Africa 75 (3), 2005

REVIEW ARTICLE

FERTILITY'S FIRES AND EMPTY WOMBS IN RECENT AFRICANIST WRITING

Nancy Rose Hunt

DENISE ROTH ALLEN, *Managing Motherhood, Managing Risk: fertility and danger in west central Tanzania*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press (pb US$24.95, £16.00 – 0 472 03027 2; hb US$65.00, £37.00 – 0 472 11284 8). 2002.

CAROLINE H. BLEDSOE, *Contingent Lives: fertility, time, and aging in West Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (pb US$22.00, £17.50 – 0 226 05852 2; hb US$67.00, £47.50 – 0 226 05851 4). 2002.

MARIA C. INHORN and FRANK VAN BALEN (eds), *Infertility around the Globe: new thinking on childlessness, gender, and reproductive technologies*. Berkeley: University of California Press (pb US$22.50, £14.95 – 0 520 23137 6; hb US$55.00, £39.95 – 0 520 23108 2). 2002.

HENRIETTA L. MOORE, TODD SANDERS and BWIRE KAARE, *Those Who Play with Fire: gender, fertility, and transformation in East and Southern Africa*. London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology vol. 69. London: Athlone Press (pb £16.99, US$26.95 – 0 82646367 3; hb £65.00, US$84.95 – 0 48519569 0). 1999.

ELISHA P. RENNE, *Population and Progress in a Yoruba Town*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (pb £24.99 – 0 7486 1815 5); Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press (pb US$26.95 – 0 472 08983 8). 2003.

DAVID SHAPIRO with B. OLEKO TAMBASHE, *Kinshasa in Transition: women's education, employment, and fertility*, 2003. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (hb US$37.50 – 0 226 75057 4). 2003.

LYNN M. THOMAS, *Politics of the Womb: women, reproduction, and the state in Kenya*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press (pb US$24.95, £15.95 – 0 520 23540 1; hb US$65.00, £41.95 – 0 520 22450 7). 2003, 300 pp.

NANCY ROSE HUNT teaches African history and anthropology at the University of Michigan. Her *A Colonial Lexicon of Birth Ritual, Medicalization, and Mobility in the Congo* (Duke University Press, 1999) received the Herskovits Prize from the African Studies Association in 2000. She is presently completing an anthropological history of violence, infertility and laughter in colonial Congo; and an edited book/DVD video documentary project on gender, health and knowledge in contemporary Accra.

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2005.75.3.421 Published online by Cambridge University Press

If Emily Martin's *The Woman in the Body* forever changed the cultural study of biomedical and lay metaphors of reproductive processes with its publication in 1987, Janice Boddy's *Wombs and Alien Spirits* (1989) soon showed the complex signifying work that wombs and their specialized spirits can do in the context of an African healing cult, one that like most converges on reproductive disorder. These were hardly equivalent books in feminist anthropology, though each placed wombs – American wombs and African wombs – centre stage, and each has had ripple effects. If Martin's book got all kinds of people thinking in new ways about the powerful metaphors of biomedical knowledge, Boddy's gave new meaning to spirit possession as feminist discourse and gender performance. If Megan Vaughan's considerations of colonial medical knowledge, *Curing their Ills* (1991), emerged within the same Foucauldian wake displayed by the former, the anthology entitled *Those Who Play with Fire* (1999) and Carol Muller's *Rituals of Fertility and the Sacrifice of Desire* (1999) continue in the interpretive vein of embodiment and performance so skilfully displayed by Boddy.

Shifts in the anthropological study of reproduction continued to make their mark, however, and central among these were two books that appeared in 1995 – *Conceiving the New World Order: the global politics of reproduction*, edited by Faye D. Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp, and *Situating Fertility: anthropology and demographic inquiry*, edited by Susan Greenhalgh. If the first introduced the robust concept of stratified reproduction and powerfully pointed to global stratification in terms of *who* is subjected to and *who* has access to what kinds of reproductive, technological and pharmaceutical agendas, the second screamed out against the mind-numbing ways that demographers had stepped up to the epistemological plate of these global agendas. Both books demanded situated, nuanced and textured knowledge about reproductive knowledge and practice instead.

Most of the books considered in this review essay, it could be argued, fall out from the stir created by these two books that politicized reproductive politics, demographic inquiry and global population control programmes in striking new ways. But this is not entirely so, and even some of those which do, do so with such originality, subtlety and methodological innovation that they deserve our special attention. Some of this originality lies in counting, how they do it and to what effect; we see this especially in Bledsoe's and Renne's books. Another set of books are still playing with fertility's fires through much more interpretive and hermeneutic means and rubrics, ones we should be careful to track as well if we are to have a sense of the full range of analytic possibilities at hand. We also need to wonder if the field is bifurcated in a sense – less between anthropological and historical work perhaps, but between phenomenological, meaning-centred studies of ritual and those of everyday politics and practice.

