

# NOTES AND DISCUSSION

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## BIRTH AND DEATH IN AN ISLAMIC SOCIETY

Moslem countries have a high birth rate (40%-50%) and a rapid rate of natural growth (28%-34%). Not even in towns where mortality has decreased does natality appear to have decreased, and not even where the family nucleus is beginning to assert itself can a drop in the birth rate be ascertained. This is attributed to a "backward attitude toward economic and social changes."

Iran is no exception to the rule. Fertility in Iran appears quite natural, except perhaps in certain more acculturated urban sectors (and not counting religious minorities).

This situation, which at times seems unfavorable to the evolution of the equilibrium men-resources poses the following question: in what way is a high birth rate tied to society?

In recent years some studies have been made which have sought an explanation for the level of natality in Moslem coun-

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tries.<sup>1</sup> But these studies merely pose the question, and not always too clearly (few results of the research are as yet available).<sup>2</sup> The factors advanced as related to fertility in Moslem (or solely Arab) countries can be classed in the following manner.

Certain practices constitute the immediate determinants of fertility. The prevalence of marriage, early marriages, the custom of remarrying soon after divorce, or widowhood, have the result that the greater part of a female's fertile years are spent in the married state.<sup>3</sup> Fertility is not limited by a delay in marriage, as at one time was the case, for example, in France.

In ten Moslem countries between 70 % and 86 % of the women between the ages of fifteen and forty-four are married, which is one of the highest ratios in the world. Ritual practices of abstinence in marriage are employed much less than in other societies. Furthermore, the use of contraceptives seems to be rather rare. Only the length of the nursing period may be cited, finally, as a practice which could perhaps limit the frequency of pregnancies. And pregnancies are "naturally" reduced as a result of disease or undernourishment, common aspects of underdevelopment in Moslem countries.

A second series of factors advanced involves the customary social relations and status, functions, and the expectation of function.

For the man from a tribe, for the peasant, but also to some extent for the city dweller, the family is regarded as the institution which ensures the economic and political security of the individual. The continuity of the family is expected to be safeguarded by the descendants, who are responsible as well for the

<sup>1</sup> Cp. in particular Mahmoud Seklani, "La fécondité dans les pays arabes," in *Population*, XV, 5, pp. 831-856, October-December 1960; Dudley Kirk, "Factors Affecting Moslem Fertility," in *Proceedings of the World Congress on Population*, organized under the auspices of the United Nations, 1965.

<sup>2</sup> Dudley Kirk, *op. cit.*, cites and analyzes briefly recent studies relating to fertility in Moslem countries. These are for the most part focused on family planning, properly speaking, rather than on an explanation of traditional behavior.

<sup>3</sup> See on this subject, beside the sources already mentioned: J. C. Chasteland, M. Amani, O.A. Puech, *La population de l'Iran, perspectives d'évolution 1956-1986*, Teheran, I.E.R.S., 1966, p. 312. The proportion of unmarried women (aged fifty in a population of age fifty) in certain countries is as follows: Iran-1.2; Iraq-4.2; Pakistan-0.9; Tunisia-2.3; France-8.0; United States-6.5 (according to the censuses carried out between 1954 and 1960).

numerical strengthening of the family, or the tribe in local clashes. Members of the family are also expected to carry out religious rites after death, to participate in agricultural labor, to assist the aged, and to assure the continuity of property. Real wealth, in certain cases at least, is in consequence of the number of family members. An axion sums up these functions: the children are the first line of economic defense. Furthermore, women expect from giving birth to many children, beginning right after marriage, a certain guarantee against repudiation.

The inferior status of women in the patrilinear and patrilocal family, which is characterized by a strong predominance of the male, the great age difference between a woman and her husband, her lack of education, her ignorance of the physiology of reproduction and especially of the periods of fertility and infertility in the menstrual cycle, her unawareness of means of contraception are other factors conducive to a high level of fertility. On the other hand, it is agreed that such changes as the increasing independence of the couple with regard to the patriarchal family, and the raising of the level of education of women, would tend to promote a desire to limit births.

It is believed further that due to the high rate of mortality the couple is prodded to conceive more in order to replace those that have died. The search for a sort of equilibrium to offset the high mortality would then become a factor in the high birth rate. And one would expect that should the rate of mortality diminish, this would bring about a decrease in the birth rate.

The multiplication of the number of children, finally, is seen as a religious duty, properly speaking. Islam expects through procreation an increase in the number of fighters for the faith, an increase of the faithful, in confrontation with other nations, for the day of national revival.

Other factors put forward relate to beliefs and values. Child-birth, for example, is considered natural, a gift of providence, a divine benediction, and not something to which reason can apply. The number of children to be brought into the world is an "unknown" thing, a matter of "chance." Moreover, God is believed to provide for the souls which he permits to come into the world. These beliefs would testify to a certain fatalism, or could serve as a certain justification for it. They are considered

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to be connected with the dogma of absolute predestination, which, we are told, legitimizes everything, contrary to man's effort to influence his fate, and appeases the suffering and worries of those who entrust themselves to God.

Thus Islam is opposed to any type of limitation of births *a posteriori* ("when the sperm has penetrated the uterus, it is illicit to cause it harm"); abortion is likened to infanticide.

However, it should be pointed out that under certain conditions (notably under economic stress) and in certain forms (*a priori*, through *coitus interruptus*), the limitation of births is admissible. Stress is given the fact that recently, in certain countries, members of the Moslem clergy have been in favor of birth control.

Finally, it is said that Islam is a creed that favors a high birth rate because of the value it places on sexuality, an original characteristic as compared with other religions. They point moreover to the existence of a "cult of numbers" in the family, as well as of a cult of "the race", a cult of natality. The number is considered a sign of divine fortune, as well as a guarantee of power, giving the poor the "illusion of wealth," and to those who are already well-to-do, a tangible wealth. And to each it affords the pride of ruling over a large family. The cult of numbers would be difficult to counteract with new ideas, and especially with the aspiration for greater affluency, the primary factor which one would expect to lead to a curtailment of births.

