

Masculinity, Perceived Economic Hardship, and Fertility Transition in Nigeria: An Ethnographic Perspective

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Abstract: Men are often portrayed as obstacles to lower fertility in Africa because they support patriarchal values. This view misses a more complicated story in which men's positions vis-à-vis gender inequality, marriage, fatherhood, and fertility-related goals and practices are diverse and changing. **Methods:** This article draws on evidence from 30 years of ethnographic study in southeastern Nigeria to describe and explain men's views and practices regarding fertility limitation. The primary methods are participant observation and open-ended, semi-structured interviews, including yearly follow-up with a sub-sample. **Results:** The findings show that Nigerian men are increasingly supportive of having fewer children. Further, one issue stands out in men's motivations to reduce the number of children they father: money. Most Nigerian men explain fertility transition, and particularly the impetus for their own choice to have fewer children, in terms of financial hardship. Four routine financial "emergencies" associated with contemporary manhood are identified and illustrated. **Conclusion:** The study points to a contradiction at the core of Nigerian men's growing support for fertility reduction. While having fewer children is historically associated with positive social and economic indicators, men who favor lower fertility see it as a necessity created by hardship connected to the struggle for money.

Keywords: fertility transition; masculinity; ethnography; Nigeria

1. Introduction

One of the biggest questions over the past 50 years in the demographic study of Africa is why fertility transition has been slow, or as some have suggested, stalled [1-2]. Why, in other words, do Africans still have so many children? In Western discourse, and in some demographic literature, Africa's relatively high fertility is seen as a problem, and even a pathology, linked to development failures [3]. Such viewpoints typically connect African pronatalism to tradition and culture, which are depicted as obstacles to development and other societal improvements [4-5].

Demographers and other social scientists have extensively studied the persistence of high fertility. Much of the most convincing scholarship shows that Africans' fertility decisions make good sense in their contexts [6-8]. The evidence further demonstrates that fertility transitions are, in fact, well underway in most of Africa, and that African people are responsive to similar societal variables and incentives that have been used to explain demographic decisions and practices resulting in fertility transitions all over the world [1,9].

While many factors have been identified, investigated, and persuasively argued to be associated with fertility declines (including reductions in mortality, increasing urbanization, and rising levels of income and education), it is fair to say

that when it comes to the influence of gender, much more attention has been paid to women than to men [10-11]. The dominant paradigm regarding family planning and fertility reduction in Africa is that women are more likely than men to support having fewer children, and they are better able to successfully enact their lower fertility preferences when they are empowered through greater access to education, employment, income, and contraception. To the extent that men are considered relevant to the story, they are frequently portrayed as obstacles to lower fertility because they support pro-natal, patriarchal values [12-15]. Whether through promoting and enforcing pro-natal goals in their own families and communities or in their efforts to control women's sexuality (for example, by discouraging women's use of contraception), male gender in Africa is generally associated in the demographic literature with opposition to major reductions in fertility [11,16-17].

Studies that characterize African men as pro-natal and patriarchal, and therefore antagonistic to family planning, capture an important aspect of the influence of masculinity on fertility. But they miss a more complicated story in which men's positions vis-à-vis gender inequality, marriage, fatherhood, and fertility-related goals and practices are diverse, changing, and sometimes contradictory [18-19]. A significant body of literature in demography and related social science has started to take greater account of men, including paying attention to their growing support for a less patriarchal gender system and for family planning and lower fertility [20-25]. It follows the efforts of some pioneering demographers who have long recognized the significance of men's sometimes positive influence on Africa's fertility transition [26-28].

Building on these earlier contributions, this article describes and explains the views and practices of men whom the author got to know over more than 35 years of working in Nigeria, including several years when he conducted ethnographic research specifically about family and fertility in the Igbo-speaking southeastern region [29]. As part of this research, the author and his Nigerian research assistants interviewed dozens of men about marriage, fatherhood, family, and fertility, exploring their values, beliefs, and behavior. These men were by no means monolithic in their views and practices, differing, for example, by age, education, wealth, and rural and urban residence [18]. But individual preferences and practices sometimes proved difficult to aggregate in conventionally predictable ways. Many men said and did contradictory things: saying one thing and doing another but also saying different things about the same issue in different contexts and engaging in seemingly contradictory practices at different points in time [19, 30-31].

