

The Changing Nature of Adolescence in the Kassena-Nankana District of Northern Ghana

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This study reports the results of a primarily qualitative investigation of adolescent reproductive behavior in the Kassena-Nankana District, an isolated rural area in northern Ghana, where traditional patterns of marriage, family formation, and social organization persist. The study is based on in-depth interviews and focus-group discussions with adolescents, parents, chiefs, traditional leaders, youth leaders, and health workers, supplemented by quantitative data from the 1996 wave of a panel survey of women of reproductive age conducted by the Navrongo Health Research Centre. The social environment that adolescent boys and girls in the Kassena-Nankana District encounter and its links to reproductive behavior are described. The principal question is whether even in this remote rural area, the social environment has been altered in ways that have undermined traditional sexual and reproductive patterns. The survey data indicate a considerable increase in girls' education and the beginning of a decline in the incidence of early marriage. The qualitative data suggest that social institutions, systems, and practices such as female circumcision that previously structured the lives of adolescent boys and girls have eroded, leading to an apparent increase in premarital sexual activity. (STUDIES IN FAMILY PLANNING 1999; 30[2]: 95–111)

Although early childbearing has always been a notable feature of demographic behavior in sub-Saharan Africa, a recent study of the region conducted by the National Academy of Sciences argues that a transformation is taking place in the nature of adolescence and the social context of adolescent fertility, particularly in urban areas (Bledsoe and Cohen 1993). The limited data available point to a decline in age of menarche, a rise in schooling (particularly for girls), an alteration in employment patterns, and an increase in the mobility of young people. Adolescence, the period between the onset of secondary sex characteristics and marriage, appears to be a more significant phase in the life cycle of girls now than it has been previously. Indeed, as a distinct stage of life, adolescence, at least for girls, is said to be a new “phenom-

enon” in the region. In the past, the transition from childhood to adulthood was made “during the relatively short period of initiation,” with distinct customs associated with each ethnic group, regulating social behavior (Balmer 1994: 2).¹

With the greater prominence of adolescence for girls in sub-Saharan Africa, sexual pressures that boys and men exert on young women appear to be greater, the older generations' control over young people seems to have declined, and a concomitant rise in teenage childbearing outside of a socially sanctioned relationship is believed to be taking place (Bledsoe and Cohen 1993). Opportunities for secondary schooling that now exist permit young men considerable autonomy, removing them from the family compound or home and the watchful eyes of elders. Although no data are available that document a decline in age of first intercourse for males in sub-Saharan Africa, the perception exists that in contrast to the present, “in the past a young man might have had little opportunity for full sexual expression until his late twenties” (Bledsoe and Cohen 1993: 85). Moreover, young men who are not in a formalized union appear to be increasingly unwilling to acknowledge paternity, whether for economic reasons (that is, the rising cost of childrearing), because of their greater exposure to Western life styles, or simply because they

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are less mature, having engaged in sexual activity and become fathers at an earlier age now than in the past.

This article reports the results of a qualitative research investigation of adolescence in the Kassena-Nankana District of Ghana, a rural, isolated area in the country's Upper East region, where traditional patterns of marriage, family formation, and social organization persist (Binka et al. 1995). The principal question addressed is whether, in this remote rural setting, the social and economic landscape has shifted in ways that undermine traditional sexual and reproductive behavior. Relevant data from large-scale demographic surveillance and survey initiatives in the district are used to provide a quantitative context in which to set the qualitative findings.

The Setting

The Kassena-Nankana District of Ghana is in the northeastern part of the country bordering Burkina Faso. The district, which has a population of about 175,000, is classified ecologically as belonging to the Guinea savanna. The area consists of semiarid scrubland; natural vegetation is limited to widely spaced trees, shrubs, and grasses and resembles the Sahelian countries to the north more than the export-growing cocoa regions of Brong-Ahafo and Ashanti to the south (Fayorsey et al. 1994; Binka et al. 1997). The soil is of poor quality, and rainfall, limited to the months between June and October, is low and considered unreliable for agricultural purposes (Tonah 1993). Subsistence agriculture predominates, and the district is considered among the poorest in the country. Seasonal malnutrition is common.

The district consists of some 90 villages organized into ten paramountcy chiefdoms² and is more than 80 percent rural. Navrongo, the capital, has an estimated population exceeding 10,000. Whereas both the Kassena and Nankana speak languages belonging to the Gur group, Kassem—spoken by slightly more than half of the district's population—is a Grusi language, and Nankam is a Mole-Dagbani language (Naden 1974; Tonah 1993). Although linguistically distinct, the groups are culturally homogeneous, having social structures and religious practices similar to those of other Voltaic speakers in the North (Fayorsey et al. 1994). Indeed, because of "increasing intermarriages and urbanization, it has become very difficult to make a distinction between the two ethnic groups" (Tonah 1993: 60).³

Compounds, which consist of multiple mud huts, generally include a head (the patriarch), his wives, his married sons and their wives, and his grandchildren (although married sons, with the exception of the eldest,

may build their own compounds next to their father's). A compound can contain several family groups and may include as many as 50 people (Abasi 1995). The lineage is composed of many extended family compounds. Descent among the Kassena-Nankana is patrilineal. Clans are exogamous, with marriage forbidden between members of the same clan or those from the same natal village and even adjoining villages. Residence is patrilocal, with the wife taking up residence in the husband's compound after marriage (Fayorsey et al. 1994). Authority rests with the oldest male member of the lineage, who as the ritual head of the family consults with the soothsayer. The soothsayer has the critical task of communicating with the ancestral spirits, who are consulted on all important family decisions, including marriage (Adongo et al. 1998). The Kassena-Nankana are animists, and even those who identify themselves as Christians or Muslims often adhere to some traditional practices, especially to those concerning funerals, for the ancestral world is believed to be entered at death (Abasi 1995).

In describing the cultural setting of the Kassena-Nankana District, Binka and his colleagues (1995) observe that a "climate of traditionalism" exists. As background for a large-scale health and family planning project in the area, researchers have investigated the social, religious, and cultural constraints to fertility regulation (see, for example, Bawah et al. 1999 and Adongo et al. 1998). The focus of the work has been on older married women, however. The position of women is described as being particularly bleak. Few are believed to have any formal schooling, and the prevailing form of social organization, which gives compound heads a "gatekeeping" role, allows women little autonomy. According to Nazzar and his colleagues (1995), the limited mobility of women and their low level of literacy, combined with a dispersed pattern of settlement, effectively isolate women from new ideas and institutions. As for adolescents, they note (p. 310):

The problems of young women are particularly acute. Arranged marriage among teenagers is virtually universal. Although premarital fertility is believed to be low, fertility soon after marriage is highly desired. Thus, high adolescent marital fertility rates occur in a population where maternal mortality is known to be extremely high for first-born children.

Although adolescent behavior has not been a particular concern of the social scientists investigating the district, previous research suggests that the social environment and institutions that structure the lives of young people in this rural, relatively remote area have changed little in recent years.

Traditional Patterns of Adolescent Behavior

To the extent that earlier observers of African society concerned themselves with the transition to adulthood, their attention was limited to marriage customs and initiation rites. Although the notion of "traditional" culture is anathema to anthropologists, who rail against static descriptions of premodern societies, such a term, nevertheless, is convenient for characterizing the lives of young people in colonial West Africa. It is useful if only for determining whether the adolescent experience currently observed in contemporary Kassena-Nankana District has evolved in recent years. Although some insight may be gained into the lives of young people from the sparse literature that exists, this study relies, where necessary, on recent accounts of apparently long-standing traditions that persist in some areas of the district.

