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Social Change in Adolescent Sexual Behavior, Mate Selection, and Premarital Pregnancy Rates in a Kikuyu Community

CAROL M. WORTHMAN and JOHN W. M. WHITING

The study of puberty rites, their meaning and function, has long been important to anthropology (Frazer 1900; Van Gennep 1909). Studies of sexuality, sex role identity, and gender politics have also been foci of increasing interest (Broude 1981; Herdt 1982). These concerns have assumed practical relevance as rapid shifts in population growth rates and individual reproductive histories have emerged as frequent concomitants of accelerated socioeconomic change in developing countries (Nag 1980). Too frequently, human reproductive behavior has been examined outside its cultural context, and there is a growing awareness that that context must be in-

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cluded in order to achieve adequate dynamic models of human fertility (Caldwell 1982; World Bank 1984).

This report documents an example of interactions of cultural change with adolescent fertility and marriage patterns in an East African community. Between 1950 and 1980 the rate of unwed motherhood in Ngca, a Kikuyu town in central highland Kenya, showed a marked increase. According to a census carried out by the Child Development Research Unit,\(^1\) of the 214 children born between 1940 and 1970, the percentage reported by respondents to be children of unwed mothers was 0% in the 1940s, 4.8% in the 1950s, and 11.4% in the 1960s. This change is statistically significant. It may be the result of reporter bias, but we and the people of Ngca believe that there has been a real increase in unwed motherhood during this period. We will present evidence of recent changes in Kikuyu culture that may account for this change. Such an analysis will, moreover, contribute to our understanding of the functions of ritual and of the social structure of human experience.

THE TRADITIONAL CONTEXT

Bantu-speakers and British, two successful expansionist groups, met at the edge of the Rift Valley in central Kenya at the end of the last century. Bantu-speakers were represented in part by a group of Kikuyu who had arrived in Kenya about 1500 and had made their way from the coast to central Kenya by the 1880s (Muriuki 1974). Other than a few early traders and explorers, the first British to arrive in the 1890s were those responsible for building the railroad from Mombasa on the coast to Lake Victoria. These were followed by British administrators, missionaries, and farmers.

On the grounds that the land appeared to be unoccupied, the British settled on most of the rich farmland in the central highland region, which the Kikuyu claimed as their territory. The Kikuyu disputed British claims, and land remained an issue during the period of British control over Kenya until independence in 1962 (Sorrenson 1967). Traditionally, the Kikuyu were middle-level agriculturalists whose principal subsistence crops were maize and beans. They also kept goats, sheep, and a few cattle, which were more important for ritual than for dietary purposes. Kikuyu speakers would sometimes join forces against a common enemy, but intratribal warfare also occurred. Because the terrain was regularly scored in a
ridge and valley pattern, most expansion and settlement took place along the ridges. A group of hamlets occupying a single ridge was the largest localized political unit; most hamlets were small patrilineages three or four generations deep. Polygyny was common. Married women, men, and adolescent boys all had separate huts clustered around a compound.

An age-grade system governed the lives of all individuals from childhood to old age. The sequence of age grades for males was: childhood; junior then senior warriorhood; junior, senior, and ritual elderhood. For females, the sequence was similar, comprising childhood, maidenhood, young womanhood, junior elderhood, and elderhood. Warriors were responsible for military matters, including the training of junior warriors, defending the ridge, and scouting for and acquiring new lands to relieve population pressure. Maidens were responsible, in a manner described below, for consolidating and ensuring solidarity within their age set and among the different clans on the home ridge. Women had primary responsibility for raising and preparing food for the family, and for producing and rearing the next generation. Female elders played an important role in arranging and overseeing the rituals and ceremonials that occurred frequently in Kikuyu culture. All political and judicial decisions were made by the male junior and senior elders. Ritual elders were responsible for performing the most sacred rites and ceremonies.

Although the age-grade system produced a strongly gerontocratic society, several features prevented lineal stratification. The payment of substantial bridewealth hindered accumulation of wealth by a single family. Sons produced military and political power, daughters brought wealth; thus, an egalitarian system was ensured as long as the sex ratio remained balanced among lineages. Further, accumulation of heritable power was largely prevented by a “generation” system consisting of two moieties, to one of which all Kikuyu belonged. A person belonged to the moiety of his grandfather rather than that of his father; a moiety is hence usually referred to as a “generation.” Only the members of the ruling generation or moiety had the right to hold office. At intervals of approximately 30 years, the incumbent ruling generation stepped down and the other moiety assumed the right to hold office. Most men, therefore, exercised authority for little more than half their lifetime.