Lest one not realize, it is important to know that there are still demographers out there who speak of well-educated city women as the 'vanguard' of a modernizing movement that will bring to Africa its long-deserved fertility transition. Yet when they do so, as David Shapiro

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2005.75.3.421 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and B. Oleko Tambashe discovered for Kinshasa, the assumption that female schooling and formal sector employment will have an influence on fertility rates can meet with disappointment and contradictions. The evidence suggests that Kinshasa women are hardly turning to modern contraceptives but rather to induced abortion, in a context where formal sector work has been strongly reduced for men and women alike since severe economic crisis began in early 1990s. Some of the tabulated evidence presented in *Kinshasa in Transition* is interesting: not only that about abortion but also that on intra-family forms of solidarity in investing in children's schooling. Parents and kin go to extraordinary trouble to pay school fees, buy uniforms and supplies. And fostered children are not only imported to help with household labour but as a way to assure that kin receive schooling. Still, the authors have to reckon with what a contradictory modernity this is. And more might have been said about what contraceptives, abortions and uniforms cost in a context of extraordinary inflation, economic and political crisis, civil war, and massive unemployment. Shapiro and Tambashe are left speculating about – rather than understanding – whether economic crisis may produce fertility limitation or greater female autonomy or less capacity to invest in school fees or all three.

A study of meanings or experiences or politics, *Kinshasa in Transition* is not. Some of this is clearly admitted. There may be a backlash at work against any simple reliance on African voices within African studies (Hunt 1999; Cohen *et al*. 2001; Petersen 2004), but when 'voices' are so flagrantly absent, they begin to look mighty appealing. So do social action, individual strategies and things. (With the exception of the use of items like the radio, the television, music systems, refrigerators, freezers, fans and air conditioners to assess economic well-being, materials objects are missing here.) A book like *Kinshasa in Transition* is an important reminder of the kinds of knowledge production that new anthropologists of fertility and reproduction in Africa are working against. It also implicitly asks us to pay special attention to the kinds of methodologies that are being marshalled in this new work. I consider three of them here: one that began as a dissertation and two by seasoned anthropologists with years of experience and data collection.

Denise Roth Allen's *Managing Motherhood, Managing Risk* is a contribution to the growing field of ethnographies of development. Her argument is that standardized development interventions often fail and she demonstrates this by looking at the first ten years of the World Health Organization's Safe Motherhood Initiative in a rural Tanzanian community. Following James Ferguson, she looks at development as an apparatus that produces standardized interventions by which to manage mothers, all the while relying on a moral language of saving lives.

The book turns on a critique of the WHO's standardized pat narrative of one woman's road to maternal death, a narrative that is crafted for local professional and lay audiences to highlight biomedical solutions along this problematic road. Allen argues that homogenizing women's experiences in this way leads to generic policies and programmes, as if what will work in one location will certainly work in another.

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2005.75.3.421 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Instead, more attention should be paid to local perceptions of risk, the process by which access to treatment unfolds, and the quality of provider–client relations. The result is preachy at moments, though one can see Ginsburg and Rapp's cues at work here in the global/local dynamic to the analysis: knowledge about maternal health risk produced is top down – from the North to the South – with little flexibility for or comprehension of a local level. In fact, this expert, official knowledge constructs motherhood itself as risk, the risk of excessive childbearing. It is an obtuse message, oblivious to local women's worries about unsuccessful fertility, whether in infertility, miscarriage or pregnancy loss. Ultimately Allen shows that it is fertility control that drives safe motherhood initiatives, while women's legitimate concerns about secondary infertility receive almost no official attention.

Allen's work is based on twenty-two months of ethnographic and survey-based research in a Sukuma community of 4,000 and the book is divided into 'official' (colonial and international and national) and 'unofficial' (local Sukuma) definitions of maternal health risk. 'Tradition' itself is often construed as risk in official terms, whereas Allen shows the complex local vocabulary that exists for various forms of fertility, childbearing and post-partum risks. Her account also provides compelling evidence of the often appalling conditions in many of Africa's maternity wards, a theme that has best been developed for francophone Africa. When she first began her research, Allen observed twenty-one births on a labour ward during a three-week period before she stopped because she could no longer stomach the hostility of the staff towards patients. Nurses insulted and abused women in labour. She witnessed hitting during labour, whereas a lay midwifery course in El Paso, Texas constituted Allen's norm. Her observations of a woman healer's midwifery practice and clinic proved more tenable and fruitful, if avoidant of the realities of 'inhospitable medicine' (Jaffré and Olivier de Sardan 2003) in postcolonial Africa.

Caroline Bledsoe's *Contingent Lives* is a major work, beautifully and engagingly written, based on rich and unusual data, which pits the enterprises of anthropology and demography against each other in revealing juxtaposition. It is a searing critique of the population control industry's focus on child-spacing as a way to sell fertility limitation to Africans, while completely misunderstanding when and why African women are using contraceptives – not to limit births, but to enhance maternal health and thus reproductive potential. When women use strong birth control injections, it is usually to give their bodies a rest from childbearing.

