

The Influence of Traditional Religion on Fertility Regulation among the Kassena-Nankana of Northern Ghana

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This article presents findings from a study of the influence of traditional religion on reproductive preferences of Kassena-Nankana lineage heads in northern Ghana. Seven reproductive preference questions were administered to nine lineage heads who are primary practitioners of the cult of soothsaying. With the assistance of soothsayers, interviews were repeated in conjunction with the invocation of religious rites in order to determine the views of ancestral spirits on the seven questions. Pairs of lineage head and ancestral interviews are compared to determine the role of traditional religion in shaping male reproductive preferences. Interview pairs reflect a shared preference for sons, large compounds, and a growing lineage. Findings nonetheless show that some ancestral spirits want small families, some even wanting fewer children than corresponding lineage heads. Spiritual consultations are nondogmatic and open to external ideas and influences, suggesting that family planning introduction will not encounter systematic religious opposition among the Kassena-Nankana. (STUDIES IN FAMILY PLANNING 1998; 29,1: 23-40)

The Kassena-Nankana people of northern Ghana have no word for the supernatural; boundaries between reality and imagination do not exist. Mortals and ancestral spirits can readily communicate through the medium of soothsaying. Every lineage is headed by a patriarch who employs soothsayers for contacting ancestral spirits to explain the past, interpret the present, and forecast the future on matters of current concern to his lineage.¹ An experimental program of family planning services is being introduced among the Kassena-Nankana.² Because soothsaying guides the most mundane decisions of daily life, it is reasonable to expect the custom of soothsaying to guide community reactions to this family planning program.³ This article reports findings from an investigation of ways in which soothsaying affects responses of lineage

heads to the introduction of family planning services in this setting.

Achieving an understanding of the role of traditional religion in fertility regulation is relevant to the more general research program of the Navrongo Health Research Centre.⁴ Located in an isolated rural area of Ghana's northernmost region, the Navrongo Centre conducts research on the determinants of health, survival, and demographic dynamics in a traditional population.⁵ In 1994, the Community Health and Family Planning Project (CHFP) was launched to develop a culturally appropriate approach to providing primary health care and family planning, and to test the impact of experimental services on fertility and mortality. The communities' use of public health services is known to be infrequent. Fertility and mortality remain high and pretransitional; at the beginning of the Navrongo experiment, Western contraceptive-use prevalence was about 4 percent (Debpuur et al., 1994). Making family planning information and services freely available thus involves introducing the concept of hormonal contraception into a traditional society that has not practiced contraception previously.

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The rites of traditional religion are enormously important to the Kassena-Nankana.⁶ Every village has soothsayers who guide the rites of ancestor worship. Every compound has a shrine for making sacrifices and pouring libations to the spirits of ancestors, thereby establishing links between past generations and the present one. Social surveys indicate that about 70 percent of all Kassena-Nankana men practice traditional religion exclusively; most of the remaining 30 percent pursue Christianity or Islam in tandem with traditional religious practices.⁷ Although attention has been directed to clarifying the impact of Catholicism and Islam on the acceptability of family planning services in a variety of African settings, little work has been directed to researching the implications of traditional religion for family planning programs.⁸ Family planning services have been promoted in northern Ghana as an imported concept that is borrowed from Westerners, rather than developed within the precepts of the local culture. This approach runs the risk that program activities will precipitate social discord, leading religious leaders to counsel followers to reject its communication themes or to avoid using its services on religious grounds.⁹ This study aims to examine ways in which traditional religion reinforces high fertility beliefs and practices among the Kassena-Nankana and to determine whether family planning service delivery represents an affront to traditional religion in this setting.

Religion as a Fertility Determinant

The role of religion as a fertility determinant has been the subject of considerable discussion in the fertility literature. Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, traditional religious beliefs and practices are embedded in lineage and descent systems that structure society and sustain high fertility.¹⁰ In this tradition, the lineage is believed to have mystical significance as the corporate soul of its living and departed members—whereby births reunite lineal spirits with the living and deaths remit souls to the afterworld. Spirits of the recently departed are believed to be omnipresent observers of daily activities of the living, showing favor by bringing good fortune to the lineage or disfavor by bringing chaos, illness, or death to its members. Because the lineage assures ancestors of means of communing with this earth, the end of a family line is a spiritual catastrophe, banning ancestors to perpetual ghostly oblivion. Religious exchanges are therefore replete with advice to practitioners to have many children, and sons in particular, so that the lineage can grow and prosper and its spirits can survive and flourish.

Although general agreement is found in the socio-

logical literature that lineage, marriage, and family-building customs structure high fertility in sub-Saharan Africa, less consensus is found about the implications of traditional religion for reproductive motives.¹¹ Studies of aggregate fertility data generally show that religious differentials are inconsequential, leading analysts to conclude that religion has little net behavioral impact.¹² In this view, reproductive beliefs and practices in religion are the consequence of fundamental exogenous social and economic determinants, with religion playing only a weak, and largely endogenous, role in affecting behavior. An alternative perspective consigns central significance to the role of African spiritual traditions in structuring high fertility, arguing that the rites and beliefs of traditional ancestor worship provide a powerful motivational influence on reproductive decisions and beliefs.¹³ From this perspective, religion not only reflects high fertility norms, but, more fundamentally, determines high fertility beliefs and practices.¹⁴ Caldwell and Caldwell (1987: 427) summarize this view on the role of religion in the following passage:

Traditional African religious values have sustained high fertility in two ways. First, they have acted directly to equate fertility with virtue and spiritual approval and to associate reproductive failure or cessation with sin. Second, they have placed both positive and negative sanctions on filial piety and material homage to the older generation so that high fertility is rarely disadvantageous.

The implication of this perspective is that traditional religion structures high fertility by eliciting divine rewards to parents with many children, while signaling to the ancestors of couples who regulate their fertility that today's generation disregards their well-being.¹⁵ Spiritual disregard is tantamount to inviting chaos, misfortune, and ill health. Promoting family planning in this socioreligious context invests in programs that are inconsistent with social institutions. Such programs not only will fail, they will foster social discord. Promoting low fertility is more akin to promoting a curse than to promoting a social benefit.

At the outset of the Navrongo experiment, no one could predict its socioreligious impact or consequences. The implications of structural perspectives had to be examined for this project. Listening to the spirits, and to the men who consult them, was crucial to designing a culturally sensitive approach to family planning service delivery for the Kassena-Nankana. Structuralist perspectives on the pronatalist influence of traditional religion provide a rationale for investigating Kassena-Nankana responses to the Navrongo experiment. Our study aims

to determine if high fertility is universally and emphatically supported by the tenets and rites of Kassena-Nankana traditional religion and whether contraception is, therefore, rejected on the basis of religious consultations. If so, providing family planning services among the Kassena-Nankana will generate conflict between tradition and the program, possibly leading to organized opposition to family planning services or to social discord if contraceptive innovation occurs. Moreover, if religious opposition is prominent, the success of family planning introduction in this context may become contingent upon the eventual erosion of religious traditions. If the sociological literature is the sole guide for action, the assumption is appropriate that family planning services cannot succeed among the Kassena-Nankana until the proselytizing religions dominate and the secularization of daily life begins.

