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NIGERIA'S DEMOGRAPHIC DELUSION:  
A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE  
CENSUS CONTROVERSY

BY P. O. OLUSANYA



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**NIGERIA'S DEMOGRAPHIC DELUSION:  
A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE CENSUS  
CONTROVERSY**

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## NIGERIA'S DEMOGRAPHIC DELUSION: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE CENSUS CONTROVERSY

Mr. Vice-Chancellor Sir, Your Highness, Your Excellencies, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Provost College of Medicine, Mr. Registrar, Fellow Deans of Faculties and Heads of Departments, Academic Colleagues, Fellow Students, distinguished ladies and gentlemen.

IN THESE days of increasing concern for socio-economic development in Nigeria, one of the greatest constraints on planning is the lack of data. From the time of the Colonial Government's Ten-year Plan of Development and Welfare for 1946-1955 to the present time, the call has been for statistical information needed for efficient planning. Apart from the obstacle created by the death of trained manpower, needed for the implementation of that plan, lack of basic information prevented or delayed the execution of the plan.

Writing about the statistical situation in Nigeria at that time, Macleod Smith said:

No very prolonged study of existing Nigerian statistics is required to show that they are entirely inadequate for the purpose of large-scale development planning. We do not even know what the population of the country is . . . The complete lack of adequate statistics outside Lagos has meant that no one has any idea of the rate of increase of the population of Nigeria, though there may be unmistakable signs that it is increasing (Macleod-Smith, 1946).

Although a national census, regarded in some quarters as the best available information on the size, distribution and characteristics of Nigeria's population, was taken in 1952-53, the situation is hardly different today.

As a sociologist whose main area of interest and specialisation is population, I feel, therefore, that the most relevant contribution I can make to the current efforts at finding solutions to the nation's problems of development is in the area of population. I shall, therefore, address myself in this lecture to the problem of population enumeration in Nigeria.

To many, this is an overflogged and sensitive issue which should be let alone considering the heat it has generated in the past and the rigid positions which many Nigerians have taken on it. This, of course, is not to say that the last word on the subject has been heard. For, as long as development planning goes on in Nigeria, so long will the question of a national census retain its prominence as a unique and indispensable denominator in man's effort at measuring his socio-economic progress.

#### *Uses of Population Census*

The word "Census" is said to have been derived from the Latin word "Censere" which means to tax or value. In other words, in ancient times the objectives of population enumeration were not to collect data for the study of population or for socio-economic planning the way we know it today. It was carried out mainly for military conscription and taxation as among the Romans, the Chinese, the Athenians and the Greeks. "Ordinarily, their limited purposes restricted the census to certain segments of the population; men able to bear arms, head of families, farmers, merchants, landholders and others on whom taxes might be levied" (Thomlinson, 1965 : 37)

Today, there are far numerous questions which the census is supposed to answer as a result of the complexities of government activities and the demands of socio-economic planning. Some of these may be mentioned:

- (i) What is the number of persons in a country and how is this population distributed into its political sub-divisions?

- (ii) How is the population distributed with respect to age, sex, literacy, educational, marital and occupational status?
- (iii) What are the relative weights of rural and urban populations?
- (iv) Is the current growth of the population too rapid for ease of planning socio-economic development?
- (v) Are there differences in the growth rates of the various sub-divisions of a country? If so, what are the factors in this growth?

These and numerous other questions can be satisfactorily answered only by a population census. In short, data from the population census are so valuable that their inavailability will adversely affect the rationality of public policies.

#### *Population Enumeration in Nigeria*

Census-taking in a country of the size and diversity of Nigeria is a technically complex undertaking. It becomes even more complex when extraneous matters such as policies are confused with the operation. This has been the experience in Nigeria since the past two decades. Consequently, it is popularly believed that the figures obtained from the last two censuses were deliberately inflated and therefore useless. Whether this allegation is true or false is neither here nor there. The important consideration is that the figures, whether accurate or not, are unacceptable to many Nigerians because of the belief, rightly or wrongly, by one group that the other group has some political and economic benefits to derive from a population size that is larger than any other.

Most of us are familiar with the history of our wated effort in the area of census-taking. I will, therefore not tax your patience by recounting the detailed history. It is necessary, however, to mention some of the salient facts about our attempts at population enumeration in order to put this lecture in its right perspective.

Population enumeration in Nigeria began as far back as 1866 and between this date and 1911, it was confined to the Lagos area. Estimates had, however, been made for various parts of the country between these dates but these were no more than guesses. For example, between 1901 and 1910 the population of Nigeria was variously estimated at between 10 and 30 million people. It was not until 1911 that an attempt was made to widen the scope of enumeration to cover the main ports.

This limited coverage of the population was excusable. The geographical entity now known as Nigeria has not always been one country. The process of colonising the hinterland continued from 1861 when Lagos was taken in order to suppress its illegal slave trade, and gradually led to the proclamation of the Protectorates of Southern and Northern Nigeria in 1900; the introduction of indirect rule to Northern Nigeria in 1903, the merging of Lagos with Southern Nigeria in 1906, and finally the amalgamation of the Southern and Northern Protectorates in 1914 (Burns, 1948). In short, a census of the whole country could not be taken before 1921, and between this date and now, five population enumeration exercises of differing quality have been carried out.

The 1921 census was divided operationally into two parts – the township census and the provincial census. The township census was, according to the report, fairly accurate while the provincial census was an utter failure because of intractable operational problems. Although the 1931 census was originally planned to cover the whole country, the disturbances in parts of Eastern Nigeria associated with taxation discouraged a country-wide count and the total population figure of 19.9 million returned for Nigeria was an estimate derived from existing records.

The first census of population in the real sense of that word was taken in Nigeria in 1952–53. Few people today, except an insignificant proportion of population analysts, are aware that the inadequacies of that census were many and included omissions of thousands of people in some areas and gross over-enumeration in others. Incidentally, as a result

of poor census organisation and over-enthusiastic census propaganda occasioned by the novelty and excitement of the whole idea of census-taking in a backward society that had just been initiated into the ritual of socio-economic planning. The count, of course, erred on the low side as a result of mass apathy. Fortunately, however, Nigeria was still under colonial rule and so the census was not, and could not have been rejected by any group of Nigerians even though a grossly undercounted population is as bad as an over-enumerated one.

By the time the second post-World War II census was taken in 1962 the ruling elite had come to realise probably as a result of the introduction of a Federal system of government and some measure of regional autonomy in 1954 and finally political independence in 1960 the importance of population size in the balance of political and economic power in an ethnically heterogeneous and underdeveloped society such as Nigeria.

The 1962 census exercise was carried out from May 13 to 31 but no result was given out until July. Nigerians are characteristically an impatient people, and given the political instability of the time and the emerging problem of the fear of ethnic domination, there were rumours long before July 1962 that the census totals had been inflated in certain Regions – for example in Eastern Nigeria where the discovery of a village of 20,000 people not in existence in 1953 had been announced (Udo, 1968 : 101). In a statistically underdeveloped society such as Nigeria with many inaccessible areas and thousands of remote rural communities scattered over the wide expanse of the north and virtually cut off from the mainstream of national activities, it was even a wonder that a result could be announced within two months from the beginning of the operation!

The total population returned is said to have been 42 million, which would appear to be a considerable understatement, judging by the size of the 1952–3 population and the fact that this was grossly undercounted. The share of the North in this total population was said to be 49.2 per cent.

Considering the fact that in 1921, 1931 and 1952–53 the North constituted respectively 57 per cent, 57 per cent and 55 per cent of the total population, and that these dates fell in the colonial period which was free from partisan politics, this was a sharp decline which should naturally be cause for a critical examination of the figures for possible errors.

This was done and in January 1963 a new figure of 52 million was announced which attributed to the North 57.7 per cent of the total population. Given the complexity of the operation, the level of efficiency and attitude to work of Nigerians, these divergent results should not surprise anyone. The outcry against the sudden discovery of about 8 million additional people in the North was spontaneous in spite of the fact that Southern enumerators were sent to the North and Northern enumerators to the South during the verification exercise in January 1963. It was widely felt that the bitter controversy that ensued might lead to civil disorder (Post and Vickers, 1973). The results of the 1962 census were therefore nullified in February 1963.

Another population census was taken in November 1963. This recount was supervised by the Census Board set up by the Federal Government. It lasted four days (5–8 November) rather than two weeks as in the previous count. More than three times the number of enumerators for the 1962 count were employed. There was an exchange of enumerators between Regions and a team of female enumerators from the Eastern Region went to the North to assist in counting women in purdah (Udo, 1968 : 102).

The results released about four months later in February 1964 put the total population of Nigeria at 55.6 million. Of this total population, the North constituted 53.7 per cent. The Eastern Region and Lagos returned the same figure as in the 1962 count the Western Region increased substantially and the Northern Region experienced a decrease over the 1962 verification figure of 31 million to 29.8 million which was still 7.3 million more than its original 1962 figure of 22.5 million. The Federal Government later accepted the results without further reference to the regional governments.