The age-grade system played an especially critical role in defining adolescent life. Both females and males, early on in puberty for girls,
and just after for boys, were initiated into an age set named for some notable event that identified the year during which the initiation occurred. An accurate annual event calendar is provided by the age-set names, based on the female age set formed each year. Members of the same age set were classificatory siblings; strong group coherence and identification was inculcated among age setmates.

The initiation rite had both marked physical and ritual components, including an elaborate ceremony highlighted by a genital operation for both sexes. This operation consisted of excision of the tip of the clitoris for girls, and slitting of the prepuce for boys. Clitoris and prepuce were believed to be masculine and feminine body parts respectively, so the operations were undertaken to correct or exclusively align the gender of the initiates.

The rites of passage at initiation were also embedded in a sequence of instruction, socialization, and behavior change associated with assumption of new roles as warriors or maidens. As soon as their wounds had healed, bachelor age sets were incorporated into a regiment composed of all boys on a ridge initiated over a nine year period. They were trained in the arts of war by the senior warriors, members of the previous regiment. Initiates remained in the status of junior warrior until their regiment of nine initiation cohorts was completed, after which they were promoted to senior warrior grade. As such they were responsible for organized defense, for training and socialization of the succeeding group of junior warriors, and for identification of new territory suitable for colonization by their lineage. Since the Kikuyu were a highly fertile group, land shortage was a persistent problem that made scouting out new lands an important duty. Once the subsequent regiment of junior warriors was formed, and after a four and one-half year hiatus in male initiation, the regiments turned over, and incumbent senior warriors advanced to the status of junior elder and began their political and judicial duties.

After a brief novitiate, initiated girls entered a maidenhood stage which lasted until they married four to six years later. During this period they were expected to help their mothers with the work of adult women—household chores and gardening. If a maiden showed competence and diligence, it was believed that her parents could command a high brideprice for her. Maidens’ most important role, however, was to strengthen the social fabric of the region by entertaining the bachelor warriors, often those in their older broth-
ers’ age set, when they visited from neighboring hamlets. This ideally pan-territorial identification and social cohesion within age sets was to be cemented by exogamous patrilocal marriages, with a shift in status to adult married woman marking the end of the maidenhood stage. Maidens married at about age 19, while warriors’ first marriage occurred at around age 26.

Maidens and bachelors engaged in an intense social life organized around a year-round cycle of dances and, in the case of males, competitions of prowess. In the evenings, groups of maidens and bachelors met to dance, feast, and make love. The prescribed form of lovemaking was called ngweko, described by Kenyatta (1938:157–158) as follows:

The girls visit their boy-friends at a special hut, thingira, used as a rendezvous by the young men and women. . . . Girls may visit the thingira at any time, day or night. After eating, while engaged in conversation with the boys, one of the boys turn the talk dramatically to the subject of ngweko. If there are more boys than girls, the girls are asked to select . . . whom they want as their companion. The selection is done in the most liberal way. . . . In such a case it is not necessary for girls to select their most intimate friends, as this would be considered selfish and unsociable. Of course, this does not mean the girls do not sometimes have ngweko with those whom they are specially fond of, but generally they follow the rules of exchanging partners. The same freedom of social contact exists even among married people and for this reason youths are encouraged to cultivate the spirit of comradeship and group solidarity before marriage.²

After the partners have been arranged, one of the boys gets up, saying: “ndathie kwenogora” (I am going to stretch myself). His girl partner follows him to the bed. The boy removes all his clothing. The girl removes her upper garment, . . . and retains her skirt, motheru, and her soft leather apron, mvengo, which she pulls back between her legs and tucks in together with her leather skirt. The two V-shaped tails of her motheru are pulled forward between her legs and fastened to the waist, thus keeping the apron in position and providing adequate protection of her private parts. In this position the lovers lie together facing each other, with their legs interwoven to prevent any movement of their hips. They then begin to fondle each other, rubbing their breasts together, whilst at the same time engage in love making conversation until they gradually fall asleep. Sometimes the partners experience sexual relief, but this is not an essential feature of the ngweko.

Ngweko was not casually engaged in, as it was performed in a context of well-articulated behavior codes. Directly following initiation, a girl was instructed by members of the next senior age set that she was expected to entertain lovers during her maidenhood and warned against letting her lover touch her genitals. During her novitiate and before she was permitted to entertain lovers, an older maiden taught her by demonstration and practice how to arrange
her skirt and apron and how to intertwine her legs with her lover. Further, explicit instruction was given regarding appropriate partners and social behaviors. Young junior warriors were also taught proper ngweko behavior by the older maidens. Both the girls and the boys were taught that touching the genitals of the other by either of them would result in pollution that required purification by a medicine man and sacrifice of a ram. Boys were said to be ostracized and excluded from further participation in ngweko by their peers if they broke the rules. The fact that this lovemaking was usually carried on in groups of several couples in the same hut (thingira) made peer sanctions more effective and reinforced its function to enhance age-set solidarity.