All of these factors together, customs, patterns of relationships and of roles, beliefs, are seen as accountable to Islam, since "the attitude of the Moslem couple toward life has its origin, perhaps a great deal more than in other communities, in a complex body of religious beliefs, rules of conduct, matrimonial customs, whose dogmatic, moral and legal bases stem from the same source: the sacred texts (the Koran), and the personal example of Mohammed (the Sunna)."<sup>4</sup>

This would explain "the strongly conservative influence of Islam," an influence which is quite widespread and difficult to delimit. Beside this very general factor of a high rate of natality, another element could be singled out: that is, the low level of

<sup>4</sup> M. Seklani, *op. cit.*, p. 831.

economic and social development. Natality would have the tendency to decrease with the penetration of Western culture on the one hand, and with economic growth on the other.

These studies, whose hypotheses we have just analyzed, have the merit of having posed the problem of fertility in Moslem countries and especially of having suggested relationships between morphological facts and cultural aspects. They may nevertheless be criticized on more than one point, and call for the establishment of a genuine body of hypotheses before undertaking any empiric study.

At the outset, the implication is that Islam explains everything, and this appears contestable and likely to distort the whole body of proposed explanations. To summarize the reasoning: Islam has largely taken over pre-Islamic tribal customs and has stabilized them. The tribal families, peasant or city dwellers, motivated either by obedience to the law or by respect for custom, thus have adopted a certain number of patterns which more or less correspond to necessities, since in particular it is only through "illusion" that the poor peasant procreates according to a natural rhythm which in reality impoverishes him.

However, if Islam, which is considered unalterable by these authors, has upheld in the past a level of fertility, neglecting the felt needs of the people, why could it not continue doing so? In what way could a modification in the behavior of Islamic populations be expected? And if Islam is no longer today a universal principle to explain society, why should it have been earlier?

Islam, and this fact must be accepted, does not constitute the definitive model of Islamic societies; each of them, in adopting it, has interpreted it in its own way.

Thus, although Islam is conducive to a high birth rate, which moreover does not distinguish it from other religions, it appears in fact that it is the only one of the great creeds which had permitted and continues to permit, under certain conditions, the restriction of childbirth. Even though the command to marriage is frequent in the holy book, nevertheless a justification for a reversion away from marriage, in the expectation that the economic situation of the faithful will improve, may also be found there.

Also, rather than the opposition of Islam to such practices as

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birth control or celibacy, we should speak rather of the attitudes favorable to these, which have not been discussed. Is not the best proof that contraception is accepted today by certain religious authorities? An interpretation of the texts was therefore possible in this sense, and if it has not been interpreted thus in the past, the reason must be that the problem had not arisen.

In dealing with "Islamic civilization," it behooves us to constantly keep in mind the fact that the Moslem religion has been quite open to existing syncretisms and has easily superimposed itself onto the ethics or at least onto the customs of the societies in which it has become established.

Not only does official Moslem ethics appear as an amalgam of pre-Islamic Arab traditions, of the teachings of the Koran and of foreign elements, mainly Persian and Greek,<sup>5</sup> but also that under the cloak of these ethics, behavior patterns and native moral systems have continued to exist. Reality has never been in conformity with the ritual or legal injunctions of the Law. Everywhere pre-Islamic customs have survived.<sup>6</sup> If we attempt to explain morphological facts such as birth rate in terms of a culture, we should be careful not to impute these to Islam as a dogma, unless this is done through the totality of its ideas and values or those of the Islamized societies under study.

Religion is merely an element of the social structure. Its function may vary from one society to another, and the place of Islam in society seems to have been too often interpreted in an ethnocentric way, including the affirmation of its specificity and especially of the strict interlacing of religion and activity, of the determination of actions by religious precepts.

Statistics, moreover, give few reasons for attributing a high rate of fertility to Islam, not only because, as we have just said, the real nature of the relationship is not clearly manifest *a priori*, but also because it tells us only that the rates of Moslem countries are only somewhat higher than those for other underdeveloped countries. It also certainly tells us that they are more uniform than the areas covered by other religions, and, it seems, more

<sup>5</sup> R. Walzer, H.A.R. Gibb, s.v. *Akhlak*, in *Encyclopédie de l'Islam*, new edition, vol. I.

<sup>6</sup> G.H. Bousquet, s.v. *Ada*, in *Encyclopédie de l'Islam*, new edition, vol. I.

resistant to diminution. What should then be explained by Islam would rather be a certain uniformity in space and time of the result of the behavioral patterns. This would be another problem and could not, no more than formerly, be explained by Islamic civilization, whose unity is non-existent, but more probably by a common aspect of the relationship of religion to different societies.

The explanation that the high fertility of Moslem countries is due to the low level of economic and social development does not appear to withstand critical examination. Certainly, there is between the two, at the level of the national states, a sound statistical relationship, which the Moslem countries share with a number of other countries. But the real social content of this relationship should be examined closely, notably in the light of contrary examples taken either from ancient traditional societies (American Indians, etc.) or among the minorities, themselves underdeveloped, in the underdeveloped countries (Tuaregs in Algeria, Armenians in Iran, etc.), or among the backward areas of advanced countries (Morvan in France, etc.).<sup>7</sup>

The methodological consequence of these monistic prejudices, and primarily of the first one, is that no attention is paid to the contradictions in the facts brought to light. It is curious, for instance, that the knowledge of contraceptive methods should have been transmitted throughout the course of history, while their utilization should have been forbidden and practically non-existent, that the women, although less educated and having an inferior status, now want less children than their husbands, or that, finally, another current observation, that birth control is still not widespread, when parents often want fewer children than the average number of families in the same society and when certain Islamic authorities do not oppose birth control, so much so that the idea of contraception, contrary to what has occurred in countries such as France, seems to come rather from "above" than from "below."<sup>8</sup>

The failure of these attempts, which consist in drawing a

<sup>7</sup> P. Vieille "Les conditions sociales de la production agricole en régions dé-tériorées. Un exemple: le Morvan," in *Esprit*, VI, June, 1955.