The big anomalies studied here concern contraception. Why do women who want to have as many children as possible use modern contraception to lengthen the intervals between births? And why are older women and those who have suffered a miscarriage or stillbirth even more likely to use modern contraceptives? Slowly – sometimes too slowly – Bledsoe reveals the answers. Critical is the notion of reproductive mishap. Along the way Bledsoe pulls readers into her research process; she alternated between bewilderment over anomalies

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2005.75.3.421 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and seeming inconsistencies and a slow reckoning with an entirely different way of conceiving of not only reproduction, but also ageing and the life course. A pivotal moment is when her Gambian research assistant came to her with an alternative fertility survey form, based on muscles lost per pregnancy, and arranged according to births produced per husband. From this survey form issued forth Bledsoe's notion of contingent – rather than biologically clocked – lives, and her work began to shift from the demographic obsession with the puzzle of child-spacing to an African puzzle: how to defer ageing. The overall picture that emerges is of Gambian women paying enormous attention to preserving reproductive potential and using Western contraceptives if necessary to do so, all to gain an esteemed and comfortable elderly period of rest and esteem.

Bledsoe shows the logic of practice that underlies tactics related to having many children and having a successful marriage, while also being able to remove oneself from childbearing as needed. Minute decisions about how to delay or stop pregnancy are linked to a logic about giving the body rest. Profound local meanings about blood, muscles and the body emerge, as she shows how women comprehend ageing in relation to childbearing and reproductive mishaps in an intimate, physical way. She takes us very close to a new understanding of habitus, body gestures and technologies, and she does so through language – the speech of women collected during monthly rounds over a three-year period of time. Some of this is conscious and easily verbalized. We learn less about what is not. And, perhaps unfortunately, the social frame is narrowed almost entirely to conjugal life. A woman obtains 'conjugal credit' for each pregnancy, whether it results in a live birth or not. We learn very little about the wider worlds within which people are living, about friendships, about economic conditions, nor even how local woman go about accessing something like birth control. Yet her anthropology extends way beyond the demography establishment to our entire Western approach to time and reproduction. Having fully revealed the Gambian habitus that undergirds the African contingency perspective, she then deconstructs the late twentieth-century Western habitus that produced this narrow focusing on biological clocks, by showing how differently Euroamericans viewed reproductive toil when fertility levels were higher and childbearing much more dangerous. In doing so, Bledsoe's book sheds important light on vulnerable African women, those more susceptible to reproductive mishap due to a lack of help in the fields and around the hearth from their husband, co-wives, children or foster children, thus those exposed to harder physical labour and a lesser diet. And just as a reproductive mishap might be the trauma that aged the body earlier, her study implies, so might other forms of 'trauma', from gruelling labour to malnutrition to war.

Bledsoe argues that her informants do not count. Indeed, they refuse to specify the number of births that they want, seeing such enumeration as a matter of destiny; they have been assigned a number they can never know, rather they can only try to live up to this potential. The contrast between Gambian women's rejection of numeracy and

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2005.75.3.421 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Bledsoe's embrace of it could not be more stark. For anthropologists with an ethnographic sensibility, the book demonstrates the capacity of numbers to bear important puzzles, clues, and ultimately to speak vital meanings. A major part of the methodological innovation here is how Bledsoe gets numbers to speak. (At moments, the book almost reads like an affectionate commercial for the Epi Info database.) She also notes the importance of attending to awkward English translations in one's data as a source of fruitful meanings and a place for further semantic inquiry.

Renne's *Population and Progress in a Yoruba Town* is another forceful critique of fertility transition theory, its basis in modernization theory and the idea of universal progress, though accomplished through thick and varied ethnography. It is a richly detailed study of ideas about fertility and development (or population and progress) in one Yoruba town, where the local ideas that link fertility to followers and people to a developed town are traced at every turn. Much of its success is related to its methodological and interpretive focus on what Renne calls 'diagnostic things', most of which are closely associated with human bodies, including houses, graves, hymens, blood and bones. The photographic evidence is superb, showing us in each case Renne's quick and ready eye and amplifying this emphasis on objects and material life.

Ultimately the questions are focused on relationships between people's interest in attracting followers and residents with the ways they understand and practise progress and development. Using survey data at all kinds of levels, she gets to the meanings and practices of 'civilization', a word choice that Renne never explores though is part of local speech in a book that is otherwise extremely attentive to the Yoruba language and the meaning of things, terms, idioms. Some are limiting the size of their families with the new idea that quality not quantity is what matters.

The sharp structure of the book forces seeing how local people perceive fertility in relation to the body and social relations on the one hand, and to development and the state on the other. After a first part in which Renne establishes the historical, anthropological and demographic context for the study including local words associated with fertility, she divides her analysis into two additional parts. 'Bodies, Persons and Social Relations' has chapters on virginity and marriage; child-fostering and parenthood; and burial and death. It includes fascinating material on how girlhood, marriage, parenting and burials are changing. The final part, 'Population, Development, and the State', takes on hygiene, sanitation and education; houses and land tenure; and counting and censusing. When you look at what she builds up out of a very concrete set of questions about how people are getting married, building houses, burying their dead and how they understand themselves to have been building development through electricity, roads, health centres, cleanliness and state building, you learn an enormous amount about the 1990s in a town in south-western Nigeria: how people talk about politics and various Nigerian regimes, how they

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2005.75.3.421 Published online by Cambridge University Press

have been building their town, how population is important to that goal, and how they speak and reckon with numeracy. Indeed, this is one of the strongest and most unusual parts of the book. Renne provides a very rich historical ethnography of numeracy: how new forms of censusing and vital registration came in with colonialism, the politics and practices surrounding national censuses in the 1950s and in 1991, and how local people keep count of births through strings of beads and marks on parlour doors.