According to Cardinall, a local administrator of the British colonial regime during the early part of the century whose commentaries are well regarded by contemporary anthropologists (Wilson 1998), a girl's marriage occurred directly after her circumcision⁴ (Cardinall 1926). However, in a discussion of marital rites, he notes that during courtship some parents "are quite content to permit intercourse, since they still retain the ownership of the girl, and, unless her temporary husband can satisfy their requirements in the shape of presents, will eventually own the children" (Cardinall 1926: 76). Writing 30 years ago about the Sisala, an ethnic group who live immediately to the west of the Kassena-Nankana District, Grindal noted that whereas premarital sexual unions were disapproved of, premarital sexual activity apparently was not. "[S]uch behavior is nonetheless expected of young men and women, and virginity is not seen as a prerequisite of marriage" (Grindal 1982: 48).⁵ Nevertheless, premarital liaisons were expected to lead to courtship and marriage, particularly if a child were conceived. Moreover, elders were concerned if the very young participated in sexual activity. Such activity occurring too early was said to cause "a boy to become weak and impotent and a girl to become barren and lazy" (Grindal 1982: 48). According to Smock's (1977) analysis of precolonial Ghana, in which she commented about premarital sexual behavior (generalizing, in this case, about both the "northern groups" and the Akan and the Ewe, the two dominant ethnic groups in the South), these societies did not consider female chastity to be particularly important. What was critical was that a girl did not become sexually active and pregnant before the celebration of puberty rites, which were usually held soon after menarche so as to reduce the possibility of an unsanctioned birth. Indeed, Cardinall emphasized that virginity was considered an "honour . . . at the time of excision" (1926: 76).

A British colonial administrator's commentary from the 1930s confirms that sexual activity prior to marriage was, if not entirely condoned, certainly accepted. Rattray, who had lived in the region nearly 25 years when he wrote *The Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland*,⁶ describes "the mating of lovers" in detail, using vignettes based on observation.⁷ He notes that whether a young man was acquiring a lover or a wife, the same method of courtship was followed. Yet, because of tribal law, lovers who came from the same town and thus were referred to as *tapa* (sisters) although not sharing the same parents, were prohibited from marrying. He states that courtship "is done quite openly with the full consent of her [the girl's] parents. The young man justifies his desire for a lover on the grounds that he needs experience prior to marriage. 'I may not marry you any day at all, but a man learns how to make love to women from his 'sister.' If one does not seek one's sister, how will he understand the finding of wives and avoid being laughed at by them[?]" (Rattray 1932: 153).

Rattray confirms that intercourse for girls prior to circumcision, while known to have occurred, was not sanctioned:

When a girl, during the operation, is found not to be a virgin, she will be shamed amongst her neighbors. On account of this, it is very difficult to get a young girl to consent [to intercourse] before she has been cut. . . . "Do not be in haste, let me get 'cut' first, for I don't wish to get 'cut' and be disclosed to be *suulino* [not a virgin] and have people laughing at me . . ." As young girls and boys are often sleeping together on the same mat, it follows that sometimes a girl will weaken. In such a case, when the time for cutting comes, her *zaba* [lover] pays [bribes] the operator to save the disgrace following the exposure of her condition (Rattray 1932: 155 and 169).

If discovered, the boy felt consequences also: "[I]t is shameful for him among his companions; they will tell him that he has destroyed the girl" (Rattray 1932: 169). However, to what extent the boy was ostracized or was forced to pay some penalty is not specified, nor does the author say whether the girl's chances of marriage were reduced.

From available accounts, circumcision appeared to be universal in the northern part of the country, and it entailed both the physical act of excision (removal of the clitoris) and the subsequent instruction of newly circumcised girls in the preparation of herbal remedies and the brewing of *pito* (the local alcoholic drink), in gardening, basket weaving, in "how to sleep with a husband," as well as in taboos to observe during pregnancy and after

childbirth (Knudsen 1994). The practice also had a religious significance linking women to the spiritual world and, therefore, to their ancestors (Caldwell et al. 1997). Indeed, according to a recent account of female circumcision in the region, “the final permission for womanhood initiation, which is based on excision, is granted from the spirit world” (Knudsen 1994: 169). Thus, typically, a soothsayer was present at the ceremony, which involved sacrifices of animals and offerings of food to both the gods and the ancestors. Although ritual circumcision of girls appears to have been a fundamental feature of the transition to adulthood in traditional Kassena-Nankana culture—in fact, a girl was considered unmarriageable if she had not undergone the procedure—when the practice began is not known. Information on the origins of female circumcision elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa suggests that the practice may date from as recently as the middle of the nineteenth century (Leonard 1996).

According to these descriptions, circumcision for girls took place soon after the onset of menstruation, with marriage, perhaps preceded by sexual activity, following closely after. Less is written about boys’ transition to adulthood. According to Rattray (1932: 139), “When a man has sons, he tries to teach them farming; he does not wish them to idle about; he wishes them to look after cultivation, the rearing of winged creatures, and live stock. . . .”

Modern accounts of what are apparently traditional practices note that boys are trained by older men of the compound in the jobs of their lineage (see, for example, Abasi’s [1995] discussion of his inheriting the role of *bayaa*, funeral or burial expert, from his father). Adolescent boys are provided with plots of land to farm for themselves and have increasing responsibility for the grazing of animals. Girls’ duties, in contrast, are primarily domestic and performed near the family compound; thus their interaction with peers other than kin is effectively limited. Beginning in early adolescence boys spend increasing amounts of time with age mates, attending funerals and going to market (Grindal 1982). Boys are also permitted to sit with elders when important discussions take place, although they are not allowed to participate (Fayorsey et al. 1994). Twenty-five years ago, according to Naden (1974), temporary migration was common. Work was sought in the southern part of the country on cocoa plantations, in mining and timber operations, and in domestic service. Although the impetus for migration might have been economic, given the relative isolation of the district, this temporary movement must have had an impact on a social structure based on strong identification and cooperation with kin,

compliance with authority, and respect for one’s elders. Writing 30 years ago about the Sisala, Grindal (1982: 67) commented: “Migration to the South thus provides a means of bypassing the traditional age-status system by allowing the young man sufficient economic autonomy to acquire the material symbols of wealth and prestige.”

Little was written about adolescent male sexual activity of the past other than what was cited here earlier with regard to girls. Analyses of sexual behavior in other polygynous societies suggest that an “implicit contract” between older and younger men gave the younger men access to the junior wives of the patriarchs and made postponement of marriage more tolerable (Calvès et al. 1996; Orubuloye et al. 1991).⁸ Whether this practice existed among the Kassena-Nankana as well is unclear. Cardinall (1926) indicates that only older men, by virtue of their status in the community, had access to women, including women who were not their wives. Thus, when adolescent boys had sexual intercourse, which they did with unknown prevalence and frequency, such behavior was, he reports, not entirely acceptable. “Old men will have the women, and only illicit intercourse is possible for the youth of both sexes since youth must be satisfied” (p. 76). This remark makes sense only if by “youth” Cardinall means very young adolescent boys and uncircumcised girls. Given the dominant position of older men, who, according to Cardinall, “control the market of the women,” the sexual activity of young male teenagers may have been what was viewed with disfavor. Although the behavior may have been considered illicit by Cardinall, a white Christian colonial, whether it would have been viewed that way by the Kassena-Nankana is not clear.