<sup>8</sup> Data relative to present behavior according to D. Kirk, *op. cit.*, citing the results of recent research.

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*priori* on some aspects of social reality in order to explain another, shows that it is first of all necessary to construct a sociological theory which would replace the morphological data considered at the core of the total social situation. An attempt of this sort will be undertaken here, beginning with the first experience of a rural society.

The object of this study then is to examine the real way in which the rate of births is integrated with customs, the habitual forms of social relations, and values. The question that poses itself is to know how men, women, families, local groups *experience* the problem of natality. We tend to define a type. Hence we accentuate the discontinuity of the society being considered in relation to other societies, even though in a later phase demonstrating the continuity on the bases of true variables.

This discussion concerns only the rural society of Iran, in which moreover it is quite possible that different types exist which have not as yet been defined precisely. And it is *a fortiori* evident that we do not claim that the theory presented is valid for countries other than Iran, although it could contribute to the clarification of certain problems in a larger area, notably the problem of the relationship of Islam with Islamized societies. We note further that the present work is only a preliminary attempt, having no other object than to provide a body of hypotheses for the analysis of an investigation.

In the course of the presentation we will be compelled to tie in the problem of infant mortality with that of natality, not so much because parents have the notion, truly surprising enough, of maintaining a sort of equilibrium between deaths and births, which in some way would make death the motive even for high fertility, but because the death in the first year of one child out of five today, and still more a few decades ago, effectively poses to the analyst a problem of relationship, and because births and deaths in the first year seem to be part of the same order of things for the peasants.

Certain aspects of infant mortality and natality—and first of all this important fact (real, or only apparent, it does not matter for the purpose of our subject) of the sur-mortality of small girls, which is contrary to nature—poses the problem of the difference in value between the sexes within the society and the culture.



And this leads us straight to the problem of sexuality, and specifically to the roles and values attributed to man and woman in sexuality.

But before tackling the questions themselves which are the subject of this article, we would like to raise a basic preliminary problem of the study of Iranian society: that of the duality of verbal expression and the ambiguous sense of behavior.

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How are birth and death, as practices and ideas, integrated or how can they be integrated into the traditional social organization? This is the first question which we will take up before specifying the concepts of death and fertility in popular Iranian culture.

The non-industrial societies are considered to have "accorded more attention to the reproduction of human beings than to the production of the means of existence." The human being is in fact for these societies the primary instrument of production. They tend to increase the human labor force because it is the first factor that can be manipulated in the increase of production (actually possible or conceived as such).

This thesis cannot however explain the excessive preoccupation with the multiplication of males. Such an attitude would be functional only in societies in which either the cultivable surface, or the output by unit of surface through the addition of work units, would be indefinitely extensible. Iran does not, nor has it ever in the past, fall into one of these categories. It is quite probable, on the contrary, that in the course of history the cultivated surfaces have tended to decrease, without moreover cultural patterns having been modified, and hence a larger labor force has allowed a sensible increase in production. In fact, young children were dying traditionally, in great numbers up until recent years, and general mortality was high. This fact shows plainly that the equilibrium men-division-subsistence was not realized, that births were too numerous, and that local groups, attached to specific and delimited land, did not dispose of the surplus necessary to ensure the survival of the children whom they put into the world.

Is this concept of equilibrium so difficult to comprehend for

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village communities? Don't they somehow have an immediate perception of it? Many pre-industrial societies have exercised one form or another of birth control. Infanticide, practiced right after birth, has been one of the most "primitive" forms. It has, it seems, been very widespread and has frequently been subjected to laws (the opinion of parents or neighbors, moment of birth in relationship to the weaning of the preceding child, etc.). Abortion with the aid of medicinal plants or through mechanical means also seems to have been known from very early times. It was practiced by the American Indians, and is still used under certain circumstances (the interruption of pregnancy before marriage) in black Africa.

Other methods of birth control have also been utilized. In France, under the *Ancien Régime*, natality was controlled through the celibacy of the younger sons, a phenomenon of which there are still traces in some rural French departments. And it could be said that the privileges of the first-born, both in matters of inheritance as in marriage, had the purpose of maintaining the equilibrium population-resources.<sup>9</sup> Another means, used in particular in France in the nineteenth century, was the choice of a wife of a more advanced age, for whom the approach of menopause guaranteed fewer children. French society offers another remarkable example of a rapid change in the means of birth control determined by the modification of laws. After the Revolution had abolished the privilege of the first-born in the family, marriage became generalized (this fact is so important that it could be referred to as a demographic revolution), but it was also accompanied by a severe limitation of the number of children. In order not to break up inheritance, the French family reacted with the only child.<sup>10</sup>

Why have certain societies limited fertility while others have not? Why in particular did Iranian rural society, as is apparent, traditionally adopt a pattern of high fertility associated with high infant mortality? One may propose the hypothesis that the behavior with regard to birth was tied to the legal status of the

<sup>9</sup> P. Gemachling, in G. Friedmann (editor), *Villes et campagnes, compte rendu de la deuxième semaine sociologique*, Paris, A. Colin, 1953, p. 335.