The Socioreligious System

Religious traditions of the Kassena-Nankana reflect the dominant social role of male compound heads and lineage leaders and the importance of the lineage to social organization. The lineage and its ancestors are believed to be a spiritual continuum in which the rites of soothsaying establish communication between mortals and spirits in the manner illustrated in Figure 1. In this religious tradition, generations of spirits communicate revelations directly to lineage heads or to soothsayers, as indicated by the downward arrow (*a*) in the figure. The lineage is a corporate group of extended family compounds, headed by a common patriarch, the lineage head, who is the oldest male member of a lineage and believed to be closest to the ancestral spirits.¹⁶ The lineage heads are respected for their knowledge of the lineage and are obligated by custom to convene compound heads to share these revelations and advise the lineage to respond to ancestral advice (*b* in the figure). Lineage heads also consult soothsayers on behalf of lineal families to determine the wishes of the ancestors and to avert calamities (*c*). They perform critical social functions, such

as insuring marriage, encouraging childbearing, interpreting illness or death, and resolving disputes. On matters of importance to lineages, the lineage head assembles compound heads, seeks their opinions, and elicits collective deliberations and action (*d*). Thus, the practice of religion represents a process of dialogue with lineal spirits, mediated by the rites of soothsaying (*a* and *e*). Men other than lineage heads can consult soothsayers (*f*), but only the lineage head has the right to perform ceremonies on behalf of the entire lineage. The rites of soothsaying are practiced only by men who are compound heads and lineal leaders.¹⁷ In the process of religious consultation, soothsayers may impart advice (*g* and *h*), but more typically, the consultation is dominated by rites for establishing direct spiritual communication (as in *a* and *g*; *a* and *b*).¹⁸

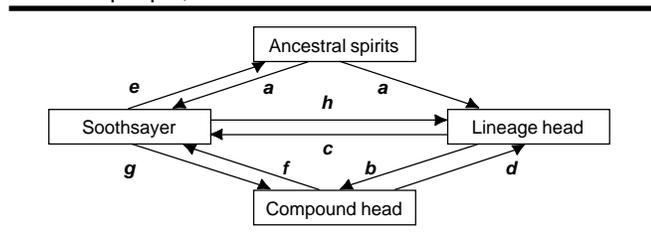
The time required for soothsaying rites to be performed varies; each question raised by the client typically requires ten to 15 minutes of ritual incantation and several more minutes for interpretation of the results of the spiritual exchange. A session of soothsaying typically begins with the soothsayer's incantations. A sacred stick held by the client and the soothsayer is allowed to circulate among charms on the floor. The pointing and probing of the stick in the course of incantations clarifies messages from spirits symbolized by the charms.¹⁹ In most soothsaying encounters, little discussion takes place between soothsayer and client. Incantations are believed to establish communication with spirits, allowing the client to interpret questions on his own. However, at the end of the session, soothsayers typically impart advice on auspicious actions to pursue, sacrifices to make, rites to perform, or libations to pour. Usually, a sacrifice is prescribed, to be offered at an ancestral shrine that is present in every Kassena-Nankana compound.

Thus, the rites of soothsaying serve to reinforce social customs that establish male dominance in familial decisionmaking, institute corporate identity and norms associated with the lineage, and inculcate respect for hierarchy, age, and collective lineal identity.

Methods and Procedures

Lineage heads, by virtue of their authority in the family and proximity to the ancestors, were expected at the outset of this study to want others in their lineages to have many children and to oppose the introduction of family planning in the community. Some individual lineage heads might express personal preferences that are at odds with the interests of the lineage, but religious consultation on such matters should support high-fertility norms and practices consistently. Any inconsistency between

Figure 1 Socioreligious belief system of the Kassena-Nankana people, Ghana



personal and spiritual opinion was expected to reflect the proposition that high fertility is rarely perceived to be disadvantageous in the African religious context.

The process of religious consultation and the unique role of lineage heads as the arbiters of religious influence provided a basis for testing these assumptions by interviewing lineage heads twice. The first interview was conducted in private, at home, with an in-depth discussion of a series of seven open-ended questions on the theme of reproductive motives and family planning practice. The second interview repeated this sequence: The lineage head was interviewed in the sacred hut of the lineage soothsayer, but responded in the mode of seeking opinions of the ancestors on each of the seven questions and themes. The soothsayers were involved in the second interview as mediums for the ancestral interviews and were encouraged to participate, interpret, and advise their clients in the usual manner of consultations conducted in the past.

Analytical Framework

Two interviews provided a basis for comparing the views of individual lineage heads with the corresponding responses of their ancestors, permitting appraisal of the extent to which the preferences of individual lineage heads are consistent with ancestral preferences. Questions were designed to elicit responses that are conducive to fertility regulation, neutral about fertility regulation, or opposed to such practices. Questions determined desires, intentions, or attitudes for paired interviews of lineage heads and ancestors, so that each set of responses could be arrayed. The strategy for interpreting pairs of responses is illustrated in Table 1. The diagonal represents the concordant situation in which the outcome of religious consultation agrees with personal preferences. The cell that indicates concordant responses favorable to family planning is labeled (a), the concordant unfavorable responses are cell (b). The upper right-hand cells (c) represent discordant responses suggesting that religion lags in the process of ideational change, and the lower left-hand cells (d) represent conditions where individual responses are less favorable to reproductive

regulation than are the responses of the ancestors. The study was launched under the hypothesis that most pairs of responses would be of type "b," indicating pronatalist-stated preferences reinforced by concordant spiritual beliefs, or type "c," discordant responses indicating influences of religion that constrain the introduction of family planning. Among lineage heads who expressed favorable views, religious beliefs were expected to mitigate such opinions, indicating that favorable reproductive preferences are offset by pronatalist normative reproductive values ingrained in religious traditions.

The Interviewing Procedure

Interviews of male lineage heads were semistructured. The questionnaire, to ensure salience and sustain interest, was kept short and focused on reproductive preferences and family planning. To be relevant to the religious context, interviewing was couched in terms of the lineage. That is, rather than interviewing the men about their personal preferences, the inquiry focused on what is good for the lineage, and the role of the family planning project in the community. The study was exploratory, and interviews were open ended. No attempt was made to acquire statistically meaningful samples.²⁰

The field procedure was as follows: First, lineage heads were identified in the three micropilot villages where family planning outreach services have been functioning for the past year. This process involved visits to each of three villages. Three heads were selected at random from the listing of lineages in each village. Next, lineage heads were approached about the study to establish rapport and to clarify the goals and purpose of the investigation. This exchange involved a frank explanation of our interest in knowing the views of the lineage heads and their ancestors about reproductive matters. The procedure of dual interviewing was explained and openly discussed. The research plan specified that individuals who indicated reservations about the study were to be replaced by resampling. None were dropped however; all individuals approached about the study thoughtfully complied with the interviewing regimen, including the component involving soothsaying. After this discussion, seven questions about reproductive preferences and ideal family size were administered. Finally, the ancestor interview was conducted by repeating questions in the presence of a soothsayer, with responses recorded representing reported spiritual exchanges. Ancestor interviews were conducted on the day following the interviews with lineage heads.