In the absence of a full census report, it is not certain when preparations for the 1973 count began. Presumably, arrangements did not start before the end of the Civil War in 1970. There were a number of considerations that favoured uncontroversial and considerably improved results.

- (i) The country was under a military regime composed of soldiers drawn from various ethnic groups in Nigeria so that the question of favouring one state to the disadvantage of another hardly arose;
- (ii) There were no political parties and no election was in view;
- (iii) Census propaganda was different from what it was in previous censuses; there was no reference to parliamentary seats although, admittedly, the word *anfani* (advantages) in the radio propaganda given out by a popular comedian in the Western State was highly suggestive of those good things which a large population in one state relative to another, could bring;
- (iv) The ravages of the Civil War were still much in evidence and the country was preoccupied with social reconstruction so that falsification of census could be regarded as a remote consideration for the vast majority of Nigerians;
- (v) Respondents' thumbs were daubed with indelible ink so that it was difficult to be counted more than once.

The census was taken in November 1973. What appeared to be a staggering figure of 79.76 million was reported as the total population of Nigeria and out of this the North accounted for 51.38 million or 64 per cent. In considering the relative proportion of the North in the total population, what people usually forget is that the date of the census fell

within a period of unusually large volumes of immigration from the Sahelian region, evidence of which abounded in all parts of Nigeria up to as recent as two years ago.

It will be recalled that in May 1967, 12 states were created out of the existing four regions. All the six northern states with the exception of Benue-Plateau recorded growth rates around 4 per cent and more during the 1963-73 intercensal period. In the South, Lagos, Mid-West, and Rivers States had growth rates of 5.4 per cent, 2.5 per cent and 3.7 per cent; while Western, East-Central and South-Eastern States had -0.62 per cent, 1.1 per cent and -0.51 per cent (Table 1). The population enthusiasts were probably quick in adding up separately the population figures for the North and the South and, seeing the large disparity, were loud in their protest and charge of inflation against the North even though the North, as they knew it in the pre-1966 period, no longer existed. They did not wait to consider the cause of the negative rates of increase in parts of the South.

One puzzling fact about the low negative population increase in three of the southern states today is that the enumerators employed were mostly indigenes and those literate in the local language. In the short history of census controversy in Nigeria no state or region has ever been accused of deflating its population and no census official would wilfully reduce the growth of a state to nothing. What one suspects here is gross inefficiency on the part of the interviewers. My personal experience during that census inclines me to believe that thousands and probably even millions were missed out of the count at least in the Western State. If, as a result of shoddy field-work in the South the North was substantially larger in population, who is to blame?

The census figures were declared acceptable as official by the military government which, in addition, announced that a post-enumeration survey would be carried out to rectify any anomaly in the "provisional" census results. This was, however, not done until a new military regime, which came to power in July 1975, cancelled the census and

directed that for planning purposes the government should use the 1963 census figures that were then 12 years old.

In short, it seems that the problem of census-taking in Nigeria has been one of perception of a huge amorphous giant (the North) standing astride the whole country in spite of relative backwardness or under-development. The population enumeration problems we have today should be seen against this background. The spectre continues to haunt the southern Nigerian elite even after it has been dismembered, the dismemberment itself being a political response to the fear.

#### *Points of Controversy and their Validity*

One question which continually comes to my mind is: If indeed the censuses of Nigeria had been "rigged", what was the strategy employed and who were the actors involved? Three related questions may also be asked:

- (i) Was the alleged falsification of the census figures  
• the result of respondents deliberately presenting themselves for enumeration, or were unwittingly counted more than once by overzealous enumerators who had been instructed to do this by the census offices that recruited them?
- (ii) Was it the result of officials at the state/regional level deliberately adding fictitious figures to the totals in order to bring the population of a state/region up to or beyond those of other states/regions?
- (iii) If so, how was the figure in each case distributed over each of the component sub-divisions of the states/regions (divisions, districts, urban and rural communities, wards etc.) and over the socio-economic categories into which the data were tabulated, for example in 1963?

I have searched the literature on this subject in vain for answers to these questions, and I have questioned some of those who took part in the controversial censuses all to no avail. I shall, therefore, examine these questions, drawing from the writings of population analysts who have devoted attention to this subject.

One such analyst is Professor R. K. Udo. Writing about the 1963 census, he says:

It took the Census Board slightly over three and a half months from the close of enumeration before it announced the preliminary figures for the 1963 census. This delay, according to the Board, was occasioned by the fact that the census figures had to undergo a number of exhaustive tests to ensure their accuracy and acceptance. 'Without this thorough appraisal of the figures', the Board argued, 'the governments of the Federation and the general public will have little or no confidence in any population figures'. That was a true statement, but whatever the Board did to ensure accuracy, it does not appear that they achieved much and, today, there is a growing opinion in Nigeria and abroad that they returned an excessively high total figure. The growth rates implied by their figures are ridiculous and unrealistic. Since the number of immigrants into Nigeria during the last decade has been negligible, such growth rates can only be accounted for by a gross undercount in 1953 or a *deliberate overcount*\* in 1962. We cannot rule out the former completely but the mass of evidence provided by various incidents during and after the 1962 census suggests that there was large-scale inflation in 1962 and also in 1963 (Udo, 1968 : 97).

One of the questions raised by Udo was: "Why did people who refused to be counted in 1952 decide to return inflated figures during the 1962 census?" In other words, in spite of the recognition of the fact that gross undercounting in 1952-3 could account for the excessive (but not unique) rates of growth observed between 1952-3 and 1963, he is positive that the "people . . . decided to return inflated

figures" in 1962. And for this blatant act of inflation he could only find an answer in the distribution of parliamentary seats and the balance between the North and the South.

In another section of the same article he further confirms his pre-conceived opinion of the census in the following words: "People did not only make sure that they were not left out in the census but thousands saw to it that they were counted at least twice." His only source of support for this biased conclusion was a report in the *Morning Post* that enumerators were being suspended in some parts of the country for listing more names "than they are expected to do". (Udo, 1963 : 101). What this means is not clear. Why anybody should have a pre-conceived idea of the exact number of persons to be listed in any given area was not explained either by the author or the *Morning Post*. In any case, who were the thousands that "saw to it that they were counted at least twice"? Is it the masses of village dwellers who did not know the import of the whole exercise? If supervisors or census officials suspended enumerators for careless work (or is it deliberate inflation without prior briefing by anybody?), who then is to be held responsible for the alleged falsification of the data, assuming that suspension was not sufficient as a deterrent to dishonest enumerators?

One incident which seemed to buttress people's belief that the 1962-63 counts and recounts were deliberately inflated was the announcement by the district officer of the discovery in Eket Division, Eastern Nigeria, of a new village with 20,000 inhabitants while the census campaign was going on; and another discovery of a fishing village of 1,000 inhabitants in Uyo Province which could not be identified in the 1953 census. Udo asks: "Is it a mere coincidence that these villages were discovered in a 'minority area'? . . . What if the people wanted to make up for the loss of 1953?"

\*Emphasis mine.

Here again one is treated to a re-statement of the same biased opinion without any more proof than the discovery of two hitherto unknown villages whose populations added up to a relatively insignificant 21,000.

I would like to say, at this point, that the discovery of new settlements is by no means unusual. In a study of migrant farmers in south-west Nigeria between 1970 and 1972, two colleagues and I found several migrant settlements whose names could not be found either in the 1952 or 1963 census report because they had not been established by the colonizing migrants then. Some had previously existed and their names were to be found in the records of local tax offices but had since disappeared. In a country where adequate and up-to-date maps are a rarity, such sudden discoveries are to be expected.

Professor Ogunlesi provides a useful illustration of the inconclusiveness of the charge of "rigging" based on the discovery of new settlements in his account of the enumeration in Ibarapa District of old Western Region in 1963. Here, the University of Ibadan had launched its Community Health Project in February 1963 and a survey of the baseline population of the district which coincided with the census exercise formed an important part of the project. According to him, "The absence of any record of populations in the 1952 census for villages surrounding Igbo-Ora, Eruwa, Lanlate, Tapa, Aiyete, Igangan and Idere that are now known to have been in existence long before 1952 suggests that the 1952 census was incomplete in this respect" (Ogunlesi, 1968 : 117). These communities were identified in 1963 and therefore the population of the whole district apparently trebled itself from 51,494 to 137,542 between 1952 and 1963. If, however, we compare only the populations of those communities that were identified in 1952 in this district with the populations of the same communities in 1963 we find that the 1963 population was less than double the 1952 figure (i.e. from 51,494 to 97,878). And only in the case of the larger communities was the growth rate as high as this as a result of their absorption of the populations of smaller communities.