<sup>10</sup> J.E. Havel, *La condition de la femme*, Paris, A. Colin, 1961, p. 144-145.

agricultural producer. When the extent of cultivable soil is limited, the latter tends to limit or not to limit fertility in accordance with whether he is or is not, individually or collectively, in a position to establish a relationship between the population and the land available; that is, within a framework in which the factors of production are stable between the population and the resources.<sup>11</sup> French society bears out this hypothesis. Small proprietorship made its appearance there after the beginning of the nineteenth century and acted as a particularly active Malthusian ferment, while tenant farming remained associated with high natality. In the eyes of the agricultural producer the second legal status, contrary to the first, does not limit the possibilities for the settlement of children when they have reached an adult age.<sup>12</sup>

The Iranian peasant is traditionally a tenant farmer who does not cultivate a fixed domain once and for all; his relationship to the land is commanded and overseen by the landowner. The future of the lineage, of the family, of the children, does not

<sup>11</sup> This hypothesis is undoubtedly quite different from the one that R. Koenig would formulate in his course at the University of Cologne. I have unfortunately not been able to consult him. According to his concept, every organized community should have controlled fertility and conversely. The author takes as a notable example the Egyptian village with its great residential mobility, its lack of local institutions, and its natural fertility. The proposition does not seem entirely satisfactory to me. Certainly, in France before the Revolution, the regions with concentrated habitation, the better organized communes, had a less high natality than communes with dispersed habitation. But since the Revolution the tendency to restrict births has been much more widespread, much more rapid in areas of dispersed habitation, which demonstrates clearly the intervention of another factor.

Neither can it be said that the Iranian village is unorganized, although it is not organized by the producers themselves, but, traditionally, by the feudal lord.

<sup>12</sup> Ph. Aries, *Histoire des populations françaises et de leurs attitudes devant la vie depuis le XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, Self, 1948, demonstrates this in two ways. Through cartographical correspondences: from 1801 to 1936 in the areas where there were small property owners fertility decreased most; tenant farming areas were less affected by the decrease of natality. Through case analysis: in one department considered as an example, two social strata are remarkably prolific: the poor agricultural laborers and the rich farmers (that is, two categories whose subsistence does not depend on precise limits of the land). These latter live largely without care about the future, their children pose merely the problem of the division of the capital for exploitation and not the unsolvable one of the division of landed property. Moreover the author shows how under certain conditions the small land-owner or one who aspires to be a property holder, is led to birth control.

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depend so much on the equilibrium men-resources as it does on the equilibrium peasant-proprietor, which is in reality an equilibrium with three poles: the proprietor confronting two lineages or groups of rival lineages.

This equilibrium is essentially variable. Moreover it is not foreseeable. It conceals from the individual, or from the lineages, the relative stability of the collective equilibrium men-resources. If the concept of this equilibrium cannot arise at the level of the tenant farmers, considered individually, neither can an awareness of it occur at the level of the village collectivity. The latter is divided; it has unity only in the opposition of lineages; its organization is kept in hand by the large landowner who dominates it through the oppositions that he fosters. He cannot therefore become the initiator of a stabilization of relationships between lineages, no more on the level of demography than on any other level.

Thus there is for the peasant no collective destiny, no collective measure of the population, of the number of men and their children. There are only individual destinies, and these are not known in advance. Each one *a priori* believes in his chances and those of his descendants. The idea that birth and the destiny of each are within the power of supernatural forces or of God and that they cannot be altered is functional to these perceptions and beliefs. It is God, according to accepted belief, who gives life and the possibility of subsistence to those whom he has called into being.

Thus, on the one hand, no obstacle is *a priori* put in the way of nature, in conception, birth, and life. The human fact of procreation is transformed into a phenomenon of nature, but, on the other hand, the revenge of the equilibrium resources-population, which is disregarded so far as birth is concerned—the death of young children—, is transformed into a necessity or willed by God. “Children are given and are taken away,” they come as a gift and die as readily. The potentialities of life are abundant: “each hair of a child’s head, each of his teeth, is a child,” but if the child dies, “it was its fate,” its destiny (*ghesmatech boudeh*). The peasant practices in some way a “demographic liberalism,” and calls necessity or God the collective equilibrium, which he ignores or cannot understand.

Yet peasant culture is not free of tensions with regard to birth; it is haunted by the idea of the equilibrium population-resources. First of all the peasants well know that the distribution of goods is not carried out in proportion to the size of families, the importance of the descendants, but according to ability in social relations, which carries weight in the equilibrium of the village.<sup>13</sup> The establishment of the children is not a promise, but only a hope.

The idea that there is a ratio of children who can survive is explicitly implied. The expression, "If all children were to die, men would eat men" is a common saying. But this affirmation is without practical consequence, detached as it is from concrete human relationships. Those who *a priori* would want to limit the number of children would appear to lack hope, to be cowards. But if everyone hopes that all children will be able to live, *a posteriori*, in face of the difficulties this would impose, many regret having so many children. This is particularly noticeable in periods of extreme discontent. When psycho-social controls weaken, the malediction of children, the wish for their death, becomes a common occurrence.

In the fact of the established pattern of high fertility, factors of resistance do exist which are not actualized. And unquestionably one could venture establishing a link between this circumstance and the implication of the State in the death of children. The peasants consider that the State is responsible for them, that it is up to the State to provide the means for the survival of children. This strange judgment, which is moreover only one aspect of the demand of the nation to the State, of the *Mellât* to the *Dowlât*, is apparently the result of the following, unformulated reasoning: the "subjects" have placed their future in the hands of an authority, which has taken charge of the organization of society, and which in the last analysis is the State. The latter, if it makes the collective decision to allow children to be brought into the world, must make it possible for them to survive. This peasant idea may be likened to the traditional political doctrine of Shi'ism, which much more primitively regards

<sup>13</sup> P. Vieille, M. Kotobi, *L'origine des ouvriers de Tebran*, Teheran, mimeographed, I.E.R.S., 1965.

