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Fertility and Kinsihp, by Yu and Liu

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Book Reviews

FERTILITY AND KINSHIP IN THE PHILIPPINES. By Elena Yu and William T. Liu. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980. 286 pages.

Published in 1980, *Fertility and Kinship in the Philippines* is the ethnographic culmination of ten years' research by an interdisciplinary team of social scientists, headed by Yu and Liu. This work draws on initial scientific concern and discussions of fertility and population trends which erupted in the 1960s; and draws on literature reviews, statistical data, and traditional anthropological, sociological and demographic field methods, consisting primarily of a large-scale study of fertility and its problems, in an attempt to get beneath the surface organization and discover the underlying structures of Philippine society which control the solution to population problems (p. ix).

Preliminary findings and opinions by some of the co-workers were published in various journals throughout the 1970s. But what this current volume attempts to do is integrate the ethnographic knowledge of the way Cebuano families operate in regard to reproduction; to locate this and the value of family planning of both natives and agencies within the structured economic and social realities which so often in Southeast Asia encourage couples to have large families. This study attempts to come to terms with the frustrations met in planning population controls, and understand why natives persist, for either practical reasons or "desire", in "excessive" breeding. The authors show how and why contraceptive methods of—and imposed by—the West fail to take account of the social, cultural and economic (i.e., poverty or subsistence) conditions—also often created by the West—plus the natives' concept of physiology, reproductive-contraceptive medicine, which warrant an already strong and extensive kinship system to disperse and alleviate the burden, and in fact enhance the value of, children; in a cultural milieu where masculinity/femininity is closely tied to having children, and where the local language lacks even the words to describe the scientific understanding of reproduction—or the Western methods devised to prevent it.

The present volume focuses on the interrelations between family, kinship and fertility-coping behavior: how the family serves as an intermediary between the cultural system and the individual, shaping the latter's perception of kinship duties and obligations, assists in sheer survival and reproduction, in turn influencing one's family-building processes. There is an attempt to identify some of the social institutions and value systems that encourage large families, and understand patterns of interaction between spouses, families, relatives, friends and neighbors, with a brief reference to folk contraceptive practices (p. 2).

To this end the authors give a run-down on relevant demographic data in the first, introductory, chapter. This is followed in chapter 2 by a brief overview of the cultural values and institutions of Philippine society with an emphasis on their relation to the economic conditions of the Philippines, supported by simple but relevant statistics and tables. Although now somewhat out of date, these statistics portray conditions which still persist today.

The third chapter outlines the various methodologies used in collecting and collating ethnographic and statistical data. It is in the fourth chapter, "Cebuano Reproduction and Courtship," that preceding material is called upon and allows us to fully appreciate contraceptive knowledge and use, and the folk methods of birth control discussed in chapters 5 and 6.

Specifically in chapter 4 some "premarital realities" are disclosed. For example, premarital pregnancies (of some 28 percent), although long suspected, have yet to be thoroughly researched anthropologically. Yu and Liu, with some reference to the double standard in restrictive Philippine society, attempt a reasonable explanation. More importantly, although this sociological data is now antiquated and there has been some progress toward explaining the facts (see, e.g., Barbara Dobson, Western Australia University, on elopements), Yu and Liu's data stand in obvious contrast to previous Philippinist writers, (e.g. Eggan, Fox, Jocano, Lynch, Mendoza, Pal, Hart, Hollnsteiner, etc.), of the 1950s and 1960s—all of whom at least in general terms painted pictures of Philippine society as highly normative, moral, religious, law-abiding, peaceful, and of near-ideal social harmony. This rift in the historical context of the respective sociological camps is the implication Yu and Liu raise and attempt to confront. For too long the sexual and moral realities of Philippine life and society have been obfuscated, and it is only recently that they have come to light through the efforts of writers such as Yu and Liu.

Chapters 7 and 8, on marital and extramarital relationships (such as the *querida* system) are bridging chapters. They outline how previously discussed values and institutions are acted out and reflected in actual behavior; how knowledge and beliefs relevant to birth and children are practised. These chapters review the conjugal institution at a personal level but set within the macro, sociocultural paradigm. Consequently, it allows for a smooth transition to chapter 9: a focus on the role and locus of children in, and affecting, that conjugal bond.

