

# MAN, POPULATION IN HISTORY: A CONCEPT OF POPULATION EDUCATION

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## **Introduction**

The introduction of Population Education in Africa was a recent development although the programme was undermined by some initial problems of misconceptions of its objectives and theme. Simply because it emanated from the western nations, the general belief was that it was designed to foster neo-colonialist ambitions, hence the apparent lethargic stance of most African states to the programme in the 1970s.

In the advanced and some of the Third World countries outside Africa, the programme was embraced enthusiastically and by the early 1980s it had become so popular that it bred widespread optimism that it would unerringly offer solutions to population problems<sup>1</sup>. Although at present the programme has been embraced by many African States, no serious attention has been given to it in terms of drawing up detailed schemes for implementation on account of certain misconceptions concerning its ethical and religious effects. Indeed the programme has been regarded as a vehicle for family planning and sex education no more no less among certain groups in Nigeria.

## **Definition of Population Education**

It is necessary therefore to clarify the meaning of population education in order to mobilise people to embrace its advantages. This will help in removing the diverse misconceptions that had, over the last two decades bedevilled its implementation. Indeed, its significance has often been underestimated even by past policy makers who lacked an understanding of its values in national planning and management of our scarce resources to attain our national goals on a consistent basis.

It is pertinent to remark that only one single definition of population education that is acceptable to all and sundry is difficult to come by because of the prevalence of various forms of population education content world wide. In other words, various definitions abound which reflect current peculiar socio-cultural contexts, goals and objectives of each country although in the final analysis the definitions have certain goals in common.

In the Nigerian context, Population Education has been officially defined as:

“an educational process which provides for an articulated and practical study of the population situation in the family, the community,

the nation and the world, with the aim of developing in the individuals a more rational attitude and responsible behaviour towards improving the quality of their life now and in the future"<sup>2</sup>.

This is an all embracing definition which recommends a continuous educational process regardless of change of government in order that in the long run public awareness of population problems would become contagious from the grass roots to the national and international levels.

It was envisaged that eventually the policy objectives of the programme could only be achieved through active involvement of each individual, every family, community, state and the federation as a whole. The implication of this kind of national mentality is that leaders of opinion at each level of the social ladder must be seen to exemplify the ideals which the programme seeks to promote in their homes but unfortunately most of our traditional rulers, village heads, community and religious leaders are polygamous and cannot objectively claim to represent the national interest, hence the general lethargy with which majority of the Nigerian populace regard the programme. No wonder the objectives of the programme are dismissed with a wave of the hand and the propagators of its advantages are dismissed as dissemblers or damagogues no matter the quality of their disquisitions on the subject matter of the scheme they want to popularise.

To remove the various inhibiting misconceptions about population education such as family planning, sex education and teaching of demography, it is necessary to expound its characteristics and objectives to make the programme more attractive. Within the context of our aspirations, culture and traditions as a multi-lingual nation, it is necessary to emphasise the demerits of unrestrained growth of our population in relation to our socio-economic reality and our present and future quality of life. To improve the existing level of living that affects the quality of our life, there is need to stress the unmistakeable fact that there is a symbiotic relationship between population phenomena and the equitable distribution of our limited resources.

### **What History can offer**

History has a lot to contribute to the disquisition on the theme under the methodology of separate or monolithic subject approach whereby population education can be taught like any other subject in the school system.<sup>3</sup> Assuredly, history can then achieve the primary objective of population education by making students cultivate an awareness of population problems which would enable them make rational decisions to improve their quality of life as well as their family welfare.

History provides studies of past population trends, power struggle among different groups over limited resources, and changes in population situation. Such



studies help in forecasting future trends. History is replete with the genesis of population explosions, their attendant problems in specific areas of the world particularly in China, India, and how solutions were found to them. Thus history prevents us from repeating such expensive mistakes that had precipitated national and international crisis in the past. Rather than bear the unprecedentedly high costs of population problems, it is cheaper to allow the lessons of history as provided by Thailand, Pakistan and Indonesia to guide and help us in preventing such problems.

### **Man, Population in History:**

The question of population explosion was first raised between 18th and 19th centuries in Europe by various scholars. Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834) and his contemporaries addressed the issue in social, political and economic perspectives in their publications.<sup>4</sup> However it was Malthus, a professor of political economy, who synthesised the scattered ideas of eminent scholars and economists to conclude that there was an inherent imbalance between population and means of subsistence. To effect a realignment therefore, he suggested the need to restructure the economic system.