Because the second round of interviews was associated with time-consuming soothsayer incantations and rites, interviewing was limited to only seven questions.²¹

Table 1 Illustrative scheme for the classification of response pairs from interviews concerning reproductive motives and family planning practice with both lineage heads and ancestors, Ghana

Responses from lineage heads	Responses from ancestor interviews		
	Favorable	Neutral	Unfavorable
Favorable	Supportive (a)	(c)	(c)
Neutral	(d)	Neutral	(c)
Unfavorable	(d)	(d)	Opposed (b)

Questions administered in the course of this investigation were:

- 1 Is it good for women in your lineage to have many children?
- 2 If you think about men in your lineage, do they have more children than they want, fewer children than they want, or about the right number of children?
- 3 If you could start your family over again, how many children would you want to have?²²
- 4 In this lineage, are big compounds better off than small compounds?
- 5 When babies are born in this lineage, is it better for a woman to have a boy or a girl?
- 6 Some men and women use methods to delay or avoid a pregnancy. In general, do you approve or disapprove of couples in this lineage using a method of family planning?
- 7 A project has been launched in this village to provide men and women with health care and family planning. Will this program help your lineage in the future? Are there ways in which this program is bad for your lineage?

Soothsaying sessions were dominated by ritual incantations for arousing the ancestors. These procedures, while steeped in symbolism, often had only indirect relevance to the questionnaire. Each set of incantations has, nonetheless, been the subject of interpretive analysis.

This investigation coincided with a more general focus-group study of community reactions to the Community Health and Family Planning Project. Dialogue from the focus-group sessions has been reviewed, and relevant comments have been used to interpret responses recorded in our analysis.²³

Findings

Results of preference-question response pairs have been arrayed by question and reported in the accompanying tables. Contrary to expectations that responses would be homogeneous, responses reflect considerable diversity of opinion and inconsistency.

Benefits of Family Size

The top panel of Table 2 presents results of nine pairs of responses to the question: "Is it good for women in your lineage to have many children?" As the table shows, narrative responses cover the full range of possibilities outlined in Table 1. Response pairs 3, 4, and 5 stated that

having many children was not good for the lineage; response pairs 1 and 6 express discordant views in which the lineage head believes many children to be good for the lineage, whereas the ancestors believe that having many children is not good for the lineage. The ancestors for response pair 2 believe that this matter is up to the gods to decide, whereas the lineage head believes that having many children is not good for the lineage. Response pairs 7, 8, and 9 are discordant type "b" responses, indicating ancestral views that are more favorable to large families than are the views expressed by lineage heads. The lack of consistency in responses demonstrates that not all ancestors view many children as being good for the lineage. The weight of opinion suggests, nonetheless, that ancestors are more inclined to view having many children as being good for the lineage than are the lineage heads. The type "b" responses shown in the upper right-hand cell represent three response pairs sharing the perspective that it is good for the lineage if women have many children. But the view that having many children is bad for the lineage is also expressed by respondents. As one lineage head noted:

In this lineage, the young men cannot even take good care of their wives because of poverty in the community. With this problem, I think they would not like to give birth to many children.

Even the ancestors concur with the view that economic conditions are harsh and that fertility regulation is a wise and necessary response to economic difficulties. Response pair 5 reflects the view of lineage heads and ancestors alike that the current economic situation is worse now than that faced by generations in the past.

Q1: Is it good for women in your lineage to have many children?

Lineage head 5:

It is good for women to have children, because children are a help and a source of happiness to the family. However, it is not good for them to have so many children, because these days the children go to school and pay fees. If you have so many children, you cannot cater for them.

Ancestor 5:

'Abaga-o' (calling the ancestor), the question is that, should they give birth to many or few children? They should give birth to few . . . (long pause.) They should control the rate of childbirth. That is what the ancestors said.

Response patterns reported in Table 2 are thus inconsistent with patterns that would be expected if reli-

Table 2 Responses of lineage heads and their ancestors to questions about reproductive preferences, by response-pair number, Ghana

Question	Lineage head's response	Ancestor's response		
		Not good for the lineage	Neutral, undecided	Good for the lineage
Is it good for women in your lineage to have many children?	Not good for the lineage	3,4,5	2	7,8,9
	Neutral, undecided	—	—	—
	Good for the lineage	1,6	—	—
If you think about men in your lineage, do they have more children than they want, fewer children than they want, or about the right number of children?	More children than they want	5	7	—
	About the right number, undecided	1	3	6
	Fewer children than they want	9	2,4	8
If you could start your family over again, how many children would you want to have?		Few children (5 or fewer)	Undecided	Many children (6 or more)
	Few children (5 or fewer)	4	—	5,7,8
	Undecided	1	3	2
	Many children (6 or more)	9	—	6
In this lineage, are big compounds better off than small compounds?	Small are better	—	—	—
	Medium are better	—	—	7
	Big are better	—	5,6	1,2,3,4,8,9
When babies are born in this lineage, is it better for a woman to have a boy or a girl, or does it not matter?		Girls are better	It does not matter	Boys are better
	Girls are better	—	—	—
	It does not matter	—	2,5,8,9	7
	Boys are better	—	4	1,3,6

gious traditions strongly and consistently structure high fertility. The dominant view expressed by respondents is that economic conditions are harsh and that fertility must be planned to adapt to economic realities. Pair 3 reflects this type of response:

Lineage head 3:

I would like each and every one of the women to have children, but I do not intend to let them have too many children, because it would be good to have the number of children that you would be able to take good care of.

Ancestor 3:

The ancestors say that it is now difficult to get an education as well as to do farming. If . . . a problem crops up, and the child is sick, then money is everything. You have to buy medicine, and even if you go to the herbalist, you need to take a fowl along for (paying for) treatment. . . . It is no longer the same as in the olden days, when everyone did farming.

The ancestors often concur with the view that fertility regulation is good for the lineage. Some even appear to be more concerned than the lineage head about the consequences of having many children, as is reflected in the case of response pairs 1 and 6, in which the lineage head states that many children are good for the lineage, but ancestors want families to be small and healthy:

Lineage head 1:

I would like them to have many children because it is a large following that makes one a chief.

Ancestor 1:

The ancestors would like them to have three children each. One would be your mother, one your father, and the other your child.²⁴ (*After probing*): They would like everybody to have a small number of children, but they should not refuse to have children altogether.

Lineage head 6:

Lineage succession is from one generation to the other, so when it is your turn, your wish is to let your men get wives and have children. The number of children in the lineage tells your achievement during your period of heading the family. (*After probing*): I want to have many children. People confer chieftaincy on you when you have many children.

Ancestor 6:

(Asking the ancestors): Should they give birth to two or to ten children? (The ancestors say) they should give birth to five. If they give birth to too many children, they cannot take care of them. If you have few children, you can cater for them. . . . When the children are many, they will suffer.

Responses to this question are consistent with other qualitative data compiled by the Community Health and Family Planning Project. Whereas men once depended upon agriculture as the sole source of income, land available now for agriculture is either depleted or inadequate to sustain the extended family. Increasingly, families rely upon children who migrate to cities in the south and send remittances to their father or kinsmen. Education, skills, trade connections, and other attributes of children have become more important than sheer numbers. In recent decades, rural Sahelian households have faced unprecedented hardship, leading men to reappraise traditional views of the value of children. Lineage head 2 explained the economic situation:

The days of our forefathers and the present are not the same. In those days, a woman could have four children and that was enough, but now the world is very difficult to live in, so if you have three children, it is enough.

This view is also an opinion reflecting ideational change. In the case of pair 2, the ancestor states that the gods, not individuals, determine the number of children:

Whatever number of children the gods give them is final. They cannot do anything about it.

The dominant opinion, among ancestors and lineage heads alike, is reflected by the view that hardship and adversity compel all families to reconsider these traditional values. Even men who are satisfied with the number of children they have, and men who want more children, typically refer to economic difficulties in qualifying their pronatalist views. Ancestors concur with the view that hardship necessitates caution about bearing too many children.