A major problem highlighted here is that of family composition. As with most writers on Philippine society, as bilateral, Yu and Liu claim that the most common form of family/household is nuclear. But these present authors at least attempt to explain in terms of family interaction, fluidity and migration, the 30-40 percent of families (at any one time) who are not nuclear. Yu and Liu go beyond the classic anthropological explanation that, "household structure is a consequence of kinship organization," and they suggest other "certain ecological factors" (p. 204). But in dealing with these, particularly physical and economic constraints, the authors run into major problems, (see, e.g. the confusion and poor paragraph organization of pp. 204-5). Given that Philippine family/household organization has as yet not been satisfactorily detailed and explained, it not surprising the authors are confused; but they make a bold attempt to wrestle with the problem, and by bringing to bear other significant factors, make some progress in solving a seemingly simple matter that remains a perplexing anthropological riddle.

Chapter 10, "The Web of Kinship," then places all the previously noted relationships, with their concomitant beliefs and practices, in a wider framework of close social interactions, showing how children are integrated into and valuable to the bilateral kinship system which, fully recognizing children as assets or contributors to the welfare of society, sanctions and supports appropriate reproductive behavior.

In chapter 11 the authors extend the kinship network to include fictive/ritual kin, relations in which, according to my observations and with which Gudeman's (1971) excellent article concurs, children play a pivotal role.

Much has been written on the value/disvalue of children in Third World cultures, (see, e.g., Mathews, PSR, 1986), but almost all take a functional and economic perspective. To date only Gudeman has fathomed the symbolic meaning of the centrality of children, and raised profound questions relevant to social structures which behaviorally pronounce strong concepts of the sacred and the profane. Unfortunately Yu and Liu are also guilty of this functionalism and of structural-symbolic neglect. Rightly and convincingly they expound in chapter 11 and the conclusion how and why Cebuanos spread the costs of child-rearing and maximize their socioeconomic gains; how such mechanisms, often ignored by family-planners, have worked to sustain population growth (p. 10), and the authors recognize that everywhere in the Philippines children occupy a central position, both structurally and in actuality, and how they are distributed through the larger kinship system.

But here I must raise two points: Firstly, when one speaks of "maximization of economic gains" in Philippine (or peasant) society, one needs to consider Scott's (1976) argument that the natives' concept of "maximum" may mean "minimum of risk", i.e. maximization to an acceptable, subsistence level, and not the often misconstrued Western capitalist imposed idea of greatest profit before the onset of declining marginal returns. As I have

argued elsewhere (Mathews, PSR, 1986), children are primarily valuable because they can sustain themselves, and therefore they are not a burden on parents and that they can (and do) repay the initial parental investment/outlay in them; but their real value lies in that, over and beyond their initial costs and their ability of self-sustenance, they offer the potential (and often the actuality) of marginally contributing to the family and/or household subsistence. It is in fortuitous cases, not uncommon, that a child may clearly profit (i.e., more than marginally) his/her family. Fortunately Yu and Liu tend to accept Scott's general peasant-subsistence framework.

Secondly: Given that there are few or no alternative investment opportunities, or other social security measures available in peasant societies, children are obviously economically attractive. But this economic determinism fails to account for the pivotal role children seem to play in bridging various relationships—those between mother-father, parents-society, parents-grandparents, family and kin network, and, as an exemplary case, between parents and fictive kin. Why is the child the focal member in a family; why does this role, so important, even exist in a bilateral kin system? It seems to be that, apart from the obvious economic and functional reasons, a bilateral kinship system can only perpetuate itself through children, who by extending kin networks, also join nuclear groups. But to act as such an intermediary the child needs to be pure (sacred), not profane. It is here that the child's symbolic significance becomes closely tied to his/her social role, and hence pivotal position. (Of course the question remains: why have a bilateral system in the Philippines, the only such system in Southeast Asia, that makes it necessary for children to play such a pivotal role?)

It seems to me that this book is worthy of more attention. There has been a horrid paucity of quality Philippine ethnographies until the mid-1970s, and Yu and Liu's ethnography—not just a fact-finding mission—provides descriptive details which allow for a greater and more personal appreciation of analyses. It is by no means without fault: most survey respondents were married women and data focuses on their fertility; at times presentation is emotive and slightly moralistic; and the authors fail to fully explain the pivotal and symbolic role of children. The conclusions the authors reach, relevant to all developing nations with population problems, are well based, but require further attention in order to be reconciled with Caldwell's (1982) *Theory of Fertility Decline*: that fertility will decline as education—and its cost—rises. But Yu and Liu's book, at least implicitly, forces attention to these questions, as it does also to the reality of Philippine sexuality and society, in obvious relief to the rich harmony of an exotic Southeast Asian culture verbally painted by predecessors.

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