Hitherto, some economists were optimistic that the agricultural prosperity of England and Europe would continue till after mid-19th century while ignoring the expanding population and its problems. Malthus looked at the economic realities with greater concern for the suffering poorer people. By 1800 the agricultural prosperity had declined; shortage of food led to high prices. Food situation was aggravated by bad crops and famine conditions. These combined to precipitate riots, disease, unemployment and widespread poverty. These phenomena became the focus of Malthus' research which culminated in his theory of population.<sup>5</sup>

In the 19th century, the bogey of over population was dismissed on the ground that about three-fourths of the earth's habitable surface was still uncultivated. It was believed in Europe that population would not increase fast enough to cover all the habitable surface in the foreseeable future. There was a general conviction in 1794 that through the use of science which would prolong lifespan, man had the ability to achieve complete happiness and that overpopulation could be avoided because science would increase the means of subsistence while human reason would be employed in preventing an undue population growth.<sup>6</sup>

Malthus' writings, which appeared in several editions, discounted the optimism of the scientists by postulating that population increases in geometrical progression because sex is a powerful instinct in human beings, which, if not checked, will increase population by procreation. He also observed that the means of subsistence in terms of food supply would only increase in arithmetical progression because of the law of diminishing returns in agriculture. His conclu-

sion was that population is bound to outstrip the supply of means of subsistence. His recommendation was that population growth could only be restrained through 'preventive' and 'positive' checks.<sup>7</sup> By preventive checks he means the steps by man himself to avert the problem. Such steps are late marriage, celibacy and moral restraint within the marriage.

Malthus abhorred prostitution and extra-marital sexual relations because such acts would lead to the production of illegitimate children thereby aggravating the problem of supporting additional mouths from time to time. The positive checks which he recommended were the means adopted by nature to cut down the population: these include such means as flood, draughts, famines, diseases, wars and epidemics.<sup>8</sup>

Since the publication of his sensational ideas, Malthus has been attacked, criticised and condemned. Yet his contributions were instrumental to the regular conduct of the English census from 1801 onwards for the purpose of economic planning.<sup>9</sup> His critics based their arguments on the facts of economic development in America and Europe, stressing that the quick yield of food grains had not been overtaken by the rate of population growth as predicted by them. They denounced his fear of food scarcity limiting the size of population as a remote development. They also contended the eventuality of population growth, which if according to them it became inevitable, that the problem could be solved by improvements in the means of subsistence and voluntary decisions of the people unaided by education or compulsion on the part of the state.<sup>10</sup> Today those critics have been proved wrong by the realities of over-population problems in several parts of the world particularly in many Third World countries.

### **Why man should heed Population issues**

The evil day which Malthus envisaged over two centuries ago eventually caught up with the advanced and some Asian countries as early as the 1940s when family planning schemes were employed to trim down the growth of population. When the rate of population increase outruns the rate of increasing national resources, individuals, families, communities and the nation are at the receiving end of poverty. It will be increasingly difficult to distribute the national wealth evenly for the enhancement of quality of life in terms of food and nutrition, clothing, health, safe drinking water, education, leisure, parental care and attention. A country with an optimum population will conveniently finance education for self-fulfilment and gainful employment. It will implement social schemes for the improvement of the welfare of parents and increase the real incomes of its citizens to cater for the brothers and sisters.

### **Population issues in the past**

It is pertinent at this juncture to demonstrate some historical facts to support



the sentiment that man should heed population issues. Between the 17th and 18th centuries, land hunger in Europe compelled mass emigration to the Americas where there were bright prospects for plantation farming.<sup>11</sup> Yet labour problem in the Americas had to be solved by slave trade, hence the enslavement and transport of Africans to the New World. Thus the problem of overpopulation in Europe was solved by emigration to America where there was sparse population. In the process, export of African labour helped in swelling the American population to the detriment of West Africa, Congo, Luba, Lunda and Angola.<sup>12</sup>

Within the 18th and 19th centuries, the lucrative slave trade caused an unbridled growth of Africa population which precipitated social unrest, abolitionist campaigns and which culminated in the American Civil War of 1864. The end of the war witnessed intensified agitations for social reforms that would guarantee racial equality, freedom and improved racial relations. Earlier on in 1821, the United States Government had sponsored the repatriation of 3,000 Blacks from New York to Sierra Leone.<sup>13</sup> Thousands of Africans later emigrated to West Africa to establish a republic known as Liberia in 1847. Since then, the American-Liberians had been at loggerheads with the rival claims of the Vai, Grebo and Kru in Liberian politics and administration.<sup>14</sup> Yet the problem of racial inequality persisted in the United States till after the 1930s when the population of Afro-Americans increased to 11,890,000 or 9.7% of the total population.<sup>15</sup> Although the economic potentialities of the blacks were not in doubt, they were denied employment opportunities and in the process, the efforts of successive American governments at finding some solutions to racial disharmony were frustrated.