Q2: If you think about men in your lineage, do they have more children than they want, fewer children than they want, or about the right number of children?

Lineage head 9:

I think they have about the right number of children. They should just have enough. (*Probe: Why do you think so?*) Food is the major problem. There is no food to feed them or to sell and send them to school. So it is better they have few children.

Ancestor 9:

The ancestors are saying we should limit the number of children so that we can take care of them, for now it is becoming difficult to have many children. What "the book" is saying, according to the ancestors, is right.²⁵

Results from the second question reflect a degree of ambivalence about stating preferences for precise

numbers of children. Three of the ancestors were undecided, but none of the ancestors expressed the view that men in the lineage are having fewer children than they want. Although some of the ancestors are inclined to want fewer children than corresponding lineage heads, others want large families. Lineage head 2 was fatalistic about childbearing, whereas his ancestors were pronatalistic. Pair 7 reflects a different pattern, however, whereby the modern economic concerns of a father are offset by the traditional concerns of the ancestors that the lineage continue to expand.

Lineage head 2:

That is God's own design. I would like to have many children, but if God gives me only one child, there is nothing that I can do.

Ancestor 2:

They would like to have eight children.

Lineage head 7:

They need to have just enough children. Currently, it is very difficult to fend for them. There is no food to feed them; if they are in school, it is difficult to pay their school fees and to buy them school uniforms. That apart, taking them to the hospital when they are sick demands a lot of money. That is why we need to give birth to few children.

Ancestor 7:

Listen to what I have to say! Listen! Children are the lineage. If there are no children, the lineage will end. We (ancestors) want many children. The women should give birth to many children.

The inconsistency of responses may portray underlying ambivalence about the issues raised by this interview. Men who voice their concern about the cost of supporting children can have ancestors who are intensely opposed to such views.

Some of the respondents allude to the importance of child spacing:

Lineage head 8:

In the days of our fathers, women used to give birth to so many children, but the [Navrongo Centre] is helping us to have three children so that we can take good care of them. We are able to space the birth of our children now,

Ancestor 8:

Women and their children; they should give birth to many and that it is 'sweet' to give birth to many children. When they give birth, the children should reach five years before they give birth to another child.

but our fathers were not able to do so. They gave birth to many children. (Probe: Suppose you are able to space your children well, would you like to have many or few children?) Hmm! (sighs). That is true. Just as I told you earlier on, our fathers were interested in giving birth to so many children, but now there is so much economic hardship that you cannot cater for the children when they are in school, and you even find it difficult to get them food.

Ideal Family Size

Although lineage heads and ancestors often agree that having many children is not good for the lineage, the number of children considered ideal is typically high. The ancestors often express a larger ideal size than do the lineage heads. In one pair, the lineage head and ancestors agree that the ideal number of children is six or more.

Q3: *If you could start your family over again, how many children would you want to have?*

Lineage head 6:

I would have liked to have as many as ten children. I would have liked to have six or seven girls and about six or ten boys (sighs).

Ancestor 6:

The ancestors would like [them] to have what number of children God gives them. They could have ten, seven, six or any number depending on the wish of God.

For three pairs, the ancestors' ideal is considered to be greater than that of the lineage heads. The following pair reflects this response pattern:

Lineage head 5:

I would have liked to have four or five children. If I had so many children, I would not be able to take good care of them.

Ancestor 5:

They would have given birth to the females who will marry. The husbands of the daughters together with the sons would farm and feed them and their parents. They will give birth to six girls and six boys. That is, twelve children.

The Benefits of Large Compounds

Focus-group studies of the Kassena-Nankana show that men view large compounds as a source of status and influence in the community. Not surprisingly, men interviewed in this study want to have large compounds, a view that is consistently shared by lineage heads and their ancestors. Lineage head 4 noted:

I would like to have a big compound. To tell you that I would prefer a small compound to a big compound would mean I am lying to you.

The literature on traditional reproductive motives often characterizes fertility as a nonvolitional process governed more by biology than by deliberate fertility-regulation behavior. Responses in this study suggest, however, that childbearing is governed by choices—and fertility regulation can be a matter of choice and decisionmaking—even in a society not practicing contraception.²⁶ In response to the question about ideal family size, for example, polygyny was discussed as a means of achieving the goal of having a large compound while having few children. During that discussion, lineage head 4 noted that having a large compound and many children can be attained by having many wives, each of whom has few children:

Lineage head 4:

If I had three wives and each had a child, I would be happy. When you marry two women, it implies that you want to have many children. (Probe: Does that mean that three children would have been enough for you?) Yes.

Ancestor 4:

(The ancestors) say that if they give birth to many children, they cannot cater for them; so they would like to have two or three children.

Thus, for at least one of the respondents, the goal of developing a large compound is compatible with fertility regulation. Most men involved in this study view large families as being incompatible with current economic conditions; nearly all ancestors who were interviewed want large compounds.

When large compounds are mentioned as being detrimental to the welfare of the lineage, the theme of social discord is mentioned.

Q4: *In this lineage, do you think big compounds are better off than small compounds?*

Lineage head 8:

It is true that we have big compounds and small

Ancestor 8:

He says in the big house there are many children,

compounds. However, you can have a big compound, but there would not be peace and unity among members, thus tearing it apart, and you would rather find peace and harmony in a small compound, thus fostering unity in the family. . . . This is the wisdom our fathers have taught us. (*Probe: In your opinion, are big compounds better off than small compounds or do you think small compounds are better off than big compounds?*) I think if you have a big compound, it is better off than a small compound.

This is a minority view, however. Other responses indicating a degree of ambivalence on this issue suggest that men place great value on large extended families, even if their own nuclear family is small. Thus, the value of large families is a value consistently applied to the extended family compound and the lineage, whereas it is not necessarily applied to a man's own wives and their children. Ancestral indifference about compound size is couched in large family norms:

Lineage head 6:

No one prefers a small compound to a big compound. It is the number of people in it that determines what compound you should have. I want a big compound.

and so that one is better.

Ancestor 6:

Though big compounds are good, the small compounds are equally good. Small compounds will grow to be big compounds, because people in small compounds strive to have many children. The ancestors are indifferent to whatever compound one has, because the small ones will grow into big compounds.

But, in a typical exchange on the value of children to the lineage, respondents also acknowledge the need for men to have few children with their wives. The desire for a large compound and a large and growing lineage is, therefore, not necessarily linked to a personal goal to have many children. Several of the respondents who

want big compounds and ancestors who want big lineages also believe that nowadays, men should have few children.

Sex Preference

When lineage heads and ancestors are interviewed about sex preferences, respondents either prefer boys or state that the sex of children is "up to God." Patrilocal inheritance customs are prominent influences on the preference for boys. Daughters marry outside the compound; sons build their families within the lineage. Sons are thus a source of prestige for men. Men view sons as contributors to the wealth of the extended family, whereas daughters are lost to other families through marriage. Although attitudes toward childbearing suggest that reproductive aspirations may be changing, Table 2 suggests that the traditional preference for sons remains intact. Ancestral responses are consistent with the responses of lineage heads on this issue.

Q5: When babies are born into your lineage, do you normally wish that the women give birth to girls or to boys?

