

Jennifer Johnson-Hanks (ed.), Uncertain Honor. Modern Motherhood in an African Crisis

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Laura Bernardi

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The book is a compelling reading to all scholars interested in demographic and social change in relation to the diffusion of formal education in contemporary Africa and a remarkable piece of beautifully written anthropological demography. The author skillfully combines anthropological theory and methods with descriptive demographic tools in a consistent analysis of the relationship between formal schooling and delayed childbearing among educated Beti women in Cameroon. This relationship is pivotal in the understanding of demographic and social change in Western Africa, where educated women are in the front line in producing and experiencing both changes. In the author's powerful expression, " *When schooling represents the path to development, sex the path to school and pregnancy the limit to hope, poetics becomes political economy*" (p. ix).

Introducing her own research, the author uses secondary sources to describe the major economic and demographic changes from the colonial years until today, introducing the reader to the major forces defining the socio-cultural context of contemporary Cameroon. The attention is focused on three such forces: the historical central role of the Catholic Church in diffusing and emphasizing formal schooling, the formal and informal discourse on the economic and moral crisis after 1987, and the persisting asymmetric intergenerational relations rooted in the historical monopolization of power and prestige in the society by senior men ("wealth in people," p. 30, Ch 2). The empirical ground for the arguments developed in the main corpus of the book is an extensive range of data consisting of an 8-month ethnographic observation in 1998, a structured life-history survey with 184 women, and open-ended interviews conducted in person by the author and by her research assistants in Yaounde and Mbeya as well as DHS data. The author convincingly argues that in such social context it is above all a woman's ability of self-dominance and discretion and (though less so) her autonomy that defines her as

L. Bernardi (✉)
Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, Konrad-Zustestr. 1, Rostock 18057, Germany
e-mail: bernardi@demogr.mpg.de

an honorable woman (Ch 3). Formal schooling is closely connected with a higher motivation to behave honorably because only a selected elite group of women attend it and because schooling functions and is perceived as a socialization factor that reinforces the characteristics of an honorable conduct through specific practices we cannot describe in detail here (Ch 4–5). The concept of honor as self-domination and autonomy also defines a woman's conduct in the immediate context of childbearing events, sexual relations, and a dominant use of natural contraceptive methods (Ch 6).

All of the elements mentioned above combine together to show that entering socially recognized motherhood plays a critical role in delaying first childbearing among educated women. Socially recognized motherhood equals motherhood within a cohabiting union, possibly within marriage, ideally within a marriage that has received the blessing of the Church. Other motherhood states are seen as states of ‘uncertain honor’. By focusing on case studies representing pregnancies that may carry ‘uncertain honor’, i.e., that occurred ‘out of place’, the author provides evidence that women regulate their entry into the social category of mothers rather than childbearing events per se. Such regulation may translate into attempts to delay conception, but also to separate the outcome of a pregnancy (through abortion) or of a birth (through temporary or permanent fostering) from social motherhood (Ch 7–8).

The theoretical frame inspiring the author is modeled around the Bourdieuan concept of habitus, practice, and conjuncture, as well as the more general concept of modernization, honor, and respectability. These cultural elements are shown to constitute constant dialoguing tensions with the social context and the institutional setting in which young Cameroonian women live. Most interestingly, the author proposes an interpretative paradigm, which she defines as *vital conjunctures* and which represents a compelling way to interpret how cultural and structural elements combine to produce specific childbearing behaviors in specific life histories. In the author's words, vital conjuncture are ‘socially structured zones of possibility that emerge around specific periods of potential transformation in a life... temporary configurations of possible change...(p. 22)’. This paradigm has an undeniable suggestive power for demographers, who are used to think in terms of age, time, and events rather than in terms of delineating the meaning and expectations related to demographic choices. This perspective position also provides room to see the selectivity process as constituting a fundamental element in defining the substantial social process rather than as a disturbance in the causal interpretation of it. However, precisely because of the potential that the *vital conjunctures* paradigm has in contributing to demographic thinking, it is unfortunate that the author misses the occasion to exploit this potential further by not moving beyond her case study. It would have been desirable to find a final chapter showing the substantial applicability of vital conjunctures to different social contexts, less characterized by biographical uncertainty for instance. In the same direction, the author could have elaborated further on the methodological tools necessary to move toward a systematic appraisal of the set of vital conjuncture configurations in given social contexts as well as their comparability across social space and time.

The author must be praised not only for her analytical skills, but also for the narrative ability. She masters an impressive amount of theoretical reflections, survey data analysis, and fieldwork observations and maintains the reader's attention focused on her main argument. The book by Johnson–Hanks is a vividly written and empirically argued lecture on the explanatory power contained in research approaches that interpret the correlations between social and fertility change as the expression of the culture of reproduction in the social context.