The literature does not refer to particular initiation rites for adolescent males. Circumcision of boys was not performed in colonial times. For boys, marriage marked the end of adolescence and the beginning of adulthood (Tonah 1993; Cardinall 1926). No mention is found in the ethnographies of an acceptable age at which young men can acquire a lover or marry. Assuming that the Kassena-Nankana were similar to other polygynous ethnic groups, marriage for men may have been delayed until the late twenties (Calvès et al. 1996).⁹ Rattray (1932: 140–141) devoted considerable space to a discussion of boys courting girls too early, thus squandering gifts (tobacco, guinea fowl), which are expected to be offered with each visit:

It is on account of all this that some people do not agree to their children beginning early to seek for women, or wander to a place where there are girls, because they are only wasting things. A man may tell his son all this, but still

the child's ears may not hear. If the son's ears are still closed and he does not agree to leave off [his wanderings], he, the father, will swear an oath upon him.

In characterizing traditional nuptiality patterns in West Africa, scholars commonly mention several features. First, marriage is said to be a fluid process rather than a well-defined demographic event (Meekers 1992; Bledsoe and Pison 1994). Second, no universal sequence exists for the standard African conjugal events of pre-station (sharing of drinks, kola nuts, and the like), transfer of property from the husband's to the wife's clan, initiation of sexual relations, cohabitation, and ceremony (van de Walle and Meekers 1994). Third, as a result, a "degree of disjunction between . . . sex, conjugality, and procreation" is permitted (Fortes 1978: 23). In other words, "premarital" sex, or cohabitation prior to completion of formalities, is not "precluded" (Caldwell 1967: 67). Fourth, the nature of union formation and connection of offspring to the lineage means that a child's "legitimacy" is not clearly determinable and is more a consequence of male acknowledgment of paternity than of a legally or formally binding marriage (Fortes 1978; Ngon-do a Pitshandenge 1994; Bledsoe and Pison 1994). Fifth, control over marriage rests with the kin group rather than with the individual partners and typically involves transfer of bride wealth from the man's lineage to the woman's. Sixth, polygynous unions, although by no means universal, are common, particularly in rural areas.

Describing nuptiality patterns in Ghana 30 years ago, Caldwell (1967) observed that the majority of marriages were of the traditional form with "one or more ceremonies" and transfer of bride wealth. Polygynous unions were common; in rural areas in the 1963-64 Conjugal Biographies Survey of Ghana, approximately 45 percent of rural men aged 15 years and older reported multiple wives (Caldwell 1967), compared with about 20 percent of urban men. Caldwell notes that in the rural north, most girls married at 15 or 16, soon after puberty. Marriage rarely interfered with schooling because only 900 of the 42,000 girls aged 15-19 residing in the northern and upper regions were in school in 1960. Considerable pressure for the early marriage of girls was exerted, because, according to Caldwell, "there is little place in the farming compounds of northern Ghana for an unmarried woman who has reached puberty" (1967: 69).

The literature describes the expected procedures for choosing a wife among the Kassena and Nankana. We know, however, not only from reports of the process in the district but also from other accounts of West African traditional marriage that much variation occurred. Nonetheless, a description of what was supposed to take

place is useful for understanding how the process has altered. A boy would likely have met a girl at a social gathering such as a funeral or festival or at the market. Then he would visit the girl's parents, bringing tobacco with him. If the gift were accepted, more visits would follow, the first accompanied by a present of one guinea fowl and subsequent visits with three or four. At one of these visits, the boy would bring a male friend along to reinforce his case with the girl's family.¹⁰ Gifts offered to the girl's parents on additional visits would include salt, guinea fowl, and tobacco. When a sufficient number of guinea fowl had been presented, the boy would refrain from visiting and his male relatives would visit in his place. They would bring hoes and additional guinea fowl until the girl's family agreed to the marriage. At that point, a sacrifice would be made at the ancestral shrine.¹¹ The marriage contract was sealed after the families negotiated the bride wealth (Rattray 1932). Modern accounts of traditional marriage disagree as to the number of items included in the bride wealth. These included, however, sheep (seven appears to have been most common number), an ax, and assorted other items, including hoes, smoking pipes, and a bull. These gifts were paid out over an extended period. The bull, for example, was presented (or demanded) after the girl had given birth. After the bride wealth was agreed upon, the girl was brought to her husband's compound in a public procession. She was kept in the elders' room for four days while being introduced to the ancestral spirits; only on the fifth day was she brought to her husband's room (Fayorsey et al. 1994; Tonah 1993).

Among the Kassena-Nankana, as nearly as can be determined, the transition to adulthood for a boy a few generations ago entailed his acquiring a greater economic role in the household as he gained increased responsibility in farming and herding, his stronger identification with age mates, the possibility of his moving temporarily to the southern part of the country to improve his economic prospects, and his opportunity for sexual activity. Although premarital unions and very early sexual activity were unacceptable, apparently intercourse between a young man and a circumcised girl prior to marriage was condoned, particularly if it led to courtship and marriage. Among girls, by contrast, adolescence (the period between the onset of secondary sex characteristics and marriage) was of short duration. Prior to puberty, much of a girl's time was spent in close proximity to the compound assisting her mother and other female kin with domestic tasks, although opportunities occurred to interact with males at the market and at social gatherings such as funerals. Circumcision generally took place soon after menarche, and courtship and mar-

riage were expected to follow shortly thereafter, especially if sexual activity had occurred.

The Changing Nature of Adolescent Reproductive Behavior

Recent analyses of adolescent reproductive behavior in sub-Saharan Africa have pointed to a transformation in the nature of sexual activity and childbearing among the young. With an increase in urbanization and education, the social fabric is said to be breaking down and with it the traditional authority structures governing marriage and sexual behavior, as well as the familial and community support networks that eased young people's transition to adulthood (Barker and Rich 1992). Some scholars have characterized the African family as being in crisis, drawing parallels with changes taking place in the United States (Bradley and Weisner 1997), whereas others speak merely of an alteration in indigenous family forms, noting that nuptiality systems, though evolving, have retained traditional elements (Lesthaeghe et al. 1994; Meekers 1992).¹²

Age at marriage for women is on the rise in much of the region, a development attributed generally to the expansion in schooling for girls (Gage and Bledsoe 1994; Bledsoe and Pison 1994). Although age at marriage has risen, age of first cohabitation may be falling. "[A] streamlining of marriage arrangements and the emancipation of young people from the control of lineages may have led to a younger age at union in many urban contexts" (van de Walle and Meekers 1994: 58). Indeed, the apparent increase in unsanctioned sexual activity and the rise in childbearing prior to marriage, particularly in urban areas, are attracting considerable attention¹³ (Bledsoe and Cohen 1993). According to recent research, adolescent boys, having greater independence from their families now than in the past, are more likely to make sexual demands on girls (Bledsoe and Cohen 1993), and, in turn, girls who want to continue their schooling are increasingly required to use their sexuality for economic gain (Bledsoe 1990; Gage and Bledsoe 1994).

Some commentators have asserted that the fluidity that has always characterized the African conjugal form, and made marital status so difficult to define, has simply become more pronounced with time (Bledsoe and Pison 1994). Others maintain that "premarital and extramarital liaisons have only become a way of life in the wake of colonialization and modernization" (Ocholla-Ayayo 1997: 110). In any case, widespread concern exists about the social, economic, and health implications of the transformation in reproductive behavior, engendering a concomitant focus among researchers in the

population community on documenting it (see, for example, Boohene et al. 1991; Calvès and Meekers 1997; Kiragu and Zabin 1993; Ocholla-Ayayo 1997). The apparent unwillingness or inability of young men to support their offspring and the emergence of HIV/AIDS have made these changes in adolescent reproductive behavior particularly worrisome. The question addressed here is whether this transformation in the nature of adolescence that has been observed in the urban parts of sub-Saharan Africa—rising age at marriage and increasing premarital sexual activity and childbearing—is also characteristic of a relatively remote area such as the Kassena-Nankana District of northern Ghana.