Lineage head 6:

The girl would grow to be the property of another compound, but the boy would grow, live in the compound, and maintain it. However, since you cannot determine the sex of the child, you accept whatever sex God gives you. (*Probe: But which of the sexes do you prefer?*) I would wish that the woman gives birth to a boy, then a girl and so on. If there is no boy in the compound and the girl marries, and decides to join her new family, then she would go! The compound would be reduced to ruins (laughter).

Ancestor 6:

For the lineage to grow, boys are preferred to girls.

As Table 2 shows, four of the nine pairs of interviews reflect concordant indifference about the sex of children ever born. The following pair is typical of the view that preference for one sex over another is unnatural and improper. Several children are needed, and both boys and girls are preferred:

Lineage head 9:

The fact is that when a woman gives birth to boys successively, it is not good. There is the need to have both girls and boys. (*Probe: But which of the sexes do you prefer?*) As I said earlier on, it is better to have both sexes.

Ancestor 9:

It is true that if women give birth only to men, the world would come to an end, and likewise if they give birth to only women, one sex cannot reproduce. The two complement each other. Thus, there is the need to have both sexes to ensure continuation of the human race.

Approval or Disapproval of Family Planning

Ancestors and lineage heads tend to express approval of the concept of fertility regulation (see Table 3). Five pairs of responses reflect general agreement about this issue, but only if children have been born (lineage head 5) or if six or more children have been born (ancestor 5). Professed support for the right of individuals to decide to use family planning is sometimes qualified by statements of ambivalence reflecting the view that family planning is a “bad thing”:

Lineage head 3:

I disapprove of such couples in my lineage, but such couples do not discuss such problems with their compound head or lineage head for him to advise them against such bad attitudes. (*Probe: As you are the lineage head and you normally go to consult soothsayers when a problem arises in the compound and now you disapprove of such couples, would the ancestors approve or disapprove?*) They would also disapprove, because when there are no people in the compound, and they are in need of something, they would not have the chance of getting that thing. So they would not like members of the compound to practice such methods.

Ancestor 3:

They do not inform them before going in to practice family planning. It is only what is good enough for us that the ancestors do help us to obtain, but with this bad thing they will not be made aware of it. He (the ancestor) is only being silent over it; if you are not able to give birth to a child, it is not their (the ancestors’) making. If you have two children and you decide to practice family planning, there is no problem, but to even have as many as five children now is a big problem.

This ambivalence is sometimes linked to the view that

family planning is dangerous to the health of users. The following response reflects the view, expressed in most of the interviews, that family planning is a powerful drug that is potentially harmful and that sometimes others introduce it to control women’s fertility, but that it is something that some women need, nevertheless.

Q6: Some men and women use certain methods to delay or avoid pregnancy. In general, do you approve or disapprove of couples in this lineage using a method of family planning?

Lineage head 6:

If only they would go to the hospital and use these methods correctly, I have no problem with them, but there are some who go and buy these drugs from the drugstores and use them wrongly, thus developing very serious health problems. I do not approve of those who do not visit the clinics but use them. They are just creating problems for themselves.

Ancestor 6:

The ancestors agree that they should use these methods to limit the number of children they want to have. They should have children, but it should be the number of children the couple wants to have.

Moreover, contraception is sometimes associated with abortion:

Lineage head 1:

I disapprove the use of such methods. (*Probe: Why don't you like the use of family planning methods?*) Such methods destroy or prevent pregnancy, but if she gave birth to that child, that child would help in the future.

Ancestor 1:

Their parents would not like them to use such methods.

More commonly, contraception is viewed as a threat to male control of women, and is an invitation for sexual pandemonium.²⁷ This attitude is reflected in the following interview in which the lineage head expresses concern about women’s “roaming about”:

Lineage head 5:

If the woman would have some number of children before practicing family planning, there is no prob-

Ancestor 5:

They say that if they give birth to six, then they can practice family planning (birth control). If they

Table 3 Responses of lineage heads and their ancestors on attitudes toward family planning, Ghana

Question	Lineage head's response	Ancestor's response		
		Approve	Undecided	Disapprove
Some men and women use methods to delay or avoid pregnancy. In general, do you approve or disapprove of couples in this lineage using a method of family planning?	Approve	5,6,7,8,9	—	2
	Undecided	4	—	—
	Disapprove	3	—	1
A project has been launched in this village to provide men and women with health care and family planning. Will this program help your lineage in the future? Are there ways in which this program is bad for your lineage?	Approve of the Community Health and Family Planning Project	7,8,9	1,2,3,4,5	—
	Undecided about the project	—	—	—
	Disapprove of the project	—	6	—

lem about that, but some of the women have used these methods and are roaming about, and that is not good. (Probe: What I want to find out from you is, if you approve of couples in this lineage practicing family planning methods?) If the woman would have some children before practicing family planning, I would not mind, but when a woman has not given birth to any child and wants to do it I would not consent to it. (Probe: That means as long as they have children, you would not object to the idea of using a method, is that it?) Yes.

One concordant pair of responses (pair 1) expresses disapproval of family planning. In one response pair, ancestors express support, whereas the lineage head is opposed (pair 3). Ancestor 2 wants few children, but rejects the concept of contraception, whereas the lineage head clearly favors it. To explore these discordant responses farther, the interviewer asked a series of follow-up questions. Family planning is recognized as something that some women need, although modern hormonal contraception is sometimes associated with death and is often confused with abortion.

Q: If they disapprove of such methods, and they want the women to have three or four children, how will they prevent a pregnancy after they have had this number?

don't get six children, then they shouldn't do it.

Ancestor 2:
If the woman already has the number of children she is to have and you still have sex with her, you can

boil some herbs for her to drink and she would not get pregnant again.

Q: Why don't you like modern methods of family planning?

Ancestor 2:
With the herbal method, you would not have any health problem if you use it, but modern methods can cause the death of the user.

Lineage head 2 (Commenting on the ancestor's response):

For instance, someone would be three-months pregnant and yet go for a method, and some of them die out of it. Normally, the women dodge their husband and go for these methods, and some of the young girls who are not yet married also go into practice (family planning). When they get pregnant, they feel forced to use a method, and finally some of them die.

When support for contraception arises, it is typically expressed in terms of tolerance of a necessary evil. Attitudes toward contraception are associated with considerable ambivalence, inconsistency, and uncertainty. Perhaps, for this reason, little ambivalence is associated with the approving responses tabulated in the upper panel of Table 3.

Another common view, however, is that soothsaying has nothing to do with family planning. The following quotes exemplify this view, as expressed by two young men participating in a focus-group session:

When a man wants to do family planning with his wife, the man himself is the soothsayer and does what will benefit them. I don't see why if you want to practice family planning, you should pour libations to ancestors or go to the soothsayer. No, that is not their concern.

Because when our parents brought us forth, they poured libation to give birth and not for family planning. With me, if you are trying with your wife [to have a child] and you want to do family planning, you don't have to pour libation of this decision. . . . They just don't get up to pour libation because of family planning. We can't do that.

Others professed the belief that ancestors are impotent in such matters: "Soothsayers cannot teach you anything [about family planning]."

Although ancestors may have a role in a man's deliberations about the timing of childbearing, ancestors are not consulted about preventing pregnancy. Family planning is not one of the things to be addressed by conducting sacrifices and pouring libations; it is a matter involving understanding between couples, often with deference to compound heads or their wives, but with the husband in the primary position of authority. As one young man stated:

It is left with you and your wife to come together into agreement before you go to see the person who will help you to practice the method. There is no libation pouring in this decision. You both have to understand each other before you go for the family planning.

