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HOW MANY AFRICANS?

not only is Africa's population growth rate high in comparison even with India's, but its steep climb is likely to continue when Latin America's, its nearest rival in the future, begins to fall away.

THERE SEEMS TO BE a vaguely complacent belief that Africa is not involved in the population explosion. India, yes; Africa, no. Even experts are apt to subscribe to this idea. Thus Professor Bohannan maintains in his recent *African Outline* (Penguin, 1966) that "African birth rates are probably not high in comparison with other underdeveloped areas". The very opposite is true, at least according to the statistics produced at the United Nations World Population Conference last year. If one is to believe these figures — and let us believe them for the moment — then West Africa has by far the highest birth rate in the world: 52 per thousand per year. The figures per thousand per year, for the whole of the continent, in regions as defined in the 1964 *Demographic Yearbook*, are: Western Africa 52; Northern Africa 44; Southern Africa 43; Eastern Africa 42; Middle Africa 40.

The only comparable figures are those of: Middle America 44; Middle South Asia 43; South East Asia 42; South West Asia 41; Tropical South America 40; Republic of Korea and Taiwan 40.

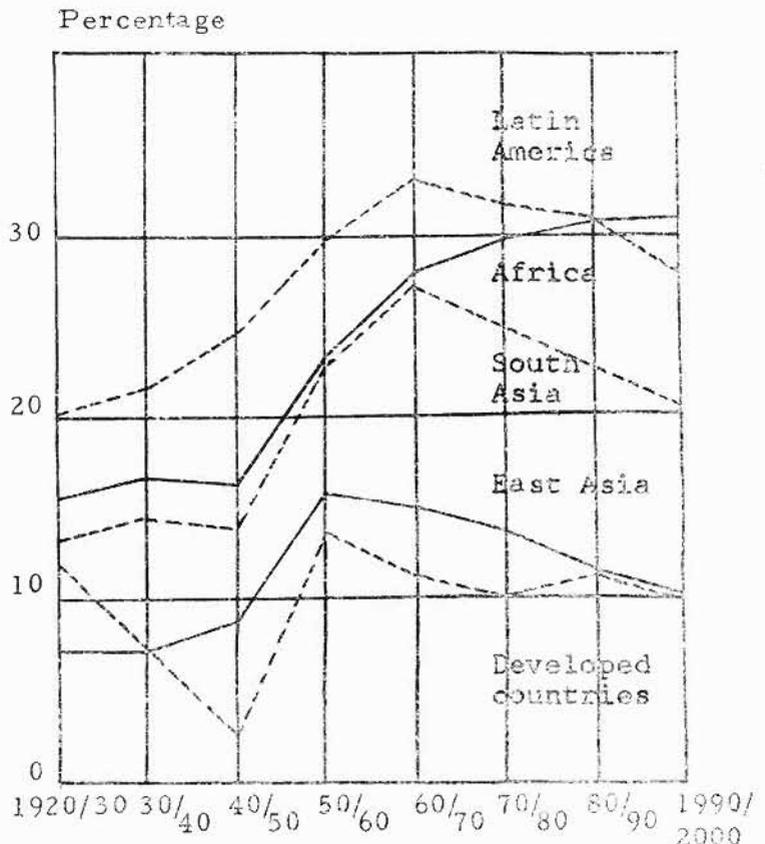
The figure for Western Europe, with the lowest birth rate in the world, is 17 per thousand per year.

Whilst the birth rate in Africa can thus be seen to equal and in some areas even exceed that of India — the notorious example of population explosion — the actual rate of population growth in Africa is perhaps even more pronounced. In the first half of this decade, the average annual increase in Middle South Asia (i.e. India) was 2.3%, whilst the figures for Western, Southern, Northern, Eastern and Middle Africa respectively were 2.7%, 2.7%, 2.5%, 1.8%, and 1.5%. Only in some parts of Latin America was the percentage increase higher than in Africa, and even this is small consolation: if the growth rates are projected into the future in accordance with all factors which are now known to influence the situation, then Latin America shows a decline whilst the African growth rate continues its steep climb. In fact, the African rate is the only one in the world to show such a rise as the graph, compiled by Mr Bourgeois-Pichat from UN data, so vividly shows (from *Population Growth and Development* by Jean Bourgeois-Pichat, International Conciliation No. 556, January 1966, published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace). [See opposite.]

If these predictions are accepted, then we must expect the population of Africa by the end of this century to be almost three times as large as it was in 1960, a rise from 273,000,000 to 768,000,000. What this means in economic terms can easily be imagined: the rate of development is equal to the difference between the rate of economic growth and the rate of demographic growth. Once the two rates are of the same order of magnitude, economic development becomes virtually impossible. This is what has been happening in many countries in recent years. The point where population increase began to outpace development came somewhere before 1950, marked by the sharp upward turn of the curves in the graph, and it coincides with the release for general use of sulphur drugs, anti-biotics and insecticides developed during World War II. The

resulting decline in mortality was drastic. As Mr. Bourgeois-Pichat points out, if the population of the developing countries is growing so fast, it is because, thanks to these discoveries, death rates are now low, whilst the high birth rates formerly required to balance the high death rates have been maintained.