Nonetheless, in the face of men's diverse beliefs and behavior and their capacity for contradiction, important patterns emerged. Although anthropologists often find it useful and illuminating to acknowledge and try to understand the messiness of social reality, the goal in this article is to focus on the patterns. The findings provide a necessary corrective to the dominant discourse that portrays African men as unyielding in their opposition to fertility transition. Further, an ethnographically grounded interpretation of men's ambivalent but very much growing support for lower fertility not only sheds light on masculinity in relation to Nigeria's fertility transition but also offers important insights about demographic transition generally [24].

The evidence presented below shows that while many intertwining factors explain Nigerian men's growing willingness to plan smaller families, one issue stands out in their motivations: money, and specifically the costs of fulfilling men's expected role as providers. The research found that whether a man was rich or poor, in every arena of his life, the successful performance of masculinity in Nigeria hinged on money. Indeed, worries about money cut across many of the factors that led men to postpone marriage and parenthood, and to aim for fewer children once they did start a family.

In contemporary Nigeria, everything costs money. It is necessary for a huge range of socially valued tasks and moral obligations, from getting married and sending children to school, to providing one's family with adequate housing and consumer commodities that are socially recognized as symbols of the successful performance of being a good husband, a good father, and a good man. Fathering too many children makes these masculine life projects more difficult.

In these circumstances, in contrast to the demographic literature, which associates fertility transition with underlying economic improvement, most Nigerian men experience and explain fertility transition, and particularly the impetus for their own choice to have fewer children, in terms of hardship (see [32] for an early example of scholars taking Africans' articulation of economic woes seriously as the impetus for reducing fertility). While this experience of hardship may be related to rising expectations as well as to actual increases in material suffering, based on this study's ethnographic findings, all but the very wealthiest men in Nigeria experience the transition to lower fertility as being compelled by an economic squeeze. Indeed, as a sign of how powerful the discourse of financial hardship is for explaining the decision to have fewer children, even men who could not by any measure be accurately described as lacking money adopted this narrative when talking about fertility transition in general and their own decisions in particular. After describing the anthropological methodology behind the ethnographic data, a few revealing and representative cases are explored to explain this connection between money and men's fertility-related beliefs and behaviors.

2. Materials and Methods

To develop and support the analysis, multiple sources of primary data are utilized, including surveys, in-depth interviews conducted almost every year from 1995 to 2018, and regular participant observation over the same period. The ethnographic interviews and long-term participant observation build on a wealth of baseline information about the people and the community the author studied, which was first collected as part of his dissertation research in the mid-1990s [29].

For his PhD project, the author conducted 20 months of research from 1995 through 1997 in the semi-rural (but gradually peri-urbanizing) community of Ubakala, which comprised 11 villages and approximately 20,000 people. Ubakala is located on the outskirts of Umuahia, the capital of Abia State. For his dissertation research, with the help of several research assistants, the author interviewed 153 husband-and-wife pairs (interviewing men and women separately). To examine how things might be changing, he administered a survey of nearly 800 secondary school students sampled from 19 secondary schools in and around Umuahia and another to over 400 students at nearby Abia State University. The surveys investigated young people's sexual and reproductive knowledge, practices, and future intentions. The study design also incorporated in-depth interviews with a sub-sample of 20 of the 153 husband-and-wife pairs. They became the subjects of longitudinal in-depth interviewing. Finally, nearly two years of participant observation during the author's dissertation fieldwork laid the foundation for almost 25 years of follow-up.