Some of the most fascinating material is that on moral revaluations of virginity and premarital sexuality, reinterpretations of the body (notably the hymen) and how best to establish marital relations that seem to have been fully in play among modern school-going young women by the 1970s. By the early 1970s, sexual intercourse before marriage had become commonplace, seen as a necessary part of selecting a spouse, being 'enlightened' and preventing infertility. Marrying for love and consciously choosing one's family size have accompanied these moral revaluations of marriage, fertility and sexuality. Why the 1970s? Some of Renne's informants mention television. It would be good to know more concretely how and why these boom years in Nigeria precipitated these changes. Also, why does Renne exclude the extensive information that she has collected on the use and meanings of contraceptives from this analysis? After all, Renne has collected some of the richest evidence available for the entire continent on this subject. Might it not be part of a chronology of new forms of girlhood and 'diagnostic things'? Granted, this material is published elsewhere. Yet would not integration of the meanings and uses of these new social objects – from postinor to IUDs – have enriched the exegesis and even perhaps assisted in untangling some of the mystery about new sexualities, desires and the 1970s?

Each of these three books are important rejoinders to the hegemony of global population control and its expression in narrow quantitative demographic work and insensitive maternal health interventions. Bledsoe and Renne's books, in particular, show how demographic research can be combined with an ethnographic sensibility and careful attention to narrative answers to open-ended survey questions. Over nine years, Renne returned again and again with new mini-surveys. Bledsoe had others doing this work for her and admits that her primary research site was the computer room; yet, still, much of her interpretive work is organized around these narrative-based replies. These books also suggest that in the early twenty-first century, economic crisis and AIDS are forcing a downward turn in African fertility, at the household and often the national levels. And at least some Africans are counting and they are counting in new and watchful ways. They also suggest that historians should pay even more attention to what the transition from initiation rites to schooling has meant for girls and boys in Africa. If the 1970s was a critical decade in this sense in south-western Nigeria, Renne's data also suggests that we need to be careful not to assume that sexuality and desire are always aimed at having more babies.

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2005.75.3.421 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Anthropologists of the body have found, over and over again, that fertility – and not just procreative fertility – is at the heart of the ways Africans act upon their worlds, and at the basis of these symbolic repertoires is the human body. Henrietta Moore's excellent theoretical introduction to the anthology, *Those Who Play with Fire*, explores how anthropological interest in fertility in Africa has changed, with its greater focus on gender and the body, and due to the shift from structuralist and functionalist anthropology to poststructuralist, phenomenological and practice-oriented work. She makes a distinction between Bourdieu and Merleau-Ponty in terms of this history and material, but she does not draw it out in terms of a critique of the work in the volume. What she does explain is why there is such a focus here on the unconscious and the unspoken – the move away from language and speech to practice. Clearly, *Those Who Play with Fire* takes us into very different terrain from the kind of speech-centred work of Bledsoe and Renne. The essays collected here show that practice-based analyses of rites of initiation and origin myths remain a staple of this kind of fertility research. No matter how much they import Judith Butler on performance and gender inversions, and despite Bourdieu's emphasis on material circumstances, the attention paid to embodied ritual seems to keep most of the authors in *Those Who Play with Fire* from situating their analyses within a larger frame than the locality and temporality immediately at hand. They present ritual and myths in terms of gendered meanings, including the maternal body and the fertility of land and people. Yet the work seems excessively synchronic, wearisome even, so detached does it seem from history, agency, and change.

Fortunately, the maternal body and fertility more capaciously defined are not only receiving renewed attention at the hands of practice-oriented symbolic anthropologists. In addition to the new work by culturally minded demographic anthropologists we visited above, wombs and fertility anxieties have become a central theme in recent histories of twentieth-century Africa. Renne's book is an important gesture in this direction. And several historians have been writing nuanced histories of colonial forms of medicalization, eugenics and the reproductive 'tensions of empire' (see especially Stoler 2002). If Megan Vaughan (1988) paved the way, several others have pitched in. The result is a huge outpouring of material on what might be broadly considered the rubric of colonial eugenics and the medicalization of female bodies, including work on maternity (Allman 1994; Beinart 1992; Burman and Naude 1991; Conklin 1998), childbirth (Burns 1995; Deacon 1998; Hunt 1999), abortion (Bradford 1991), miscegenation (Barrera 1996; White 1999), infertility and sexually transmitted diseases (Callahan 1998; Feldman-Savelsberg 1999; Kielmann 1998; Jochelson 2001: Summers 1991; Vaughan 1992; Wallace 1998) and female circumcision (Bell 1998; Boddy 1998).