It should be noted here that there was a barrier regarding direct discussion of sexual matters between parents and children. Parents communicated practical information on public behaviors and imparted the complex formal rules regulating partner and sleeping arrangements at all ages, but information regarding physical and emotional intimacy was not conveyed. This functional taboo did not apply between grandparent and grandchild, but it was the age-set system, rather than the family or lineage, that was responsible for the transmission of ngweko rules and procedures, and patterns of intimacy.

Peer control over the practice of ngweko was also exercised by the senior warriors, who claimed lovemaking as their privilege. Moreover, ngweko between members of the same age set was considered incest, so physical intimacy and mate selection occurred between younger female and older male circumcision cohorts. Junior warriors were required to pass through a number of stages to obtain social privileges, each requiring the donation of a goat or ram to the senior warriors. They had to purchase the right to attend the dances associated with ngweko. According to Leakey (1977:414–424), young men would often dance naked before choosing a maiden for lovemaking. Junior warriors were not permitted to do this until they had paid an additional fee. Finally, they were required to pay a third fee which gave them the right to sleep with a girl. Hence, it was primarily the senior warriors who practiced ngweko and controlled access to the privilege which was also a key element in mate selection.

Both the dances and the practice of ngweko facilitated the process of mate selection. Marriages were not arranged; rather, they were based on the mutual consent of partners. Bands of warriors traveled
about among hamlets and could expect hospitality (shelter, food, dance, ngweko) from their age setmates. This not only promoted age-set solidarity across localities, but also provided opportunity for mutual identification and recruitment of spouses.

Despite social rules and sanctions, premarital pregnancy did sometimes occur. Median age at menarche is at present just under age 16 (Worthman 1986), while the average age of marriage was between 19 and 20. Some of the early maturing girls were therefore fully fecund before they married. It was not uncommon for a maiden to agree to break the ngweko rules and engage in full intercourse with someone she wished to marry. She would not ordinarily do this unless her lover agreed that they should marry and the lengthy negotiations between the two sets of parents had begun. Genealogies collected in 1969–70 indicate that the bride was usually pregnant before the marriage ceremonies were completed and she moved in with her husband. (This was not considered a premarital pregnancy.) It was rarely the case that a pregnant woman could not persuade one of her lovers to marry her. If the presumed father refused to do so, the elders required him to pay a heavy fine to the girl’s family. An unwed mother would live in her natal home until she found some man who would marry her. Few young mothers remained unwed for long, due largely to the practice of polygyny, the value of women’s work, and the premium on large families. The husband of an unwed mother often adopted her child, especially if it was a daughter (she would eventually bring bridewealth and not compete with sons for inheritance of land). If he refused to do so, the child would be adopted by the mother’s parents.

In traditional Kikuyu culture, as maidens and bachelors, young women and men thus played a crucial role in maintaining an egalitarian social structure based on age grades and age sets. Controlled lovemaking provided an efficient method of mate selection and at the same time served to consolidate diverse clans on a ridge—an important function in a society without a hierarchical political structure. That ngweko was a viable solution to the problem of premarital sex and mate selection in middle-level societies, especially those with long maiden- and bachelorhood, is evidenced by the fact that similar practices have been reported for several other Bantu societies, particularly in East and South Africa.
A PERIOD OF RAPID SOCIAL CHANGE

Between 1903, the date chosen by Leakey (1977) as his ethno-
graphic present, and 1983, when Worthman last visited Ngeca, the
life and outlook of young people of the village were transformed by
rapid and dramatic social change.

During the colonial period, there were two major foci of conflict
between the British and the Kikuyu—land and female circumciscion.
Conflict over land arose from the fact that Kikuyu territory encompassed
a major portion of the desirable arable land of the central
highlands. In the late 19th century, the British Foreign Office set-
tled on a policy of colonization in order to defray the costs of con-
structing the East African railroad. Immigration was slow initially,
but by 1912 the competition for land was so strong that Kikuyu were
moved onto “native reserves” in order to make a large portion of the
arable land available to expatriate farmers. Ngeca was one of these
reserves. Surrounded on three sides by large British tea plantations,
Ngeca inhabitants had no room for expansion. Furthermore, the
practice of scouting for new land was effectively stopped by the pac-
ification of native peoples, precluding establishment of new Kikuyu
colonies. The Kikuyu warrior, therefore, no longer had a function.
Land nevertheless retained its central importance because the ma-
jority of Kikuyu continued as farmers and have adopted increas-
ingly modern farm economy and technology.