Data Collection

Subjects for focus-group discussions and in-depth interviews were chosen randomly from lists generated by the Navrongo Demographic Surveillance System (NDSS). The NDSS, created in 1993 and managed by the Navrongo Health Research Centre, is a population-registration system that monitors demographic dynamics in the district in order to measure the impact of community health and family planning interventions ongoing since 1994.¹⁴ The surveillance population numbers nearly 125,000 people (including approximately 44,000 young people aged 10–24) living in an area of 1,674 square kilometers (1,040 square miles). Since July 1993, each of the 14,000 compounds within the surveillance system has been visited every 90 days; demographic events have been recorded in registers and entered in a computerized data-management system (Binka et al. 1997).

Although the NDSS comprises five zones, only three of them are included here, sufficient to represent the two ethnic groups resident in the district. Central Navrongo, which contains the major town and consists of both Kassem and Nankam speakers, was selected, as were two rural areas: the west zone, which is Kassem-speaking, and the east zone, which is Nankam-speaking. The north and south zones were not included because of the similarities between them and Central Navrongo. One sampling cluster from each zone was randomly chosen for inclusion.¹⁵

Forty-three in-depth interviews were conducted with adolescents and young adults, the parents or guardians of adolescents, health workers, youth leaders, and chiefs and community leaders. The procedure used for selection varied. Adolescents and young adults between the ages of 10 and 24 and the parents or guardians of adolescents were randomly selected from the NDSS, ensuring that sufficient numbers of males and females (and, for the adolescents and young adults, of a range

in ages) were included. Nineteen of 24 adolescents and young adults were successfully interviewed, as were eight of 12 parents or guardians. In addition, six health workers, four chiefs or community leaders, and six youth leaders were interviewed.¹⁶

Fifteen focus-group discussions, with between six and 12 participants each, were conducted with adolescents and young adults, students, parents or guardians, and women aged 45–65. Except for students, focus-group participants were randomly selected from the NDSS. The selection process for students was as follows: Schools were randomly selected, and school authorities recommended candidates for participation, a procedure that may have resulted in a selective sample of students.¹⁷ Because of the difficulty of locating a sufficient number of the computer-identified adolescent participants, these groups were much more heterogeneous than is usually considered desirable; one focus-group discussion was conducted in each of the three zones, and therefore, young people of both sexes between the ages of 10 and 24 were grouped together. Although mixed age and sex groups are generally considered to violate standard focus-group procedures, those responsible for data collection noted that most participants spoke.

In both interviews and focus groups, respondents were asked about current initiation rites, including their opinions about circumcision for boys and girls; about sexual behavior of adolescents, the marriage process, and the age at which marriage is socially approved; about the mobility and migration of adolescents; and about peer networks. In addition, chiefs, parents, and older women were asked about differences between adolescent behavior now and in the past, including changes in sexual behavior, age at marriage, the marriage process, and migration. In the in-depth interviews, adolescents were asked about their sexual behavior, their schooling, and migration outside the district, and about partner selection (if married) or expectations concerning partner selection (if unmarried).

Responses from interviews and focus-group discussions were analyzed by collecting all statements about a particular subject, by summarizing the main point if consensus existed among focus-group respondents, by noting differences if there were disagreements, and by selecting illustrative comments for inclusion. For a more exhaustive set of respondents' statements, see Mensch et al. (1998).

NDSS and Panel Survey Data

Beginning in October 1993 and continuing annually, a demographic panel survey has been conducted among

all women aged 15–49 in a sample of about 1,200 compounds in the Kassena-Nankana District. Starting with the second round of the panel in 1994, husbands of the women surveyed have also been interviewed (Binka et al. 1995). For this study, data are drawn from the complete panel survey in 1996 and from the NDSS.

Table 1 shows the proportion of women aged 15–44 who have ever attended school and the proportion who have ever attended junior secondary school, thus having completed primary school, by five-year age groups. These data from the panel survey reveal that a tremendous increase has occurred in educational participation in the district. Only about one-fourth of women aged 40–44 have ever been to school, compared with more than two-thirds of those aged 15–19. The increase in schooling among younger women is even more striking. More than 40 percent of those aged 15–19 and more than one-fourth of those aged 20–24 have attended junior secondary school, compared with 9 percent to 14 percent of those aged 25–44. As a result of the recent expansion in schooling, characterizing the district as an area where “levels of educational attainment and literacy are low” (Binka et al. 1997: 3) is probably no longer accurate. Educational attainment and literacy are unquestionably low among adults; adolescents, on the other hand, have had an opportunity to go to school, and they are clearly the first generation in this district to have done so in significant numbers. Whether the schooling they have received is of sufficient quality to confer literacy is not known, however.

Table 2 presents data from the panel survey for the proportion of women married by ages 18 and 20, according to age groups. In light of the earlier discussion about courtship and marriage in West Africa, there is no unambiguous age at which marriage can be said to begin among women in the region. Nevertheless, the survey research team attempted to elicit this information. To the extent that the data reveal a trend toward later age at marriage, it is of recent origin. About two-thirds of women aged 25–44 were married by age 20, compared

Table 1 Percentage of women aged 15–44 in Kassena-Nankana District who have ever attended school and who have ever attended junior secondary school, by age, Ghana 1996

Age	Ever been to school	Ever been to junior secondary school	(N)
15–19	68.4	41.2	(645)
20–24	52.7	26.5	(888)
25–29	35.8	14.3	(911)
30–34	27.5	10.3	(891)
35–39	24.4	10.7	(794)
40–44	24.3	9.1	(695)

Source: 1996 panel survey tabulations.

Table 2 Percentage of women aged 18–44 in Kassena-Nankana District who were married by age 18 and percentage of women aged 20–44 who were married by age 20, Ghana, 1996

Current age	Married by age 18	Married by age 20	(N)
18–19	21.8	—	(317)
20–24	25.2	55.1	(886)
25–29	27.2	65.3	(911)
30–34	29.2	68.4	(891)
35–39	28.1	68.1	(795)
40–44	27.2	66.3	(695)

— = Not applicable.

Source: 1996 panel survey tabulations.

with 55 percent of 20–24-year-olds. For marriage by age 18, the prevalence for women aged 20–24 and even more for women aged 18–19 seems to be lower now than in the past. Although these results are not nearly as striking as those concerning education, the increase in schooling undoubtedly presages a change in the timing of marriage and perhaps in the nature of the courtship process and of conjugal relations.

The data concerning the fertility of adolescents and young adults that are drawn from the NDSS and shown in Table 3 are puzzling. These numbers, which together with the age-specific figures for women 25–49 produce total fertility rates (TFRs) for the area ranging from 5.3 children per woman in 1994–95 to 4.6 children in 1996–97, are low for a population that does not practice contraception. A comparison with the DHS rates for rural Ghana, displayed on the far right of Table 3, confirms this assessment. An analysis of the quality of the NDSS fertility data reveals some evidence of underreporting of neonatal events that end in death. The estimated fertility rate is considered plausible, however, for a population with high levels of lactational amenorrhea and lengthy postpartum abstinence resulting from spousal separation following childbirth (Binka et al. 1997). Moreover, the data on rates of net migration by age (not shown) indicate that large numbers of young men seeking employment move out of the district, suggesting that part of the explanation for the low TFR may also lie with a

Table 3 Recent age-specific fertility rates for women aged 15–24 in Kassena-Nankana District, Ghana

Age	1993 DHS rates for rural Ghana				
	1993–94	1994–95	1995–96	1996–97	
15–19	101	88	80	83	145
20–24	228	235	218	209	273
Total fertility rate	5.0	5.3	4.8	4.6	6.4

Sources: Navrongo Demographic Surveillance System tabulations; Ghana Statistical Service and Macro International (1994).

temporary (or perhaps permanent) deficit of men. In short, adolescent fertility in the district does not appear to be as high as it is in other pretransition societies. These data do not reveal whether the nature of adolescent childbearing has altered, however—whether, for example, an increase has occurred in premarital pregnancies and births among young women.