In the decades since his dissertation fieldwork, the author has continued to conduct research in Ubakala (as well as in the nearby cities of Umuahia and Owerri), making no fewer than a dozen research trips, including two semester-long stints during sabbaticals and many shorter summer trips of four to six weeks. Although some of those trips were primarily dedicated to other research projects, on most visits the author conducted follow-up interviews with the sub-sample of 20 couples who had been study subjects during his dissertation fieldwork. Beginning in 2010, as part of a follow-up study, the author started interviewing some of the (by then) adult children of the couples in the original sample. Since 2018, research assistants in Nigeria have carried out follow-up interviews once a year with the same couples and some of their adult children. Conducting research in one place for so long ideally creates a sense of

familiarity and trust between the ethnographer and his interlocutors. Many years of carrying out participant observation, and more importantly living in the community, have afforded the author an unusual degree of access. For this project, it manifested primarily in people's willingness to share information about their intimate family lives.

The examples presented below are drawn from fieldnotes and from transcripts of recorded conversations. Fieldnotes and interview transcripts were coded using the qualitative data organizing software Atlas.ti. Coding qualitative data such as interview transcripts and fieldnotes enables one to see patterns and to check for potential associations by manipulating possibly important independent variables (like gender, age, education, wealth, marital status, etc.) and dependent variables of interest, such as fertility (actual and desired), contraceptive use, and attitudes about gender equality. The survey data were originally organized and analyzed using a software program called EPI-Info. Later, with the assistance of a quantitatively trained graduate student, further analysis was done using Stata. While quantitative findings are not presented in this article, interpretations of the ethnographic evidence are informed by the survey results.

Finally, over the years, the author frequently shared or presented findings, interpretations, and conclusions with interlocutors in Nigeria, including both Nigerian scholars and community members who were the subjects in the research. In addition to being part of an ethical ethnographic practice, sharing findings and receiving interlocutors' reactions, both affirming and contesting the investigator's ideas, proved to be valuable for checking the validity of interpretations and provoking new questions to explore.

3. Results

This section shares the ethnographic evidence for the main argument, which, to reiterate, has two parts. First, Nigerian men are more supportive of fathering fewer children than is assumed among policymakers and program personnel who promote family planning and compared to how men's views are represented in much of the scholarly demographic literature. Second, men commonly experience and explain the need for family planning in relation to their struggles for money and their perception that the performance of socially expected masculinity depends on having money.

The results presented below provide a few brief examples from much longer case studies. They were selected because they are representative of trends observed not only through coding qualitative data, but also from the accumulation of years of observations during the time the author spent with men in southeastern Nigeria. The ethnographic cases are not (and are not meant to be) representative of the full range of men's views and behaviors, nor of the spectrum of diversity that characterizes the male population overall. Rather, they are meant to offer insights into the underlying processes. The findings are organized into two sections. The first section focuses directly on men's experiences of the growing costs of marriage and fatherhood. It illustrates the high cost for men of getting married, which contributes to the trend of later age at marriage, itself sometimes a significant factor in reducing societal fertility rates. The section further portrays men's experience with the growing costs of fatherhood, which is intertwined with fathers' increasing emotional investment in parenting.

The second section describes what can best be labeled routine financial "crises" or "emergencies" that many men face, all of them, in some way or another, connected to marriage and fatherhood. Indeed, most men experience these major financial crises more than once, and in some instances annually (even more so if they live in cities). Regular demands for large amounts of money that most men don't have on hand are integral to the structure of everyday life in contemporary Nigeria, part and parcel of societal expectations regarding what a good and successful man must provide for his family. These routine financial crises include: 1) the annual payment of children's school fees; 2) advances for housing

rental (often required to cover two years, or more); 3) bills for health care emergencies, including not just for one's nuclear family, but also for parents and other kin; and 4) financing what have grown to be the exorbitant costs of burial ceremonies for deceased parents and in-laws. As will be elaborated in the Discussion section below, all these financial demands create pressure on men to consider limiting the number of children they aim to father.

3.1 Money, Marriage, and Fatherhood

Getting married remains a pillar of manhood in southeastern Nigeria [29,33-35]. However, the ways that men find their wives and the character of the conjugal relationship itself are changing. The rise of romantic love as a relationship ideal has transformed marriage and men's behavior [21-22,36-38]). But even as social expectations regarding men's relationships with their wives and children require increasing emotional investment, having and providing money is the most valued way a man can establish and retain his standing in a modern family setting.

