

---

---

# African Marriage Systems: Perspectives from Evolutionary Ecology

Patricia Draper

*Department of Individual and Family Studies, College of Human  
Development, Pennsylvania State University*

## THE PROBLEM OF HIGH FERTILITY AND SCARCE RESOURCES

**T**here are many characteristics of contemporary African societies that puzzle demographers and others concerned with economic and social modernization. One of the most prominent is that the birth rate remains in both urban and rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa in spite of the presence of several factors that supposedly promote lowering of fertility (McNicoll 1980). Some of these factors are increased survivorship of children into adulthood, increased availability of education and levels of educational attainment (for both sexes), increased urbanization, and increased monetarization of the economy via migratory wage labor and cash cropping. Each of these is normally thought to promote the freeing of young people from the control of elders and to foster the development of economically independent nuclear families, close conjugal relations between spouses, and parenting practices with more intense investment in smaller numbers of higher quality children (Caldwell 1977a, 1977b, 1982; Caldwell and Okonjo 1968; Anker et al., eds. 1982; Sudarkasa 1977; Page and Les-thaeghe 1981; see Barkow and Burley [1980] and Vining [1986] for further biosocial consideration of demographic transition.)

Instead, in much of Africa, not only among country people but among urban populations as well, there persists high fertility and a pattern of parental investment in which both mothers and fathers invest, by Western standards, relatively little in each offspring and pursue a pattern of delegated parental responsibility (Draper and Harpending 1988). Coupled with low investment parenting is a mating pattern that permits early sexual activity,

Received April 1, 1987; revised May 31, 1988.

Address reprint requests to: Patricia Draper, Ph.D., Department of Individual and Family Studies, College of Human Development, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802.

*Ethology and Sociobiology* 10: 145-169 (1989)  
© Elsevier Science Publishing Co., Inc., 1989  
655 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10010

0162-3905/89/\$03.50