This view is not unique to any one village or focus-group panel. Modern medicine and the prescriptions of community health nurses are understood to be matters that are not within the purview of soothsaying or spiritual exchanges. In the words of a lineage head:

There is no pouring of libation [about family planning]. This one is what a doctor went and learned about. For if we do that, it will help us through our health. Why do you have to go to a soothsayer to help you with that, or go to pour libation . . . ?

Some men went so far as to say that the decision to practice family planning is not a matter for soothsayers, but is a decision for women to make. This finding was not anticipated, in light of the significance of ancestor worship in Kassena-Nankana society, and the role of soothsaying in assisting families in interpreting events around them. Given the socioreligious context of this exchange, and the fact that direct experience with family planning is rare in this society, responses must be interpreted with caution. A man actually confronted with decisions about family planning might seek guidance from a soothsayer, just as any event in life may require interpretation and spiritual advice. Moreover, a

strong undercurrent of fatalism exists in this society, which holds that reproduction is not a matter for decisionmaking, but rather, a matter of fate.

Focus-group exchanges about reproductive matters convey the sense that discussion of this issue is somewhat alien and unnatural, possibly leading respondents to conclude that soothsayers have nothing to do with family planning. Nonetheless, the cult of soothsaying should not be viewed as a force aligned against family planning. Although a man may consult a soothsayer for spiritual guidance when he learns that his wife is pregnant, he will not necessarily feel obligated to seek ancestral advice if his wife is weighing decisions about family planning. Given the dominant role of men in reproductive decisionmaking, and the importance of religion in general, this conclusion has implications for the success of family planning programs in this environment. Family planning is regarded as a decision to be made in the physical and not the spiritual realm. People are aware of and understand family planning, and most know where to go for consultation and methods. Consultation with soothsayers is considered to be an unnecessary complication in this decisionmaking process.

Attitudes Toward Service-Delivery Operations

Of the nine sets of ancestor interviews in this study, six of the spiritual responses had no opinion about family planning services or the family planning experiment, whereas three interviews indicate ancestral support for the project despite general ancestral approval of the concept of fertility regulation, as shown in Table 3. Western contraception and services are not typically subjects that lineage heads believe to be appropriately raised with soothsayers. Although soothsaying is important for society, matters that are nontraditional are not the subject of religious consultation. Traditional decisions require soothsayers' guidance. Deliberations on the purchase of livestock or obtaining rights to land involve guidance about auspicious timing, appropriate price, and suitable location. However, the purchase of modern goods, such as bicycles or radios, has no role in traditional religion. The origins of disease and illness will be discussed with the ancestors, but decisions related to modern allopathic medicine are set apart. Decisions to take a drug or to comply with medical advice do not typically involve soothsaying.

When respondents were asked about attitudes toward the Community Health and Family Planning Project, lineage heads expressed their unqualified appreciation of household visits, mainly because primary health care has been delivered to the doorstep. Community information and services appear to be generally accepted

and supported. However, six of the nine ancestors interviewed about the program were silent on this matter. Considerable effort has been directed to understanding this silence, because community support ultimately may be contingent upon the support of traditional religion. The program itself is appreciated, mainly for the impact of its health-care outreach, but the concept of contraception is so alien to people in this setting that spiritual encounters fail to arouse ancestral comment or opinion. The exceptions to this generalization are ancestral spirits who comment on the health benefits of the outreach scheme.

Q7: A project has been launched in this village to provide men and women with health care and family planning. Will this program help your lineage in the future? Are there ways in which this program is bad for your lineage?

Lineage head 8:

It is good. Some years ago, measles used to kill so many of our children, but since the nurse started working here, this problem has been reduced drastically.

Lineage head 9:

Well, they go round the compounds treating sick children and prescribing medicine for them. Those who need to be referred to the main hospital are referred. We do not find it difficult now traveling to treat ourselves, so I think they are doing good work in the community.

These and other interactions with the community underscore the importance of the community health-care approach to achieving a culturally compatible family planning service model in this setting. Support for the initiative from men is grounded in the view that outreach services reduce child mortality; support from ancestors is also linked to the observation that the health of communities benefits from the new Navrongo outreach program.

The following response from lineage head 6 indicates areas in which the program merits review and development. In focus-group studies, men sometimes characterize the project as a “women’s activity” with no particular benefit for men:

Ancestor 8:

They say they like their work very much and so they should do the work, because the people don’t get illnesses here. Measles no longer kills our children.

Ancestor 9:

The ancestors are happy with the work of the nurses. They support their activities and they would not send them away because the nurses are helping them.

These [service-delivery] people only have close contacts with the women. If they would include men in their activities, I think we would like it. Apart from this, I have no problem with the work they do.

Community information, counseling, and other activities of the program are focused on the needs of men. Compound services, however, are designed to reach women with convenient, confidential, and low-cost services. Extending services to families will require a more comprehensive approach that includes outreach services directed to men.

Conclusions and Implications

Numerous sociodemographic studies in sub-Saharan Africa have been directed to interviewing the living about their reproductive norms and aspirations. This study has been the first to be conducted with respondents who are deceased. Comparisons of the responses of mortals with those of their ancestors clarify ways in which religion represents a determinant of reproductive beliefs and practices in Kassena-Nankana society.

Two contrasting views of the sociodemographic significance of religious practices in African settings are posited in the population literature: The first, based on the comparative analyses of survey data, holds that traditional religion has only modest effects on reproductive behavior. Practitioners of traditional religion engage in practices that extend durations of postpartum abstinence and breastfeeding. However, contraceptive-use differentials by religion are inconsequential. The second view, based on microdemographic analyses, argues that themes and rites of traditional religion universally and consistently reinforce high fertility and constrain the introduction of family planning. This structuralist perspective is the dominant view in the fertility literature. In keeping with this perspective, participants in ancestral seances were expected consistently to express pronatalist responses to questions concerning reproductive preference. Indeed, lineage heads and ancestors in this investigation share a strong preference for sons, large compounds, and a growing lineage. This investigation has, however, also produced results that do not conform to structuralist expectations. Some ancestral spirits want small families, and some even want fewer children than do their corresponding lineage heads.

The interviews with spirits illustrate ways in which traditional religious consultations are nondogmatic, open to outside ideas, and subject to social and economic influences. Modern contraception and reactions to the family planning program are not viewed as matters for

ancestral consultation. These findings suggest that traditional religious practices of the Kassena-Nankana are not a monolithically negative force aligned against the Navrongo family planning experiment. Results of this study are more consistent with conclusions derived from comparative analysis of surveys than with structuralist perspectives on the demographic role of traditional religion.

Africa is a region of great cultural and demographic heterogeneity, and caution must be exercised in extrapolating results of this study to other cultural settings. However, caution must also be directed to interpretations from the regional literature portraying traditional religion as a force aligned against family planning.²⁸ Findings from this investigation suggest that religious practices of the Kassena-Nankana do, in fact, influence reproductive motives, but that the role of religion is not as consistently and emphatically pronatalist as the literature portrays. Lineage heads express support for the view that having a small family is often a matter of economic necessity; ancestral spirits concur with this view. Both lineage heads and ancestral spirits consign considerable value to large compounds and to the birth of sons, but economic change has undoubtedly led to ideational change among mortals and ancestors alike. Although modern contraceptives remain tainted with ambivalence, fear, and doubt that they are appropriate for lineages served by the program, responses also reflect a remarkable degree of openness to new ideas about reproduction and family planning.