Lynn Thomas' *Politics of the Womb* is an extraordinary intervention within this new field and one of our very first histories of girlhood in Africa. It shows how pronatalism – first emphasized by the colonial state and native authorities and then by Kenyatta's postcolonial regime – had

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2005.75.3.421 Published online by Cambridge University Press

striking effects on how and when girls were circumcised, where women could give birth and how premarital pregnancy was managed. Stretching from the 1920s through the 1990s primarily in the Meru area of the central Kenyan highlands, Thomas shows how girls' sexuality, fertility and initiation practices have been the subject of heated debate and intense gender, generational and political negotiations since the 1920s. Tightly argued and copiously documented with archival and oral interview evidence, it twists Bayart's 'politics of the belly' in new and mischievous ways. It points to the kinds of colonial 'politics of the womb' that sought population growth and conflated sexuality and reproduction, and to the kinds of postcolonial 'politics of the womb' that left Kenyan politicians furious at the capacity of their young lovers to sue them for child support. If the title's turn of phrase is felicitous and does good work, the more important theoretical intervention is to insist that despite the misgivings of Fred Cooper or Megan Vaughan, Foucault's notion of bio-power needs to be taken seriously for colonial Africa; these were not just extractive economies, but ones that willfully, if ambivalently, promoted life.

Two chapters reveal debates around and interventions in female circumcision practices in an area where initiation was a prenuptial practice performed on girls in their teen years, where virginity at marriage was not emphasized and where a pre-initiation pregnancy was so dangerous that girls and their kin would resort to abortion. It seems that the numbers of abortions – and thus pre-initiation sexuality – increased in the interwar period, although why this might have been so never quite comes clear. Fathers were facing greater difficulties in assembling the wealth necessary for initiation owing to colonial demands on their labour and incomes. Extraordinarily, in a colonial context where population decline was a worrying issue and where there was a colonial attempt to intervene in female circumcision in 1928–31 (until the extent of the backlash was comprehended), native authorities in the Meru area, in conjunction with British colonial agents and with the use of police, actually instituted the enforced circumcision of girls in the name of preventing population decline. Equally extraordinary, Thomas relates how during Mau Mau, when circumcision was banned, a generation of Meru girls, sometimes with the help of elder women, took it upon themselves to circumcise themselves with razor blades and song. Song is beautifully used to show the meanings of these events, including one song – banned by the state as seditious in 1930 – about uncircumcised daughters giving birth to dogs. Thomas complicates these astonishing stories with a chapter on the coming of maternity births to the area and troubles over locating 'girl-midwives' able to do the work, largely because of associations between promiscuity and this kind of schooling and work. The last two chapters shift gear and compass to legal suits brought in the late colonial and early postcolonial period in relation to premarital pregnancies, child support and the Affiliation Act.

The materials on female circumcision, childbirth, schooling and use of the courts to redress pregnancy outside marriage make this a compelling history of Meru girlhood and, so far, Shula Marks's *Not Either an*

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2005.75.3.421 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Experimental Doll (1987) has been our only African history of girlhood. This one is contextualized in relation to the 'entanglement' of global and imperial agendas at every turn, showing the curious conjunctures between feminist and demographic wishes in both the interwar and the immediate postcolonial periods. With the partial exception of the last chapter on single mothers, the focus is on how girls became women, with Thomas making a compelling argument that the shift from initiation to schooling was immensely significant, as the primary realm where girls grew up and received knowledge and experiences related to sexuality, fertility, and motherhood changed. Renne's material, too, suggests that this transition will be a major new area for research.

If just a tad more of the kind of hermeneutic spirit found in *Those Who Play with Fire* (and richly evident in *Population and Progress in a Yoruba Town*) could have found its way into an analysis of the shift in Meru meanings as puberty ritual and pre-initiation pregnancy practice changed so dramatically (with aborted foetuses accumulating and causing alarm), this would have been an even stronger book. Thomas does not often let herself pause to pull out deeper meanings or explore some of the messy, complicated material that must have been gathered by colonial would-be ethnographers and in her own interviews. The book is so tightly written and argued that there are moments when it feels too compressed. I would have liked to hear more about memory and the body, for example. How was the body dressed and decorated? Did it have a hymen? How was aborted bodily material named? But these are quibbles in the face of an amazing and deeply researched work.

The explosion of new work on the history of colonial interventions in medicalizing and fashioning women's bodies has been paralleled by new work on the importance of African procreative metaphors in understanding not only a symbolic anthropology of reproduction, but the social body and the body politic (Hunt 1999; Feeley-Harnik 1997). Especially notable is Pamela Feldman-Savelsberg's *Plundering Kitchens, Empty Wombs* (1999), an anthropology of infertility that insists on being much more than a medical anthropology, but a cultural, political and historical anthropology of social reproduction as well. Indeed, its metaphorical and interdisciplinary depth contrasts strongly with the few brief Africanist essays collected in the recent edited volume, *Infertility around the Globe*, a feminist anthropological collection that moves among subjects like donor insemination, adoption and new reproductive technologies and includes chapters on Costa Rica, Vietnam, China, Egypt, India, Israel and the United States. Lori Leonard's policy-driven essay contrasts the scientific narrative of infertility in Africa with that provided by infertile women's voices – especially one Chadian woman's voice. Trudie Gerrits looks at the experiences of thirty-four infertile Macua women living in a district capital of northern Mozambique and finds that the general picture given in the anthropological literature, where infertile African women's lives are marked by suffering and exclusion, works somewhat differently in this matrilineal setting. Notably, men rather than women can be blamed for infertility, and the idea that sperm may be defective and should be evaluated prior to