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any authority as illegitimate which is not in the hands of the descendants of the family of Ali, the son-in-law of the prophet. Only such an authority would be religiously and politically just, capable of realizing the divine will and especially of providing for the children whom God has given the effective possibility of living.

We note in passing that there is no contradiction, for the peasant, between the responsibility of the State and destiny or the will of God, the former being in essence only an instrument, good or bad, in the hands of the latter.

At any rate, the implication of the State is a supplementary indication of the existence of a tension in the culture. To limit or not to limit the number of children is a problem. The organized level, the values and habitual social behavior attest to the intangibility of fertility, but, on the other hand, also very generally, either directly and spontaneously or indirectly in established expressions, a resistance against natural fertility does exist. We will return later to this contradiction in the culture, when we clarify the concept of fertility, and we will show that it corresponds to a latent social tension.

Not to depart here from the relation between the status of the peasant and his behavior with regard to fertility, we point out that the recent modification of the status of landed property, the abolition of tenant farming, and the accession of tenant farmers to the ownership of the land they cultivate, by the prohibition of transfers of property, that is, in practice, by the immobilization of the farms within their present limits, promises, if our hypothesis is correct, to reinforce considerably the desire to limit births and to bring about a modification of the customs in this sense. Two years after the land reform the peasants are apparently still far from perceiving the implications of the new status of landed property, but undoubtedly it is too soon to expect important changes to have occurred and to be astonished by the persistence of century-old attitudes.

One would be more surprised if the earlier modification of the death rate (the struggle against endemic diseases and the introduction of modern pharmacy date from fifteen to twenty years ago) and its consequences—a rapid increase of the population, the survival of a greater number of children—had not

changed the attitude with regard to childbirth either. A basic disequilibrium has been introduced into the traditional relationships between resources, births and deaths, which, on the whole, does not seem to have been compensated for by a corresponding increase in food resources, despite the undoubtedly remarkable progress in certain specific sectors (consumption of sugar, for instance). There is therefore a considerable chance that the level of alimentation has been, on the whole, checked. But traditional society certainly did not have a high level of alimentation, and, at any rate, the elasticity which the results of studies in consumption demonstrate would make for a rapid increase in food consumption if there were the possibility, that is, if the society were in the position in which the psychological marginal value of food products were great. The relative scarcity of food products could not therefore be strongly felt. But if these peoples are well aware of the rapid increase of the population (it even appears that they overvalue its importance), they nevertheless do not draw any practical consequence from it with regard to the number of children a family may have. The contradiction is remarkable, and it tends to confirm the hypothesis that the status of the peasant was until recently not conducive to the perception of the relation between resources and population. At the same time another hypothesis is invalidated: that which claims that in the traditional family infant mortality is in some way the measure of natality, that the parents seek to make up for the losses through death by producing a greater number of children.

After having examined generally the role of birth and death in peasant society and culture, we would like to state explicitly the concepts of death and fertility, starting with the former.

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The comparison of behaviors with regard to birth and death shows perfectly that the resignation with which children are accepted in the name of necessity, of the divine organization of the world, is in fact a will to multiply the descendants: while the submission to necessity intervenes with regard to death only *a posteriori*, in the matter of birth it intervenes *a priori*.

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But why are children wanted? Why so many? Religious motives are practically non-existent, the Islamic idea of increasing the number of faithful through procreation has practically no popular basis, even though at times we encounter it in the sermons of priests. As in other societies, the purpose of fertility is the personal fulfillment in maternity and paternity. It satisfies a need for affection and for steadying the personality through an action in which human beings customarily achieve recognition: the power of reproduction. But this is insufficient motivation for the uncontrolled multiplication of births. The latter is explained by the aid that the children from an early age can contribute to production, which is frequently illusory; by the care they will take later on of their aging parents, which is less illusory; by the solicitude they will have for their parents after death: the cult of the tomb, of the soul, the reciting of prayers for the destination of the deceased; by the preoccupation of extending the lineage, which is rather different from the concern of the traditional western peasant populations with maintaining family continuity on landed property which they are attached to; and finally by the anguish of losing children.<sup>14</sup> In a general way the multiplication of the descendants appears as an antidote against a feeling of insecurity and isolation. Thus the status of the peasant would not only result, as we have shown above, in depriving him of any idea of a measure in childbirths by available resources, but also in creating motivations favorable to the increase of the number of children.

Where does this belief in the infinite possibilities of life, the resistance to the idea of voluntary action for the purpose of limiting births, the absolute uncompromising value of fertility stem from? It is wrong to limit births, every sexual act must in itself bear the possibility of fecundation, every fecundation once begun must be carried to its fruition.

This ethic has been transformed into an ideology, supported by the priests (if it did not stem properly from Islam, it would disturb nothing in the least, neither the feudal lords nor the clergy); it has thus been rendered more impervious to change.

<sup>14</sup> This is quite different from the hypothesis which we rejected earlier in this discussion as to births measured by deaths.



But behind these outwardly affirmed principles one does find the desire to limit births, as we observed earlier, and behind the affirmation of the realities of existence, an obsession with its limitations. It is said that children should not be counted, that God alone counts them, that all have the same value; but in fact it is the first child or children primarily who have prestige; the consideration accorded to consecutive children decreases rapidly, and only in particular cases does one speak of the advantage of a numerous family or of a very fertile woman—when the parents are sufficiently affluent to be able to take good care of all of them. Children, it is said, should be measured by the well-being of the parents, and it is frequently specified that it is in the absolute, in the eyes of God, that all children of one family have the same value. Beside this preoccupation with the future of the children, there is a motivation for birth control with a feminist orientation. Not to “break” the woman by too frequent pregnancies, too early or too late, is an aspiration often expressed by women. In general, it may be said moreover that men tend more toward intransigence, toward a refusal to consider the measure of births, while it is the reverse for women, so much so that the tensions within the culture are projected into social tensions.

