

(IN)FERTILITY AND THE MODERN FEMALE LIFE COURSE IN TWO SOUTHERN NIGERIAN COMMUNITIES

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Being “modern” is an aspiration for many in sub-Saharan Africa and entails certain widely held expectations regarding material living conditions and social status. Using ethnographic and survey data on female fertility from two communities of southern Nigeria, this article describes some of the ways women are becoming modern and analyzes the forces behind these changes. The discussion includes education, initiation rites, premarital pregnancy, marriage, and the influence of Pentecostal Christianity. In agreement with modernization theory, there is a trend toward women becoming more educated and autonomous. They also increasingly valorize monogamy, companionate marriage, smaller families, and inclusion in the formal economy. In contradiction to the expectations of modernization theory, there is no decline in supernatural beliefs. Contemporary Christian churches are important to women becoming modern by helping them develop networks through voluntary associations, responding to women’s aspirations for material goods, alleviating kin obligations, and encouraging personal spiritual advancement. (Southern Nigeria women, fertility, modernity, Pentecostal Christianity)

In contemporary sub-Saharan Africa, “being modern” is a key aspiration for many people and entails certain widely held expectations regarding material living conditions and social status. These expectations have been found to be frequently connected to a shift from high fertility to lower fertility, and this shift has long been considered a sign of a modernizing community by demographers and other social scientists. The problem of infertility is intimately related to the issue of fertility, but has not been examined in the context of “modernizing” societies. While evidence shows that infertility is a serious affliction for women in high fertility populations, the question is whether the same holds true in the context of “modernizing” communities where expectations for women are changing. Does infertility present similar problems in communities where elements of the life course are reconceptualized and women can envision or take advantage of alternative life paths beyond motherhood?

With research data on female fertility and infertility from two communities in southern Nigeria,¹ this article addresses certain processes in the women’s lives

and analyzes the forces driving these changes in order to illustrate how women there have fashioned a form of modernity with features that are both predictable and unexpected with regard to modernization theory.

Of particular interest is the role of Christianity in women's transitions to modernity. This focus may appear paradoxical, as social scientists once cast religion as an obstacle to development and modern progress (Inkeles and Smith 1974). More recent research in Africa (e.g., Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1997; Peel 2000) has shown how Christianity can provide the basis for the construction of modern selves. It seems relevant, therefore, to examine the role of Christianity, particularly evangelical Christianity, in these communities in the production of subjects who see themselves as modern.

Pentecostalism's efficacy as a modernizing agent in Africa has been the subject of some debate among anthropologists. Marshall-Fratani (2001:89) says Pentecostalism brings about "the creation of modern subjects" as autonomous individuals, but Newell (2007:486) argues that Pentecostalism's drive to produce "socially legitimate individuality" has been compromised by its association with the very occult forces it seeks to combat. Englund and Leach (2000), critiquing the power of "meta-narratives of modernity" in ethnographic research, suggest that Pentecostalism's appeal stems more from locally specific cultures than from its ability to mediate its followers' encounters with modernity. In light of this discussion, one aim of this essay is to assess the relationship between Pentecostal Christianity and emerging forms of modernity in the lives of women in this part of Africa.

MODERNIZATION THEORY IN CONTEMPORARY ANTHROPOLOGY

Modernization theory enjoyed its heyday from the 1950s through the 1970s. While there were different strands of this theory, generally it predicted a convergence on multiple levels which would lead societies from a premodern to a modern condition. Modernity would be marked politically by strong national governments, popular participation, and a clear sense of national identity. Economically, modernization theory posited that liberal policies and industrialization would lead to rising living standards and a more equitable distribution of wealth. Socially, modernization would be characterized by (among other things) education of the masses, mass communication, the nuclear family, rising individualism, and gender equality. These changes would be propelled by schools, factories, and modern communications media. Science would displace the explanatory frameworks of religion and magic, bringing about a Weberian-style rationalization process (see Huntington 1966, Inkeles and Smith 1974, Ward and Rustow 1964).²

In the period of modernization theory, anthropologists applied it to their ethnographic work (e.g., Geertz 1962), examining the role of culture and religion in supposedly universal developmental “stages of growth” (Rostow 1960). Since their discipline’s move away from grand narratives in the 1970s and 1980s, however, anthropologists have considered the changes associated with development and modernity more critically (Edelman and Haugerud 2005). As specialists of human cultural diversity, anthropologists are wary of modernization’s supposed homogenizing power and its implicit Eurocentric bias (which has often led to modernization being equated with Westernization). As social theorists, they question its normative expectations of progress and its empirical underpinnings. The predicted convergence of economic, political, and social change has not occurred, and where modernization theorists foresaw a single form of modernity derived from the Euro-American industrial model, anthropologists have identified multiple “alternative” or “vernacular modernities” (Knauff 2002a, Miller 1995) around the world. Modernity, with its capacity for multivocality and creative reappropriation, has proven a useful concept, at least in the plural form; as Englund and Leach (2000:226) note, “current anthropological sensibilities have little patience for a discourse on modernity in the singular.”

