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Joel Gregory: An Appreciation

Patrick Manning

Many others have commented eloquently on the strength and the warmth of Joel Gregory's contributions to African studies before his untimely passing in July 1988. I wish to add a voice to theirs and to focus especially on the field which Joel did so much to define and to structure: African historical demography.

I do not know if this field can be said to have a founder, but Joel was certainly its prophet and its leading practitioner since the mid-1970s. In one sense, his work was a straightforward extension, into one more disciplinary terrain, of the logic of African studies – at its best, multivariate and multidisciplinary social science linked with commitment to social justice. At the same time, Joel's approach to the reproduction of human population helped unleash some profound changes in African studies and in demography. He identified the strategic intellectual importance of African historical demography and contributed to that nascent field the originality and the prescience of his approach, plus his ability to lead and orient the work of those around him. He worked in a collective style, so that one cannot separate his work from that of his closest co-workers Dennis Cordell and Victor Piché, nor from his colleagues such as Mohamed Mbodj and former students such as Lututala Mumpasi. To celebrate Joel's work is to celebrate the work of all in the group.

The field of historical demography, as developed in Europe and North America, scarcely concerned itself with Africa. Historical demographers typically worked with precise and detailed data – censuses and, increasingly, parish registers – and with populations commonly assumed closed to migration. Out of their work on industrial nations grew the framework of the "demographic transition" – the broad pattern of decline in mortality, then in fertility, apparently associated with long-term economic growth.

The parent discipline, demography, was meanwhile wrapped up in highly mathematical, model-oriented work; it also neglected Africa. More practically-oriented demographers tended to treat Africa as a continent at a rapid-population-growth stage of the demographic transition; they saw it as needing policy measures to stem its excess fertility rather than requiring analysis of its underlying demographic processes.

Analysts of African development, in many fields, mirrored the approach

of demographers in their tinkering with contemporary policy. Long-term historical trends, they assumed, were unknowable for lack of data or were rendered insignificant because of the impact of the West or were directly explainable through such simple frameworks as modernization and demographic transition.

As Joel observed in a 1980 critique: "Lacking numbers, history, and theory there is nowhere to go but forward." The strategic importance of African historical demography was its challenge to this void. Joel Gregory made the challenge explicit: the notion of a timeless and plastic Africa would be attacked at one of its key roots. The families of Africa would be the focus of the analysis. Their population history could be reconstructed through imaginative and interdisciplinary use of sources. Their migrations (not just their births, deaths, and marriages) would be analyzed. Furthermore, these strictly demographic variables would be related to a range of social, political, and ideological factors well beyond those considered in demographic transition analysis.

When I first met Joel in the early 1970s, he was already teaching demography at the Université de Montréal, and he was studying Marx with the vigor characteristic of his approach. Out of that experience, he adopted the label "materialist" for his thinking, and he later returned to contract his demographic theory with Marx's in the context of a broader materialist framework.

Demographers, even theoreticians, require data. Yet there was to be no Colyton, no La Hulpe for African historical demography. Lacking such well defined data sets, Joel launched his empirical and methodological work in a major study of population structure and migration in what was then Upper Volta. That is, his practical attack on historical demography in Africa centered on that intractable demographic problem – migration – and it addressed the shortage of traditional data by implementing retrospective surveys. In a word, he began the work of developing new methodology and new data sources.

Established historical demographers were tempted to dismiss this new African work as "demographic history" (i.e., stories about population in the past) rather than as properly rigorous historical demography. In his general statements, Joel explicitly defended the new work as meriting the term historical demography. Meanwhile, he and Dennis Cordell catalogued sources and, with Raymond Gervais, published a general bibliography for the field.

By 1981 Joel's leadership was recognized in his selection as chair of the second African Historical Demography conference, in Edinburgh (Basil Davidson chaired the first such conference in 1977). This meeting made evident that much of Joel's work involved coordinating and reviewing the work of historians and other social scientists who were undertaking demographic work. In the same period, Joel served as an editor of the *Canadian Journal of*

African Studies and brought several studies on African historical demography into print.

Meanwhile, his theoretical work continued to develop. As earlier, he began with a critique of the reluctance of demographers to theorize and of the weakness of demographic transition theory. He argued that historical levels of fertility and mortality in Africa rose and fell by region and over time in a pattern too complex to be explained, for instance, by a putative "natural fertility." Instead, he offered the notion of the "demographic regime" – not simply a collection of demographic variables but the interdependence and mutual determination of fertility, mortality, migration, and other socio-economic variables. This concept would come to life through study of contending social strategies for the production and reproduction of labor.

With Dennis Cordell, Joel convened a conference whose results were published as *African Population and Capitalism: Historical Studies*. The multidisciplinary studies of this volume provided the strongest statement to date of the possibilities of African historical demography, and of the usefulness of the methods and hypotheses proposed by the editors. Then in 1987, the prestigious Société de Démographie Historique agreed to hold a session on Africa at its international conference on the Population of the World before 1900. Joel's work had now engaged historical demographers of other regions, had drawn more demographers and historical demographers into work on historical demography of Africa, and had helped to advance the techniques and analyses of non-demographers working in the field.

Meanwhile, as Joel Gregory's work on Africa progressed, the broader field of demography underwent some remarkably parallel changes. From a field concentrated highly on the North Atlantic, demography was transformed into a field where much of the study is in Third World areas, and where many of the new demographers are from outside the North Atlantic. In a field earlier focusing mainly on fertility and mortality in closed populations, theorists now do much to explore the potentialities of demographic analysis in open populations and to analyze life-course transitions other than birth, marriage and death (e.g. employment, education). Computer techniques permit far closer study of migration and other complex phenomena. Historical demographers have revised many of their views, particularly with publication of the findings of the European Fertility Project. These results showed a complex historical pattern of fertility change that cannot be explained by demographic transition theory, that is, by the simple levels of economic development which had earlier been thought to explain demographic change.

These remarkable changes in the fields of demography and of historical demography stem from a wide range of causes, not just from the work of Joel Gregory and the African historical demographers. But the vision, the systematic thinking, the energy, the coordination, and the particular analytical

insights of Joel Gregory have given form to the field of African historical demography the position of offering leadership to historical demographers generally. His approach was a clarion call. It was an early judgment that the demographic study of Africa required a fundamental focus on the historical evolution of African populations, an early identification of the limits on demographic theory and demographic method which had so far obviated the study of African historical demography, and an energetic interdisciplinary, collaborative effort to draw together data and insights.

Indeed, Joel Gregory's scholarship was a remarkable accomplishment in a life cut cruelly short; he set into action a field of study and a cadre of scholars whose contributions will surely grow in influence with time. As Joel noted in 1980, "Once the possibility of doing African historical demography is admitted, results will follow."

Joel Gregory's Scholarly Contributions to African Historical Demography

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