	50.0	79.3	68.0
Disregard for parents' advice	-	5.4	3.3
Moral Laxity	5.7	3.6	4.4
No Reason	44.3	11.7	24.3
<i>Timing of Change Away from Arranged Marriage</i>			
Less than 30	11.4	10.8	11.0
30-39	17.1	8.1	11.6
40-49	7.1	11.7	10.0
50 and above	-	2.7	1.7
Onset of civilization	44.3	17.1	47.5
Long ago (not certain)	20.0	49.6	18.2
<i>Reason for Increase in Free Union</i>			
Disregard for parents' advice	9.1	-	4.1
Non-observance of tradition	13.6	3.8	8.3
Independent decision making	45.5	77.3	62.9
Civilization	31.8	18.9	24.7
<i>Reason for Change in the Practice of Widow</i>			
Civilization	9.9	4.0	6.9
Women outnumber men	5.0	4.0	4.5
Financial constraints	18.8	13.9	16.3
Old age/Menopause	26.7	31.7	29.2
Lack of Interest	25.7	19.8	22.8
Problems brought about	13.9	26.7	20.3

enlightenment, as the case may be, has been a major vehicle of change from arranged marriages.

The opinion of respondents under 40 years of age, were also sought on the reasons for increase in free-unions. Obviously, free-union (or defacto union) is phenomenon peculiar to the present generation. The distribution presented in Table 2 shows that independent decision-making followed by its co-variant civilization, are responsible for the increase in free-unions. One can thus say that, an increase in free unions is mainly a result of the fact that youths are now freer to make decision on matters concerning themselves without involving their parents.

Table 2 further shows that many widows are increasingly finding it difficult to remarry. The table shows that 26.7 percent of male and 31.7 percent of female respondents associated the change with old age/age of menopause. Among some other reasons mentioned are: "individual preference" which include lack of interest, dignity and affection for dead husband/wife; "matrimonial problems" such as misunderstanding, frequent quarrelling with existing wives and the fact that widows are insatiable.

Reproductive Behaviour and Mate Selection

Information on the reproductive behaviour of women is given on the questions on number of children ever born and the use of contraceptives. As the majority of the respondents would not admit having ever used contraceptives, information on attempt made to stop pregnancy after the birth of last child was used to obtain this information. Panel 1 of Table 3 reveals a higher mean number of live births (5.1) for women in individual marriage as against 4.5 for women in family choice marriages. This finding is in contrast to what was observed in an earlier study (Feyisetan and Bankole, 1991), where the mean number of live births for women in family choice marriage is higher. In panel 2, it is demonstrated that women with individual choice of partners have greater knowledge and use of contraceptive. Though contraceptive use seems to be low for both groups.

The mean number of live births by women in the two groups according to their level of education is presented in Table 4. The distribution reflects a U-shaped curve for both groups of women and a higher mean for women

Table 3: Percentage distribution of women by their reproductive performance

Characteristics	Type of Mate Selection		
	Personal (N=276)	Family (N=227)	All women (N=403)

Panel 1:

Number of Live Birth

0	1.8	2.2	2.0
1-4	33.9	48.9	40.5
5-8	51.7	33.3	43.5
9 and above	5.4	8.9	7.0
Not Stated	7.2	6.6	7.0
Mean	5.14	4.49	

Panel 2:

Attempts made to stop pregnancy after the birth of last child

Abstinence/withdrawal	3.9	2.5	3.2
Oral Contraceptive	3.3	2.2	2.7
Not Applicable	92.8	95.6	94.0

in individual choice marriages, however with an exception of women with no formal education. The only explanation that can be offered for this finding is that, it is possible that the majority of women in family choice marriages are also in polygynous unions. On the other hand, they are married to men who are quite older than they are. Such older men may not be interested in having too many additional children from the new wives. It has even been conclusively shown by Feyisetan and Togunde (1988) that such men marry for prestige or to have young wives whom they believe could provide "tender care" for them at old age.

Figures in panel 2 shows that women in arranged unions have higher mean live births for all ages at marriage and that within each group, fertility declined with an increase in age at marriage. The impact of prenuptial level of education on fertility can never be over-estimated. In panel 3, it is shown that, for the

Table 4: Children ever born by selected socio-economic characteristics of women

Level of education	Type of Mate Selection		
	Personal (276)	Family (N=227)	All women (403)
No formal Schooling	5.2	5.5	5.4
Primary	3.3	3.0	3.5
Secondary	1.5	2.0	1.8
Tertiary	3.7	3.5	3.6

two groups of women, a general decline in mean number of children ever born is observed as education before marriage increases. However, at each level of education, the average number of live births per woman with family choice partner is higher than that of women with individual choice partner.

Attempt was made to examine the relationship between fertility and each of religion of the husband and age difference between spouses (Panel 4 and 5). The pattern observed is also identical to those of earlier studies (Ekanem, 1974; Farooq, 1980; Feyisetan and Togunde, 1988). Fertility is highest among Catholic and lowest among Muslims. For the two groups combined, the data in panel 5 show a moderate positive association between age difference between spouses and children ever born. Mean number of live births is higher among women in family arranged unions at all interval of age difference.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to demonstrate that marital fertility varies according to mode of mate selection. This difference is mainly caused by variations in the demographic and socio-economic characteristics that are associated with each mode of mate selection.

Contrary to an earlier finding in urban locations (Feyisetan and Bankole, 1991), the fertility of women in individual choice marriage was found to be higher than that of women in family choice marriage. The involvement of family in the choice of partner is declining and people's attitudes, with respect to mate selection are also changing. One can rightly point out here that despite the declining involvement of the family in the choice of marriage partners and the changing attitudes of the people, the level of marital fertility is still high. Though there is an increasing tendency towards individual choice of partner by virtue of the enlightenment brought about by civilization, yet the people's preconceived cultural notion about the value of children remains unchanged.

On the basis of existing evidence, it is possible to discern that there is a general increase in freedom from control by family authority. This indicates that a rural community is no longer an isolated, almost self-contained world, within

which each member is dependent on the goodwill of the rest and must secure it by conformity with accepted rules. A major consequence of this situation is that marriage has become increasingly a matter of personal choice rather than an arrangement between groups in which the elders have a dominant say. It is now rather clear that the authority of parents and guardians is decreasing and often amounts to nothing more than a formal consent.

The level of fertility of women is still high with respect to increasing tendency towards individual choice of partner. This may have an effect on the total fertility level of the country, as the people in rural areas make up about 70 percent of the population of Nigeria (NDHS, 1999). To achieve a lower fertility in rural communities, one would have to re-orientate the views of women (and men alike) toward the importance of reduced number of children. This can, however, be achieved through (i) giving incentives (such as free medical treatment and education to children) to families with lower number of children (ii) educating people in the rural areas about the importance of reduced number of children via public enlightenment programmes (iii) extension of comprehensive family planning programmes to the rural areas taking into consideration the cultural views and norms of the people.

KEY WORDS Mate Selection. Marriage. Fertility. Betrothal. Menopause

ABSTRACT This study demonstrates that marital fertility varies according to mode of mate selection among the Yorubas. Data for the study were obtained from a survey conducted in two rural communities in Osun State, Nigeria. The study reveals that (i) the involvement of family in choice of partner is declining in the rural communities just as it is happening among the Yorubas in the urban areas (ii) the level of marital fertility is still high among the group in spite of the changing attitudes of the people. The study therefore indicates the need to re-orientate the views of people towards achieving a lower fertility in the rural communities through such measures as incentive giving, education and extension of family planning programmes to the rural areas.

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