Willingness to assimilate the customs of peoples with whom they
came in contact during their expansion was a characteristic cultural
feature of Bantu-speakers (Murdock 1959). This included accep-
tance of new cultivars and, probably, adaptation of the age-grade
system from peoples who had migrated to Kenya from Ethiopia.
Many features of British culture were rather quickly integrated.
One which had the most profound effect on the adolescents of Ngeca
was Western schooling. This was introduced by Christian mission-
aries, with the argument that education enabled movement into the
modern sector. As expansion into new land was no longer feasible,
this was convincing logic for a means to expand into the altered
structure of opportunity. Adolescent boys were therefore trained to
be clerks instead of scouts and warriors, and girls were formally ed-
ucated for employment, as well as raised as farmers.

A school was started eight miles from Ngeca by the Church of
Scotland Mission in 1905. By 1910, a few students from Ngeca be-
gan attending it, and after a few years a bush school was started that met under the trees in the village. By 1920, with support from the mission, a wattle and daub hut was built and the Ngecu School was founded. In 1928, the school was housed in a larger building that was also used as a church; over 500 students were in attendance. The initial skepticism of some of the Ngecu parents had apparently disappeared, and schooling received enthusiastic acceptance.

The Church of Scotland united in 1929 with the Presbyterian Churches of East Africa (PCEA), which initiated a move to abolish female circumcision (clitoridectomy). All church members and those wishing to enroll children in church schools were required to pledge to give up initiation rites in general, and clitoridectomy in particular (Kenyatta 1938:130). The debate over female circumcision even reached the British House of Commons in 1930 (Leakey 1931). Due partly to an eloquent presentation of the African point of view by Jomo Kenyatta, no edict against it was enacted. He argued that it had cultural and theological importance similar to the Jewish rite of circumcision. In Facing Mount Kenya he states that:

The real argument lies not in the defense of the surgical operation or its details, but in the understanding of a very important fact in the tribal psychology of the Gikuyu—namely, that this operation is still regarded as the very essence of an institution which has enormous educational, social, moral and religious implications, quite apart from the operation itself. [Kenyatta 1938:133]

The controversy divided the village between those who supported the PCEA and those who adhered to traditional values. A large group withdrew from the PCEA, joined the Independent Church Movement, and in 1923 built a different school for their children. Only seven Ngecu families remained loyal to the church and continued to send their children to the Ngecu school. But in spite of strong differences of opinion concerning the female genital operation, both groups had adopted Christianity and were thereby convinced that the initiation ceremony itself was pagan and unchristian; it was therefore abandoned. This had wide-reaching implications for the context of socialization of adolescents. The genital operations continued to be performed, but in a completely secular context. Boys were operated individually on demand by the paramedic at a nearby clinic. The operation for females was done in great secrecy at the home of a traditional female practitioner. Most of the educational function of the rites was thereby lost, including the training of adolescents in the practice of ngweko and other aspects of peer and sexual
relations. The church, moreover, disapproved of the custom. Christian rules of sexual propriety were adopted, particularly by devout members of the PCEA. Most dancing was given up for similar reasons, and thus the major contexts for adolescent socialization and mate selection were removed.

Since 1940, schooling has become increasingly prevalent, reflecting its importance to parents: school fees were higher than taxes, yet parents were willing to work hard raising cash crops or working for wages to pay for their children's education. By 1956, the Ngeca primary school was seriously overcrowded and a new one was built, this time by the government rather than the church. Schooling was virtually universal in Ngeca by the 1960s.

Both demographic change and the process of development have brought an escalation in required educational achievement. At first, a few years of schooling were thought to be sufficient, and early schoolgoers rarely finished primary school. By the 1960s, however, it had become apparent that, to obtain benefits in the modern sector that had been an initial impetus for education, it was necessary at least to complete primary school. By 1970, both students and their parents felt that acceptance into secondary school was a prerequisite for success, and many aspired to attend the University of Nairobi or to go overseas for higher education.

The first and most critical step on this ladder to success through educational advancement is faced at the end of primary school. At that time students take the examination for the Certificate of Primary Education, known as the CPE. Because attainment of an adequate passing grade (which also has risen constantly) is a prerequisite for entry to a government-supported secondary school, the examination has progressively superceded the remnants of traditional puberty ceremonies as a critical rite of passage. In fact, for boys it has become customary to link circumcision to completion of the seven years of primary school and sitting for the CPE examination. This test of competence has thus perhaps taken the place of the traditional rites of passage.