Obviously, the question may be asked, where does this particular attitude on the part of women stem from. It would be too easy to cite here evidence of residues of the past, of the matriarchal period, of the period of primitive communities prior to the feudal period (of what past, whose existence is uncertain?). It seems rather that it has its origin in a feminine culture that is distinct from masculine society.<sup>15</sup>

The latter envisages descendance more in the terms indicated above, while for the former, the child is first of all the pregnancy, nursing, the tasks of feeding and of education during the first years, which rest essentially on the mother. In addition, while the man refuses to separate sexuality from impregnation, these are, for the woman, contradictory. Every impregnation and primarily the physical fatigue which results from the multiplication of

<sup>15</sup> P. Vieille, “Un mariage en Iran,” in *Revue française de sociologie*, VII, 1, January-March 1966.

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childbirths work contrary to sexual satisfaction, which the man expects from the woman, and which the latter strives to provide him. The woman wants to remain an acceptable sexual partner for her husband and thus dispel the threat of a second wife or of repudiation.

Women feel the burden more of a large number of children and are more desirous of limiting the number. But their wishes are not heeded, no more than for other aspects of feminine culture, since they have the inferior status of women, who, outwardly at least, must adopt masculine values. The expression of the culture, and we will return to this subject, is reserved to the men. Furthermore, family institutions and social organization, of local groups, tend to impose a high fertility.

The woman achieves her full status only through fertility; her prestige in the family, in the village and with her husband is at its culminating point with her first pregnancy and first child (and especially if the latter is a boy). It is moreover noteworthy in this respect that the mother is often called by the name of her first child. The situation is analogical with what has been observed in black Africa.<sup>16</sup>

After the marriage the couple's families, the entire village await the pregnancy. If it occurs soon, the young woman is coddled, her husband is very attentive to her, but if she is late in conceiving, everyone becomes anxious. The father of the young woman has provided the means of reproduction. He is discredited by a daughter who does not immediately bear a child. The family of the husband on its part has acquired a woman for the purpose of increasing its descendants. If the sterility is prolonged, the husband becomes disinterested in his wife and threatens to send her away or to take a second wife. One is not resigned to sterility as one is resigned to death; the household is constituted in order to procreate. Sterility is regarded as a human contract that has not been kept, rather than as an act of fate. Whoever is the victim (real or assumed; more often it is the wife who, without proof,

<sup>16</sup> D. Paulme, published by *Femmes d'Afrique noire*, Paris, Mouton, 1960. "Everywhere the birth of the first child is a more important event than the institution of marriage. It marks the accession of the parents to a higher age class, and very frequently a special term designating that a man or woman is married rather than single is unknown." (p. 19).

is considered to be sterile) will do everything to change his status. If he does not succeed, he will be able to lead only an inferior existence; he will never enjoy a status equivalent to that of his peers; his family will feel dishonored; and the young man will sometimes find no other recourse than to leave the village.

The mechanisms which encourage childbirth do not stop with the first birth. The position of the wife in the family is uncertain, the marriage is easily broken simply by the wish of the husband (even though, in the country, divorces are traditionally few in number). The woman is therefore subjected to her husband and seeks the means which will tie her to her household. The children are regarded as being the "nails" to fasten the marriage, and the wife hastens after marriage to multiply these ties which will guarantee her against the disaffection of her husband.

Finally, even though one or the other or both of the couple desire, at a given moment of their married life, to limit the number of children, the absence of communication between them constitutes an obstacle. There is neither cooperation nor intimacy in the household; a common decision is out of the question. Innovation is therefore impossible and the relationships between husband and wife are regulated by established customary values. Men on the one hand and women on the other, and the groups they form separately in the village, may aspire to limit births; but between them the expression of values is blocked by the dictum of traditional values, and their conduct is hamstrung by the repetition of everyday actions. Let us take, for example, the group of women. This group engages in feverish activity when the question is one of combatting sterility, initiating young women, guiding them in the course of their first pregnancy, and welcoming the new-born baby. From generation to generation magic rites, medicinal practices, popular pharmacopoeia are transmitted within the bosom of this group. Not only is the activity one of mutual help, but it exercises considerable pressure on individuals with regard to impregnation, the first pregnancies. Still, later, when all are agreed that a wife has produced enough children, insofar as birth control is concerned, the group is as pusillanimous in words as in deeds, because to thwart conception is considered traditionally "evil". Certainly, the knowledge of anti-conceptual means has been conserved, usually simple ones that allow the

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interruption of pregnancy, but they are only mentioned or made use of with fear. They prefer to use means that are less sure, that appear to be the responsibility of nature: to carry heavy loads, to walk up stairs rapidly, etc. Finally, a woman who has many children is censured, but helped very little; her too great fertility has become a fault. On her part, she must suffer her guilt in silence; she does not dare to speak to her husband of birth control. Sometimes she bursts into recriminations against her husband, rather than her children, "Father sows you, then leaves you in my charge," but without future hope. Hence the social tension between husband and wife, which we mentioned earlier, is normally latent, but sometimes open. This tension never comes out into the open, however, in decisions that are likely to reduce it, and the contradictions of the culture finally develop tensions within the personality between the level of aspirations and that of practices.

The pattern of high fertility, of which we have discussed the probably origins, is thus reinforced in practice and perpetuated through the conjunction of three circumstances: the recurrence of the pattern of behavior in the body of "official" values, outwardly preferred and placed under the cover of Islam, the absence of real communications within households, the intense pressures exercised on individuals by local groups, and their different roles with regard to the accomplishment of customary actions.