Anthropologists today refer not to modernization but to “becoming modern.” This latter dynamic unfolds in myriad local variations, not least in parts of the world like sub-Saharan Africa where modernization’s hold was never perceived to be strong. The process of becoming modern stems from attitudinal shifts, which sometimes arise in conjunction with structural political and economic change and sometimes independently of them. Today, the many studies on alternative modernities suggest that there is not one singular modern ethos, but many.

In every society, conceptions and discourses of modernity reciprocally mediate popular perceptions of that which is “current,” “progressive,” and “desirable” against that which is “customary,” “traditional,” or even “backward” (Knauff 2002b). These perceptions have a powerful ability to shape constructions of the self and individual life courses, and they have a profound effect on gender roles and the status of women. This article examines the female life cycle in order to understand how perceptions of fertility and infertility have been altered and reconceptualized by women’s visions of modernity.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH SETTING

Research for this paper took place in two communities in southern Nigeria: Amakiri and Lopon.³ One of the authors has conducted fieldwork in Amakiri spanning 25 years. Between 2005 and 2007, both authors carried out research in

each community, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, for an investigation into female infertility and associated coping mechanisms (Hollos, et al., in press). To this end, in Amakiri and LoPON alike we gathered in-depth interviews with 25 fertile and 25 infertile women and performed participant observation over a period of three months. A case-control survey was administered to non-random matched samples of fertile and infertile ever-married women in both communities, for a total of 210 respondents in Amakiri and 240 in LoPON. The age range of survey respondents is from 25 to 90 years, with an average age of 46 for Amakiri and 44 for LoPON. The survey included questions on the women's background, marriage and childbearing history, economic and community activities, value of children, and their knowledge and experience of contraception.

Amakiri is located on the western bank of the Niger River in Nigeria's Delta State. Its population of approximately 7,000 is distributed among seven villages or quarters. These quarters are patrilineal descent groups which are segments of the clan to which all of the Amakiri Ijaw, as well as those from the surrounding villages, belong. The town is predominantly occupied by members of the Ijaw ethnic group, and although there are many residents who are Isoko and Urhobo, Amakiri is considered to be "owned" by Ijaw. The town is an important regional marketing center and transportation junction. It is the seat of the local government council, of an Anglican diocese, and has a hospital, a dispensary, two primary schools, and a secondary school for boys and girls.

Residents of Amakiri live patrilocally; that is, with or around the husband's male relatives. A typical household contains a man, his wife or wives, and their unmarried children. There are two modes of inheritance. Immovable property, including building plots within the quarters, rights to farmland, and fishing sites, is inherited patrilineally. Other rights inherited patrilineally include membership in the family council, the right to serve the paternal ancestors, and the responsibility to marry widows. The other manner of inheriting is through the mother. Children of the same mother share a common economic interest and constitute a group among patrilineally related siblings. During a mother's lifetime this often manifests itself in increased financial assistance among full siblings, and after her death in the sharing of her accumulated wealth or private property.

The economic base of Amakiri is horticulture, carried out in alluvial fields by the women who marry into the landowning patrilineages. These women reserve a large proportion of their harvests for their households and sell the rest. Fishing is performed almost exclusively by women. Most women are also involved in marketing and trading. A few women work as seamstresses, shopkeepers, or schoolteachers. Men dominate the traditional labor-intensive informal sector (shoemakers, barbers, tailors, shopkeepers) and the more recently emerged "formal" sector (primarily consisting of salaried occupations as clerks, gravel

diggers, and block molders). Due to men's relatively low earnings, however, households in Amakiri depend heavily on the primary activities of the women, and children's labor contribution is also considerable.

Lopon is a town located in Cross River State in southeastern Nigeria, inhabited primarily by people of the Yakurr (or Yakö) ethnic group. It is the headquarters of a local government area with a population of some 120,000. Lopon is divided into semi-autonomous wards, which are the residential territories of patrilineal groups. Despite the patrilineal political structure of these wards, political authority in Lopon rests with priests representing 23 independent matrilineal clans. These priests compose a theocratic council headed by the *Obol Lopon*, a kind of paramount chief selected from among the matrilineal priests to exercise jurisdiction over the town.

The social organization and customs of the Yakurr have been the subject of a rich body of social scientific research going back several decades. Yakurr culture has been especially noted for its double-unilineal descent system (Forde 1950). The Yakurr trace descent matrilineally for some purposes (including ritual observance, marriage payments, and the inheritance of transferable wealth) but patrilineally for others (such as the allocation of land, houses, and labor). The hybrid nature of kinship and political systems in Lopon, combining matrilineal and patrilineal features, creates a prominent role for matrilineal priests, who have traditionally been responsible for ensuring their clans' continued demographic success. Through ritual devotion to a particular fertility shrine, each priest has sought to maintain the fertility (and thereby the size and political influence) of the clan (Obono 2000, 2001).