The costs of marrying begin during courtship, when a man must perform economically as well as emotionally, spending money to demonstrate love. Indeed, it is worth pointing out that in some respects a man has the least amount of leverage in his relationship with his eventual spouse during courtship. As love has become a primary criterion for marriage, women have developed something close to complete veto power. Women can decline a marriage proposal with few consequences, especially compared with the severe social sanctions against initiating a divorce. In these circumstances, men feel compelled to spend as lavishly as they can during courtship to demonstrate both love and their capacity to provide, which are deeply intertwined [39-41].

But in addition to the relatively recent rise in financial pressures associated with courtship, the cost of marrying itself has also been escalating significantly over several decades. Beginning with the oil boom in Nigeria in the 1970s, expectations for bridewealth in southeastern Nigeria increased dramatically. The items on what people call "the list" (a document listing the things the groom and his family are supposed to provide to the bride and her family as bridewealth) expanded to include many modern and expensive commodities. Things like refrigerators began to appear as part of bridewealth payments. One community not too far from Ubakala became infamous for requiring that a man provide a motor scooter for his new wife. When Nigeria's oil economy crashed in the 1980s, it did not seem to slow the escalation of bridewealth and its accompanying signal that during the marriage itself a man should be able to provide modern commodities for his wife and family (see [42-43] regarding similar dynamics in other places).

In the 1990s, many communities began to recognize that continuously increasing bridewealth demands were making it almost impossible for men to marry. While in the past the details of what was expected in bridewealth payments were the result of collective custom, recent trends exceeded anything communities had consciously agreed to. To try to address the problem, communities generated standard lists meant to restrict and reform bridewealth payments for their area, with the hope that this would encourage families to refrain from the arms-race-like competition in conspicuous consumption and conspicuous redistribution that seemed to affect not only wedding ceremonies, but also funerals and other collective rituals [44]. At the time, everyone lamented these escalating costs, but no one seemed willing to make unilateral changes because to do so would make one's daughter seem less valuable than others' daughters.

Of course, given that in Nigeria most families have both male and female children, almost every family that is, in some instances, the bride's kin will in other marriage ceremonies, be the groom's kin. Overall, most people welcomed these interventions, and they seemed to tamp down bridewealth inflation to some extent. But compliance was mostly

voluntary and variable, and if people thought they could or should do better than the community standard, they tried. Further, the new standards were not exactly cheap. Most men would have to save a long time to have enough money, even for the newly narrowed bridewealth lists. In addition, to the extent that these collectively created new standards that helped curb the bridewealth arms race, they did little to control the rising costs of wedding ceremonies. As many men reported, the expectations and costs of the rituals themselves were often more daunting than paying bridewealth.

3.1.a Case Study #1: The Pressures and Perceived Economic Obstacles to Marrying and Having Children

The case of Silas illustrates both the imperative for men to marry and the daunting anticipation of the costs of doing so. Silas was the third son of his parents, the fourth child in a family of five. His oldest brother disappeared and almost surely died as a child-soldier fighting for Biafra in Nigeria's civil war. By the time the author began following his case, Silas's surviving brother and his two sisters—one several years younger than him—were all married more than fifteen years ago. Each had at least three children. Silas's father died more than a decade earlier, but to Silas's aging mother's deep disappointment, Silas had passed the age of 40 and still was not married. His mother constantly reminded him that he needed to marry, and when he visited Ubakala from Lagos, where he had lived for well over a decade, she often arranged for him to meet young women from around the community whom she hoped he might be persuaded to marry. She also recruited everyone she could, including her other son and her daughters, as well as cousins, neighbors, and the pastor in the family's church, to convince Silas he must marry.