One factor which compounds the problem of enumeration and which an undiscerning observer would attribute to wilful listing of "more names than . . . expected" is the pattern of dual habitation among some groups in Nigeria, notably the Yoruba (Goddard, 1965 : 21; Olusanya, 1969; 1976). In fact, rather than wilful overcounting, according to Professor Ogunlesi, "It was not always clear to enumerators whom to count or whom not to count in a particular house," (Ogunlesi, 1968 : 120), and this could lead to either over- or under-enumeration. He suggested: "More investigations are required into family and migration patterns to enable clear guidelines to be provided for the future."

Referring to the exchange of enumerators between regions in 1963, Udo (1968 : 102) says: "Later events were to prove that these as well as other precautions proved ineffective. This is not surprising; what is surprising is that the politicians agree to trust each other in expecting that each regional government would ensure an accurate count . . . Yet it was clear that in order not to expose itself as guilty of inflation in 1962, each regional government, and indeed each district would ensure that the 1963 figures were not below those of the 1962 census. This is precisely what happened, and instead of a decrease, there was further inflation in some cases. Today many of those who shouted down the 1962 figures believe that those figures were nearer the truth than the 1963 figures."

To begin with, this is not a correct statement. The latter part of the statement is evidently contradictory and reflects the biased and confused thinking of many Nigerians about past population censuses. Thus, if one were to go by this contradictory statement, the obvious conclusion would be that the opposition to the 1962 and any other count was really baseless.

Although Professor Yesufu concedes in his article on this subject the fact that the exceptional rates of growth between 1952-3 and 1963 might have been due partly to gross under-enumeration of the population on the former date because it was based, on the one hand, partly on head

count and partly on estimates, and on the other the meaning and purpose of the exercise was obscure to the masses, he finally concludes, more or less like other writers on the subject: "All these experiences . . . however suggestive they may be, they provide no argument for sustaining the results of the 1963 census in Nigeria. The rates of population growth . . . are not only too high but are too mutually inconsistent to be easily explained away. True, the high growth rate for Lagos is accounted for partly by continuous immigration from the regions. But the rate of 8.3 per cent for the Western Region is patently preposterous and out of tune with growth rates of less than 6 per cent in other regions. *It is highly suggestive of a widespread falsification of the population count*"\* (Yesufu, 1968 : 109)

Arguments have already been adduced to show that the mere fact that the rates of growth between 1952 and 1963 were excessive is not sufficient to establish the charge of deliberate inflation. Also evidence already mentioned in connection with the exercise in a part of the Western Region is sufficient to destroy the validity or cogency of the argument based merely on the rate of growth. It is worth mentioning that colonial censuses of this period in other countries share the feature of gross under-enumeration. Compared with Nigeria's growth rate of 6 per cent between 1952-3 and 1963, Ghana's rate of growth between 1948 and 1960 was 4.2 per cent, the highest ever recorded in the history of population census in that country (Caldwell, 1976 : 23). This phenomenal growth is attributed to poor fieldwork and estimating techniques during the 1948 census. Between 1931 and 1948, the growth rate was 0.9 per cent (Ominde and Ejiogu, 1970 : 243). Some regions hardly grew, some actually suffered slight declines, while others increased substantially in population between the censuses of 1948 and 1960 and between 1960 and 1970 (Ramachandran & Gyepi-Garbrah, 1975 : 27).

In Gambia, the rate of growth between 1921 and 1931 was negative (-0.5 per cent). Between 1931 and 1963 when the first post-war census was taken, the growth rate rose to 1.4 per cent which is about four times the previous growth

rate (Caldwell, 1975 : 494). This was attributed to the fact that "African censuses tend successively to become more complete." The population of Kenya according to the 1948 census, was 5.4 million and 8.6 million in the 1962 census, giving an annual growth rate of 3.4 per cent (Caldwell & Okonjo, 1968 : 53). Mauritius between 1931 and 1944 had a growth rate of 0.49 per cent, 2.26 per cent between 1944 and 1952 and 3.12 per cent between 1952 and 1962 (Ominde & Ejiogu, 1970 : 33). Uganda had a growth rate of 2.5 per cent between 1948 and 1959, and 3.8 per cent between 1959 and the census of 1969 which was considered by experts to be the most complete since 1948. Of the 17 districts into which the country is divided politically, nine had growth rates of 4 per cent to 6 per cent between 1959 and 1969. Some of the other districts had rates as low as 2 per cent (Ominde & Ejiogu, 1970 : 41).

A brief discussion of the 1952-3 census will show further that much of the excessive rate of growth recorded for the intercensal period can be explained by faulty enumeration at the former date. While there was gross overcount in some parts of the country and gross undercount in others, the overall result was substantial under-enumeration. In Ibadan Province, for example, hundreds of hitherto unrecorded villages were found and in some areas undercounting as reported by the Government Statistician was of the order of 12 per cent (Okonjo, 1968 : 81). In Ilorin and among the cattle Fulani in the North, the story also said was much the same. Two quarters of Ede town were also said to have been under-counted by 12 per cent and in the East, the Ibibio fishermen evaded the enumeration by voyaging to the creek area of Riodel Ray in Victoria and, because of shortage of launches, they could not be visited by the district officer. At the same time the fishermen refused to be counted in Victoria Division on the pretext that they belonged to Eket where they were not available for counting (Population

\*Emphasis mine.

At the same time the fishermen refused to be counted in Victoria Division on the pretext that they belonged to Eket where they were not available for counting (Population Census of the Eastern Region of Nigeria, 1953:23). In the North there were objections by Emirs to the enumeration of women in purdah and harems.

On the other hand, in Degema Division as a result of the high population provisional figure returned (228,947) an officer was detailed to recount the larger villages. The result of the recount showed that a large number of households had recklessly given round figures. In the end the adjusted figure for the division came down to 117,903. This overcount was attributed to over-enthusiastic propaganda by a politician which attracted home "sons abroad." These census migrants probably returned to their stations immediately after they were counted and were again enumerated there.

Writing about the problems of the 1953 census operations in the riverine areas of Eastern Nigeria, R. C. Duru recalled that names on some maps were those of villages that either had changed their names or were really parts of a major settlement known by a different name (Duru, 1968 : 71-72): According to him, "The roads are mostly loose surfaced and become impassable to motor vehicles.... Poor communications in the riverine area of Nigeria militated against a complete count in 1952-53. In places it took two weeks to reach settlement sites within an enumeration area. Other small settlements, notably fishing hamlets, were completely omitted . . . At the time of the 1952 census, no air photo cover existed for Degema Division; indeed there were no accurate topographical maps, nor was there a complete list of all villages and settlements for checking completeness of the census count."

One final illustration. A common assumption among southern educated elite is that the North, being partly arid, cannot support a large population. Consequently, they cannot imagine a situation whereby the population of the North is more than those of the Southern states put together. Some, in a sarcastic vein, sometimes wonder if population

enumeration in the North includes the population of cattle! A piece of evidence derived from one of the Northern states, however, would seem to show that although settlements are dispersed over a wide expanse of land, the number of inhabitants could be large. According to the 1963 census, for example, the former North-Eastern State had a total population of 7.8 million. During the WHO small-pox eradication campaign in 1968, at least 7.5 million people are said to have been vaccinated in the state (Asika, 1972 : 7). Taking into consideration people's attitude to health measures such as this in Nigeria, that is, the fact that the masses in Nigeria are scared by vaccination, the figure of 7.5 millions could be anything between 50 per cent and 80 per cent of the actual total population of state. The 1963 population of that state may well be an underestimate and the 1973 population of 15.4 million (See Table 1) should not have been regarded with scepticism.

In short, the literature on this subject contains no clue as to the method adopted, and by whom, in falsifying past census returns. All we are treated to are patently biased statements, repeated *ad nauseam*, based on ambiguous and inadequate evidence. A question one would wish answered by those who believe that the figures were falsified is the third question raised earlier; that is, if the alleged falsification was by way of deliberate addition of fictitious figures at the regional or state level, how were the figures distributed over each of the several sub-divisions of the region or state and over the socio-economic categories into which the data from the 1963 census, for example, were tabulated? My submission is that this Herculean assignment would task to the limit the analytical resources of a seasoned demographer, considering the fact that in each case the overall figure for each region, sex, age, pattern of economic activities and so forth should normally conform to expected configurations of a human population which are discernible even in a badly distorted distribution. Unfortunately, the answer to this question cannot be found anywhere in the literature.

*Further Evidence Based on the Internal Features  
of the Population*

I shall now proceed to substantiate the inconclusiveness of the allegation of "census rigging" with more concrete evidence. The first piece of evidence comes from the 1978 voters' list compiled between January 14 and February 28 of that year. During the exercise, officials went from house to house registering eligible voters (that is, persons aged 18 years and over) in preparation for the 1979 parliamentary elections. The preliminary list included names, residential addresses, sexes, age and occupations of eligible voters. The Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO) directed that persons not living in their home areas should be registered in the places where they slept, including institutions but excluding prisons.