WHY AFRICA'S GROWTH RATE refuses to decline when all the others apparently respond to the demand of our day for family limitation is a question which deserves examination. First, though, a closer look at those African birth rate statistics, and in particular the West African figure of 52 per thousand per year: The area includes Nigeria, Africa's most populous state. The 1963 census disclosed 55.7 million Nigerians — an increase of 83% since 1953, or 5.7% per annum. It should be said right away that few people in Nigeria believed the 1963 count to be accurate; in fact, it gave rise to a first-rate row as a result of which the ruling NPC/NCNC coalition came apart — a break which was as instrumental in bringing about



Decennial population growth of the major regions of the world from 1920 to 2000

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the downfall of Sir Abubakar's government last January. The regional allocation of seats in Nigeria's federal parliament depended on population size, hence it was in the political interest of the regions to boost their respective census counts. These considerations alone make the 1963 census count and the 5.7% increase in the birth rate which it denotes questionable, but there is another good reason to doubt them: according to experts, it does not seem that the population growth rate anywhere can in fact exceed 4% annually. As Dr Aluko pointed out in a most illuminating analysis of Nigeria's census problems (in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3, Oct. 1965) the data available in mid-1963 showed that in Africa only Ghana's population recorded a 6.2% increase between 1950 and 1960 (from 4,000,000 to 6,700,000). The annual rates of growth in other African countries since 1950 were highest in Guinea (3.1%), Togo and Dahomey (2.8%), Niger and Senegal (2.7%), Ethiopia and the Republic of South Africa (2.6%), Egypt (2.5%), and Ivory Coast (2.2%). Most other African countries recorded lower rates of growth: Gabon (0.8%), Tanzania (1.8%), Mali (2.1%), and Algeria (1.9%). Cameroun, Nigeria's nearest neighbour to the east, maintained a growth rate of 1.0% per annum compared with 5.3% in Eastern Nigeria; Chad, the Central African Republic, and Niger, which surround Northern Nigeria, have been growing at annual rates of 1.0%, 1.9% and 2.7% respectively, as compared with 5.1% in Northern Nigeria.

These comparisons can only increase the doubt which political considerations throw on the 1963 census figure of Nigeria, whose annual growth rate of 5.7% is therefore scarcely acceptable. Furthermore, since Nigeria constitutes one quarter of Africa's total population, this percentage increase must be reflected to a considerable extent in the continent's total. The steep rise in Africa's population growth curve may have to be modified in accordance with these considerations. There is also this argument to be taken into account: the methods of census-taking in colonial days — unscientific sampling and the popular connection between these counts and taxation, resulting in attempts by the population to evade the counts — support the belief that the steep increases recently noted in some African countries are more apparent than real, since the past figures on which the calculations are based may have been low. Nevertheless, even if the African projection were to be modified with these objections in view (and some of these have been provided for in the United Nations calculations) the rate of increase would remain disquietingly high. (This is indicated by the fact that the Southern African and Egyptian statistics, which are comparatively reliable, show about the same annual increase for the period 1960-65 as West Africa.)

WHAT IS MORE, SUCH MODIFICATIONS would not seem to alter the fact that the African growth curve is expected to continue to rise in contradistinction to the rest of the world. Its projection into the future is, of course, only a prediction based on certain assumptions, such as recent estimates of advances in life expectancy and qualitative evaluations of the health facilities available. The decline of the growth curves for the rest of the world reflects a decline in fertility, largely the result of family planning. That this expectation is justified is borne out by the rapid decreases in the birth rates in recent years in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and a number of other areas in Asia where birth control programmes are carried out with government support and financial assistance. Such limitation is apparently not envisaged for Africa, at least by the end of the century. To what extent is this assessment justified?

Mr Bourgeois-Pichat's study contains the following observation: "Demographic factors — fertility, mortality, and migration — are deeply affected by the cultural climate in which they occur. The level of fertility is a national state of mind rather than a physiological characteristic of couples. Any alteration in the demographic situation of a country thus can come only from within. Any external action is interpreted as an attack on the existing culture, in other words, an attack on that which a country generally holds most sacred." He probably did not write this with Africa in particular in mind, but to no other part of the world could these remarks be applied more fittingly. This is not the place to discuss the importance

of children, generation and regeneration in the traditional African world-view, but the cultural resistance to birth control and to those who advocate it is deeply felt throughout the continent. Some of this resentment was recently expressed in an article by Alhaji Shodeinde, the Chief Imam of Lagos (*Daily Times*, 11.3.1966). After describing birth control as the technical strangulation of the small life-germ, a barbarous and ungodly practice akin to murder, invented by civilised man, he wrote:

The argument so far adduced by the protagonists of birth control or of the so-called family planning is that if the present world birth rate is left unchecked there might be overpopulation and consequently shortage of food to go round. No argument can be more puerile, untenable and unreasonable. Is the whole of the earth's surface now fully populated by human beings? What of the large tracts of vacant and uncultivated lands in the forests of Asia and Africa?

This last argument is, of course, difficult to counter by "civilised man". Whilst there may not be any tracts of vacant land vast enough to feed the hungry, at least in Asia, a fraction of the money now spent on preparations for war could transform the earth into a place capable of providing for generations to come, even at present population growth rates. There is the danger that aid-giving countries may come to regard birth control for the underdeveloped a panacea — a cheaper and easier substitute for the promotion of economic development. President Johnson has already been reported as saying that "less than five dollars invested in population control is worth 100 dollars invested in economic growth". (*UN Monthly Chronicle*, Special Commemorative Issue, July 1965.) However, a lower birth rate would not by any means eliminate the need for economic development, and the initiative for demographic stabilisation must come from the developing countries themselves — it cannot be imposed.

Of course, those responsible for economic and social development cannot afford a complacent view — even in Africa, where the relatively low population density may make the situation appear less urgent than elsewhere. For every person alive in Africa in 1950 there will be two in 1980 and 3.5 by the end of the century. There is no country in Africa which can claim a rate of economic development capable of keeping up with this rate of population growth. There may be good grounds for doubting the United Nations statistics — on the other hand, to rely on the assumption that they are wrong would seem somewhat risky. ●

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