Like other men struggling to find enough money to marry, Silas would often say, especially to his mother when she hounded him, "How can I marry when I don't have anything doing?" By this he meant that he did not have steady work or a stable income, so how could he afford a wedding ceremony, much less the costs of a family? Nevertheless, eventually Silas married. His sisters contributed significantly to the cost of the wedding, and his sister-in-law (Silas's brother's wife) was instrumental in finding the bride, who was a relative of hers. Silas gave the impression that he may have received a discount in the amount of bridewealth he had to provide because it was a second marriage between these two extended families. Not more than a year after the wedding, Silas and his wife (almost twenty years his junior) had a baby boy. Everyone in Silas's family was extremely happy about the marriage and the child, especially Silas's mother, though she was already hurrying her son and daughter-in-law to have another baby. Silas seemed much relieved to have finally procreated. The last time the author saw him, Silas proudly took the author to his son's nursery school to take pictures of him and his son.

Since then, Silas and his wife have had two more children. After his third child was born, he was, and remains, adamant that he and his wife will have no more. When asked why, he cited the costs of school fees. He specifically mentioned the fees for nursery school, which has become a common expectation for parents to provide for their children, especially in urban settings like Lagos. Further, most nursery schools in Nigeria are privately owned, which means the fees are higher than at the very few government-run preschools. Silas also indicated that his family had outgrown their small flat, and he lamented that paying two years of annual rent in advance (as is typical in Lagos) was already beyond his means. In his reasoning that three children were enough, he cited two of the four routine financial crises that so many Nigerian men anticipate and experience, and which heavily influence the widely shared perception that lack of money is the chief factor in limiting fertility. It is those financial emergencies that are described and explained below.

3.2 Routine Financial Crises: Masculinity and the Experience of Hardship

A sense of financial crisis gets reproduced repeatedly for most Nigerian men. They are felt so acutely because they are associated with men's socially exalted position as providers. As will be illustrated below, these financial "emergencies" unfold in arenas central to the roles of husband, father, and kinsman. They are structurally embedded in the rhythms of everyday life, and they impinge significantly on men's decisions and practices regarding family planning. To reiterate, these routine financial crises are: 1) children's school fees, which are typically due annually at the beginning of a new school year (and must be paid for all school age children, from nursery school through university; even government primary schools, which are ostensibly "free," require significant payments from parents); 2) house or apartment rent, which usually requires payment in advance for anywhere from a full year to three years (obviously this only applies to people who do not own their own homes, who are mainly rural-to-urban migrants, but in contemporary Nigeria this is a majority of working-age men); 3) major medical treatment for anyone for whom a man has or feels some combination of affection and obligation that compels him to cover—or at least help cover—the costs (for most men this includes spouses, children, and parents, but potentially many other categories of kin); and 4) the burial of deceased parents (for many men the expectation to cover the costs of burial ceremonies is almost as high for parents-in-law as for their own parents).

3.2.a Case Study #2: *To Be a Man Is Not a One-Day Job: Navigating Routine Financial "Emergencies"*

This section condenses the story of Nwoke, which is told in more detail elsewhere [41], to illustrate how these routine financial emergencies impact men's lives, contributing to a sense of hardship that men draw on to explain the reasons why they feel compelled to limit the number of children they father. Nwoke was a vulcanizer, which meant he made a living repairing automobile tires. He represents a huge category of rural-to-urban migrants who struggled mightily to earn enough money to enable them to fulfill their most basic aspirations as men.

Being a vulcanizer was a precarious way to make a living. It was a challenge to provide for his family. Nwoke's wife, Ify, earned even less than he did. She was a cleaner/custodian working for a woman who ran a private primary school. Together they were lucky to bring in the naira (local currency) equivalent of \$300 a month. When the author first met them in 1995, they had three young children, two of them in primary school and a toddler who accompanied Ify to her workplace. Most of their income was spent on the basics: food, water, clothing, kerosene (for lamps and cooking), transportation, and rent. They lived in a very modest one-bedroom apartment; Nwoke and Ify slept on a bed in the bedroom, and the children on a foam mattress that they laid out each night on the floor in the parlor. As mentioned above, rent in urban Nigeria is typically paid in advance for at least a full year. While rents are relatively modest (Nwoke and Ify paid a little more than \$40 a month), the pay-in-advance method created an annual crisis. Nearly \$500 in one shot was a huge burden on a \$300-a-month income. Usually, they had to borrow from kin or friends and then pay it back over time. Urban-based families in Nigeria generally dreaded the deadline for annual rent.