A study by John Herzog (1973) lends some support for this interpretation. A battery of self-image tests were given to 127 Ngeca boys who had recently been or were about to be circumcised in the fall of 1969, and repeated six months later. On the basis of these, Herzog argued that the CPE was probably more important than the genital operation in effecting a change in the self-image of Ngeca youths.
The two events were so highly correlated that this conclusion was quite tentative. It was clear, however, that the "secondary schoolboy" had taken the place of the "junior warrior" as an important status for the adolescent males of Ngeca, for education is seen as the most secure and desirable route to further improvements in status.

Passing the examination has become as important to the girls as to the boys, partly for the same reasons concerning access to further socioeconomic opportunity and advancement. Sitting for the test and genital operations for girls are dissociated, however, because the operation should take place before menarche. But, at present, only 40% of girls undergo clitoridectomy. For the remainder, the school examination is a central event, as indeed it is for even those girls who are operated upon: genital operations are no longer a sine qua non for mature status in females, as it is in males, but passing the test is necessary for further advancement. Schooling also frees girls from work at home in the years between finishing primary school (about age 16) and marriage (average age 19). Further education increases their desirability as mates, improves employability in the modern sector, and provides additional formal and peer socialization in modern life.

MATING STRATEGIES, SEXUAL BEHAVIOR, AND PREMARITAL PREGNANCY IN CONTEMPORARY YOUTH

Social change in the study community has in many ways altered the social structure of experience and opportunity for adolescents. In this section, changes in mating strategies and sexual behavior of young people are documented, and the ways in which these represent a pragmatic response to perceived options are explored.

Schooling has been a major agent of change. The school has effectively replaced the age-set system as the institutional framework for mate selection by providing social contacts and defining marriageability (by quantifying performance and qualification, and structuring access to socioeconomic opportunity). The classroom and schoolyard are contexts where boys and girls from different lineages and localities meet. However, sex education has not been in the curriculum, and the traditional means of ritual, instruction, and socialization in the age-set system that so strongly structured adolescence have been greatly attenuated. Consequently, young
people are not trained in the traditional mode of limited intercourse, nor in the appropriate, defined partners and contexts in which it is acceptable. Furthermore, peer pressure and peer surveillance for proper sexual behavior has diminished.

Decline of the age-set system and rise of schooling have also interacted to shift the inculcation of rules of general social behavior during late adolescence and young adulthood away from peer- and group-identification to ego-orientation. In the age-set system, age-mates were considered siblings and strong pressure was exerted for mutual social and material support. School, on the other hand, reinforces individual performance in competition with others for scarce resources.

Despite changes in sex education and the social control of pre-marital sex, most young women of Ngeca have married the father of their first child before it was born. Based on genealogies taken in 1973, this was the case for 89% of the 147 women in this sample who gave birth to their first child during the 15-year period from 1958 to 1973. Moreover, all but 3 of the 16 initially unwed mothers had subsequently married someone other than the father of their first child. Nevertheless, unwed motherhood is increasing, and is perceived as a modern problem that was absent in the “good old days.”

To test the hypothesis that schooling is related to breakdown of the traditional system of courtship and marriage, cross tabulations were run on the sample described above. As can be seen in Table 1, there is a positive association between the amount of schooling and the prevalence of unwed motherhood. This association remains when age of mother is controlled.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Association between Marital Status at Birth of First Child and School Attainment in a Sample of Ngeca Women between 1958 and 1973. The Numbers in Parentheses are Column Percentages.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of Schooling</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>1-6</th>
<th>7 or more</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unwed</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
<td>6 (9%)</td>
<td>8 (28%)</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wed</td>
<td>51 (96%)</td>
<td>59 (91%)</td>
<td>21 (72%)</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-square = 9.9; p < .01; Phi = .28
In traditional society, a fecund girl had close contact with young men other than her brothers only at the ngweko dances, which as we have indicated were highly supervised. A contemporary girl in her late teens who is still attending school has close contact with her male classmates with no explicit instruction as to how to behave toward them. Contiguity and lack of information are only part of the explanation, however, for the actions of young people are also directed by individual life history strategies and perceived options for attracting a desirable spouse.