When many people discovered that they had not been registered and the end of the exercise was near, there were several appeals through the media that the deadline be extended. FEDECO, however, refused to do this and by the end of registration it was clear that many eligible voters had not been registered. The degree of under-registration during the exercise will probably never be known. A total figure of 47,433,717 prospective voters as against an expected total of 39,914,514 was published in the *Daily Times* of March 30, 1978 (p. 15). It is highly probable that any omission from the voters' list was compensated for by the registration, largely in error as a result of ignorance of age, of persons below, but not too far from, the minimum age of eligibility. This is probably what has given the data the pattern which I shall now discuss.

To begin with, if we take as our point of departure the assumption that the voters registration data, subject to human or organisational errors, are acceptable, a comparison of the data with those of the 1963 census should be enlightening. FEDECO could not have deliberately inflated the figures since there was no guarantee that all eligible and registered voters would actually vote, and since, in any case, that body could not have been sure about the disposition of votes among the candidates.

A comparison of 1963 census figures with the voters registration figures shows that the pattern of distribution of population among the states was virtually the same in 1963 and 1978 (Table 2). Kano State, which ranked first in population size in 1963 was also first according to the 1978 voters list. Oyo also retained its second position on both dates. In short, nine of the states retained their 1963 positions in 1978; another seven were in 1978 either one place up or down in rank order on their 1963 positions and only 3 (Lagos, Kwara and Benue) were completely different in 1978 from their ranking in 1963. This agreement between the 1963 census population and the voters registration data is too close to be easily brushed aside. In fact, if a simple projection of the 1973 population of approximately 80 million is carried out on the assumption of a birth rate of 50 per 1,000 and a death rate of 20 per 1,000, we obtain for 1978 a total population of about 92 million which is roughly what one would expect (and has actually been estimated) on the basis of the 1978 voters registration figure of 48 million (Adewuyi, 1979 : 15).

A glance at graphs of age structure drawn for male and female Nigerian 1963 populations (Fig. 1), the northern and southern males and females (Fig. 2), male and female urban populations of Nigeria (Fig. 3), male and female rural populations of Nigeria (Fig. 4), male and female populations in the Federal Office of Statistics 1965-66 rural demographic sample survey (Fig. 5), male and female populations of the national KAP University of Ife 1971-1973 survey (Fig. 6), male and female populations of the 1960 census of Ghana (Fig. 7) shows that all of them and several others from different parts of tropical Africa have at least four features in common. These features are that :

- (1) They show a pronounced "hump" between the ages 15 and 30 years, the peak of the hump being, in virtually all cases, at age 20-24 years. This is an evidence of mass transfers of persons from the age group 15-19 years considering the deep hollow in this age group. The mass transfer of persons from this age group is an evidence of mass illiteracy and ignorance of exact ages;

- (2) Females appear in all cases to be more guilty in this regard, the hump of their graph being more pronounced than in the case of males. The same factors are in evidence here but in addition the distinctive physiological development of the females and their earlier entry into marriage and child-bearing has a tendency towards exaggeration of ages, either on their part or on the part of enumerators;
- (3) After the initial high concentration in the young adult ages, female numbers dwindle very rapidly and in all cases are consistently smaller in proportion than males from about the age 35 years onwards, thus giving the peculiar pattern of excessively high sex ratios at advanced ages characteristic of many African populations; and that
- (4) In spite of the distortions which are to be expected by reason of our level of socio-economic development, the usual pattern of decline in numbers with age can be seen.

Moreover, the distribution by single years of the Nigerian 1963 population as well as its sub-divisions shows the usual digit preference associated with the rounding of ages; that is, concentrations of the population at ages ending in zero and five and to some extent at even numbers. This is a feature common to the data from all the sources mentioned earlier.

In terms of the sex ratio by age, there is a marked departure from the usual pattern (that is, a ratio slightly over 100 at the very young ages and a gradual and consistent decline below 100 as age advances) as a result of relatively fewer male survivors than females. In the Nigerian 1963 population, the graph of sex ratios at the beginning of life is around 100, rises sharply between ages 5-10 and falls below that figure at age 10. Between this age and 35 years it falls really low but then comes up above 100 again and rises to an excessively high level at the advanced ages.

In other words, there are more males than females up to age 10, very few males relative to females between ages 10 and 35, and extremely few females relative to males thereafter. It is not certain whether this unusual pattern is due to errors in the data or to the pattern of sex differentials in mortality. This unusual pattern is, however, replicated by so many African populations – the Federal Office of Statistics 1965-66 rural demographic sample survey for total rural Nigeria as well as for each of the component regions, rural Western Nigeria study (Olusanya, 1969 : 43), the populations of Liberia, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Ghana 1960 (Joseph, 1975 : 530), to mention a few – that one is inclined to think that this is a distinctive feature of African populations. Unfortunately, the lack of adequate vital registration data for most parts of tropical Africa makes it difficult to say what factors are responsible for this pattern.

Considering all these weighty facts, a question that should be asked is: If indeed the 1963 census figures were falsified, how were these rather consistent patterns of errors common across tropical Africa worked into Nigeria's population not only at the national but also at the regional level as well as the single-year and the five-year age distributions of the population? Who were the mathematical geniuses who did this so successfully?

Thus, while conceding the fact that errors due to census migration, an unclear demarcation of enumeration areas, difficult terrain and inaccessibility are inescapable in Nigeria, available evidence shows that the data could not have been deliberately inflated. If this was done at all, the extent must have been so insignificant that it could be ignored for all practical purposes.

In short, if we divest our past national censuses of the deceptive cloak of controversy, the bare image we have is that of poor organisation (a social malaise which manifests itself in various aspects of our lives), of indiscipline, of a carefree attitude to work which makes an enumerator work diligently in one field context and shoddily in another, depending on his changing moods. This makes for marked

differences in the quality of enumeration which can, at times, be very glaring but which have nothing to do with the falsification of data or the struggle for political power.

It is an established fact that in high fertility and high mortality societies which are subject to sudden epidemics and other major disasters resulting from an inadequate control over the natural environment, the number of deaths fluctuates widely from year to year while the number of births remains virtually stable. This may lead to a succession of very high and very low rates of increase within the same region and in two successive years so that absolute population growth becomes sporadic and gives a false impression of inadequate enumeration or falsification of data for political reasons.

In the world's demographic history population, as available evidence shows, grew very little from year to year before 1650. After this date, however, the world's population began to show signs of rapid increase especially following the industrial revolution. The present century, in fact, has witnessed a tremendous quickening of population growth unparalleled in history; changes in population have been rather abrupt and startling, especially in parts of the developing world. The implication of this for Nigeria is that abrupt changes should not come as a surprise even within a span of 10 years.

Having said this, let me hasten to add that there are parallels to the Nigerian situation in the world's history of census-taking. It has been said of Russia: "The difficulty of divorcing censuses from politics has carried over into the 20th Century. The Russian census of 1937 was suppressed and officially disclaimed, supposedly because it contained serious methodological errors. Western observers, however, were inclined to view the 'methodological errors' as being essentially a failure to indicate the expected number of inhabitants;" (Thomlinson, 1965 : 39).

An interesting example is also given of the United States of America which illustrates man's attitude to abrupt

change: "For many Americans, rising rates seem inherently desirable. An expanding population is part of the everyday outlook and increase is a criterion of 'normality.' In one city, reported by the Bureau of the Census to have had a very small decrease in population during the previous decade, City Hall was shaken, businessmen were shocked, and enraged citizens wrote letters to the editors of local papers claiming that the census was faulty. Following an indication that the census was accurate the letters changed to the themes 'Don't give us the ship' and 'Those who desert the town (ship) are rats.' Given the traditional high rate of increase in the United States, Americans, not surprisingly, are accustomed to taking for granted that population will grow in every city and State. (Thomlinson, 1965 : 13-14). That two of the world's foremost countries were involved in census controversy at some time in their national history, however, is hardly salve for Nigerians.

#### *The Case for a New National Census*

Despite the general belief that the past two Nigerian censuses were deliberately inflated, that future censuses will continue to be falsified as long as the distribution of social amenities and parliamentary seats are based on them, and the fact that the 1973 census was officially rejected, opinion is divided on the desirability of taking another census. Various arguments have been advanced either in support of or against taking a population census in the very near future. Those who are opposed to taking a census in the near future argue that Nigeria is too backward for such a delicate undertaking as the census and therefore population enumeration should be suspended until such a time that the vast majority of Nigerians will appreciate the importance and uses of the census other than for political purposes, and until such a time that everybody has put behind him memories of the past census controversies. This, they argue, would obviate social conflicts and political instability in Nigeria. Government functionaries may be included in this group. Quite recently, the National Population Bureau announced a plan to conduct a survey for the purpose of determining the country's population probably as an interim measure.