Even by Umuahia standards, Nwoke and Ify were poor, but with two steady, if meager, incomes they were better off than many. But Nwoke wanted more. He wanted to be a good provider for his family. He desired to educate his children. He hoped to be able to share more money with his aging parents who still lived in his natal village. He aspired to build his own house in the village, a widely shared goal of most rural-to-urban migrant men who originate from southeastern Nigeria. He wanted to be able to travel to his village at Christmastime each year with his family, with enough money to cook food for, share drinks with, and give money to his many kin. But in addition to the burden of paying in advance

the annual rent for his urban accommodations, the other financial emergencies identified above kept Nwoke on precarious and uncertain economic footing.

Like rent in its regularity, the most routine financial crisis is spurred by the required payment of annual school fees. By 2012, when all his children were over 20 years old, Nwoke had only been able to afford to put one of them all the way through secondary school. The others had to drop out. This was a source of great sadness for him. When the one son graduated, he and Ify were very proud. But they could not possibly pay for him to go on to university. In addition to Nwoke and Ify's own frustrations, the other son and the daughter who had to drop out before completing secondary school because of lack of funds were highly disappointed, and at times said things that made Nwoke feel both angry and ashamed. On top of the fact that Nwoke had not built (or even started) a house of his own in the village, his failure to educate his children to the level he (and they) aspired to added to the reasons he rarely traveled home to his village at Christmas, or any other time for that matter.

After house rent and school fees, the third major crisis-creating expense is health care. In theory, Nigeria has a system of basic primary health care. In practice, private providers deliver most health care, and even at government hospitals, staff commonly demand advance payment before services are provided. A few years ago, one of Nwoke's children was in an accident while traveling on public transportation, and she broke her leg. The injury required surgery to reset the bone. The doctors at Queen Elizabeth Hospital, the main government hospital in Umuahia, would not do the surgery until Nwoke paid a deposit equivalent to more than \$200. He had to travel home to his village to borrow some money from kin, and Ify got an advance from her employer to enable them to make the payment. Another time, Ify's mother came to Umuahia from her village very sick, and they again had to borrow money for a hospital bill. It is common for people to narrate the financially ruinous costs of a health emergency.

Besides rent, school fees, and health care emergencies, the other common crisis-inducing financial burden that so many men described was the death of their parent—or their wife's parent. In both cases, a man is expected to contribute a very large amount of money to support the costs of elaborate festivities. Indeed, for many migrant men, a significant measure of one's ultimate success as a migrant is the level at which one buries one's mother or father. Nwoke was no exception. When his father died about 15 years ago, Nwoke experienced anguish trying to come up with his share of the burial expenses, not to mention the inadequacy he felt, as he perceived that his kinsmen found his contribution meager. Nwoke said something like what many men reported: "A man is not fully a man until he has buried his father." His statement signaled more than just how much money it cost, but there was no doubt that the social pressure to perform financially was one of the tests of manhood posed by a parent's death.

The cost of burying one's parents is but the most powerful example of the pressures on migrant men to earn and spend money in their rural communities of origin. Others include the expectation to build a house "at home," as well as the desire to bring their families home every Christmas, and the pressure to do so in style, if they can. Men are also expected to contribute to village development projects. Nwoke regularly made excuses to miss meetings of his village development union to avoid the disgrace of being unable to pay his levies. His poor financial situation not only challenged his and his family's physical wellbeing, but it also constantly affected his social relations and his sense of himself as a man.

Tellingly, in more recent years, when each of Nwoke's sons was interviewed individually about their own intentions regarding marriage, fatherhood, and fertility plans, they both said that they anticipated delaying marriage indefinitely

and planned on having no more than two or three children once they married. Both explained the reasons for postponing marriage and their preferences for lower fertility in terms of the mismatch between what they perceived as the exorbitant costs of marriage and parenthood and their own conditions of financial hardship.