The Adolescent Experience

In order to let respondents speak for themselves, a number of direct quotes from the transcripts are presented below.¹⁸ Each quotation is identified according to whether the respondent participated in a focus-group discussion (FGD) or was interviewed (IDI), and according to age,¹⁹ sex, and zone. In a few instances, the respondent could not be identified in these ways, as is indicated.

Circumcision

As noted above, female circumcision was a key feature of Kassena-Nankana ritual life, not only signaling a girl's readiness for marriage but also permitting the fulfillment of certain rituals. For example, an uncircumcised daughter was not allowed to participate in her mother's funeral rites. According to religious beliefs, if a woman had not performed these rituals, she would be unable to join her ancestors upon her own death. The respondents accepted circumcision as a long-standing rite of passage for girls practiced in generations past:

As a girl, when you are circumcised, it means you have become a woman, and you can also take part in performing your mother's funeral. (IDI, 87-year-old male, West Zone)

According to respondents, circumcision was undertaken in order to ready a girl for marriage and was used as a mechanism for controlling female sexuality:

People in the past thought that if a girl was of age and was not circumcised, she didn't have the chance to grow well because she had unhealthy blood in her. So if she goes through the practice, that blood is drained and she will develop fresh blood that will make her healthy and strong enough to marry. (IDI, 37-year-old female, East Zone)

Circumcision of females controlled their sexual attitude toward men. (IDI, 19-year-old male, West Zone)

The practice was justified on the basis of its being normative; if a woman did not perform the ritual—and non-

performance was said to be visible because, in the past, women seldom wore clothing—she would be ridiculed and her babies stigmatized:

[In] our time, there [was] no clothing to cover our “ugly faces” [vagina], so we removed the clitoris because it exposed us too much. (FGD, 54-year-old female, East Zone)

We circumcised because colleagues hurled insults such as “long-big-thick-clitoris” at those women who didn’t circumcise. (FGD, 52-year-old female, Central Zone)

Babies born to uncircumcised women were called *zankabri bia* (clitoris babies) and were treated with disdain in society, as they were considered stubborn. These are things most women can’t stand or take in our society. (FGD, 56-year-old female, East Zone)

Remarkable unity is evident among respondents in their opinions of the causes of change in patterns of circumcision and of the desirability of those changes. For the most part, informants say that female circumcision has been brought to a halt because, on the one hand, the social ostracism that enforced adherence to the custom has now faded, and, on the other, the practice is unhealthy, unnecessary, painful, and reduces sexual sensation:

[I]n the old days, there [were] no health facilities, and during delivery the clitoris “would be spitting” at the women who are helping to labor, and they would be insulting her. (FGD, 22-year-old female, West Zone)

God knows why he put that part of a woman there, and since it is not blocking any act, then it should be left there so that we all have our peace. (FGD, 48-year-old male, West Zone)

[Women] can bleed to death in the course of circumcision. They can also get infection that affects them later. Others can become barren due to this circumcision, through infection. (FGD, 22-year-old male, Navrongo Town)

I don’t support female circumcision because it kills their sexual feelings. (IDI, 19-year-old female, West Zone)

A large number of respondents who say female circumcision is unhealthy cite a particular concern, that the loss of blood caused by excision, coupled with the loss of blood during childbirth, may be too much for a woman to bear:

The white man, too, is right to say the practice [must] be stopped, because the female . . . nor-

mally loses too much blood in the process, and more [than] that, the women still lose blood at childbirth. Now if the two [are] combined, [what] would the life of the woman be like? (FGD, 48-year-old male, West Zone)

Additionally, some respondents say the practice has declined because “you people”—the government and its health workers—have decided it should be stopped. Indeed, the Ghanaian government outlawed female circumcision after the 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development—one of the first developing countries to do so:

Female circumcision has been practiced since we were born, but you people have come to stop it and rather encourage male circumcision. (FGD, 64-year-old female, East Zone)

Interestingly, the 1995 panel survey, which included a module on female circumcision, revealed that its prevalence has declined greatly, a finding that is consistent with the qualitative results reported here. Whereas circumcision was nearly universal (94 percent) for women aged 35 and older, it was much less common among women aged 15–19: Only one-fourth of these young women had undergone the procedure (Mbacké et al. 1998).²⁰

Male circumcision is a relatively new phenomenon in the district, and some respondents noted that it was not part of traditional culture:

I don’t see any significance of boys’ circumcision; it is something our ancestors never did. They copied this from other people as they travel to the south [of the country]. (IDI, 70-year-old male, East Zone)

Respondents’ comments about male circumcision form an almost exact mirror image of those cited above regarding female circumcision. Respondents say that uncircumcised men catch and spread diseases, that the government promotes male circumcision, and that men willingly have themselves circumcised nowadays, out of a desire to appeal to women, and to enjoy sex more fully, and in order to avoid social ostracism:

You people have been saying that if a boy is not circumcised, he may contract diseases. . . . (FGD, 56-year-old female, East Zone)

It adds beauty to itself when circumcised because it is attractive to women; it is clean, doesn’t contract STDs; and detection and treatment of disease is quick. . . . (FGD, 40-year-old male, Central Zone)

Those boys who have been circumcised make

fun of those who haven't, and so the adolescent boys see it as very important in their lives. . . . (FGD, 20-year-old male, Central Zone)

A 13-year-old boy interviewed in the East Zone expresses succinctly the overall response to circumcision that emerges, remarkably consistently, from the various district residents consulted:

Girls should not be circumcised, but boys should be. . . . Girls can die through circumcision, but for boys it prevents diseases.

In the interviews and focus groups, occasional voices are raised in defense of female circumcision from those who are unwilling to accept its demise:

I will say it [female circumcision] should be continued because it is an ancestral practice that was passed down by our forefathers. It is because most young girls now go to school and because they cannot endure pain that they do not do it anymore. (FGD, 41-year-old male, East Zone)

Sexual Activity

The perceived rise in premarital sexual activity in the district is associated in the minds of many informants with the decline in female circumcision. Several adults say that the discouragement of female circumcision has led to a situation in which girls' developmental status is unclear and their sexual desire uncurbed; unsanctioned sex is thus more likely:

[In] our time, one only started moving with boys after being circumcised, but nowadays, as this idea of circumcision has been stopped, [as soon as] the girls start shooting breast, they feel they are grown, so they start "jumping on boys." (IDI, 50-year-old female, East Zone)

In the past, a girl's maturity was determined by her time of circumcision. If a girl was circumcised, you knew she had matured enough to relate with the opposite sex. Circumcision is no longer practiced, so it is difficult to have any control over boys and girls. (FGD, 51-year-old female, East Zone)

Although adolescents were not forthcoming about the changing nature of sexual behavior, one girl spoke about the increasing pressure on girls to have sex:

[Sex] has become a part of life, believed to be what builds your love. That is why I have been forced to do it. (FGD, 19-year-old female, Central Zone)