Farming is the primary economic activity in Lopon, and a wide variety of crops are grown throughout the year. While men are responsible for bush clearing and burning, women sow, weed, and harvest the crops. Lopon is also an important center for local commerce (most of which is undertaken by women) and government.

In both Amakiri and Lopon, as in most of Nigeria, living standards have stagnated for many years. Economic marginalization and uncertainty have placed a heavy burden on Nigerians since the 1980s. Despite massive oil revenues, poverty is pervasive throughout the country, especially in rural communities "not only in terms of low income and consumption, but also in terms of low achievement in education, health, nutrition, and all other aspects of human development, resulting in powerlessness, voicelessness, vulnerability, ecological deprivation and general fear" (Garuba 2006:22–23). High levels of unemployment, particularly among males, only exacerbate problems caused by inadequate provision of basic services by local, state, and federal governments. Women are under great pressure to perform their traditional domestic roles as wives and mothers and also to contribute income to the household. There is widespread frustration over

persistent state corruption and the squandering of Nigeria's vast natural resources (Smith 2007), and faith in the country's prospects for economic development and material progress has ebbed. In the absence of an effective welfare state that can ensure some minimum quality of life and social security, Nigerians who are elderly, jobless, or otherwise needy must rely solely on their kin for support.

Against this backdrop, new forms of religiosity have flourished. Throughout Nigeria's southern (predominantly Christian) zone, there has been a remarkable rise in the number and influence of evangelical (especially Pentecostal) Christian churches which demonize many African customs and urge worshipers to make a "clean break" with the past (Meyer 1998). This trend has been observed in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, where it seems plausible to posit "some relation between the fading credibility of developmental time, on the one hand, and the rise of new spiritualities with their associated temporalities, on the other" (Ferguson 2006:191). The stance of these new churches toward local custom stands in marked contrast to that of long-established Catholic and mainstream Protestant churches in the region, which have practiced a more tolerant *modus vivendi* with respect to many aspects of African tradition.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CHANGE IN WOMEN'S LIVES

Even in the face of this chronically gloomy political-economic environment, there is little doubt that communities like Amakiri and Lupon are "becoming modern" in socially significant ways. This is revealed by ethnographic and survey data on education, initiation rites, premarital fertility, marriage, and participation in voluntary associations from both towns. These areas emerged as important and as intimately related to the role fertility plays in these women's lives.

Education

Throughout the world, formal schooling is one of the most fundamental correlates of becoming modern, especially for females. In Nigeria, as in other African countries, political leaders accepted the axiom that "education is the basic component in nation-building The reason was patent: in a modernizing society where personal achievement tends to supersede and replace ascribed status and primordial relations, only education could open the door to political participation, social opportunities and economic advancement" (Turner 1971:6). This "ideational change," which includes openness to new experience and rational thinking, has been linked to fertility decline and lower mortality and child morbidity by demographers (Cochrane 1979; Caldwell 1982, 1986; Lee 2000; Pillai and Wang 1999).

Western style education or schooling, however, came to Nigeria through the efforts of Christian missionary societies with a heavily religious content. As colonial administrators saw the need to take the control of education and form an expanded, centralized educational system, the curriculum became more secularized, but its substance remained basically the same and heavily influenced by its Christian origins. In Amakiri, the first primary school was established in 1906 by the Christian Missionary Society of London; in Ugep, by Church of Scotland missionaries in 1911. Beginning in 1952, increasing power came into the hands of Nigerian politicians in southern Nigeria, who began to call for free, universal, compulsory education. This resulted in a rapid growth of the school system, ostensibly under secular control, but many schools remained in the hands of religious organizations, and even in the secular schools the curriculum was strongly Christian. Prayer and religious teachings, for example, are included as a matter of course in the curriculum of all schools and as late as 1990 one of the two secondary schools in Amakiri was run by the Catholic church. Thus, to be educated in these communities is equivalent to becoming a Christian.

In both Amakiri and LoPON, survey data show a significant increase over time in educational attainment among women (see Table 1). While a majority of women age 40 and older had completed primary school (59 percent in Amakiri, 65 percent in LoPON), primary school completion was nearly universal among women age 25–39 (94 percent in Amakiri, 93 percent in LoPON). Females' access to education has risen even more dramatically at the secondary level. In both communities, the secondary school completion rate for younger women is more than double the rate for older women (32 percent of women age 40 and older finished secondary school in Amakiri, compared to 67 percent of women age 25–39). In LoPON, the rate increased from 37 percent (age 40 and above) to 78 percent (age 25–39). Smaller gains are also apparent in women's educational achievement beyond the secondary level, such as nursing school, teachers college, or university. The rate of women with such training increased in Amakiri from 18 percent (age 40 and older) to 24 percent (age 25–39), and in LoPON from 21 percent (age 40 and above) to 32 percent (age 25–39). The relatively smaller gains in Amakiri when compared to LoPON are probably due to the higher rate of out-migration from Amakiri, especially by women with higher education. Mothers interviewed in both communities expressed a strong desire for their sons and daughters to be educated through the secondary level at minimum, and preferably through the tertiary level. The perceived necessity of formal schooling is one of the primary factors these women use to explain their preferences for having fewer children.