4. Discussion

In southeastern Nigeria, marrying and having children are still social imperatives. For Nigerian men, being a husband and a father remain pillars of masculinity [40-41]. The preeminent Africanist anthropologist Meyer Fortes noted long ago that it is "parenthood that is the primary value associated with the idea of family in West Africa" [33, 121]. "Parenthood," Fortes said, "is regarded as a *sine qua non* for the attainment of the full development of the complete person to which all aspire" [33, 125]. In southeastern Nigeria, even with all the changes in marriage, fertility, and kinship, some of which might lead one to expect that the social importance of parenthood would diminish, Fortes' observation is as true now as ever. Indeed, one might reasonably argue that marriage and parenthood are more valued than ever, in part because they are perceived as ever more difficult and costly to achieve.

But as the cases above illustrate, changes are afoot. Parenthood is being postponed to an extent that was unthinkable a generation ago. Not only are men and women marrying later and having fewer children; from men's perspectives, the postponement of marriage and parenthood and the reasons to have fewer children are tied to the challenges of modern masculinity. In particular, men face intense anxieties and ambivalence as they experience the elevation of money to be the main means by which they must prove their status, demonstrate their capacity to be caring husbands and responsible fathers, and project their worthiness as men.

As illustrated in the brief excerpts drawn from a much larger sample of detailed case studies, the intertwining of masculinity and money serves as a prism through which to understand and explain the demographic trend of the postponement of marriage and a growing preference for having fewer children once married. Further, men's narratives about the postponement of marriage and fatherhood offer a vehicle to examine and understand the changing expectations, meanings, and experiences of masculinity in Nigeria. This research shows that manhood in contemporary Nigeria is bound up with the perception of the paramount importance of money for reproduction — whether that is the expenses associated with marrying and having children or the costs related to wider processes of social reproduction that include proving (and improving) one's social status and that of one's family.

When men explain the reasons for postponing marriage and fathering fewer children, they chalk up the delay to the challenges of earning and saving enough money. This perception that marriage and fatherhood are expensive (in men's minds, more expensive than ever) has a foundation. As mentioned above, in southeastern Nigeria, wedding performances are like an arms race, where people spend more and more to keep up with their peers. Everyone laments the situation, and yet no one dares to unilaterally disarm. Bridewealth is high, manifested in, and also symbolized by, the inclusion of costly modern commodities such as refrigerators or motorbikes. And of course, raising children is more expensive than ever, especially as nearly every parent aspires to educate their offspring to the highest level possible. The monetary costs are perhaps exceeded only by the way that society judges the successful performance of masculinity based on how men spend money [21-22, 41]. In other words, it is not only men's reproductive goals that are at stake, but their very reputations as men.

The perception that marriage and fatherhood demand more money than most men have is accentuated by several regular financial crises that many Nigerian men face. Most men in Ubakala, and in the southeastern region more generally,

experienced these money emergencies on a regular basis. They have particular resonance for men's preferences and practices related to family planning because they are expenses directly tied to the male role as provider. Further, because these money emergencies combine an acute immediacy and a hefty price tag relative to other quotidian expenses, the weight of such problems is heavy. And because they all have consequences for the well-being of a man's family, they reinforce the perception that marriage and fatherhood can be perilously expensive.

All of this helps resolve the apparent paradox raised in the introduction, which is that men experience the reasons for the postponement of parenthood and the rationale for having fewer children as rooted in economic struggle, even though in the aggregate, later age at marriage, later parenthood, and lower overall fertility seem to be correlated with better economic circumstances. While part of what is going on is that rising expectations have outstripped economic improvements in southeastern Nigeria, the story is more complicated. Men's anxiety about the financial costs of marriage and fatherhood is not simply because they don't have as much money as they need, or wish for, though that is certainly true. In addition, it is the very need for money, and the fact that men are constantly being judged by their female partners, by their kin, by their male peers, and by society at large based on performances of masculinity that depend above all on having money, that puts such a premium on it. Thus, much of the angst that men experience and express as they postpone marriage and fatherhood and then aim to have fewer children than their parents' generation (and as they experience better times as harder times) must be understood in the context wherein money is problematically the measure of manhood, even in the intimate and highly valued sphere of reproduction.