The adults of the community were clearly disturbed by what they felt to be changes in adolescent behavior:

Even in front of you these adolescents have sex, and when you want to talk, they insult you and tell you that it is none of your business. Even when you try to tell them that it was not done in the past, they tell you that they are not in the past. (IDI, 25-year-old female, Central Zone)

The most common reason offered by adults for the changing sexual behavior of young people is one that would probably be familiar to parents in most regions of the world. To parents and elders in Northeast Ghana, things seem, somewhat mysteriously, to have changed. Children have lost respect for their parents and are behaving in ways that break radically with the values and traditions that older generations held dear:

In the past, we used to stay at home and help our mothers, and even if you wanted to go out, you had to finish all your house duties before you could go out, otherwise you would receive some punishment. Nowadays, boys and girls start boy-girl relationships rather too early, so that they do not even regard their parent anymore. So a girl wakes up, does not do anything, and she is on the streets roaming with boys. (IDI, 50-year-old female, East Zone)

In the past, the youth were easily frightened. If you told them [that if] they do something they will be sick, they wouldn't do it. Today children do not fear anything. (IDI, Chief)

Sometimes, older people express confusion as to the reasons for changes in the young:

We have always tried hard but have not been able to get an answer to why this sudden changing trend. (FGD, 52-year-old male, East Zone)

Times have changed, and everything has changed with them.²¹ (IDI, 70-year-old male, East Zone)

When they go beyond simple statements that today's young people will not listen to their parents and insist on breaking with tradition, elders in the sample most frequently locate the causes for such changed behavior in a set of factors that might variously be termed "modernization," "the introduction of market forces," or "westernization." Foremost among these factors, according to many respondents, is the introduction of money into what was, until recently, largely a subsistence economy. The presence of money, elders feel, has undermined their ability to discipline young people and has caused adolescents to be tempted in ways that are hard to resist:

The reason why we can no more control the children is that there is money everywhere. (FGD, 50-year-old female, East Zone)

All these early marriages are caused by the money in the system. Now when you try to control a boy, he walks out and goes to work for money. (FGD, 48-year-old male, West Zone)

In the past, food was what was used to punish children who disobeyed their parents. When a child disobeyed the mother, she would cook and would not serve him. But nowadays things have changed, and when a child is refused food, that child will go outside and look for work to do in order to get money to buy food . . . so this discipline is not effective for these boys. (FGD, female, age unknown, West Zone)

This complaint—that food deprivation was once an important means of discipline, but that the money economy and availability of alternate food sources have rendered it ineffective—is repeated again and again by older informants.

Beyond money itself, elders feel that the modern world has introduced young people to a dizzying array of costly material goods, and that the desire for these goods leads to disrespect and to new and unsanctioned sexual behaviors:

The children have something they called “walk-man,” which they put in the ears. They bring this thing home and try to challenge their parents. The white men manufacture so many different things, which when these children have them, cause them to not listen to us. (FGD, 52-year-old male, West Zone)

Some of these girls need perfume, soaps to bathe, so that they can feel they are the best in the area; and it is when they cannot afford to buy the soap that such [sexual] behavior comes about. (FGD, 51-year-old female, West Zone)

Furthermore, many elders feel that these new temptations of money and material goods are particularly difficult for parents and young people to cope with in the context of a depressed economy offering few job prospects:

As I said earlier, what [young people] want and think about is money, and the government cannot get employment for them. (IDI, Chief)

Young people emphasize the role of poverty in their lives even more often than do their elders, observing particularly how poverty and new desires together (rather than simply the desires themselves) push young people (especially girls) toward premarital sex and away from traditional forms of marriage:

All of these behaviors are caused by our parents’ lack of money. If our parents had money for our sisters to buy what they need, that would

let them limit their sexual behaviors toward men. (FGD, 24-year-old male, West Zone)

In the past, girls did not move about as much as boys, but nowadays, when they see their friends with nice dresses, they want to have some, and since their parents cannot afford [them], they move about even more than the boys in search of these things. (FGD, 19-year-old female, East Zone)

Respondents attribute the emergence of sugar daddies—older men who give girls presents or pay for school fees in exchange for sex—and prostitution to rising levels of poverty:

In the old days, parents gave their children food. Today, we can’t provide them with their food requirements. Hence, when [your daughter] comes in and you ask her to fetch you water, she will ask you if you gave her food to eat before school. So this girl will go back to the boy or man who gives her money to buy food, and anything happens there. (FGD, 52-year-old female, West Zone)

Day in, day out, you see cars, motorists, and even bicycles coming. They are elderly people, and they come to send our girls away. You know very well they send them out for a very good purpose [sex]. Because if an old man sends you to a beer bar, you won’t drink and go free. Afterward, you will have to go somewhere else and also have a nice time with him. (FGD, 22-year-old male, Navrongo Town)

Other sometimes-cited sources for new and disruptive ideas, especially about premarital sex, are the modern media, including films and videos:

We are at this state because there are all sorts of entertainment around us. So children don’t sit with their parents to learn from them through storytelling. So, why wouldn’t they be wayward? (FGD, 52-year-old female, Central Zone)

Some adults state categorically that the introduction of European—or “white”—values has eroded traditional norms and changed the behavior of children:

[In] our time, when you saw a girl and were interested in her, you sent kola nuts and tobacco to her father to declare your intention. But nowadays, you people do not do that; you’ve taken the white man’s ways. (IDI, 70-year-old male, East Zone)

European culture has come in to destroy our culture; children do not respect their parents; they go about smoking weed [marijuana]. . . . (IDI, Chief)

Other adults mention drugs and alcohol as problems in teenagers' lives—although a connection between substance abuse and changing sexual patterns is not always made:

These adolescents sometimes stick to drinking alcohol, smoking weed [marijuana], and taking all sorts of drugs, which they shouldn't have done. (IDI, 25-year-old female, Central Zone)

Occasionally, adults seem willing to admit that poor parenting—including fathers' drinking and drug abuse—may lead to undesirable sexual behavior among the young:

To me, there are still obedient children among the youth; depending on the way you train your child, he can be a very responsible child. . . . [S]o for me it is how you train or bring up a child that makes him or her what he or she is. (FGD, female, age unknown, East Zone)

Some parents are so irresponsible that, to the children, it would have even been better had their parents died, because they only drink and drink and forget the children. (IDI, Chief)

Young people—not surprisingly—are much readier than their parents to emphasize bad parenting as causing the changes in their lives:

Some fathers, too, even when their daughters come home very late from the market, do not bother to question them to know why they have kept so long in the market. If this were always done, it would help to check the children so they would not misbehave outside their homes. (FGD, 16-year-old male, West Zone)

And a mother or father who sees a boy with a girlfriend, instead of calling the boy and sitting him down with the girl to advise them, the parent rather throws insults at them, trying to prevent them. And you see, when you do that, the young will hide and see each other at a place that is not very appropriate. So, they should reason with the adolescents, and counsel. . . . (FGD, 18-year-old male, Navrongo Town)

Young people often state that they would welcome a firmer hand and greater discipline from their elders:²²

As adolescents, when we stay out too late it would be good for our parents to warn or even beat us to correct us. . . . (FGD, 17-year-old female, East Zone)

I think [sexuality] should be controlled, and there should even be a kind of laid-down procedure that one should go through before one

can be able to relate with the opposite sex. (FGD, 20-year-old male, Central Zone)

Young people cite negative peer influences as a source of changed or "bad" behavior much more often than do elders:

I think we are being introduced to some of these [sexual] things through peer groups. There are bad friends, and there are good friends. (FGD, 18-year-old male, Navrongo Town)