Decreases in polygyny, supported by religious and legal institutions, have shifted the gender and age balance of potential mates. Based on a census of Ngeca locality in 1968, rates of polygyny among men of birth years 1900–10, 1910–20, and 1920–30 show a progressive decline, with 100%, 28%, and 18% respectively. The trend is marked, even if it may be exaggerated by truncation of marital histories in younger cohorts. (Acquisition of a second wife usually occurs at around age 40.) Consequently, males have become the relatively scarce partner for whom females must compete. Competition is sharpened by the wide variation among available males in educational and socioeconomic resources that affect their desirability as husbands. Female strategems for identifying and recruiting optimal partners (discussed frequently in conversations of young women) reflect acute sensitivity to this variability among males (Little 1979).

As was traditionally the case, young people are themselves responsible for mutual selection of marriage partners, but the conditions under which the selection process takes place have altered extensively. The strategies that young women can employ to attract a desirable partner include modern features (acquisition of education, employable skills) and traditional ones (diligence, modesty). The notion that physical intimacy is part of the mate selection process has been retained from traditional practice, even while the means and regulatory context for doing so have not. Moreover, the traditional hut for congregation of youth has been retained in the form of boys' houses (kiubu). Either during puberty or soon after circumcision, most young men (90%) build and move into a kiubu. These are detached living quarters in the family compound. When possible, they are placed at a discreet distance, out of sight from the doorways of the main house and kitchen. This arrangement expressly allows privacy and social traffic at all hours, including the entertainment
of female visitors. The kiubu is similar to the thingira mentioned by Kenyatta, but its use is individual and not controlled by a powerful age-set system.

Based on the experience of previous cohorts of young women mentioned above, premarital pregnancy has led successfully to marriage. It is therefore understandable that at present girls would also view risking or undertaking pregnancy as a reasonable marriage strategy.

Under these circumstances, it is surprising that unwed motherhood is not more common than it is. A number of factors account for this. First, some protection may be afforded by a period of post-menarcheal subfecundity (Whiting, Burbank, and Ratner 1986). In Western populations, the frequency of ovulatory cycles does not reach 50% until three years after menarche, and full fertility is not attained for six years (Vihko and Apter 1980). Thus, if a Ngec girl engages in occasional sexual intercourse without contraception, she may have a reduced probability of becoming pregnant until she is 18 or 19.

Changes in brideprice may constitute a more important reason that unwed motherhood is not more common. As described above, a girl was often pregnant before the wedding ceremonies were completed and the groom had built a hut for her to move into. Such is also the case in modern times. Of the women of our sample who were married in the 1960s, over 70% were pregnant before they moved in with their husbands. The cases of unwed pregnancy were those in which girls could not persuade the father of their child to take them in. These occurred not merely because the young man was unwilling to accept the responsibility of parenthood, but also because he could not persuade his father to pay the required brideprice and was unable to do so himself.

Previously, when a warrior was not supported by his father, he would organize a raid on the Maasai and steal enough cattle to cover the brideprice. This is not an option open to the modern schoolboy. In addition, without the control of senior warriors, young men are able to entertain girls in their kiubu at a much younger age than in the past. The father of a schoolboy who is responsible for a pregnancy knows that he will not only have to pay the brideprice, but also help support the new family until his son has finished school and is able to support a wife. Thus, at present a father prefers paying a fine for his son's misdemeanor to sanctioning the marriage. Effects
on the behavior of the modern young men of Ngéca are reflected in the fact that on average they do not accept paternity until age 23. This, however, is young compared to the traditional marital history of males under the age-set system and frequent polygyny, when first marriage for males did not occur until they had reached the late 20s.

Brideprice considerations also influenced the traditional behavior of a maiden. It was clearly in her own—and more particularly her family’s—interest to marry the son of a family wealthy enough to pay a substantial brideprice. This concern has decreased in importance with the dramatic reduction in brideprice, shown in Table 2. In recent decades, brideprice has declined to less than half the earlier average. Further, payment of no bridewealth whatsoever has appeared: in the 1940s, the lowest figure in the range of payments was a sum well above token payment levels, whereas in the 1950s, the range had lowered to include zero transfers of wealth. As the option to pay no brideprice has emerged, young women feel less constrained to act in a manner that will enhance their value in betrothal negotiations by their parents, and young men feel less constrained to offer any bridewealth. Indeed, it is not uncommon for parents of the bride to agree to invest in further education of the prospective groom.