Table 1
Education Rates

	Age 25–39	Age 40 and above
Women who completed primary school (Amakiri)	94%	59%
Women who completed secondary school (Amakiri)	67%	32%
Women with further training (Amakiri)	24%	18%
Women who completed primary school (Lopon)	93%	65%
Women who completed secondary school (Lopon)	78%	37%
Women with further training (Lopon)	32%	21%

Customary Rites of Initiation

In many African societies, girls and young women have customarily undergone initiation rituals to prepare them for marriage or mark their passage from girlhood to adulthood. In Amakiri and Lopon, the most important such rituals have been female circumcision (or genital cutting) and a “coming of age” dance (*seigbein* for the Ijaw, *kukpol* for the Yakurr). In Lopon, circumcision preceded the coming out ceremony, of which there were two kinds depending on whether the bride was pregnant. The *Likpokol* was reserved for pregnant brides while the *Kekpolpam* was reserved for brides who were not pregnant after a couple of years of marriage. In Amakiri, circumcision was done in the seventh month of pregnancy. Women circumcised during the year performed special dances during the town’s annual spring festival (*seigbein*), a twelve-day celebration of the ancestors and a purging of bad spirits from the town.

Over time, rates of circumcision have fallen in both communities, especially in Lopon where only 11 percent of women age 25–39 had undergone the practice, compared to 43 percent of women 40 and above. In Amakiri, while there has been a decline, 73 percent of the women in the 25–39 still underwent circumcision (Table 2). Participation in the coming of age dance has also dropped dramatically for younger women. Just 15 percent of young women in Amakiri and 9 percent of young women in Lopon had taken part in this ritual, compared to 46 percent and 55 percent respectively for women age 40 and above in Amakiri and Lopon.

These data complement evidence from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions suggesting that most young women in these communities no longer identify with customary practices which were central in defining womanhood only a generation or two ago. Among the Yakurr, these rituals (particularly *kekpolpam*, performed on some married women with the aim of helping them to conceive children) have historically been seen as important protectors of women’s fertility. While the custodians of tradition in Lopon (almost all of them male) stressed the continuing vitality of such rituals, encounters with ordinary

women in Lupon uncovered a very different stance toward these practices. When asked about attitudes toward *kekpolpam*, for example, a participant in a focus-group discussion of Lupon women in their twenties and thirties spoke up firmly, with the full vocal support of her peers: “No, we don’t do that now. Those things are past.” Most women interviewed in Lupon saw participation in ritual societies as utterly incompatible with their identities as modern women. Female interviewees tended to dismiss such institutions as quaint or outdated and not “Christian.” Christianity in this sense refers to revivalist churches which have “finalized the dissociation between the traditional family system and community religious experience” (Obono 2000:147) by insisting “to varying degrees on the total separation of the new convert from ‘the present system of things’” (Obono 2000:148).

In Amakiri, there was some ambivalence regarding circumcision. Many young women we interviewed said that they were either circumcised or that they planned to be during pregnancy. Others claimed that the timing of the circumcision has changed and that it can now be done at any time, not only, as before, in the seventh month of pregnancy. There was also a considerable number of young women, however, who said that “there is no way” that they would undergo this operation. For example, a college-educated 24-year-old, about to be married, when asked about her plans regarding the practice said that “my older sister who lives in Ibadan is not circumcised and nor is my younger sister who is pregnant,” adding that many women in her age “still believe in the practice because it is tradition, even though the state government came out with a law against clitoridectomy.”

It is quite a different matter when it comes to the *seigbein* initiation rite, for which there was a virtually unanimous agreement that it has lost its importance. The chair of the Amakiri Women’s Association, for example, said that “because of Christianity this is less done now. It is the Pentecostals that stop these customs. What we do now is a small dance, the town festival, in April.” The chair of one neighborhood women’s association added that “in the old days, without performing the last section of the *seigbein*, known as *ayo*, women could not be buried in town land. Now that people are Christian, they can be buried anyway.” In 2005 only two women participated in the *ayo*; in 2006 the ritual was not conducted at all.