Response inconsistencies undoubtedly reflect a pattern of thought often noted in studies of African societies, whereby individual views appear to conflict with corporate norms. Attitudes and beliefs about the individual need to regulate fertility are expressed in the context of expressions of the need for large families and lineages, and ancestral interviews reflect normative values.

Nonetheless, findings suggest that religious practices of the Kassena-Nankana are flexible and adaptive to social change. Just as ideational change occurs in society, ideational change occurs among the ancestral spirits.²⁹ Only one interview reflected a pair of responses in which ancestors were consistently and emphatically pronatalist on all issues raised. Most of the responses are consistent with the view that Kassena-Nankana male attitudes are in transition, and that the ancestors are either abreast of this change or leading it. Men acknowledge the need to have sons and daughters early in marriage, and spirits affirm this general reproductive goal; but men also express concern about economic conditions and today's realities that are different from circumstances in the past. Agriculture is no longer the sole means of family support; migration to the south for wage income is an increasingly common survival strategy.

Ancestors are aware of the new hardships that families face and of new opportunities and strategies for addressing them. The ancestors concur with these survival strategies, and acknowledge the importance of fertility regulation in these difficult economic times. Thus religion in this setting is adaptive rather than dogmatic. If men are appropriately involved in the family planning program, and services are focused on health-care delivery, religious practices are just as likely to support their participation in the program as to constrain their involvement.

Clients of soothsayers tend to separate deliberations about modern decisions from matters that are distinctly traditional. Lineage heads reserve religious consultation for questions concerning traditional matters. This distinction between the modern and the traditional is often subtle. For example, health is the subject of spiritual consultation involving soothsaying, but compliance with a medical treatment regimen is not. Although childbearing is a traditional matter that often involves soothsaying, family planning practice is a modern matter for which soothsaying is often considered irrelevant. Investigators in this study were advised that activities of the family planning program, deliberations on methods distributed, and decisions to adopt contraception are not matters that require ancestral consultation and dialogue. Organizers of family planning programs may encounter situations in which village events are interpreted by soothsayers, but the program itself will not be the subject of soothsayer-mediated spiritual review and consultation. The cult of soothsaying is not opposed to family planning and should not be viewed as a social force that is fundamentally aligned against the Navrongo service-delivery program.

Community reactions to the interviewing procedure of this study suggest that the cult of soothsaying is remarkably open and that soothsayers are appreciative of information sharing. Men's frequent contact with soothsayers and the nondogmatic character of spiritualism in this setting raise questions about ways in which soothsayers and religion can be actively involved in the primary health-care program. Not only were men who were approached about this study enthusiastic about participating in it, but also others in the community heard about the initiative and sought to be included or indicated their interest in results. That family planning is a matter that could be reviewed in this fashion signals to communities that traditional institutions are respected, and that program management is listening to the same spirits that guide their daily life.

This program of religious dialogue can be expanded to address other issues of importance to the program, to seek guidance from the ancestors on ways to direct help to women and to develop culturally appropriate ways to

involve men in reproductive health programs. Reactions to the study suggest that its mechanisms may be a productive means of communicating with men, soothsayers, and spirits about reproductive matters, gender issues, or other problems of concern to the Ministry of Health. Explorations started in this initiative could be expanded to address the broader questions about reproductive health, child survival, gender stratification, or other development issues.³⁰ The impression conveyed by these exchanges is one of a religious tradition that supports existing social norms and customs. The ancestors preach the virtuous life of high fertility when high fertility is in the interest of the lineage, but also reinforce and support ideational change when new circumstances and realities arise. Traditional religion is thus a reflection of socioeconomic determinants, rather than a factor independently affecting reproductive change.

The influence of traditional religion on reproductive behavior is often characterized as constraining reproductive change, as if African religious values are somehow antimodern or reactionary social influences which must be subverted if family planning programs are to succeed.³¹ This exploratory study suggests that ancestral spirits of the Kassena-Nankana are far more accommodating to new ideas about reproduction and family planning than conventional perspectives in the literature portray. Findings of this study suggest that the Navrongo Community Health and Family Planning Project can be developed in partnership with traditional religious practitioners and in concert with traditional religious practices and precepts.

Notes

- 1 The Kassena-Nankana belong to the Mole-Dagbani cultural groups, one of the major ethnolinguistic groups of the northern regions of Ghana and neighboring Burkina Faso. In this sense, the Kassena-Nankana are more closely related to the cultures of neighboring Sahelian countries than of peoples of coastal Ghanaian regions. They comprise nearly all of the population of Kassena-Nankana district of the Upper East Region of Ghana. About 51 percent of the district's population speaks Nankam, 47 percent speaks Kassim, and the balance speaks mainly Buili. Although these languages differ, these cultural groups share common customs of religion, lineage, marriage, and family structure (see Senah et al., 1994). Although Kassena and Nankana ritual practices differ somewhat, similarities outweigh differences (Howell, 1997).
- 2 In 1992, the Ministry of Health launched a program of social research designed to diagnose social opposition to the family planning program (Health Research Unit, 1991a; 1991b; 1991c; and 1992). The Navrongo experiment represents an attempt to move beyond diagnosis to strategic development of culturally appropriate services (see Nazzar et al., 1995; Warwick, 1988). Over the 1994-95 period, a micropilot service-delivery study was conducted in conjunction with an intensive program of social research to gauge community reactions to community-based family planning, modify services in response to community concerns, and scale up operations on the basis of lessons learned (Phillips et al., 1997). Beginning in 1996, a four-celled factorial experiment was launched in Kassena-Nankana District to test the demographic impact of the approach that has been developed in the pilot study. A fifth "pure control" area has been consigned to a neighboring district (Binka et al., 1995a).
- 3 The cult of soothsaying is practiced by the peoples of northern Ghana and neighboring Burkina Faso, and by other Sahelian cultures. Practices differ somewhat across cultural settings, but the rites and beliefs reported here are similar to practices elsewhere in the region (see, for example, Bagah, 1995; Parrinder, 1969; and Mbiti, 1969).
- 4 The design of the Community Health and Family Planning Project (CHFP) is discussed in Binka et al. (1995a). The program of social research in support of the CHFP is reviewed in Nazzar et al. (1995).
- 5 The Navrongo health-research agenda is described in Binka et al. (1995b and 1996).
- 6 Previous NHRC studies among the Kassena-Nankana show that soothsaying is central to decisions involving cropping, land use, travel, health, and other issues. Explanations of illness or adversity require soothsayer consultation and appropriate sacrifices and libations (see Senah et al., 1994; Adongo et al., forthcoming). The social significance of traditional religion has been noted in most ethnographic investigations of cultural groups in northern Ghana (see, for example, Howell, 1997; Barker, 1986; Der, 1980; Fortes, 1987). Classical accounts of religious practices documented in the colonial ethnographic literature are remarkably accurate portrayals of contemporary beliefs and practices (see, for example, Cardinall, 1920, and Rattray, 1932).
- 7 See Debuur et al. (1994). The role of traditional religion is considerably more extensive than these response percentages suggest. Professed Christians and Muslims typically practice the rites of traditional religion when major decisions in life require soothsayer consultations. The boundaries between religions are not precisely articulated into separate dogmas with distinct belief systems.
- 8 Tall et al. (1992) have researched the contraceptive-use impact of involving Islamic leadership in family planning programs in the Gambia. Findings show that Islamic religion is not necessarily a source of opposition to family planning introduction if imams (religious leaders) are appropriately oriented and involved in the program.
- 9 See the discussion of this theme in Somé (1994) and Benefo (1994).
- 10 For a useful discussion of lineage and descent systems in a neighboring culture, see Goody (1973).
- 11 This consensus is summarized in a review of literature on the determinants of contraceptive use in sub-Saharan Africa by the United States National Academy of Sciences (Committee on Population, 1993). See also, Caldwell and Caldwell (1987, 1990a, and 1990b); Robertson (1976); Abu (1983); Hagan (1983); Bleek (1987); Brain (1976); Lesthaeghe (1989); Lesthaeghe and Eelens (1989); van de Walle and Meekers (1992); and van de Walle and Foster (1990). The National Academy of Sciences review stresses that the influence of traditional religion is embedded in lineage and descent systems. The precise role of these institutions varies from setting to setting, complicating the task of generalizing about the fertility role of lineage and descent (Committee on Population, 1993, pp. 91-95).