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2005.75.3.421 Published online by Cambridge University Press

marriage is integral to prenuptial initiation ceremonies. Johanne Sundby looks at diagnostic and treatment options for infertile women and men in Gambia and Zimbabwe. She concludes that resources for diagnosis and especially treatment are extremely limited, and that this is unlikely to change in sub-Saharan Africa given the limited resources and the more pressing reproductive health problems – from abortion complications, complicated deliveries and HIV/AIDS in pregnancy – that press upon obstetric and gynaecology wards in the continent's hospitals. Treatment options are extremely limited, and dilatation and curettage (D and C), a potentially damaging procedure that is no longer considered by the WHO to be an infertility procedure, is grossly overused. Infertility patients are seen for surgery and in outpatient units nevertheless, and the fact that infertility is potentially lucrative, with patients willing to pay extra fees, seems to motivate the way doctors shuttle patients between public hospitals and their private clinics for care. In both Harare and Banjul, more comprehensive infertility investigations are done in private gynaecological clinics, but gynaecological surgery and advanced assisted reproductive technology are still largely unavailable.

There is also a contribution by Feldman-Savelsberg in *Infertility around the Globe*. She asks who defines infertility as a public health problem and how. By using a capacious definition of public health, she is able to show how local women's sense of vulnerability is linked to the political context of a still-revered Cameroonian kingdom, while combining this with rich material on the culinary metaphors basic to everyday ideas and practices of procreation. There is a basic problem in setting infertility apart as a discrete problem and it is compounded if it is treated in narrow, biological and medical terms. Such work misses the very point of Feldman-Savelsberg's symbolic anthropology of infertility. The therapeutic is also political and also historical, and a key question needs to be: when does infertility become biologized and how?

Infertility around the Globe is canny about such issues but the African contributions are not what enables its science studies sophistication about knowledge production. A good part of the reason why lies in the way that in this otherwise well-conceptualized volume (that includes separate parts on 'Discourses and Debates', 'Gender and Body Politics', and 'Globalizing Technologies'), all the sub-Saharan African contributions are brought together in a separate part entitled 'The Infertility Belt'. With four very brief essays, which move between Chad, the Cameroonian Grassfields, Mozambique, The Gambia and Zimbabwe, we are hardly in the classic 'central African infertility belt' of demographers' mappings. Rather, the notion of a spatial stretch of African infertility risks being further reified through its spatial and conceptual extension here.

The larger question of how infertility might be studied in interesting and compelling ways does not seem to get asked once it is marked out as a special, bounded and neglected global health problem needing to be redressed. No one neglects infertility in Africa when it emerges as a part of everyday life. The question is how does it emerge, through what idioms and metaphors, in what household, social, therapeutic, and

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2005.75.3.421 Published online by Cambridge University Press

political contexts (Kielmann 1998; see, too, Boerma and Mgalla 2001). The concept of an 'African infertility belt' has always been a formulation that homogenizes and reifies a tropical – usually a racialized, and equatorial forested – space in terms of reproductive crisis (Caldwell and Caldwell 1983). Given central Africa's histories of sterility panic, panic that often blurred with discourses of degeneration and trauma, it becomes critical to ask: who feeds on stories of reproductive dearth, excess or disruption, and why? And to what effect? Unless we bring the political and historical dimensions of imperial dynamics into our conceptual frameworks, we risk remaining within the narrow, distorted and presentist frame of individualized suffering.

If we take the centrality of procreative metaphors as a universal, and the reasons to do so are compelling (Feeley-Harnik 1997; Herbert 1993), one task becomes to see how the eugenics of empire were based on European procreative metaphors and anxieties – projections that were no doubt intertwined with and mediated by sexuality and race. Mapping the intersection of procreative metaphors and reproductive anxieties need not mean erasing European prurience, projections and desires. But it might mean making some of this less titillating and more analytic. It might mean coming to terms with the kinds of science that produced the notion of an African infertility belt in the first place.

Nor need it mean erasing spirit possession and women's infertility cults. If we are to take indigenous natalisms seriously, the embodiments of infertility-related spirit possession also must be historicized. The link that Boddy's *Wombs and Alien Spirits* makes between infertility anxieties and spirit possession cults is an old one in Africa and in African studies. If Victor Turner (1962, 1968) first brought attention to it with his work on Chihamba and cults of affliction, John Janzen and others working on the lower Congo have shown that it goes back to the time of Kimpa Vita's emergence as a prophet in the seventeenth century (Thornton 1998) and the Lemba cult (Janzen 1982) of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. One of the most sustained analyses of such a healing organizations's practical, performative semiotics has been the work of René Devisch (1993). Yet the embodied, possessed bodies of twentieth-century ritual and healing too often remain synchronic bodies, however diachronic the rituals of which they form part. An important exception lies in Steve Feierman's call (1999) for a more capacious history of public healing that embraces less visible forms of women's healing in Africa.