Table 2
Women's Completion of Customary Rites of Passage

	Age 25–39	Age 40 and above
Underwent circumcision (Amakiri)	73%	93%
Underwent “coming of age” dance (Amakiri)	15%	46%
Underwent circumcision (Lopon)	11%	43%
Underwent “coming of age” dance (Lopon)	9%	55%

Premarital Fertility

Becoming a mother has long been regarded as a crucial step from girlhood to womanhood in Africa and around the world. The relationship between fertility and marriage in some African communities has been flexible in the past. In Amakiri, for example, it was once normal for a woman to bear a child prior to marrying its father, and there was no stigmatization of premarital sex or a valuation of virginity until marriage (Hollos and Leis 1986). A young female could be defined as an adult woman (*erera*) without necessarily having married, as long as she had given birth. In Lopon, progression from the status of girlhood (*wen-wen*) to adult woman (*sanen*) has required both marriage and childbearing, although a childless married woman could still enjoy nominal adult status.

Fertility and motherhood are still very much at the core of contemporary constructions of womanhood in these communities, a fact underscored by our research on women coping with infertility. The imperative to bear children remains basic for young Nigerian women today. The nature of fertility and motherhood, however, has shifted over time in ways that are consonant with the modernizing dynamics observed in other areas of women's lives. Women are taking more action to regulate their own fertility than in the past. Although contraception use remains low, the rate of women who have ever used any method of contraception has increased from 13 percent (age 50 and older) to 19 percent (age 25–39) in Amakiri, and from 11 percent to 23 percent in Lopon.

One factor underlying the pattern of premarital sex among young women, especially in Lopon, is their desire to prove their fertility before marriage. This seems to be of recent origin in Lopon, where premarital childbearing was historically condemned by elders and continues to be condemned by the Christian churches. Nevertheless, young Lopon women often expressed a strong interest in demonstrating that they could become pregnant prior to formalizing a union with their male partners; many women interviewed also said that they felt pressure from their partners to conceive and thus show their ability to be mothers. In Amakiri, where premarital pregnancy was encouraged in the past,

young woman now find that this practice brings them into conflict with revivalist Christianity.

While in a previous study of adolescence in the community (Hollos and Leis 1989), many young women of secondary school age (14–18) dropped out of school to give birth, this was rare during the current research and even women in their early to mid-twenties waited to be married before becoming pregnant. As one informant, a 26-year-old member of the Pentecostal church, claimed, “I am very late in delivering my first child but the pastor would be very unhappy if we came to be married with a big belly.” She did not consider abortion to be a solution to this problem but commented that “others may do so.”

Marriage

Marriage is a highly significant area for women wanting to “become modern.” Marriage remains a standing obligation for most African women (Bledsoe and Pison 1994), but its practice is changing. In the study communities, as in many other places in Nigeria (Smith 2001b) and throughout the developing world (Wardlow and Hirsch 2006), discourse on nuptiality is increasingly dominated by themes of personal choice, compatibility, and romantic love, which stands in contrast to customary discourses centered on the interests of the lineage or extended family. Monogamy also seems to be gaining ground over existing practices of polygyny. In both Amakiri and Lophon, where polygyny has long been prominent, fewer young women are entering into polygynous marriages. While 34 percent of women age 50 and older in Amakiri had entered polygynous unions for their first marriage, only 21 percent of women under 50 had done so; in Lophon the rate fell by half, from 28 percent (age 50 and above) to 14 percent (under 50). Many informants in both communities expressed the belief that polygamy, while sometimes a necessary arrangement when a wife proves to be infertile, is generally incompatible with modern marriage. This changing sentiment may stem from Pentecostal churches inveighing strongly against polygamy throughout Nigeria, including the study communities.

Marriage and marriage rites are changing as well. Whereas most of the older informants combined customary local marriage rites with a church wedding, the latter has gained increasing importance in the last few years. Also, some evangelical churches discourage the traditional rites, libations exchanged by the bride’s and groom’s patrilineal relatives, and the payment of bridewealth. A young woman who belongs to one of these churches in Amakiri said, “my pastor refused to marry us in the church if we use gin for libations or even use money instead, since money would look like buying a bride.” While many young women applaud this attitude, it is the cause of severe strain between the generations.

Another indication of a shifting approach to marriage is women's age at first marriage, which has been rising in the past few decades. In Amakiri, for example, women age 60 and older had an average age at first marriage of 16.4 years, while for women age 25 to 39 the average age at first marriage is 19.5 years. In Lophon, the average age at first marriage has risen from 18.7 years to 20.5 years. Although a majority of women of all ages in both communities reported marrying husbands who were "much older" than themselves, there does appear to be a trend toward fewer women marrying while still in their teenage years. This trend is clearly associated with young women's almost universal desire to pursue education at least through the secondary level. The increase in African women's age at first marriage indicates the changing nature of nuptiality and women's roles.

Voluntary Associations

In years past, social activity and community life for men and women alike in the two communities were framed within organizations for which membership was determined by predominantly ascriptive criteria. Clans, lineages, and age-grade societies were among the most important such organizations, and they continue to play a key role in both Amakiri and Lophon. For women, the newer voluntary associations are today the cornerstones of public life. These groups may take the form of rotating savings and credit associations, neighborhood associations, church groups, or cultural associations. Nearly all of these groups are segregated by gender, and even many groups which are not formally recognized as credit associations provide members with rotating access to credit. The role of voluntary associations has long been recognized in advancing urban African women's social mobility (Little 1972). Today, these associations are a pervasive aspect of women's lives, including in communities like Amakiri and Lophon which were considered unambiguously rural a generation ago (and which are frequently still referred to as villages by their current residents).