- 12 See, for example, Lorimer et al. (1954) and Adegbola (1988). Some studies of fertility differentials acknowledge that traditional religion exerts an influence on reproduction, but these effects arise through fertility practices that are not volitional fertility regulation. For example, Lesthaeghe and Eelens (1985 and 1989) found that World Fertility Survey (WFS) respondents in seven sub-Saharan African country studies who cited "traditional religion" as the dominant family religion had significantly lower fertility than Christians and Muslims, owing to relatively sustained durations of postpartum coital taboos. Also, WFS respondents who are Christians have significantly higher premarital fertility than practitioners of other religions have (Adegbola et al., 1981).
- 13 See, for example, van de Walle and Omideye (1988); Caldwell and Caldwell (1987, 1990a, and 1990b); and Adegbola et al. (1981).
- 14 Even if traditional religious beliefs and practices erode, uniquely African spiritual perspectives remain. As Caldwell and Caldwell (1987: 427) argue, "As traditional religion erodes, much of the behavior that it ordained remains as part of the culture with the justification that it is the African way." The social-systemic influence of religion explains the absence of significant fertility differentials in aggregate survey data. Notions of uniquely African moral perspectives on family planning are sometimes expressed in the sociological literature, possibly demonstrating this phenomenon (see, for example, Sarpong [1974] and Bygrunhanga-Akiiki [1974]). Cultural values associated with African traditional religion are remarkably resilient, even when religious traditions of different cultures merge (Benefo, 1994). Belief systems, cultural practices, and traditional fertility determinants suggest that demographic change in Africa will follow fertility regimes that differ from patterns observed elsewhere (Caldwell et al., 1992).
- 15 In Ghanaian traditional religions, infertility is depicted as a form of spiritual pollution or imbalance in society requiring religious healing through rites and sacrifices. See, for example, Ebin (1994).
- 16 Certain exceptions to this rule can arise. For example, lineal rank of children of a polygynous, deceased lineage head is determined primarily by maternal marriage order and secondarily by age.
- 17 Women can seek spiritual advice only by requesting their brothers to consult lineal spirits through soothsaying rites that seek the concurrence of ancestors. Religion thus constrains women's autonomy, ensuring that the major decisions in life are made by male members of the lineage and legitimized through male consultation with the spiritual realm.
- 18 Initiation into the role of soothsayer begins with a spiritual revelation precipitated by illness, some unusual occurrence, or abnormal behavior. This unusual event is explained by a soothsayer as the visitation of an ancestral spirit who is requesting the lineage to designate a new soothsayer to undertake religious rites. Parties to this revelation visit the chief soothsayer where they sacrifice several chickens and seek advice. If the person is deemed to be suited to soothsaying, he is left alone for three days, during which time the rites of initiation require the novice to demonstrate his spiritual powers to the community by finding hidden items. If all hidden items are found, the new soothsayer is provided a mandate to help clients communicate with their ancestors and is given a bag made from the skin of a sacrificial goat containing artifacts and symbols of soothsaying. Soothsayers array these artifacts on the floor of a sacred hut and use them to guide client interpretation of each soothsaying session. Soothsaying is usually, but not always, a full-time vocation. About 80 percent of all soothsayers are men. Although 20 percent are women, only men consult soothsayers.
- 19 A detailed description of the rites of soothsaying, charms, and their interpretation appears in colonial military ethnographic records by Rattray (1932).
- 20 Interviews were conducted in three separate chieftancy areas termed "paramuncies." Three interviews in each paramuncy provided a basis for contrasting opinions of lineage heads and examining the question of whether responses are consistently of type "b" or type "c," as hypothesized.
- 21 The original aim was to complete a somewhat larger number of interviews and to follow the format of the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) Male Questionnaire module on reproductive preferences. The scope of the investigation and the content of the questionnaire were curtailed by the complexity of the second interviews, each of which involved several hours of religious consultation, incantations, and animal sacrifice.
- 22 In the second interview, the ideal-family-size question was modified slightly to ask the ancestors: "When the ancestors tell men in this lineage how many children they should have, how many do they want men to have?"
- 23 The design of this focus-group study is reviewed in Antwi-Nsiah et al. (1995).
- 24 Reference here is to the symbolic importance of three children. Similar preference patterns appear in survey response distributions. A strong preference is found for having three surviving children (Debpuur et al., 1994).
- 25 The reference to "the book" in this citation is a slang term referring to learned people.
- 26 In a larger and more general investigation of natural fertility determinants, Bledsoe et al. (1994) have concluded that fertility behavior that has been characterized in the literature as natural fertility is more appropriately considered as deliberate fertility-control strategies in African societies that do not practice contraception. Low fertility reported in the Navrongo Demographic Surveillance System and various comments recorded in a focus-group study are consistent with the view that low fertility in traditional African societies is the consequence of deliberate fertility-control behavior rather than completely nonvolitional natural fertility behavior (see Binka et al., 1997).
- 27 Focus-group studies and service-worker interviews indicate that family planning adoption is often associated with secrecy, sometimes leading to social discord (Phillips et al., 1997; Akweongo et al., 1997).
- 28 Studies have shown that fertility levels differ in Africa owing to cultural diversity (for example, van de Walle, 1987). Moreover, the role of kinship systems and other social and institutional determinants undoubtedly varies from setting to setting (see Committee on Population, 1993: 98; and Lesthaeghe, 1989).
- 29 Findings suggesting that religion accommodates new ideas are consistent with comparative social research on dogmatic and nondogmatic belief systems. African religious practices are not guided by scriptures or written dogma and are, therefore, more flexible and adaptive to new ideas than are proselytizing religions.
- 30 See, for example, case studies of religious dialogue in the promotion of environmental protection published in Dorm-Adjobu et al. (1991), and efforts to improve primary health-care programs through dialogue with traditional religious practitioners in Kirby (1993) and Warren (1983).

31 African religions are sometimes characterized as monolithic and emphatically pronatalist. Different African traditions may have very different influences on fertility-regulation behavior. Obermeyer (1992) has criticized structuralist interpretations of the role of Islam in fertility regulation on similar grounds. Despite characterization of Islam as a pronatalist religion, empirical evidence portrays great diversity in the timing, pace, and magnitude of reproductive change in Islamic settings. As she points out, factors other than Islam appear to be decisive determinants of reproductive change.

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