To begin with, conflict is part of society. If the census as a potential source of conflict is suspended, other unanticipated sources will emerge. Hence, conflict, whether political or otherwise, is inescapable. Secondly, those who will be leaders of Nigeria, at least up to the first quarter of the next century are now either in, or are already coming out of secondary schools and universities and have had some measure of exposure to the population controversy and the prejudices that go with it. Unless our memories are really short – as short as that of the billy-goat around the stall of the bean-seller – then the implication of the suggestion of the postponement of census-taking until an auspicious period is that no census of Nigeria will be taken in the next 50 years.

Although a national sample survey, if efficiently carried out, can give a good idea of the country's growth rate and other characteristics of the population, it is unlikely to give the population of each small local area needed for planning at the grassroots level. How many urban centres there are and at what rate they are growing is a vital question in a period of massive rural-urban migration and rapid urbanisation in Nigeria. Without at least a vague answer to this question, which can be provided by even an inaccurate census, policy makers will be denied an opportunity to look at development problems not only from the urban but also from the rural perspective. This would be a sad loss indeed. Unfortunately sample surveys cannot measure this characteristic. In any case, they have to be efficiently and diligently carried out. This is the crux of the matter.

A warning contained in the report of the national Rural Demographic Sample Survey, 1965-66 is pertinent: "Based on the experience gained, it is believed that the key for improvement of the quality of the collected data in future surveys will be in supervision . . . Essential for the success of the survey is conscientious work on the part of the interviewers and it has been found that this is not likely to be achieved in the required degree without tightly organised supervision" (FOS, 1968 : 32). Sample surveys are therefore not a way out of our problem of enumeration.

Those who are in favour of continued census-taking argue that it is indispensable for various planning purposes and, therefore, a census should be taken soon, preferably in 1983. A sub-category of this group, however, think that an independent body such as the United Nations should be invited to conduct the census for us. The opinion of this sub-group can be easily dismissed. Unless all the enumerators (and not the advisers alone) are from the United Nations and are not Nigerians, the problems of population enumeration which the exponents of this view are trying to avoid will be unresolved. This also assumes, of course, that the foreign enumerators are perfect fieldworkers, understand the local languages and are conversant with local customs. These are assumptions that are very unrealistic.

The voters registration data which could have provided good estimates for the states of the Federation has failed to do so and will continue to fail because of mass ignorance of ages which leads to the inclusion of large numbers of the under-eighteens and the omission of thousands of eligible voters. The proposed national identification scheme is not likely to fare better for similar reasons. Reports of additions to and reductions from the population (e.g. through births and immigration and deaths and emigration) will be grossly inadequate considering the degree of ignorance, the attitude and commitment to work of Nigerians. The national identification scheme would best be restricted to the main purpose for which it is designed; that is, identification. All of these sources and the population census taken together can, however, provide very good estimates of the population of Nigeria.

There is therefore a good case for a new census taken in the very near future with Nigeria's human and material resources. In my opinion, an inaccurate and controversial census is better than no census at all. Nigeria's past censuses, as I have attempted to show, cannot be said to be completely false; they are not even largely false. In fact, no data-gathering exercise anywhere in the world is faultless; otherwise, there would be no need for statistical tests of accuracy, though in Nigeria as in other parts of the developing world

the degree of inaccuracy may be much higher by reason of mass illiteracy, ignorance of the real purpose of data collection and the peculiarities of the cultures involved.

Fortunately, census techniques have developed over the years and it is now possible to evaluate and adjust census data where necessary. The post-enumeration survey which should have been used to appraise the completeness and contents of the census were neglected in the heat of controversy. Moreover, in the absence of an adequate vital registration system as in the case of Nigeria, estimating the future size and structure of a population from a modified base population and an analogy with populations of countries in similar circumstances has become a standard procedure in developing societies. But one cannot modify, adjust or extrapolate without population figures, however deficient.

The practice in government circles since the cancellation of the 1973 census is to apply a constant rate of growth of 2.5 per cent per annum (itself derived from questionable sources) to the 1963 census population in order to project it for official use. For one thing, each of the 19 states of the Federation have certainly not grown at the same rate during the past 16 years and will not grow at the same rate in the future. We cannot run away from the fact that census figures are needed, at least in part, for various uses which include the delineation of constituencies and the allocation of revenue since these are aspects of national planning. However, employing projected figures based on an out-dated census which is itself inadequate in many respects and a constant rate of growth for close on two decades, is as arbitrary as using figures derived from a new census that is falsified. The latter, however, has an advantage over the former: while it is derived largely from reality, the former is wholly a figment of the imagination of the authors. The untenable assumption of those who stick to the projection of the 1963 census population at a constant rate that is itself on the low side, is that the health situation in Nigeria has not changed for about 20 years. The numerous general and specialist hospitals, health and maternity centres that have sprung up since 1963 must be really dormant.

### Concluding Remarks

The main point of this lecture is not whether Nigerian censuses in the past have been accurate or not. This, to my mind, is not a worthwhile question to pursue since any attempt to enumerate people is error-prone. In the case of Nigeria, enough evidence has been adduced to show that past censuses have been inaccurate like censuses in other parts of the world. My emphasis, rather, is that the issues that we should have addressed ourselves to, have been neglected in our struggle for political office and we have tended to blow out of proportion considerations that are of minor importance in the inadequacy of our data-gathering efforts when compared with other more disturbing factors.

The problems of population enumeration in Nigeria are largely problems of under-development, of ignorance, of mass illiteracy, of a deplorable attitude to work which is clearly in evidence in all spheres of activity. In short, even if there were no regional political rivalry and no parliamentary seats to share, our data-gathering activities would still be vitiated by other more important factors. Needless to say, social amenities are in short supply and are very unevenly distributed in Nigeria. While this fact, and the controversy emanating from the desire to secure as much of the amenities as possible for one's place of origin usually give the erroneous impression that *ipso facto* the basis of the distribution of these amenities (i.e. population) must have been wilfully inflated, the main problems of population enumeration lie in other directions.

It is true that a rigid identification with one's community of origin and the burning desire to see it prosper, which is a distinctive characteristic especially of Southern Nigerians, is a factor to reckon with in population enumeration. However, we often fail to make a distinction between the wider ramifications of "local patriotism" *per se* and the demands of efficient data-gathering. The "local patriot" who is involved in census migration is interested primarily in identifying himself with his home area so as to secure for it a fair share of development funds. The community where he

actually lives and works may suffer a reduction in population for all he cares, assuming that he even knows the implications of his action for data accuracy. Were he as literate and enlightened as the society should make him, he would not be counted again in the community where he normally lives because, to him, this is of secondary consideration. The onus is expected to be "home" and join in a renewed fellowship coming this problem.

It would appear that the supply of development funds or the provision of social amenities is even secondary to his desire to be counted in his home area and among his people. In other words, far more important, perhaps, is the desire to be identified with his place of origin for such an important national event as the census; it is a matter of helping to establish in a more concrete way the age-long importance and perpetuity of the clan. In short, the occasion of a national census, to him, is in more or less the same category as the *egungun* or *oro* festival during which the "local patriot" is expected to be "home and join in a renewed fellowship with his kith and kin and his and their dead ancestors.

Incidentally, mass illiteracy is associated with the rigid observance of traditional norms and the performance of traditional obligations. Home-coming for important events happens to be one of such obligations. As long as there is mass illiteracy and ignorance, as long as there is discrimination and oppression away from one's ancestral home, as long as even development, which was the political rhetoric of the military regime, is not seen in action so long will it be difficult for the individual Nigerian to transfer allegiance from his home, ethnic or local area.

Assuming that the socio-cultural and political problems associated with census-taking can be overcome in the very near future, census data will still be far from adequate because of poor organisation, of nonchalant and apathetic enumerators and indolent supervisors. On the other hand, given the present socio-cultural and political conditions, the quality of census data can be considerably enhanced by improved organisation and a more positive attitude to work on the part of enumerators and supervisors.

A few suggestions on organisation may therefore not be out of place. Census-taking is not a political exercise though it has political implications and so, the participation of non-technical personnel at both the advisory and supervisory levels, however, well-intentioned, should be avoided. The recruitment and training of enumerators and field supervisors should be the direct responsibility of the National Population Bureau (NPB) and its branches (if any) all over the country. Since the *de facto* system of enumeration has been adopted in Nigeria, enumeration at sight should be rigidly adhered to. Although this might prolong the census period because of repeated visits by enumerators, the result will justify the extra time spent. Youth corpsers could be useful as supervisors after a period of training. Sight enumeration is meant to avoid recording "sons" and "daughters" of the community who live and work elsewhere but whose names may unwittingly be submitted by their relations at "home."

The NPB should be solely responsible for materials given out for census education and these should be limited to simply enlightening the masses and soliciting their cooperation. The census propaganda should be exclusively demographic (e.g. the determination of the rate of growth, the movement of persons from one area to another, the various occupations and religions affiliations of Nigerians the extent of improvement in literacy and level of education since the last census etc.)