Colonialism also had a great impact on African demography. The introduction of colonial economy, European currencies and modern transport infrastructure caused diversion of labour from the villages to such sensitive sectors as the mines, ports and railway. Africans migrated to urban centres which became the headquarters of colonial administration and which were noted for large concentrations of European merchants and their commercial houses. Thus Africans looking for menial jobs drifted to the urban areas which had been developed at the expense of the rural areas. The inception of colonial administration thereby signalled the genesis of rural-urban migration.<sup>16</sup>

Early head counts conducted by the colonial masters in Africa were prompted by the need to satisfy their immediate economic objectives rather than use the population data for economic development plan. Thus for purposes of taxation, agricultural and mineral production to meet particular targets, high density of population was of crucial importance and people were a rich source of cheap labour for economic exploitation.<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, scarcity of people meant scarcity of labour. Where there was abundance of mineral and agricultural resources, the French and the Germans

used their draconian laws to remove Africans from their dwelling places and resettled them to exploit the available economic resources to their satisfaction.

By 1965, Africa had the highest annual birth rate in the world (about 45 per 1000) although this figure varied in some particular African countries: Tanzania (46 per 1000); Kenya (50 per 1000); and Guinea (62 per 1000)<sup>18</sup>. Apart from having the highest death rate of 22 persons per 1000, Africa was rated as having a high birth rate in contrast with the European birth rate which was the lowest in the world within the same period.

Censuses that were conducted by the colonial masters in Nigeria in 1911, 1921, 1931, and 1952/53 were inaccurate and did not reflect the correct demographic picture of Nigeria because they were based on guesses, estimates, tax receipts, birth and death registration.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless there was a belief that the Nigerian population increased from 16 million in 1911 to 56 million in 1963 showing an annual growth rate of 6.2%. If the provisional figure of 79.8 million for 1973 census exercise were accepted, the growth rate from 1963 to 1973 would have been 3.6%. Assuming this bewildering growth rate persisted, then Nigeria's population would double every 19 years.<sup>20</sup>

The implementation of the National Policy of Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1976 confirmed and reestablished the fact that the Nigerian population was increasing at an alarming rate. The programme whose objective was to give every child the right to free primary schooling became so popular that it caused an unprecedented increase in enrolments from 3.5 million in 1970 to 8.1 million in 1976/77, 13.1 million in 1980/81, 16.2 million in 1982/83 and 16.8 million in 1984/85.<sup>21</sup> A corollary of this development was the large financial commitments of the government for the construction of school buildings, infrastructure, recruitment of teachers and their salaries. The same trend occurred in the secondary and post-secondary education.<sup>22</sup>

In the absence of any programme like population education and reduction of family size, most male adults misconstrued the U.P.E. as an opportunity to marry more wives and produce more children in order to get the best share of improved educational opportunities, hence the high birth rate and the population growth.

Public demand for goods and services is now at variance with the resources at the disposal of the government. Our debt trap, and debt obligations constitute a drain on our financial resources thereby handicapping the government to finance full scale social services.

The poor state of our health sector has earned Nigeria a poor rating by the World Bank. Our life expectancy is below the average of 56 years for some African countries at the same income level with us.<sup>23</sup> Similarly infant and child mortality rates are considerably higher in Nigeria than the averages for the lower middle - income countries.

Despite that large sums are spent on the import bill for drugs and sophisticated



medical equipment, it has not been possible for government to satisfy public demand for health care. Lack of drugs in hospitals and absence of medical facilities for operation and diagnosis have caused death of several patients. Many towns and villages also lack adequate health facilities because of the inability of state governments to provide revenue for health care. So far, mass production of medical doctors in our various medical schools has outrun the rate of establishing well-equipped hospitals and employment of medical graduates. It is no wonder that we experienced a recent brain drain of jobless doctors and nurses to Saudi Arabia.

The global economic crunch, apart from causing the collapse of some factories has also led to retrenchment of thousands of workers with extended families. There are unemployed school leavers and university graduates. Indeed several individuals and families are in the trap of poverty which does not allow them to enjoy a balanced diet or have three square meals daily. The standard of housing and clothing for them is dehumanising. It is even difficult to support their children because of their meagre income. The foregoing are serious issues to which our policy makers should address their minds.