A few elders state that the introduction of family planning has made unsanctioned sex more likely by eliminating penalties for sexual behavior:

Now it is family planning that has brought about all these behaviors. It used not to be like this in the past, because when one girl became pregnant, the other learned from her mistake and feared to go near men. (FGD, 41-year-old female, West Zone)

It is the condom that causes everything. If there is no condom and she goes out, [she] contract[s] STDs. . . . The next time she sees an erect penis, she will be afraid to go near it. But the condom protects them, hence the misbehavior. (FGD, 52-year-old female, Central Zone)

The government nowadays has brought so many medicines for the prevention of pregnancies, and that is why when you advise these adolescent girls, they do not listen. They feel they can never get pregnant. (FGD, 49-year-old female, West Zone)

Young people also attribute the increase in sexual activity to the introduction of family planning:

You just see a small girl, she is not up to the age to have sex, but through this introduction [of family planning] she has got the chance of doing, having sex, doing whatever she wants. (FGD, 23-year-old female, Navrongo Town)

Finally, parents mention schools as possible catalysts of changed behavior in the young:

Times have changed and things are not as they used to be with education now. The children seem to feel that they know better than their parents so they will not take what they tell them. (FGD, female, age unknown, East Zone)

In summary, parents and older people in the Kassena-Nankana District tend to trace changes in their children's sexual behavior to invasive forces—money, media, "white men's values," and family planning—that have contributed to a general breakdown in behavioral

norms and values to produce a new, troubling, and incomprehensible sexual status quo. Younger people recognize many of these same factors, but with a subtle difference: Whereas elders see the invasive forces as the problem, the young are more likely to take these forces for granted, and to locate the problem in their inability to respond effectively to them. Thus, whereas an older person might see the desire for consumer goods as a problem, a younger one might see the difficulty as poverty and the concomitant inability to acquire consumer goods. Whereas an older person might blame the problems of young people on the unbridled search for gratification, an adolescent might blame parents' failure to help young people negotiate the many temptations that confront them.

Premarital Pregnancy and Abortion

Respondents expressed considerable concern about the consequences of unsanctioned sexual activity. They talked about rising levels of premarital pregnancy and about abortion, which, although legal in Ghana,²³ is not readily available:

My son impregnated a girl, and we asked [him] to marry her. He refused and we ignored him, performed the marriage rites and brought the girl to the house. He traveled and never asked the girl to follow him, and now the girl is married to another man. (IDI, 60-year-old male, Central Zone)

Almost every day girls are causing abortion everywhere; they only give birth when the abortion fails; I have clear examples here in my house. (IDI, traditional leader)

When pregnancy occurs, [a girl] would not tell you but rather go to her boyfriend who is the cause of the pregnancy to see what they can do to abort it. (FGD, 63-year-old female, West Zone)

Care of Illegitimate Children

Disagreement exists about who is responsible for the care and cost of children born out of wedlock, whether the woman's family or the man's, suggesting that this phenomenon is of such recent origin that societal norms for this issue have not yet emerged:

In the past, such a child was owned by the girl's parents; but nowadays parents see such children as a burden, so the child is usually given to the boy. (FGD, 21-year-old male, Central Zone)

Usually, it is a man who owns a child, but nowadays when a boy impregnates a girl, he usually denies it, so it ends up being a burden for the girl's parents. (FGD, 20-year-old male, Central Zone)

Marriage and Courtship

The elders in the community believe that the ease of access to sexual partners has reduced the incentive to marry:

These days, you can't force your son to marry because he gets his sex all right. The women will always come to him, and if you marry a woman for him, he will run away and leave her for you [to care for]. What will you do with her? (FGD, 52-year-old female, Central Zone)

In the past, even if you didn't want to marry, your parents could force [you] and give you to a husband. But now if a parent does that, the girl will not even stay. (IDI, 50-year-old female, East Zone)

Apparently, the traditional marriage process is being bypassed; parents and families are less involved than they were in previous generations. Respondents commented on courtship in earlier times, and some compared it with the present:

In the past, before a boy could get married to a girl, he had to see the parents of the girl with kola nuts to let them know his intention. This continued until such a time that the parents of the girl were satisfied, and they would release the girl for him to marry. (IDI, 38-year-old female, West Zone)

What these young boys do nowadays is they bring their girlfriends to the house, and after some few weeks, these girls become pregnant; they then ask their mothers to make a shrill noise to indicate that the boy has married. After the shrill noise has been made, it is then the duty of the father to fight things out with the in-laws because his son did not pass through the right channel to marry their daughter. (FGD, 40-year-old male, Central Zone)

Now the youth are their own parents when it comes to sex and marriage. A girl no longer brings her boyfriend to the house to show him to her parents. The kola [nuts], guinea fowls, and so forth are collected . . . in the market in the form of money and kind. (FGD, 56-year-old female, East Zone)

Courtship appears to have become a considerable financial burden. Lack of economic opportunity is mentioned as a bar to following traditional marriage rites and hence, by implication, is an impetus to nontraditional coupling:

The marriage process should be changed because it involves a lot, and usually after doing all these things, there may be no money left to take care of the woman, and this brings problems in the marriage. This is even one of the reasons why young men can't marry nowadays. (FGD, 21-year-old male, Central Zone)

The items of marriage should be reduced so that a lot of young boys will be able to get wives to marry. (FGD, 21-year-old female, Central Zone)

Conclusion

Researchers investigating the reproductive behavior of adolescents in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa have found that a fundamental transformation has taken place in the lives of young people in recent years. Education and age at marriage for women are increasing and adolescent fertility is falling. At the same time, sexual activity and childbearing prior to marriage appear to be more common now than they have been previously. Adolescents are said to have much greater autonomy than they did in the past, and parental involvement in everyday life, including the courtship process, is believed to have declined. With the reduced influence of elders, the increased mobility of girls, and the undermining of the traditional mate-selection process, boys are thought to be freer to make sexual demands (Bledsoe and Cohen 1993).

Some researchers see the alteration in the context of adolescent fertility, in which out-of-wedlock births are a prominent feature, as primarily an urban phenomenon. This qualitative investigation of adolescent reproductive behavior in a rural, relatively remote area of northern Ghana suggests that the behaviors that have been observed in the more developed regions of sub-Saharan Africa are also to be found in isolated and poorer locales. Despite the characterization of the Kassena-Nankana District as one in which a "climate of traditionalism" (Binka et al. 1995: 123) exists and where "premarital fertility is low" (Nazzar et al. 1995: 310), the social environment faced by adolescents and the reproductive behavior they exhibit appear to be changing. Although we must be cautious in asserting that adolescent life in the Kassena-Nankana District has been fundamentally transformed in recent years—indeed, longitudinal data

for assessing the extent of such change are lacking—this investigation has revealed that the social environment faced by young people today appears to be different from that of the past. The nature of marital and reproductive behavior among young people seems to have altered. Parents, adolescents, and traditional leaders speak of a decline in female circumcision, a rise in premarital sexual activity linked to the decline in circumcision, and a circumventing of traditional courtship. An increasingly monetary economy and the introduction of Western television and video have apparently undermined traditional parent-child relationships. As a reflection of the changes taking place in the district, the data concerning women's schooling are particularly striking. Educational attainment has risen at a rapid rate. Moreover, this rise is relatively recent in origin, indicating that adolescent girls are fundamentally different from their elders.