A census should be taken as soon as possible, preferably in 1983 so as to maintain the decennial rounds of censuses begun in 1952/53. The present climate of opinion seems to suggest the urgent need for one. Seeing the futility of determining (of all things in Nigeria) revenue allocation on a more objective basis than the out-dated 1963 census, various state governments and individuals are now calling for a new census, though they are still as confused as ever about the correct strategy to be employed in the exercise. Fortunately, a decision to take a new census during the life of the present Federal Government has been announced. However, until the full machinery for carrying out the exercise has been set up and a date announced, one cannot be sure how serious the intention is.

Although the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1979 requires the Council of State to advise the President on the acceptance or rejection of report on a census on the ground "that the population census contained in the report is inaccurate; or that the report is perverse," one would fervently hope that no census in future will be rejected on any ground what-so-ever. As I have repeatedly said in this lecture, no census is accurate and the allegation of census falsification (or "perversion" as the Constitution puts it) is inconclusive and if there was falsification it has been over-played. A post-enumeration survey should be regarded as an indispensable part of the census operation. It is only through this and a comparative analysis of the contents of the census and post-enumeration survey rather than through the uninformed opinion of the National Council of State that some idea of the extent of inaccuracy of the census can be formed and adjustments, where necessary, made.

Finally, the precautions already mentioned and others that could possibly be taken will progressively reduce but not completely remove errors in future censuses. Their effectiveness in reducing errors to the barest minimum will be enhanced by changes in socio-cultural conditions which will necessarily be slow considering the diversity of cultural patterns in Nigeria. To avoid census-taking for so long, as some have advocated, would be unfortunate. It will deny Nigerians the opportunity of gaining that valuable experience derivable from constant exposure to, and gradually overcoming the human and organisational problems of, census-taking. In short, Nigerians should be given the opportunity to get accustomed to being counted so that it is no longer a source of excitement, no longer a special occasion.

Table 1. Population Growth in Nigeria, 1952/3 – 1973

STATES	Population (000s)	Population (000s)	Population (000s)	Annual rate of increase (%)	Annual rate of increase (%)
	1952/3	1963	1973	1953-63	1963-73
North East	4,201	7,793	15,380	6.2	6.8
Kano	3,398	5,775	10,900	5.3	6.4
North West	3,397	5,734	8,500	5.2	3.9
North Central	2,354	4,098	6,780	5.5	5.1
Benue Plateau	2,295	4,009	5,170	5.6	2.5
Kwara	1,195	2,399	4,640	7.0	6.6
West	4,357	9,488	8,920	7.8	0.6
Lagos	510	1,444	2,470	10.4	5.4
Mid-West	1,492	2,536	3,240	5.3	2.5
East Central	4,567	7,228	8,060	4.6	1.1
South East	1,904	3,526	3,460	6.4	0.5
Rivers	747	1,545	2,230	7.3	3.7
Nigeria	30,417	55,670	79,760	6.0	3.6

Source: *Daily Times*, May 10, 1974 (Quoted in A. A. Adewuyi, "The problem of Population Enumeration in Nigeria: Further evidence from the 1978 voters list" Department of Demography and Social Statistics, University of Ife, Ile-Ife, 1979 (mimeographed).

Table 2. Rank Order of States in terms of Population size in 1963 and 1978

STATES	Population in 1963(a)	Population in 1978(b)	Rank order of state in 1963	Rank order of state in 1978
Kano	5,774,840	5,174,447	1	1
Oyo	5,208,884	4,520,120	2	2
Sokoto	4,538,787	3,756,139	3	3
Kaduna	4,098,306	3,420,839	4	5
Imo	3,696,753	3,465,198	5	4
Anambra	3,596,618	2,901,548	6	6
Cross River	3,578,605	2,442,227	7	8
Borno	2,952,188	2,753,400	8	7
Ondo	2,727,676	2,422,714	9	9
Gongola	2,650,573	2,284,500	10	11
Bendel	2,535,839	2,376,410	11	10
Bauchi	2,431,296	2,084,057	12	12
Benue	2,427,017	1,563,413	13	16
Plateau	2,026,657	1,618,378	14	14
Kwara	1,714,485	1,085,165	15	18
Ogun	1,550,966	1,603,004	16	15
Rivers	1,522,489	1,409,472	17	17
Lagos	1,443,568	1,811,973	18	13
Niger	1,194,508	1,040,753	19	19

Source: (a) Demographic Division, National Population Bureau, Lagos, February, 1977.

(b) *Daily Times*, March 30, 1978.