It is important to note the similarities and differences in how masculinity was evaluated in the past and in contemporary times, especially when it comes to a man's perceived suitability as a husband and as a father. Like now, in the past, a man's capacity to provide for his family was a cornerstone of his reputation. Commonly, a man's skill as a farmer, often assessed by the number of yams accumulated in an annual harvest, stood for his economic wherewithal [45-46]. This was related to his capacity to accumulate followers, not least by producing children. While there were significant disparities in earlier times, they paled in comparison to the huge inequalities in wealth that mark the current context in Nigeria, where capitalism reigns, and money is both the material and symbolic measure of economic standing. But it is not only the higher levels of inequality that produce contemporary anxieties about the capacity to fulfill the masculine role in social reproduction; it is the perception that life chances are unfairly distributed, and outcomes are often determined by forces beyond men's control.

The focus in this article on men who are struggling to meet societal (and personal) expectations about marrying and having children because of the primacy of money for successful masculine participation in reproduction is not meant to suggest that such men represent the full diversity of male positions and perspectives in southeastern Nigeria, or beyond. Nor is this focus meant to underestimate the central place of women in couples' fertility-related behavior. Below, the conclusion offers a few additional thoughts about women's position vis-à-vis the changing landscape of marriage, family, and fertility, particularly as it is affected by the place of money in these processes. But this article does not offer equal space to women's experiences and perspectives. Indeed, a premise here is the need for more work on men in considering the effects of gender in demographic change. While existing and additional quantitative research results can help extend and complement the ethnographic findings here, this article has aimed to look behind the numbers to understand the desires and frustrations, and the decisions and actions of Nigerian men as they live amid an ongoing fertility transition.

5. Conclusions

Scholarship about fertility decision-making in Africa has frequently portrayed men as strongly pro-natal, emphasizing that male pressure on women to have more children advances a combination of masculine interests, including the importance of “wealth in people” [47-48] and the preservation of patriarchal privileges associated with controlling female sexuality and perpetuating lineages [49-50]. While there is no doubt that patriarchy and reproduction have been, and, in some ways, remain, deeply intertwined in many settings, drawing on ethnographic evidence, this study found that in Nigeria men’s interests vis-à-vis the timing of marriage, parenthood, and overall fertility are changing significantly. The postponement of marriage and decisions to have fewer children are tied to a shifting political-economic and cultural landscape. Men are navigating, and creating new configurations in, the dynamic interactions between economic realities and family making [51]. All of this is deeply bound up with masculinity.

A fundamental contradiction lies at the core of Nigerian men’s perceptions, decisions, and behaviors regarding delaying fatherhood and having fewer children, one that seems to be common in many settings of contemporary demographic transition. The contradiction is that the postponement of parenthood, and fertility decline more generally, seems to be associated historically with positive social and economic indicators, such as rising levels of education and income, higher literacy, improved female social status, greater urban exposure, etc. [52-53]; and yet when Nigerian men articulate their rationales and experiences of delaying parenthood (and marriage), they commonly describe feelings of uncertainty connected to a sense of struggle and hardship. Uncertainty as a feature of reproductive decisions and behaviors in contemporary Africa has been explored and theorized in the demographic literature [18-19,30], including more recently with a specific focus on “livelihood uncertainty” [31]. However, most of this work has centered on women (e.g., [6]).

Much of the attention to men has focused on stalled economic opportunities, depriving them of full manhood. Men’s experiences of being “stuck” without viable futures have been described as “waithood” and associated with a range of contemporary social problems [54-55]. Men’s anxieties about marriage and parenthood and their association with economic hardship have been noted mostly by anthropologists and other qualitatively oriented social scientists, including in Niger [42], Kenya and Tanzania [56], Burkina Faso [32], and South Africa [57]. This article has connected men’s anxieties and delays related to marriage and parenthood to their experiences of economic uncertainty, and specifically to the perceived need for money as the foundation for successful reproduction. Men’s sense of economic struggle and the challenges they perceive to marriage and fatherhood are central to their experiences of and aspirations for masculinity. They are also important factors in the complex processes that explain the postponement of marriage and parenthood and men’s growing support for family planning and lower fertility in Nigeria, and probably in much of Africa.

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