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As we have said, the demographic liberalism practiced by peasant society does not work without high mortality. But why does death occur most often among children of early age? When so much importance is attached to birth, which they refuse to limit, and moreover they are resigned to disease and death, why then this excessively high mortality? It will be said that during the first years the child is very delicate, primarily in the period of weaning. This is undoubtedly true, but insufficient as an explanation. The answer makes it possible merely to specify that the small child does not receive the necessary care that it requires in order to have as much chance of survival as an older child or an adult. There is then, in any case, on the part of society a choice of

practices and attitudes which explain the high rate of infant mortality.

We point out that the idea of choice is strongly rejected. The concept of equality of beings, and especially equality in death, the concept of equality in grief provoked by the death of children of whatever age, is strictly opposed to such an admission: "Whatever finger of the hand is mutilated, the pain is the same." But this is only a question of a ritual assertion, in a very stereotyped form moreover, which masks a very different reality.

The most current observation is that the small child does not count in the literal sense of the word. This, however, is not declared spontaneously during censuses nor under any other circumstances. The child is rather the already pubescent child. The parents do not hesitate, after an outward assertion that there is equality, to compare the value of children according to their age. The importance of the manifestations of mourning varies according to the age of the dead child, and when an adolescent dies at a period when his marriage was already under discussion, grief is felt most strongly. These customs do not moreover correspond to a religion; the prayer for the dead is only necessary after the age of fifteen.

The small child is not in fact considered as a specific person having different needs from the adult; it is an expected adult, an inferior adult, delicate, "who can be taken away by a crow" (the symbol of death). In the end it is up to him to prove his quality as a man by existing until the age when he can live entirely as an adult. He is consequently treated in no special way. It is however necessary to qualify this general affirmation. The value of the child according to his age is combined in fact with his value according to his rank. What has been said is less true for the first child and for the first boy, primarily for the latter, who is given greater consideration and care because he is born to be politically the heir-double of his father. On the whole the conception and the treatment of the child such as we have described results in assuring a "natural selection" of individuals, allowing the most resistant children to survive in the face of disease and hunger. They make it possible to carry out this selection at an "economic" moment, at which the expenses envisag-

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ed in forming an adult are not as yet overly high. They also have the immense advantage of leaving the responsibility for the dead to nature, thus conforming perfectly with the "demographic liberalism" adopted by the peasants.

These rationalizations do not form, of course, a part of peasant culture. They lead back to it nonetheless, since they tend, by deduction, to demonstrate the devaluation of pregnancy, of delivery, of weaning, of the care given by the mother in the course of the first months, which is known data.

All that concerns the child from gestation until the end of the second infancy, when it becomes more independent of its mother, is the domain of the woman; man would not concern himself with such minor matters. He is oriented otherwise, toward "the outer world," that is, toward the "political" relations of the family and its lineage with other groups, and the complex dictates of a traditional society. He is proud of sowing the land and of impregnating his wife; he thus affirms his right to participate in a virile society. But his status prohibits him from concerning himself in a specific fashion with this nature which he pretends to dominate; he must keep his distance as the master in relationship to the servant. He belongs basically to the culture that orders nature, while his wife and infant child belong to the world dominated by men; they are potentialities subjected to the hazards of the situation in the realm of the culture and must find their own way in it. The submission to nature manifest in peasant culture appears here in fact as an ideological construction concealing its opposite, the subjection of nature, especially including the domain of the woman, to a masculine culture.

The woman may be expected to have a considerably different attitude from the one described. She is, because of her situation, more preoccupied with the young child, is more conscious of its proper needs, more preoccupied with diminishing infant mortality, as she appeared previously to be more preoccupied with birth control. In fact, here again, these feminine values exist only in an embryonic form; the masculine values are imposed on the women because of their prestige, and primarily through social realization. The woman is recognized only through her adolescent adult children. Under these conditions it is only surprising that

tension with regard to infant mortality in families is not more pronounced.<sup>17</sup>

If the child of tender age is undervalued, because it belongs to a domain which is as yet incoherent, which has not as yet been ordered by man, the small girl must be doubly so, since she is at the same time a young child and a female who is removed from the realm of the culture.

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The excessively high mortality of baby girls is in fact difficult to explain physiologically, since they are in fact more resistant than small boys. It remains to be proven whether this sur-mortality, which shows up in demographic studies, is due to genuine mortality, and declared as such. If in fact this is the case, it would show again that society makes a choice in what is considered to be within the domain of necessity. If it is not the case, the appearance given it would be just one of the indications of the underestimation of small girls, of which many other indices may be noted.

Whatever the case may be, here too the outward assertion is that the children are equal according to their sex. The assertion is especially categorical if the parents are asked to compare the pain felt on the death of a boy with that provoked by the death of a girl. No, boy and girl, are just as equal in death as two children of different ages. There is an absolute refusal to choose.

In fact, the death of a small boy is mourned more than that of a small girl, and all the actions of daily life show the overvaluation of the first by comparison with the second child. A boy is more desired than a girl as the eldest. More boys than girls are wanted. If a boy is born, "he was expected"; if a girl is born, "she brings luck." The small girl is "galling" at birth and, later on, when she starts to smile it signifies, "Don't throw me

<sup>17</sup> The devaluation of the small child is frequent in present-day underdeveloped societies, although it does not always assume the same form. Hence, in Urundi, nursing babies are coddled, but no attention is paid to new-born that are being weaned, whose mortality in consequence is very high. New interest is taken in the children at an age when they can start work. (E.M. Albert, in D. Paulme, *op. cit.*, p. 192-200).

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out, I will find my place." The boy has positive symbols, the girl, negative ones. This may easily be seen in the beliefs relative to the prediction of the sex of the children to be born; the symbols for a boy are the right side of the body, weight, good character, voracity, etc.; the symbols for a girl are the reverse.