PERCENTAGES

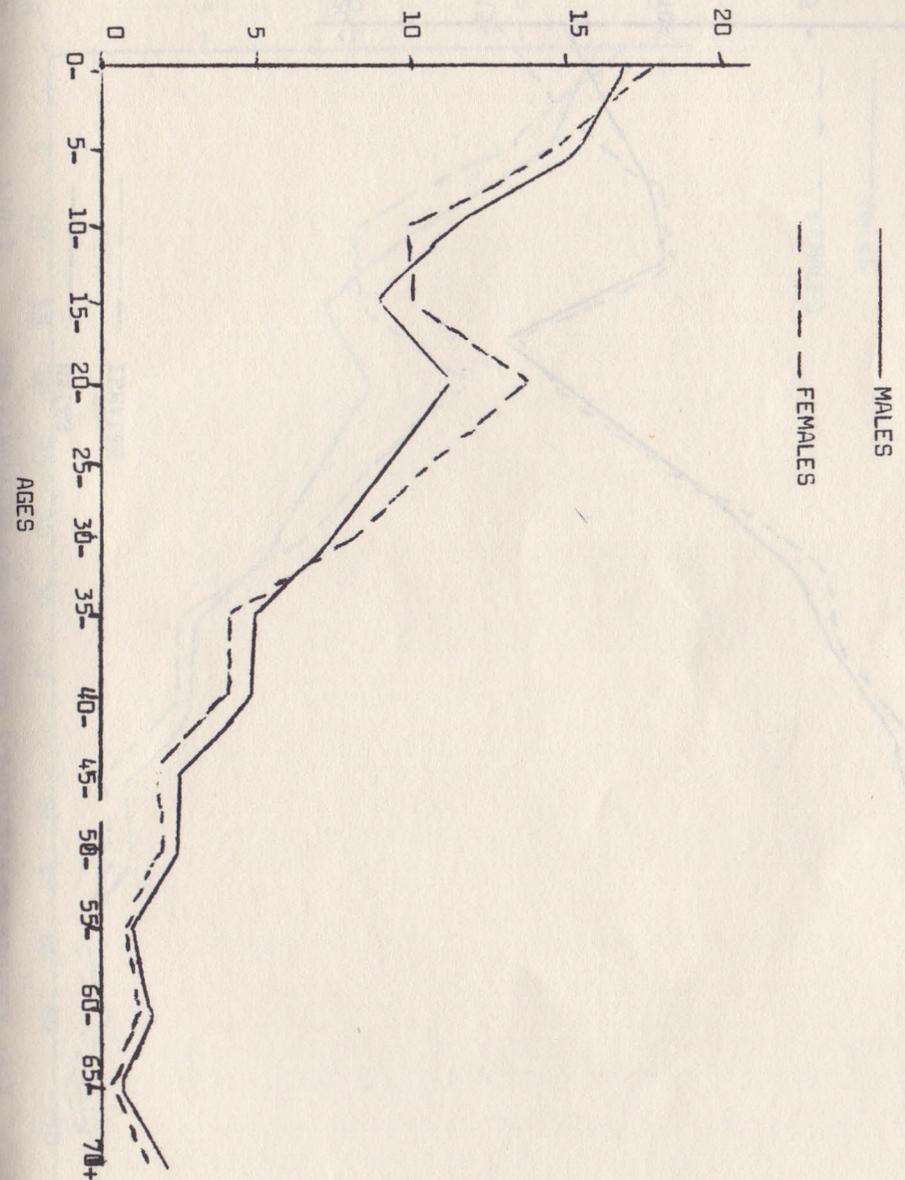


FIG. 1 AGE STRUCTURE OF THE NIGERIAN POPULATION, 1963

FIG 4 AGE STRUCTURE OF THE RURAL POPULATION OF NIGERIA 1963

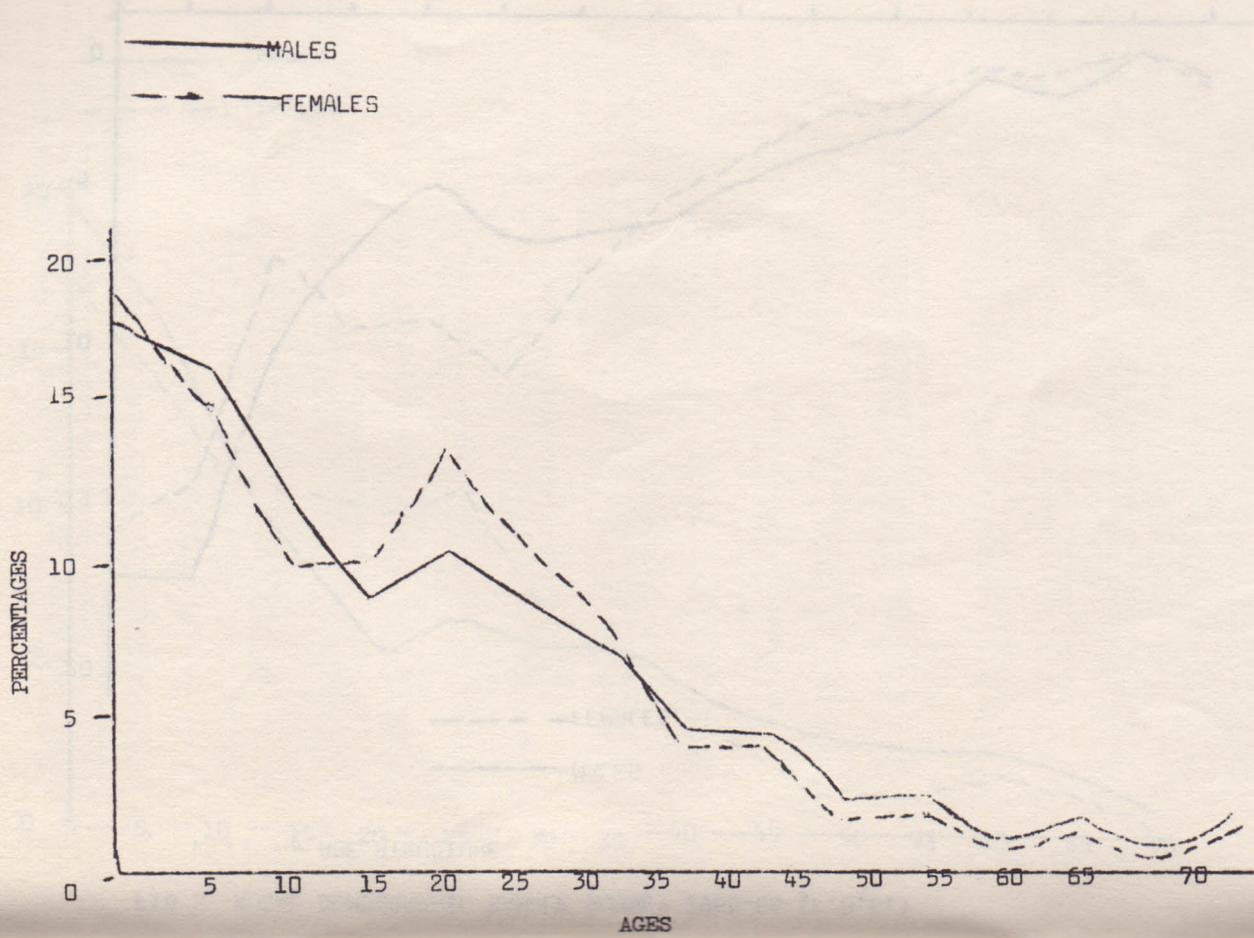


FIG 3 AGE STRUCTURE OF THE URBAN POPULATION OF NIGERIA 1963

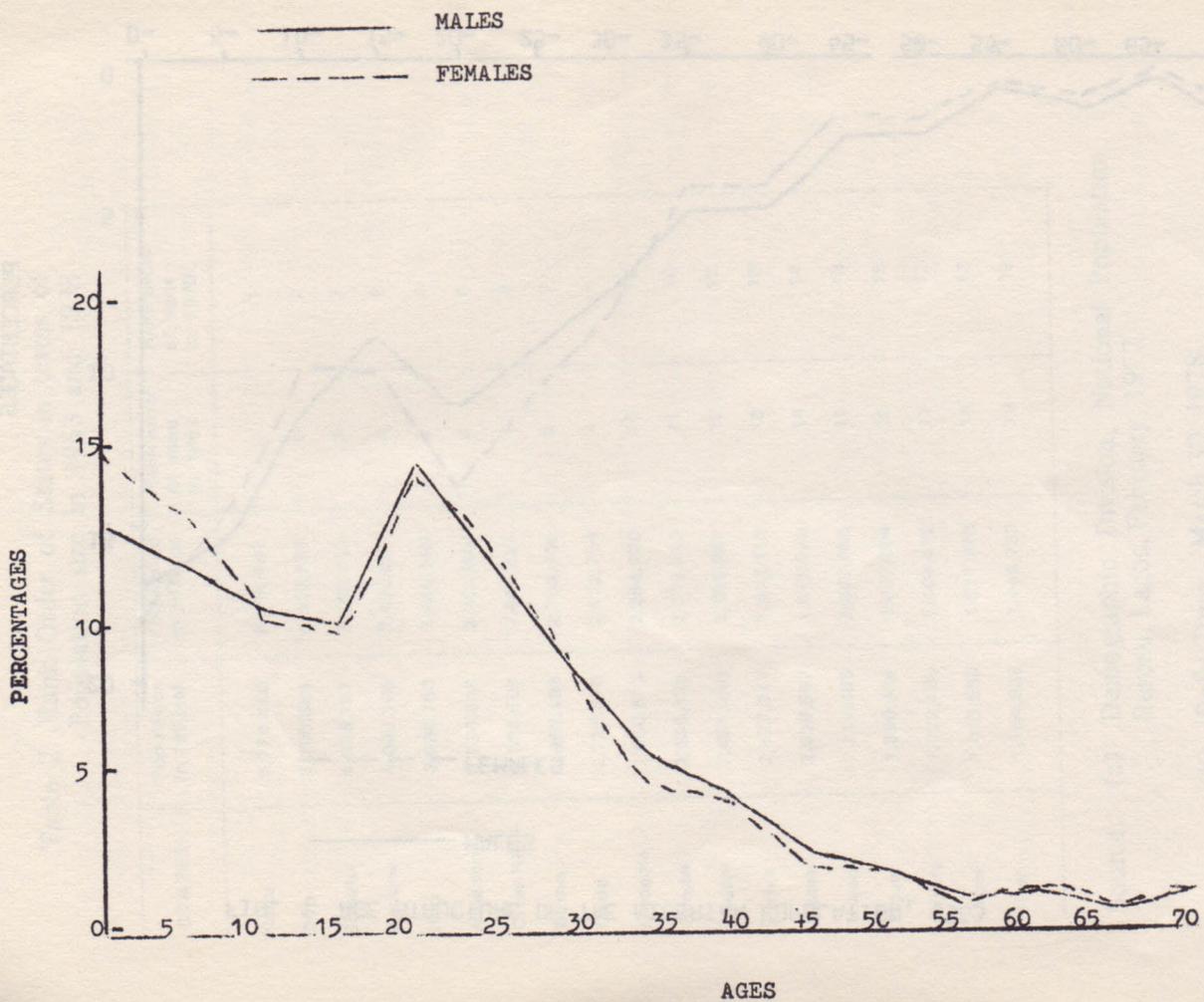


FIG 6 FERTILITY, FAMILY AND FAMILY PLANNING MAP SURVEY 1971-1973  
