

Towards Getting Precise Data in Contemporary Africa for the Years 1920-30

D. Benoit and B. Lacombe

The idea of exploiting parish registers in Africa springs from two sources: historical demography on the one hand and current research trends in African demography on the other. Let us first of all look at the latter.

1. At the present time African demography relies on the following sources:

1.1 An administrative census with all its known disadvantages (incomplete time sequences, and the difficulties of ascertaining the degree of completeness) giving only an idea of the population (cf. Sanogho 4th Congress of African demography - Ouagadougou, Upper Volta).

1.2 A census, often the only one in a given country, only provides data on the structures, but the imprecise ages shown necessitate corrections and recourse to population models.

1.3 Retrospective surveys, usually by sampling, may indicate the population structure as well as the levels of mortality and fertility. Data on migrations can also be collected otherwise than by the classic "place of birth", "place of census" (cf. Clairin, Upper Volta, 1960-61). Such data carry the same disadvantages due to the lack of precision as regards ages and dates.

These three sources of data permit us to make only transverse analyses.

1.4 Official statistics, which in European countries permit an analysis when related with the census, in African countries present the following characteristics:

- more or less limited to towns
- of recent institution.

All these are characteristics which limit its interest for current demography (cf. Andriamboahang in Cahiers ORSTOM).

1.5 Follow-up surveys, taking into account these limitations, have tried to obtain both structure and movement, at different times, within the same population. The first surveys were carried out on populations chosen either because of practical facilities, or because they had already been studied (Cantrelle, Gendreau, Podlewski, in China), others were carried out on a national scale by sampling (Algeria, Tunisia, Senegal).

This type of survey allows the acquisition of precise data for each event between two successive visits. But the intellectual investment



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involved in acquiring data has not been followed up by analysis, in spite of some remarkable work like that done by the Algerian team and by Kauffmann-Vaugelade, for instance. To understand the evolution of fertility and mortality, it would be necessary to pursue the survey over many years. But in the case of a sampling, we do not know how representative the sample has remained. And as far as writing monographs is concerned, except as a test, there seems to be no point in a costly prolongation.

1.6 In a follow-up survey, the "renewed survey" takes up a survey (by sampling or not) which has already been completed several years before (Hurault, Cameroun; Quesnel-Vaugelade, Haute Volta; Benoit, Levi, Sodter, Haute Volta; Quesnel, Vimard, Togo). This type of survey allows us principally to understand migration movements and average adult mortality, but gives us no help as far as infant mortality is concerned.

The above remarks concerning follow-up surveys also apply to the stability of the sample's representativeness.

These efforts show a trend in demography in Africa towards the acquisition of precise data and longitudinal analysis. However they come up against problems of representativeness which appear finally to be less fundamental than they seemed to be at first (cf. Vallin 2nd Congress of maghrebian demography).

2. The idea of applying the methods of historical demography in Africa (cf. L. Henry's work) has led to the exploitation of parish documents. It has appeared possible to make a field survey, allowing us to ascertain the completeness of the events recorded. But the records refer to only a few generations, since Christianity has been introduced so recently. The fundamental interest of this type of investigation is:

- the possibility of a longitudinal analysis of mortality (infant mortality in particular) over a long period
- the precision of the data (exact dates).

The major disadvantage is the non-representativeness of the population being examined, but the value of the results obtained largely compensates for it.

3. We are now going to examine the different studies of this type already carried out, or being carried out, by our teams.

The general principle consists in copying out the relevant information from all the existing documents in the parish, then completeness being controlled by a field survey. There have been variations according to the nature of the documents at our disposal. Traditions, which differ from parish to parish, result in a certain heterogeneity

Christians' record cards have up to now formed the basis of our surveys, whereas in Senegal it was the information in the Parish Registers which furnished the basis of the field survey. In the first case there was a detailed list of families, while in Senegal we had to reconstitute the families before proceeding to the field survey. The result was that in Upper Volta only the women were surveyed, while in Senegal the study related to the whole population. Another difference springs from the variable proportion of Christians in the population of the parish (90 per cent for Fakao, 60 per cent for Reo, 70 per cent for Mariatag).

Here are some of the principal results. Since the Mariatag and Zula surveys are still being carried out we are presenting those of Fakao and Reo:

3.1 The structure of the population: the pyramid of ages obtained no longer presents a bias towards ages ending in 0 and 5 as is the case in the other surveys. This shows that this phenomenon is due only to a wrong evaluation of the ages.

3.2 The appearance of a modification in demographic trends, in particular the lowering of mortality at birth and in childhood, with the advent of dispensaries and maternity clinics. This type of observation seems to be more difficult to obtain with other survey methods which, in one way or another, have recourse to retrospective methods.

3.3 A modification of the seasonal nature of infant mortality has been noted, while the structure of this mortality remains identical in spite of a lowering of the level. This child-mortality structure, which is due to weaning, is the same as that found in other surveys but its "historical" analysis is not possible.

3.4 To ascertain fertility we obtain results in cohorts. For example we have been able to study the networks of birth-intervals by the final size of the family.

All these analyses have been possible because we are sure of the homogeneous nature of the information from the point of view of time. Since it is no longer dependent only on the subject's memory, it is relatively independent in relation to the events.

Other surveys carried out using this kind of document by the multiplication of comparisons will go some way to solving the problem of the non-representative nature of these populations - a reproach which is often made in connection with this kind of work since it is more strikingly obvious than for other surveys.

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**PROCEEDINGS OF A SEMINAR
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Introduction

Historians of Africa are continually thwarted by the lack of reliable statistics about African populations in the past. No authoritative estimates are available. Most are guesswork. The aim of this seminar was to assemble scholars from different disciplines to try and get some idea of how much is known, and how much is not known, about the populations of Africa at different periods.

The participants were therefore invited to submit papers indicating what demographic data they were able to provide within their own particular fields of knowledge. Dr Basil Davidson, who originally suggested the holding of such a seminar, was chairman.

The contributed papers are reproduced in this volume. A brief record of the discussion has been added, and brief comments made during the discussion appended to a few of the papers.

The organisers realize the limitations of this collection, inevitable in a pioneer enterprise. The coverage is too restricted: no papers, for instance, were contributed on northern Africa. There are also many other distinguished scholars who could have been invited to submit papers. It appears therefore merely as a preliminary venture, to be followed up eventually by a more comprehensive gathering.

On behalf of the Centre of African Studies, University of Edinburgh, we record our thanks to the Ministry of Overseas Development for a grant towards the costs of publishing and partial distribution of the proceedings, to the International Union for Scientific Study of Population, and the Social Sciences Faculty of the University of Edinburgh for financial assistance towards the expenses of the seminar, and to the University of Jos which paid the fare of one of the participants, Dr H. Ajaegbu. We also record our gratitude to Miss Grace Hunter for her work in organising the seminar, and for preparing the papers for circulation and publication.

Christopher Fyfe

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