The boy, whose "humor is more troubled," is taken care of more than the small girl; he is fed better, dressed better, and there is more preoccupation with his needs. And yet, although materially it is not the case, one finds that the small girl is more trouble to bring up. Or, to put it more profoundly, one perceives it more in the form of expression than in the expression itself: the trouble given by a boy is borne more easily, with joy, while that given by a girl is not tolerated well. The girl is used to obedience, the boy to independence. A popular saying indicates the behavior expected: "scold a girl, she will lower her head; a boy will flee." Furthermore, it is considered normal that a boy should be authoritarian toward his sister: "He learns how to dominate."

This inferior status quite generally accorded to small girls appears contradictory with the price put on fertility. Why does the high value attributed to the latter not also reflect on the small girl? How does popular culture account for this apparent contradiction? It will be immediately noted that this attitude does not result from intrinsic reasons, that is, because of what the small girl is now, that she is regarded as inferior, but because of the role which she will have to fulfil later on and the consequences of this role. Thus, when one speaks of the trouble given by the small girl, it is not a question of actual pain, but of an anticipated, expected pain.

The essential basic fact is that the girl is perceived only as a sexual object and an instrument of reproduction, and, in view of these two qualities, she is at the same time coveted and menaced. But without this only "capital," which for her is a fragile maidenhead, she has no other value and could not be given, settled under honorable conditions, since her entire family would be covered with shame. Fear for her virginity is ever-present; the parents, the father as well as the mother, live continually obsessed by the possibility of her being violated. They can never relax their surveillance and their protection.



There are no fears of this type for the boy. On the contrary, he is himself both a menace and a protection; he is not dominated, but dominates. He is not enclosed in the "natural" roles of sex and reproduction; he is, it is said, a politician and educator, "on him rests the order of the world."

In addition, the boy will remain in the family, in the lineage of his parents. He will assure its strength and perpetuation; he will take them into his household, whereas the girl, who has caused so much trouble, will go and enlarge another family, eventually another lineage: "one raises them and then gives them to others." The fact that in practice families and lineages exchange girls is disregarded; and that they receive the equivalent of what they give. This disregard could be considered analogous to the one in which the results of behaviors are held to be collective with regard to birth. But, considering the high instance of endogamy that is habitually practiced at the level either of the segment of the lineage, or the "union of families" constituted by segments of lineage, the "departure" of the girl is true only in a very narrow sense, only for the married couple who are after all just one part of the family,<sup>18</sup> and who cannot be the only group within which behavior toward the woman is established.

In the final analysis, the "departure" of the girl could not be held to be the true motivation of behavior; it is more likely a motive that was superimposed later on the fundamental reason, which has been pointed out earlier.

The inferior status of the woman extends in the course of her existence to the whole of her activities. Her work is devalued; its worth seems to be ignored not only when it is confined to domestic activities (household work, preparation of meals, education of the children, etc.), but even when she engages in agricultural activities (the cultivation of rice) or artisanal activities (weaving of carpets), which are equivalent to those of the man.

The question may be raised at this point, as we did earlier with regard to the valuation of the young child, whether the over-valuation of the boy is the general case with women as well

<sup>18</sup> P. Vieille and M. Kotobi, *Famille et union de famille en Iran*, paper read at the Vith world congress of sociology.

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as with men, and how the family mechanisms, the relations father-mother-child, manifest themselves with regard to this over-valuation.

The Iranian family seems clearly from this point of view to possess original characteristics. Curiously, the radical opposition of man and wife in the household leads to the same valuation of the boy on the part of both. There is not, as in the West in particular, a tendency toward identification of man and wife, but there is an opposition within the complementarity, a type of relation tied to the existence of a masculine society and of a feminine society that are clearly differentiated. Each of the couple prefers the boy for different motives, which are related more to the *I* than to the familial *we*, but which in both cases result from the male domination of the woman, from the fact that the man is the political and cultural factor that orders nature and society. The special affinities father-daughter on the one hand and mother-son on the other, which characterize the western family, are not found here.

What man expects from his son is first of all the strengthening of the family and of the lineage in terms of number and prestige. The wife for her part enjoys more prestige through her sons than her daughters. Above all, she finds in her sons the means of compensating for her inferior status; it is through them that she is socially recognized; it is thanks to them that she is accorded the respect that is denied the wife, the daughter or the sister. Furthermore, the woman expects from her son an attachment, thanks to which she may counterbalance the superiority of her husband in the household. She makes the son a rival of the father and at the same time she submits to him. Beginning with childhood, the competition of the parents over the son assures the latter a privileged position, while the daughter has no positive function in the family mechanisms, and consequently has only secondary status. Only when she becomes a pubescent girl does she acquire a certain prestige in the family; she becomes the rival of her mother. But the custom is then to marry her off quickly. She will only really accede to a higher status through giving birth, and more specifically through her sons. She is thus oriented toward maternity in a negative fashion. She may therefore only be revealed to herself through the intervention of a man:

the latter appears to exercise toward his wife much more the role of an organizer than that of a husband.

The woman is a mediate being, who has value only through her husband and her sons. Moreover, the privileged relationship between the man and the woman is not that of husband-wife or lover-beloved, but the relation son-mother just as the relationship of fraternity is devalued by comparison with that of filiation, of hierarchy. The competition between these two relationships, that of the son and the mother on the one hand, that of the son and the father on the other, could easily be at the origin of the inverse and complementary Oedipus complex, which has been represented by the epic figure of Rostam, who is led by destiny to the murder of his son and is then cast down by remorse and despair. There are strong intimations of this in Persian psychism.<sup>19</sup>

At any rate, again we find the problem of the relationship man-woman that we have encountered throughout this discussion, whether dealing with fertility, with infant mortality, or with the sur-mortality of infant girls. The conception of the man and the woman, the roles expected of them, the image-guide of their relations come to be constantly intermingled with the sociological explanation of the demographic facts under consideration.

<sup>19</sup> The complex of Rostam was referred to by F. Hoveida, at the conference of I.E.R.S., Teheran, 1965.