Whether there is an actual epidemiological connection between spirit possession and pathological infertility was first explicitly posed by Anita Spring (1978) in one of the first anthologies to think in a sustained way about African women's 'ritual roles'. Our very best evidence of social and cultural sequelae of sterility, where the sterility was certainly fact – neither the product of local African anxieties nor of a florid colonial imagination – is Anne Retel-Laurentin's extraordinary work (1979) on sorcery accusations among the high-sterility Nzkakara (Hunt, forthcoming). That infertility anxieties could be acute yet also manifest a distortion, contrary to reproductive and demographic realities, has been beautifully shown by Feldman-Savelsberg. Her work in the Cameroon

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2005.75.3.421 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Grassfields also suggests that colonial anxieties about a low birth rate may have fuelled the postcolonial ones she witnessed. Indeed, more research is needed on the links between infertility anxieties and their expressions, whether in forms of 'women's medicine' – spirit possession cults like *zar* and *bori* (Lewis *et al*. 1991) – or in colonial infertility scares and the way the ensuing dynamics furthered the relatively uncontested medicalization of childbirth.

In sum, historians and anthropologists are labouring in a whole new era of sophistication due to the kinds of questions and methodologies that scholars like Bledsoe, Feldman-Savelsberg, Thomas and Renne are bringing to bear on how Africans organize reproduction and the kinds of meanings that they make out of pregnancy, child survival, reproductive mishaps and 'politics of the womb'.

Besides, the systematicity with which a new generation of demographic cultural anthropologists are constituting narrative-based knowledge of African selves should make most African historians of the twentieth century blanch. Not that Lynn Thomas's interview list is anything but dauntingly impressive. But just take a careful look at Elisha Renne's appendix on research methods and materials, listing twenty separate qualitative interview topics undertaken over a nine-year period, each topic leading to a set of separately conducted interviews; it is one way to begin to appreciate her canny and copious use of quotation in the body of her analysis. Any historian or historical anthropologist who does not take note of the kind of havoc that such serious empirical work in ethnographic orality does to our too often half-baked and haphazard forms of oral history and life history research (Cohen *et al*. 2001: 19) will miss the chance to be part of a new generation of historians of recent Africa, able to get beyond the singularity of life histories and move on to the thickness of new oralities and new textualities alike.

REFERENCES

Allman, Jean. 1994. 'Making mothers: missionaries, medical officers and women's work in colonial Asante, 1924–1945', *History Workshop Journal* 38: 23–47.

Barrera, Giulia. 1996. 'Dangerous Liaisons: colonial concubinage, 1890–1941', PAS Working Papers No. 1. Evanston IL: Program of African Studies, Northwestern University.

Beinart, Jennifer. 1992. 'Darkly through the lens: changing perceptions of the African child in sickness and health, 1900–1945', in Roger Cooter (ed.), *In the Name of the Child: health and welfare, 1880–1940*. London and New York: Routledge.

Bell, Heather. 1998. 'Midwifery training and female circumcision in the interwar Anglo-Egyptian Sudan', *Journal of African History* 39: 293–312.

Boddy, Janice. 1998. 'Remembering Amal: on birth and the British in northern Sudan', in Margaret Lock and Patricia A. Kaufert (eds), *Pragmatic Women and Body Politics*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

——1989. *Wombs and Alien Spirits: women, men and the* Zār *cult in Northern Sudan*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2005.75.3.421 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Boerma, J. Ties, and Zaida Mgalla (eds). 2001. *Women and Infertility in sub-Saharan Africa: a multi-disciplinary perspective*. Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute.

Bradford, Helen. 1991. 'Herbs, knives and plastic: 150 years of abortion in South Africa', in Teresa Meade and Mark Walker (eds), *Science, Medicine and Cultural Imperialism*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Burman, Sandra, and Margaret Naude. 1991. 'Bearing a bastard: the social consequences of illegitimacy in Cape Town, 1896–1939', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 17: 373–413.

Burns, Catherine. 1995. 'Reproductive Labors: the politics of women's health in South Africa, 1900 to 1960'. Ph.D. dissertation. Northwestern University.

Caldwell, John C., and Pat Caldwell. 1983. 'The demographic evidence for the incidence and cause of abnormally low fertility in tropical Africa', *World Health Statistics Quarterly* 36: 2–34.

Callahan, Brian. 1997. '"Veni, VD, Vici"? Reassessing the Ila syphilis epidemic, 1900–1963', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 23 (3): 421–40.