In both communities, the vast majority of women surveyed of all ages belonged to at least one women's association. These associations can be divided into two types: "traditional" associations based on members' age or neighborhood of residence, and "voluntary" ones. The activities of traditional and voluntary associations—in the form of scheduled meetings and regular social visits to fellow members—constitute a major portion of women's daily social lives. These groups dominate women's participation in life-crisis rituals (particularly weddings, baptisms of children, and funerals) and, because of their provision of credit, are an ever more important part of women's economic survival strategies. Groups help their members with the costs associated with these rituals, particularly funerals which have become increasingly expensive.

In Lophon, age grades traditionally served as an important organizing principle of the socio-political system which “emphasized age as a criterion for the devolution of responsibility” (Obono 2000:155). The age-grade system organized young adults into hierarchical segments at intervals of three to five years. According to the head of one ward, “the age grades are the units through which local administration is in any wise possible. Without them, traditional rule is impossible because through them everybody is enlisted for community development” (cited in Obono 2000:156). Age grades currently in some sense are in opposition to the newer voluntary associations, many of them rooted in the new revivalist churches. As women come to see themselves as more modern, they are less likely to be involved in those associations which are represented as traditional. But they devote considerable energy to their participation in the newer voluntary associations, which are in effect squeezing out the older groups.

Several male informants in positions of authority claimed that these groups were doing well, but one clan head in Lophon said the age-grade system is dying.

They are set up but they are not being put to the proper use as before, reason being that people are having to fend for themselves, and they disregard these things. Education also is affecting [them], in the sense that . . . people go out for greener pastures, and a good number of those people who form the core of the age grades are no longer around. And the [age-grade system] seems to be suffering a natural death.

One traditional group, illustrative of the decline of traditional associations, is the *kekonakona* women’s society in Lophon. This society served the women of particular matriclans who had difficulty conceiving children, and aimed to help them overcome supernatural obstacles to conception. In 2007, *kekonakona* membership had dwindled to two elderly women, despite the fact that infertility continued to be perceived as a major problem in Lophon, and the paramount chief was resorting to a public campaign for new membership. Most younger women who were aware of the existence of this group said they would not consider joining it to overcome any problems in becoming pregnant, and explicitly linked their disinterest in the group to their Christian faith. One focus-group participant said she would never join the *kekonakona* because its members had to appear bare-breasted in certain public rituals, which was at odds with her modern sensibilities and sense of Christian decorum.

In Amakiri, age grades persist but in a collapsed form. Instead of the traditional set of seven stages, women now mention only two: *erera* and *okosi-otu*. The former category consists of married adult women who have borne at least one child. These women run the traditional associations and organize events such as funerals, marriages, and harvest festivals. They also run the voluntary associations that provide rotating credit to their members. The *okosi-otu* women, on the other hand, are elders who have retired from these activities but oversee

the younger women's activities. There is no neat distinction between Amakiri's older, ascribed associations and the new voluntary associations in terms of membership, nor are they perceived as rivals. This is perhaps because many of the customary behaviors that the traditional associations had charge of, such as performing the *ayo*, have been abandoned as un-Christian.

CHRISTIANITY AS A MODERNIZING FORCE

Following generations of effort by foreign missionaries and native Nigerians, Christianity is by no means perceived as alien in southern Nigeria today. Christian religiosity is apparent, particularly among women. Those who described themselves as churchgoers were 89 percent in the Amakiri survey and 95 percent of respondents in Lapon, most of whom reported attending church services at least once a week. Christian worship in these communities is not limited to Sunday mornings. Throughout the week the faithful can partake in afternoon meetings, evening Bible-study classes, pre-dawn prayer services, and other events organized by the Christian denominations in their areas. Women typically make up the majority of participants in these activities.

The Christian denominations of longest standing in southern Nigeria are the Anglican and Catholic churches, introduced to the region by European missionaries during the nineteenth century. In many respects, however, it is the more recently established Pentecostal churches which dominate Christian discourse there today. So-called "renewalists" (charismatic and Pentecostal Christians) make up 26 percent of the Nigerian population, and 60 percent of Nigerian Protestants (Pew Research Center 2007). Many of these Pentecostal churches propagate a "prosperity gospel," the notion that worldly wealth is a sign of God's favor (Marshall-Fratani 2001, Meyer 2004). In contrast with mainstream Christian churches, they also advocate an uncompromising stance toward a broad swath of practices associated with African custom, from ancestor worship and polygamy to rituals and even community festivals. This stance frequently brings Pentecostals into conflict with customary authorities, who have long been accustomed to a more accommodating approach by Christian leaders. In Amakiri, the *Pere* (Paramount chief) described tensions between customary authorities and the head of one local Pentecostal group known as the Cornerstone Church:

There is a Council of Chiefs which is appointed by the *Pere*. Their job is to uphold the traditions and the culture of the people. The government now realizes that the old rules should not be scrapped. The minister of the Cornerstone Church defies the authority of the traditional ruler and thereby of the government. The Council of Chiefs has tried to get rid of this particular minister because we see his activities as detrimental to the maintenance of the traditional culture.