In light of the qualitative and quantitative evidence presented, it should come as no surprise that the physician in charge of the only hospital in the district speaks of treating increasing numbers of schoolgirls for abortion-related complications (Enos 1996). The district, despite its location, is not immune to the reproductive health problems that confront adolescents in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa. However, because of the district's distance from a major urban center and because of the low level of local infrastructure, policymakers and program managers face major obstacles in their attempts to effect change there, particularly with regard to adolescents.

Those involved in the Navrongo Community Health and Family Planning Project—a large-scale experiment conducted by the Navrongo Health Research Centre to introduce family planning in the district, monitor demographic behavior, and document and evaluate health interventions—have concluded that although social science research on adolescents is well within their purview, activities to improve the health and well-being of young people require expertise that is currently lacking. The Centre, which operates under the auspices of the Ghanaian Ministry of Health, has a mandate to conduct experimental research with a goal of encouraging health-sector reform. The view among staff is that programs for adolescents cannot be contemplated as part of a family planning experiment in part because the programs that appear to be needed are not limited to health.²⁴ As noted throughout this article, some adolescents in the district are beginning to engage in sexual relations prior to formal marital arrangements, a willingness that may be attributed to a decline in female circumcision, an increase in girls' school participation, and the rise of new forms of social interaction and economic exchange. Extending that logic, unprotected premarital sex, although

it may have serious health consequences, reflects a new social and economic landscape, and, therefore, must be addressed by a broad group of professionals including but not limited to those in the public health field.

Prior to developing any interventions, however, a more comprehensive picture must be obtained of what it means to be an adolescent in Navrongo today and how adolescence differs for girls and boys. Although the interviews and discussions held for this study indicate that the environment in which adolescents function is being transformed, as has been emphasized above, a propensity exists for respondents who are asked about social change to exaggerate the magnitude of what may only be isolated incidents and atypical behaviors. Respondents' remarks are, therefore, insufficient to establish definitively that change has occurred. Information about time use, school enrollment, schooling experiences, domestic responsibilities, familial relationships, migration patterns, work opportunities, courtship patterns, sexual behavior, and gender roles must all be described and compared with anthropological accounts of the past. Moreover, knowledge of whether and how girls' roles might be changing is critical for our understanding of adolescent life in the district, because the lives of young females in this setting have traditionally been controlled by brothers, fathers, husbands, compound heads, chiefs, and older women. Furthermore, given the role that initiation rites have played in the transmission of reproductive knowledge and behavior throughout sub-Saharan Africa (see van de Walle and Franklin 1996), an understanding of how the decline in circumcision has undermined the transfer of such knowledge and expectations from one generation to the next is essential.

Notes

- 1 When the interval between menarche and marriage is short or even nonexistent, observers have spoken of an absence of adolescence for girls (Whiting et al. 1986). Another view is that adolescence does not necessarily end with marriage or childbearing, but that marrying or bearing a child during the teen years affects the quality of adolescence (Mensch et al. 1998).
- 2 Interestingly, especially because of the important role chiefs play, the British colonial administration through its policy of indirect rule established the institution of chieftancy after the turn of the century (Fayorsey et al. 1994). The region was "traditionally acephalous in political structure" (Naden 1974: 35), that is, characterized by the absence of any centralized political organization.
- 3 Alexandra Wilson, an anthropologist who has lived in northern Ghana among members of another ethnic group and is familiar with the anthropological literature about the area, has argued that the Kassena and Nankana are sufficiently different that they should not be combined for purposes of analysis (Wilson 1998).

Although the authors have no way of evaluating her assertion, because recent studies and interventions have regarded the two groups as similar enough to justify aggregation (Adongo et al. 1997; Nazzar et al. 1995; Tonah 1993), the two groups are combined here.

- 4 The two districts to which Cardinall is referring are Navarro, the original name of the Navrongo area, and Zuaragu, which is in Bolgatonga, the district contiguous to Kassena-Nankana.
- 5 Grindal's fieldwork took place in the late 1960s, and the first edition of his research was published in 1972.
- 6 The Ashanti Hinterland referred to the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast (colonial Ghana).
- 7 Rattray was affiliated with the Gold Coast Political Service. The purpose of his 600-page book was "to furnish data which will assist those in authority to build up a sound Native Administration . . . which will be a model to other territories" (1932: xxi). He used an educated Nankan informer, who recorded social customs and rituals in considerable detail and then translated them into English.
- 8 Meillassoux (1981), in his discussion of domestic reproduction in West Africa, stated that control over pubescent women resided entirely with male elders.
- 9 This assertion about a late age for male marriage is purely speculative. Indeed, contemporary accounts of the transition to adulthood in the district as well as a contiguous area suggest that boys marry at around age 18 (Grindal 1982; Fayorsey et al. 1994). Whether age of marriage for men is no earlier now than in the past, or whether marriage may have been earlier in the past than the current demographic literature suggests, is not known.
- 10 A traditional saying associated with this aspect of the courtship process goes: "The red ants say that number makes for strength" (Rattray 1932: 145).
- 11 Cardinall (1926) mentioned two other ways for a marriage to take place: (1) A married woman, after visiting her natal village, would bring back a sister to assist with the housework. The sister would then be regarded as a new wife. (2) A girl might be captured by the men of a particular compound and kept as a prisoner of the compound's women. Gifts would be given to the girl to induce her to marry. Even if the girl consented, however, she would be returned to her parents if they opposed the match.
- 12 The weakening of some cultural traditions associated with the African family is not viewed universally with disfavor. For example, among the Kikuyu in Kenya, an abandonment of initiation rites, a substantial decline in polygyny, and a reduction in bride wealth have occurred. With the premium put on education, reversals in wealth transfers from the bride's family to the groom's family have even occurred in the form of assistance with payment of school fees (Worthman and Whiting 1987). In no sense, however, are these changes ubiquitous or always in the same direction. In Iboland in Nigeria, bride wealth has apparently increased, leading to a delay in marriage (Isiugo-Abanihe 1994).
- 13 On the other hand, adolescent fertility as a whole has begun to fall in a number of countries, although the rate of childbearing among teenagers is still higher in sub-Saharan Africa than in any other region of the world.
- 14 In 1994-95, a micropilot service-delivery study was conducted to assess the community response to the introduction of family planning services. In 1996, a four-cell factorial experiment with varying configurations of services and staff was begun in the dis-

tract to test the demographic impact of family planning. In addition, a fifth cell in a contiguous district is designated as a control area (Binka et al. 1995).

- 15 Each cluster has between 35 and 99 compounds.
- 16 Eight teachers were also interviewed from randomly selected schools. Because the teachers interviewed were nominated by school authorities, who were likely to be selective, their responses were not included.
- 17 The authors of this study decided to include the transcripts from these focus-group discussions in order to capture the voices of as many young people as possible.
- 18 The translations of the transcripts are quoted nearly verbatim, with a few changes made for clarity.
- 19 Although most respondents gave their age, the accuracy of their answers is questionable, particularly for the older respondents.
- 20 Although some girls aged 15–19 who are not circumcised may eventually undergo the procedure, by age 20 virtually everyone who is going to be circumcised has been. That only 58 percent of those aged 20–24 are circumcised is irrefutable evidence that the practice is on the wane.
- 21 This phrase appears, practically verbatim, at several other points in the transcripts. Perhaps it is a local proverb or saying.
- 22 Adolescent and student focus-group participants were asked directly whether or not they should be more “controlled”; as a result, they probably indicated a desire for discipline more often than they would have had they been asked a less leading question.
- 23 Abortion is permitted in Ghana to “protect a woman’s physical or mental health, as well as on judicial and fetal impairment grounds” (Rahman et al. 1998: 60).
- 24 This discussion of staff opinion is based on a conversation with James Phillips, senior advisor to the Centre.

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