Cohen, David William, Stephan F. Miescher, and Luise White. 2001. 'Introduction: voices, words, and African history', in eid. (eds), *African Words, African Voices: critical practices in oral history*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Conklin, Alice. 1998. 'Redefining "Frenchness": citizenship, race regeneration, and imperial motherhood in France and West Africa, 1914–40', in Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda (eds), *Domesticating the Empire: race, gender, and family life in French and Dutch colonialism*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

Deacon, Harriet. 1998. 'Midwives and medical men in the Cape Colony before 1860', *Journal of African History* 39: 271–92.

Devisch, René (Renaat Devisch). 1993. *Weaving the Threads of Life: the* Khita *gyn-eco-logical healing cult among the Yaka*. Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press.

Feeley-Harnik, Gillian. 1997. 'Dying gods and queen mothers: the international politics of social reproduction in Africa and Europe', in Maria Grosz-Ngaté and Omari H. Kokole (eds), *Gendered Encounters: challenging cultural boundaries and social hierarchies in Africa*. New York: Routledge.

Feierman, Steven. 1999. 'Colonizers, scholars, and the creation of invisible histories', in Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt (eds), *Beyond the Cultural Turn: new directions in the study of society and culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Feldman-Savelsberg, Pamela. 1999. *Plundered Kitchens, Empty Wombs: threatened reproduction and identity in the Cameroon Grassfields*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Ginsburg, Faye D., and Rayna Rapp. 1995. *Conceiving the New World Order: the global politics of reproduction*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Greenhalgh, Susan (ed.). 1995. *Situating Fertility: anthropology and demographic inquiry*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

Herbert, Eugenia W. 1993. *Iron, Gender, and Power: rituals of transformation in African societies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Hunt, Nancy Rose. 1999. *A Colonial Lexicon of Birth, Ritual, Medicalization, and Mobility in the Congo*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.

——forthcoming. 'Colonial medical anthropology and the making of the Central African infertility belt', in Helen Tilley and Robert Gordon (eds), *Anthropology, European Imperialism and the Ordering of Africa*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2005.75.3.421 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Jaffré, Yannick, and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (eds). 2003. *Une médecine inhospitalière. Les difficiles relations entre soignants et soignés dans cinq capitales d'Afrique de l'Ouest*. Paris: Karthala.
Janzen, John M. 1982. *Lemba, 1650–1930: a drum of affliction in Africa and the New World*. New York: Garland.
Jochelson, Karen. 2001. *The Colour of Disease: syphilis and racism in South Africa, 1880–1950*. New York: Palgrave.
Kielmann, Karina. 1998. 'Barren ground: contesting identities of infertile women in Pemba, Tanzania', in Margaret Lock and Patricia A. Kaufert (eds), *Pragmatic Women and Body Politics*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
Lewis, I. M., Ahmed Al-Safi, and Sayyid Hurreiz (eds). 1991. *Women's Medicine: the Zar-Bori cult in Africa and beyond*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press.
Marks, Shula. 1987. *Not Either an Experimental Doll: the separate worlds of three South African women*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
Martin, Emily. 1987. *The Woman in the Body: a cultural analysis of reproduction*. Boston: Beacon Press.
Muller, Carol Ann. 1999. *Rituals of Fertility and the Sacrifice of Desire: Nazarite women's performance in South Africa*. Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press.
Petersen, Derek R. 2004. *Creative Writing: translation, bookkeeping, and the work of the imagination in colonial Kenya*. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.
Retel-Laurentin, Anne. 1979. *Un pays à la dérive. Une société en régression démographique. Les Nzakara de l'est centrafricain*. Paris: J.-P. Delarge.
Spring, Anita. 1978. 'The epidemiology of spirit possession', in Judith Hoch-Smith and Anita Spring (eds), *Women in Ritual and Symbolic Roles*. New York: Plenum Press.
Stoler, Ann Laura. 2002. *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: race and the intimate in colonial rule*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Summers, Carol. 1991. 'Intimate colonialism: the imperial production of reproduction in Uganda, 1907–1925', *Signs* 16: 787–807.
Thornton, John K. 1998. *The Kongolese Saint Anthony: Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian movement, 1684–1706*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
Turner, Victor. 1962. *Chihamba, the White Spirit: a ritual drama of the Ndembu*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
——1968. *The Drums of Affliction: a study of religious processes among the Ndembu of Zambia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Vaughan, Megan. 1988. 'Measuring crisis in maternal and child health: an historical perspective', in Marcia Wright, Zena Stein, and Jean Scandlyn (eds), *Women's Health and Apartheid*. New York: Columbia University Press.
——1991. *Curing their Ills: colonial power and African illness*. Cambridge: Polity; Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.
——1992. 'Syphilis in colonial East and Central Africa: the social construction of an epidemic', in Terence Ranger and Paul Slack (eds), *Epidemics and Ideas: essays on the historical perception of pestilence*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
Wallace, Marion. 1998. '"A person is never angry for nothing": women, VD, and Windhoek', in Patricia Hayes *et al.* (eds), *Namibia Under South African Rule: mobility and containment, 1915–46*. Oxford: James Currey; Athens: Ohio University Press.
White, Owen. 1999. *Children of the French Empire: miscegenation and colonial society in French West Africa, 1895–1960*. Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press.

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2005.75.3.421 Published online by Cambridge University Press