### **Population in History and its relevance to Education**

This course is very important for guiding policy decisions in our country and it affords us an opportunity of comparing past and present population sizes and population characteristics.

It enables us to relate economic development to the changing sizes of population and to make useful forecasts periodically as is frequently done in the advanced countries. Since the issue of population is inseparably tied to manpower development and economic planning exercises, close attention should be given to accurate census figures, general population growth, factors for the annual or dicennial growth of the various classes of people and the identification of the particular class that accounted for the greatest proportion of the gross national product.

Current universal concern with the future use and allocation of limited or scarce resources has compelled the Third World countries to give the issue of population growth a serious thought, hence the indispensable use of some historical data to estimate the rate of population growth in the past and facilitate meaningful assessment of national policy on birth control and family planning. Historical accounts on population could enable us make valid conclusions and confine our economic programmes to a definite plan period. Available historical data will facilitate useful identification of parallels in the present and past policies on foreign immigration into our country as a reflection of repetition of some localised or national demographic phenomenon.

The course, if properly integrated into the university programme will generate

students' interests and induce them to undertake some micro-studies of population phenomenon in their localities in different perspectives. Before long, students' research efforts and dissertations will be used to ascertain how best past experiences can influence current policies on population. Moreover, teaching of the course in historical perspective will expand students' academic orientation and make them appreciate the enormity of population problems not only in Nigeria but in other parts of the world. Their exposure to demographic literature on other countries will not only be rewarding but enable them to make meaningful contributions to the ongoing debates on population issues and make some recommendations to the government. In their private life, knowledge of population programme will afford them valuable opportunities of managing their incomes to increase parental investments in their children to enjoy improved health, education and family welfare. Henceforth, there will be need to accede to a compelling urge to monitor the spending behaviour of individual salary earners in accordance with a new orientation and new system of values enforced by population education.

#### Footnote

1. Yisa Barnabas *Introduction to Population Education* Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council, Yaba, Lagos 1988 p. 11.
2. Yisa Barnabas *op. cit.* p. 12.
3. Yisa Barnabas *op. cit.*, pp. 21, 23.
4. Bhatia, H.L. *History of Economic Thought*, New Delhi, 1978, p. 129.
5. Bhatia, *op. cit.*, pp. 129, 141
6. Bhatia, *op. cit.*, p. 133.
7. Guy Routh, *The Origins of Economic Ideas*. The Macmillan Press Ltd. London 1977 p. 110.
8. Bhatia *op. cit.*, p. 135.
9. Spegel, H.W. (ed) *The Development of Economic Thought - Great Economists in Perspective*. John Wiley and Sons, 1952, 9. 147.
10. Bhatia *op. cit.*, p. 136.
11. For details, see Louis, B. Wright *The Colonial Civilisation of North America*. Eyre and Spottiswode, 1949.
12. Ranger, T. O. (ed.) *Aspects of Central African History*, Heinemann London, repr. 1973, pp. 49-70. For more information, see Asiwaju, A.I. and Michael Crowder (eds) *The African Diaspora, Tarikh* Vol. 5, No. 4, Longman, 1978, pp. 1, 20, 41, 56; Inilkori, J.E. (ed.), *Forced Migration*, Hutchinson London 1982.
13. Webster, J.B. et. al. (eds), *The Growth of African Civilisation: The Revolutionary Years of West Africa Since 1900*. Longmans, 4th Impr. 1969, p. 140.
14. Webster, *op. cit.*, pp. 155, 156.
15. *Afro-American Encyclopaedia*, pp. 2927, 2929, 2932-33.
16. White, H.P. and Gleave, M.B., *An Economic Geography of West Africa*, London, G. Bell and Sons Ltd., 1971 pp. 258-293. See also Kuper, H. (ed.), *Urbanization and Migration in West Africa*. 1965.
17. Moss, R.P. and Rathbone, R.J.A. (eds) *The Population Factor in African Studies* University of London Press 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 1975, p. 38.



18. *Oxford African Encyclopaedia*, p. 407.
19. Frank, L. Mott and Fapohunda, O. J. (eds) *The Population of Nigeria*, Human Resources Research Unit, University of Lagos, Nigeria. 1975 p. 80.
20. Igun, Ademola, *Demographic Statistics in Nigeria*. University of Ife Press, 1972 pp. 186-189.
21. Federal Ministry of Education Lagos. Statistics of Education in Nigeria, 1960-1984, p. 33.
22. Enrolments in secondary schools increased from 0.38/81 and 5 million in 1984/85. The number of universities also increased from 6 in 1975 to 21 in 1988.
23. Yisa, Barnabas, *op. cit.*, p. 4