That the transfer of wealth at marriage has been reduced at times to zero, or may even reverse directions, is congruent with the interpretation that males, rather than females, may now represent the relatively scarce partner. Interviews with parties in such negotiations indicate acute consciousness of this fact, which increases the groom’s bargaining power. In brideprice negotiations, education and earning power of each partner and wealth of parents are prime considerations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2</th>
<th>BRIDEPRICE BY DECADE OF BIRTHDATE OF FIRSTBORN CHILD</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Birthdate</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940s</td>
<td>2450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>1640</td>
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Aside from their control over financial resources, modern parents do not have an easy time controlling the sexual behavior of their adolescent children. As is the case in many other societies, there is an intergenerational taboo on discussion of sexual matters. Hence only the most self-consciously “modern” of parents are prepared to discuss reproduction and sex with their offspring, and even these would not go so far as to openly suggest an appropriate lover. Some parents have adopted the Christian view of the virtue of chastity and attempt to transmit it to their children, particularly their daughters, for chastity is not expected of young men. The kiubu, then, embodies the ambiguity generated by cultural accommodation of sexual activity for young men while increasingly requiring chastity and disapproving premarital, especially unwed, pregnancy of young women.

Parental instruction and assertion of authority over adolescent girls primarily take the form of moral interdiction and restriction of freedom of movement. Mothers do, however, explain the dangers of premarital pregnancy to their daughters. Loss of opportunity for advantageous marriage or freedom for self-advancement and the danger of lapsing into prostitution are pointed out—in that order—as negative consequences of “running around,” but the actual sexual activities that are indirectly prohibited are not detailed. Because the real cause for concern is not directly explicated, girls often feel their freedom is unjustly curtailed at the very juncture when they see themselves as more mature and deserving of increased autonomy. Their rebellion has often taken the oblique form of circumventing parental restrictions. For example, girlfriends frequently abet one another in creating alibis to allay parental suspicion so that one of them can have a nighttime assignation with a young man. When asked how Hope, a 17-year-old high school student, came to have an unwed pregnancy, her best friend Sarah said they had established a pattern of Hope staying overnight at Sarah’s. At first Hope’s mother checked up, but after a couple of times she ceased. So Hope was able to slip over to stay in her boyfriend’s kiubu, while Sarah covered for her.

Thus, if the reports of Kenyatta, Leakey, and the Ngeca elders that we talked with are accurate, there was little conflict about premarital sex in traditional Kikuyu society. Today there is considerable ambivalence on the part of both adults and adolescents, and even greater ambivalence concerning means of birth control. When
interviewed in 1983 about the limited intercourse prescribed by *ngweko* practices, some of our young informants of both sexes were aware that a traditional method of contracepted physical intimacy had existed, none had been instructed in it, and one reported it was thought to be "old-fashioned" and therefore of negligible contemporary relevance. Furthermore, an unmarried young woman is officially denied access to modern contraception unless she has already had a child. Contraception is only for women (*atumia*), and adolescent girls are designated as such only when they marry or have a child. A group of high school girls who approached the community health team on its weekly visit were refused contraception on this basis, but they were given instruction on "menstruation and sex."

Contraception is obtained by subterfuge, but young women fear that its use diminishes long-term fertility: sterility is much more negatively valued by both sexes than is premarital pregnancy, and has a strongly negative effect on a female's future. It is therefore an outcome more greatly to be feared than unwanted pregnancy. Males have little incentive to use contraception, and reported no use, but often expressed the value of abstinence and self-constraint unless marriage were considered. The two young men who were cited and fined more than twice in pregnancy cases during the recent study period were felt by other young men to be unreliable "bad lots" with unmanly lack of self-control.

While concerns of premarital pregnancy and marriage opportunity highlight changes in the reproductive histories of young women in this community, it is notable that the reproductive histories of males have actually undergone greater quantitative change. Recently, while age at birth of first child has increased little in females (birth years 1920–30, \(\bar{x} 19.5\) years; 1930–40, \(\bar{x} 20.1\) years), it has decreased substantially for males (\(\bar{x} 25.8\) and 23.4 years, respectively).\(^3\) Moreover, marriage has remained nearly universal for women, but, as discussed above, rates of polygyny among males have fallen dramatically. Variance in total fertility among Kikuyu men has been reduced concomitant with declines in polygyny, which agrees with reports that number of wives is a major component of high variance in total fertility of males in polygynous societies (e.g., Wood, Johnson, and Campbell 1985). Total reported fertility of women (seven to eight) has remained nearly unchanged. These changes for men have been physically manifested in the com-
plete disappearance of the man's house *(thingira)* from the study area by 1983.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Traditional Kikuyu culture structured adolescence through status and role changes bounded and reinforced by ritual and instruction. A variety of social changes have occurred in the study community over the last 80 years. Of these, abandonment of initiation rites and attenuation of the age-set system have most markedly altered the structure of adolescent experience, by shifting the content and context of socialization. Major agents for change in this process have been the school, church, and modern economy.