In Lophon, a senior matriclan priest (who also claimed to be a devout Catholic) recounted similar friction between Lophon's council of matriclan priests (the *b'ina*) and Pentecostal churches over the issue of the annual harvest festival known as *leboku*, an event that has long been the highlight of the Yakurr calendar. This group of Pentecostals viewed *leboku* as a pagan and therefore unacceptable ritual, and sought to have it suppressed; the dispute ultimately led to mediation by the state governor. The priest was visibly incensed by what he perceived as the Pentecostals' intolerance toward a longstanding local custom:

Some of these Pentecostal churches, these small mushroom churches, tried to react and began to impose sanctions on us, that there should be no *leboku*, nothing of that kind of thing. And so we stood, we the *b'ina*, and opposed that decision. And we were invited by the then-governor . . . and I explained that we are not opposing the churches or whatever they are. They should carry on but [the churches] should allow those of us who don't [have the same beliefs to practice as we wish].

Whatever the feelings of the custodians of tradition, it is these Pentecostal churches that set "the Christian agenda in contemporary Nigeria" (Smith 2007:213). For example, their hard-line stance against polygyny has recently been taken up by the Anglican Church of Nigeria, which for years tolerated polygynous unions among its worshipers (BBC News, 2008). Even Catholicism in Nigeria has been influenced by Pentecostal practices and discourses (Csordas 2007). Although not all women in the study sample attended Pentecostal churches, it is likely that many if not most of them share certain ideas and practices with Pentecostals. These include the notion of making a radical break with the (non-Christian) past, using worship and prayer to address worldly concerns, and in particular diagnosing physical ailments as manifestations of spiritual affliction requiring spiritual treatment.

Illnesses in this context, including fertility problems, are increasingly ascribed to the malevolent influence of Satan and his agents. Just as the prosperity gospel of these churches encourages becoming wealthy, it constructs fertility as an indication of divine support, and infertility as a spiritually generated condition. In a sermon quoted by Asamoah-Gyadu (2007:453), a Nigerian Pentecostal preacher tells women, "The fruit of your own womb is a sign of fruitfulness and fulfillment and you were created to be fruitful." There is no scriptural validation of childlessness; as Oduyoye (1999:115) writes, "Christianity does not seem to have stories from which the childless can draw strength." On the contrary, Christian women in this context may face an even stronger imperative to bear children (see Mate 2002), since physical barrenness is equated more and more with spiritual barrenness or possession by occult forces. This means that even adoption cannot compensate for women who have difficulty conceiving children. Child fostering, while widely practiced in West Africa by fertile and infertile women alike, is seldom recognized as a substitute for bearing one's own

children; this holds as true for Muslims in the Gambia (Skramstad 2000) as for southern Nigerian Christians.

Research in Amakiri and LoPON finds that the influence of Pentecostalism is strong and cuts across broad segments of the population. Since the 1980s, young people and middle-class urbanites have dominated the membership of Nigeria's Pentecostal churches (Marshall-Fratani 2001, Smith 2001a). The data we collected, however, suggest that the demographic profile of these churches is changing. For one thing, the heavy presence of Pentecostalism in a quasi-rural community like Amakiri, where nearly half of the women surveyed attend Pentecostal churches, attests to the movement's success outside large cities and towns. Moreover, in both Amakiri and LoPON older women are no less likely than younger women to attend these churches; indeed, there was no significant difference between the average age of those attending Pentecostal and those attending non-Pentecostal churches. It seems Pentecostalism now appeals to young and old alike, and in rural as well as urban areas of Nigeria.

Infertile women in these communities are increasingly likely to opt for explicitly Christian solutions. One of the most common medical complaints is a condition known in Nigeria as "internal heat," in which patients feel uncomfortably hot without showing medically observable signs of elevated body temperature. Infertile women are especially likely to suffer from this condition. Although internal heat might be interpreted as a psychosomatic disorder, many Nigerian Pentecostals explain it as "one of the ways in which spiritual oppression is manifested" (Dr. Toyin Taiwo, quoted in Isaacson 1990:195). Sufferers can seek deliverance from this type of alleged demonic control only by undertaking a long-term struggle against the influence of Satan in their lives (Meyer 1998). "Seeking the face of God" is one widely used formulation inspired by contemporary Christian discourse, and can be construed to include acts of prayer and ritual devotion. Women may choose to "seek the face of God" in lieu of biomedical intervention. This is understandable in light of the problems many women informants experienced in their encounters with modern biomedicine in their communities, including poorly trained personnel, multiple and conflicting diagnoses, expensive but ultimately ineffective treatments, and unpleasant side effects. In a setting where private medical facilities are inadequate and advanced fertility treatments unheard of, these women's frustrations with biomedicine contribute to their desire to seek religious and specifically Christian solutions.