- AGE STRUCTURE

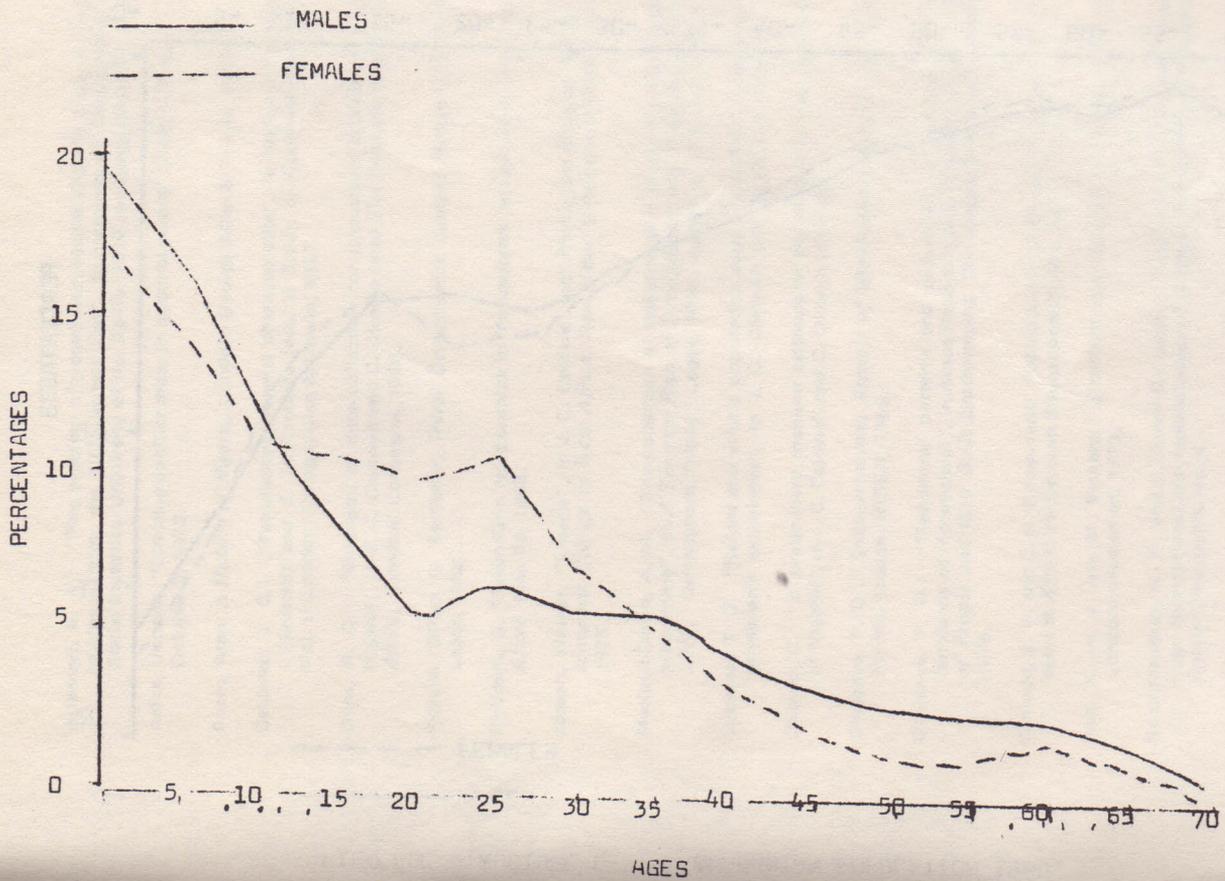
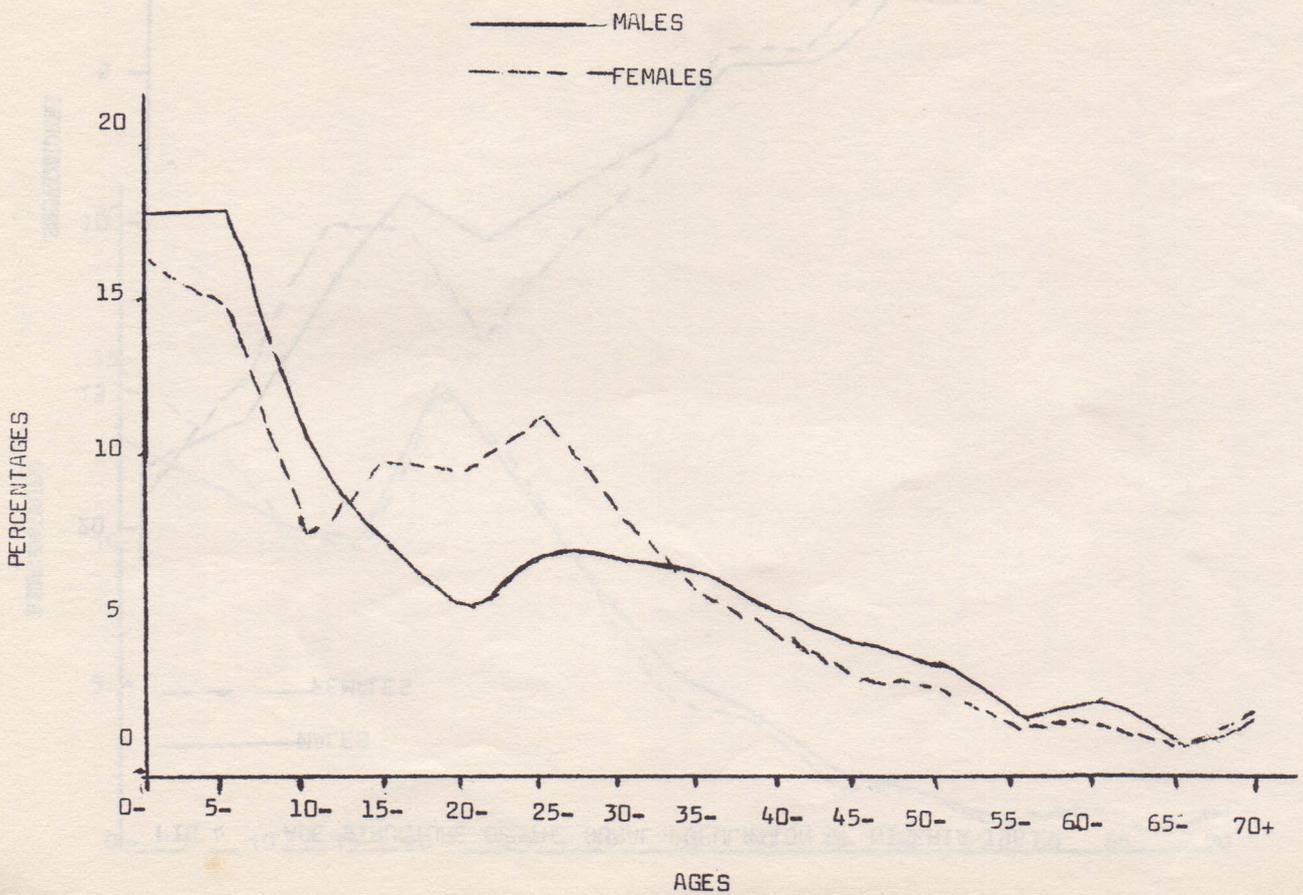


FIG 5 RURAL DEMOGRAPHIC SAMPLE SURVEY 1965-66 (F.D.S.)

- AGE STRUCTURE



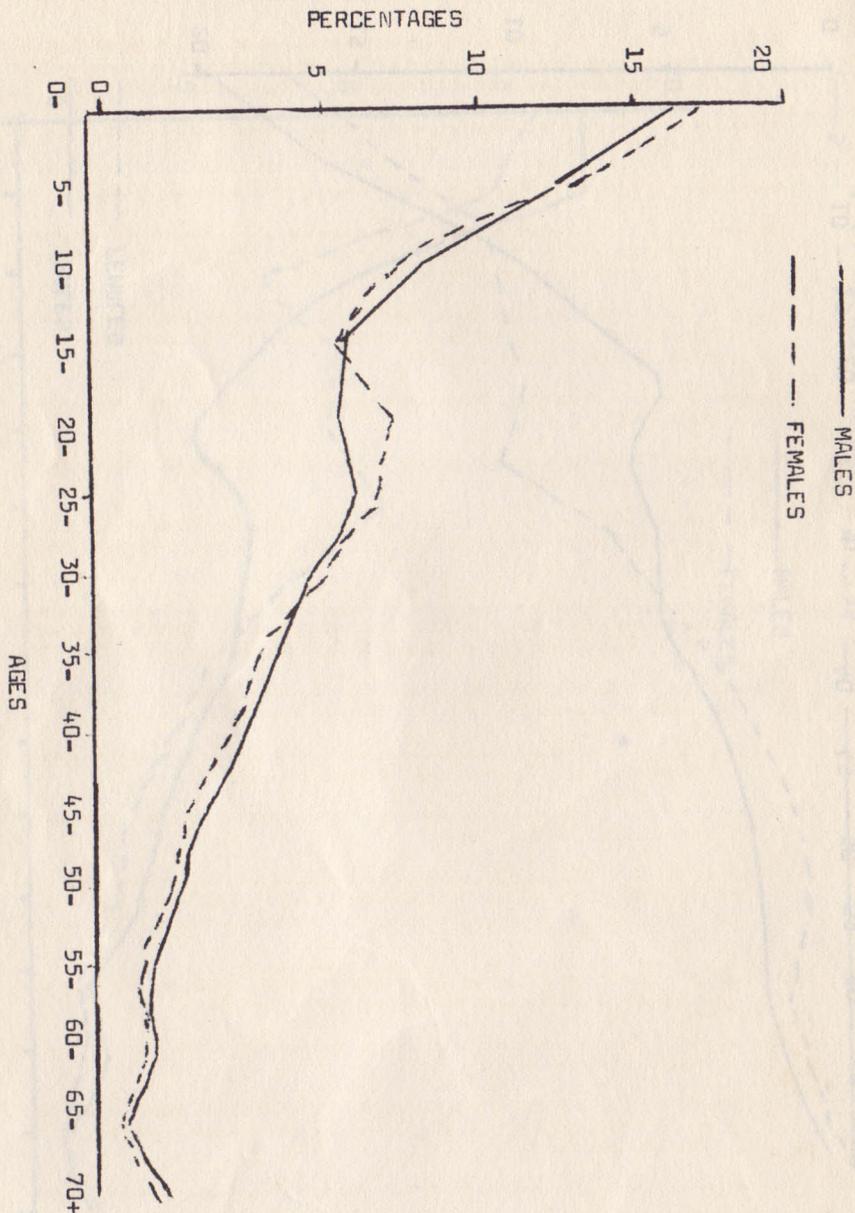


FIG 7 AGE STRUCTURE OF THE GHANAIAN POPULATION 1960.

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