Responsibility for mate selection has remained with young people, but the determinants of partner desirability and gender ratios in partner availability have shifted considerably. Traditional criteria of partner desirability included, for males, ability to pay bride-wealth and to provide the wife with land, and, for females, diligence and demeanor. At present, education and wage earning capacity affect partner attractiveness of each sex, creating quantitative and qualitative bases for differential desirability. The decline of polygyny has both shift the balance of competition for spouses toward females, and had significant repercussions in the marital and reproductive histories of males. Decreases in brideprice and reversals in direction of transfers of wealth at marriage are tangible signs of change in the marriage market.

Deritualization of genital operations and attendant weakening of the age-set system have interrupted the flow of information on sex behavior and reproduction, controlled physical intimacy *(ngweko)*, and partner selection that was reinforced by peer pressure and group identification, resulting in lacunae in information and social support for adolescents. A variety of factors were identified that support adolescent sexual experimentation and increasing rates of premarital pregnancy. These include ambivalence toward the role of sexual activity in adolescent development and mate selection; the continued importance of marriage and fertility for both sexes; existence of boy's houses; denial of modern contraception; and a history of premarital pregnancy leading to marriage. Relaxation of bride-wealth requirements has operated against increases in premarital pregnancy.
In this case, the fertility behavior of young people could not be understood without reference to cultural context, both past and present. Changes in marriage and premarital pregnancy patterns corresponded closely with social change, including the elimination of key rituals. This case study indicates a frequently neglected function of rites of passage; namely, as a medium of instruction. Practical information is often conveyed which is requisite for the successful assumption of new roles and statuses. Loss of ritual may hence result in loss of information transmission necessary to guiding individual choice and action.

There have been numerous studies of male puberty rites in preindustrial societies. Van Gennep (1909) saw them as a rite of passage, noting their structural similarity to transition rituals throughout the life course. Whiting (1958, 1964, 1981) considered them as a cultural means of resolving sex-identity conflicts induced in early childhood. Young (1965) emphasized their function as a public announcement of status change. Schlegel and Barry (1980), taking an evolutionary perspective, have shown that these rites tend to occur in middle-level societies. Finally, Paige and Paige (1981) have argued that they served to consolidate the political status of the father of the initiate. Female initiation rites have not received as much attention, although they occur more commonly than do those for males. Brown (1963, 1981) has demonstrated that their occurrence is positively related to the economic importance of females, while Paige and Paige argued that female as well as male rites are related to the political status of the father.

Our analysis of Kikuyu adolescent rituals suggests that they may have another important function that was not considered in any of the above studies. Jomo Kenyatta’s comment (quoted above), that the initiation rites are “the essence of an institution which has enormous educational, social, moral and religious implications,” points to the social-functional roles of these rites, related to the Malinowskian notion of ritual. Kikuyu youth were initiated not into the adult status of womanhood and manhood, but into an age set of maidens and bachelors. By means of a sacred ceremony, the parental generation transferred to youth the responsibility of regulating premarital sex and initiating the process of mate selection, with peers as a major source of mutual support and regulation in this process. When this system had been secularized by edict and the introduction of Western schooling, both the regulation of premarital sex and
mate selection appear to have been destabilized, at least temporarily. We suspect that this effect of modernization is not unique.

NOTES

1Our field site is Ngeca, a village 35 km northwest of Nairobi and 15 km south of the escarpment leading to the floor of the Rift Valley. The population of Ngeca in 1968 when we began our study was slightly over 5000. By 1980 it had grown to 6900. Three micro-communities in Ngeca had been chosen to represent Kikuyu culture for the Child Development Research Unit (CDRU). One of the authors—Whiting—was director of the CDRU from 1968 to 1973. Worthman carried out a follow-up study from 1979 to 1982, concentrating on the adolescent life of children previously studied. Many others carried out field studies in the village during this period. Those contributing data of particular relevance to this study are: Beatrice B. Whiting, John Herzog, Thomas K. Landauer, Jane Chesiana, Wanjiku and James Kagia, and Julius Meme. Our knowledge of Kikuyu culture before it was influenced by the British is drawn primarily from Kenyatta (1938), Leakey (1977), Muriuki (1974), and from genealogies and oral histories provided by the elders of Ngeca.

2Kenyatta is presumably referring to the custom of married women to sexually entertain members of her husband’s initiation age set (Leakey 1977:810).

3Age at birth of first child closely follows age at marriage, occurring on average 0.5 years later. Date of birth of first child is, however, a discrete event that is much more precisely and reliably reported than is the complexly defined date of marriage.

REFERENCES