What is striking about these women's discourses pertaining to religion and fertility is the absence of recognizably traditional practices of spirituality and healing, that predominated only a generation ago. In LoPON, for example, even as elderly (and mostly male) custodians of tradition stressed the ongoing vitality of customs for the treatment of infertility, including the kekonakona society for

infertile women and female circumcision, several women interviewed and focus-group participants below the age of 50 stated their belief that these institutions had been “abolished” some years ago. Perhaps one reason for the swift eclipse of these institutions by Pentecostal beliefs in southern Nigeria is the close continuity between existing non-Christian and newer Christian discourses pertaining to “spiritual warfare” (Csordas 2007, Meyer 1998, 2004). Contemporary Christian constructions of illness and misfortune in Africa are a clear case of “the translation of [local] cultural categories into Christian contexts” (Asamoah-Gyadu 2007:456). However much evangelical Christians may characterize their conversion as a total rupture, in many respects there is little change in how they perceive the role of occult forces in their everyday lives. These forces remain central to their understanding of events, but instead of being addressed through recourse to diviners and traditional ritual specialists, they are now being addressed through the Christian performance of prayer, healing and exorcism—“modern” spiritual solutions to eternally spiritual problems. The result, however, is a break with traditional customs and practices which were the underpinnings of the earlier belief systems.

CONCLUSIONS

Most of the ongoing transformations of the female life course in these two southern Nigerian communities appear consonant with many of the early predictions of modernization theory. There is a clear trend underway toward women becoming more educated and autonomous actors. Amakiri and Lupon women increasingly valorize monogamy and companionate marriage, smaller families, and inclusion in the formal economy for themselves and their children. They have distanced themselves from some of the religious and social institutions that formed the backbone of their communities during their mothers’ and grandmothers’ lifetimes, largely because they do not perceive them as suited to their own status as modern women and especially as Christians.

Taking their cue from Weber (1978), modernization theorists predicted that mass education, scientific knowledge, and technological advancement would lead to the decline of spiritual and supernatural belief and bring about the rationalization and secularization of society. What has occurred in Amakiri and Lupon is not the destruction of supernatural belief but rather its metamorphosis into new cultural categories with their own definitions of personal, moral, and material progress. It is important to stress that the pursuit of modernity in cultural and spiritual terms (Knauff 2002b) by these women occurs against a global and national context where aspirations for “development” (access to political and economic modernity) have been blocked (Ferguson 2006, Smith 2007). Higher educational achievement for these women does not guarantee them formal sector

employment. Of those survey respondents who had completed secondary school, those who worked as teachers, nurses, or “office workers” were outnumbered by those unemployed, farming, or working as petty traders or seamstresses. Churches could be the primary beneficiaries of these women’s unfulfilled desires to become modern in a professional and material sense.

On a general level, our research suggests that anthropologists have done well to stress modernities over modernization, and emphasize the diverse paths that the process of becoming modern might follow. It is important to consider how the modernities we observed differ from each other. Both Nigerian communities studied diverge from Western paths of modernity in their strong emphasis on motherhood and religion in women’s lives. And between the two communities, differences are notable in terms of the relative strength of Pentecostal churches and customary institutions, among other areas. While we recognize the many different trajectories of becoming modern, we should not overlook what they have in common.

More specifically with regard to fertility and the female life course, our research suggests that modernity in its various constructions is a central problematic in these Nigerian women’s lives and that contemporary Christian churches play an ambivalent role in how these women become modern. On the one hand, churches have helped women develop strong networks through voluntary associations which have complemented or supplanted existing avenues for social engagement in their communities; these networks provide material, emotional, and spiritual support for women struggling with the burdens of childlessness in a strongly pronatalist society, as well as the more widespread burdens of poverty and joblessness. They respond to women’s modern aspirations for material goods, for alleviation of kin obligations, and for personal spiritual advancement. On the other hand, these churches have capitalized on women’s disappointment with or mistrust of modern biomedicine to offer spiritual remedies as a substitute for modern medical treatment. The prosperity gospel in particular has also only heightened the already considerable pressure women feel to conceive their own children, further invalidating available alternatives such as fostering and adoption. Perhaps only the introduction of an effective social security system that functions outside the realm of kinship can change this situation. For the time being, however, not having children of their own is no more socially viable for modern Christian women in Nigeria than it was for their premodern ancestors.

NOTES

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2. For an insightful early critique of modernization theory, see Portes (1973).
3. The names of the communities are pseudonyms.

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