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The Age of Childbirth in the Bantu of Southern Rhodesia

BY

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In 1948 a sample census of the African population of Southern Rhodesia was carried out.

were bearing their children, as some idea of the fertility rate might thereby be determined.

METHOD

Every African woman on admission to the Maternity Unit of Harari Hospital was asked her age. This was recorded, as stated by the woman, on a card which also contained other relevant information. The age was initially

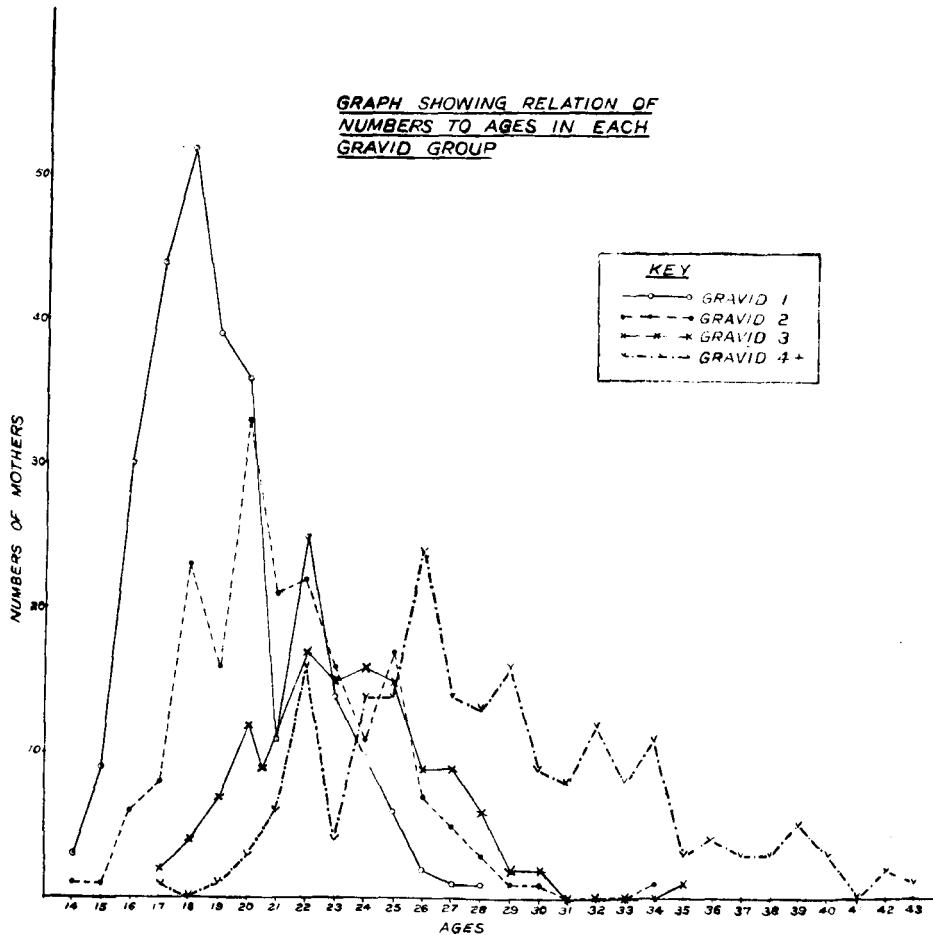


Fig. 1

During this census it was found that most Africans have only a rough idea of their ages, and consequently they were divided into two broad age groups. These groups were (a) up to and including puberty; and (b) over puberty. Puberty was considered to be any age between 12 and 15 years. Another sample census of the African population is being undertaken at the present time. It seemed to be of interest to try and determine the age at which African women

recorded by an African staff nurse, and the following morning the patient was again asked by the medical officer. If the two answers furnished as to the age did not agree, the age was recorded as unknown. Also on admission the woman was questioned as to the number of children she had previously borne and/or miscarriages or abortions she had had. This information was recorded on the card as gravidity in categories of one, two, three and four or

more pregnancies. No attempt was made to cross-check the answers to these two queries, but the answers were accepted for what they were worth.

RESULTS

This investigation was carried out from the 1st January, 1954. Only women who gave birth to a child in the hospital or on the way to hospital were included in the series. False labours, who were subsequently discharged from hospital, were excluded, as they would falsely have biased the results if they had been counted again when re-admitted to hospital for the birth of their child. Also excluded were women who were in hospital for treatment of some inter-current condition during their pregnancy.

In all, 2,307 cases were investigated. Of these, 800 (35 per cent.) knew how old they were and 1,507 (65 per cent.) did not know their ages. (Standard error = 1.) In Table I is shown the distribution of gravidity in the known and unknown age groups. In the graph is shown the gravidity distribution with respect to age in relation to the number of mothers.

unknown age-group, while the younger women belong to the group who know their age. This would be in keeping with the rapid advance in the education of the African which is taking place and has been taking place during the last two decades.

Perusal of the graph shows several important trends from the viewpoint of the obstetrician. The fact emerges that no woman over the age of 28 was having her first pregnancy. It would appear then that in the African the so-called elderly primipara must be a myth and the worries associated with the confinement of these people are absent. In contrast to this, pregnancy occurs at a very early age and the largest number of primigravida are found in the age 18 group. Houghton and Ross (1953) have commented on the high incidence of premature babies in the African, and this is probably associated with the young age at which these women are giving birth. It is seen from the graph that from the age of about 30 there is a rapid tailing off in child-birth, and after the age of 40, with three exceptions, no woman bore a child.

TABLE I

Showing the Distribution of Gravidity in the Known and Unknown Age-Groups.

Gravidity.	1	2	3	4	Total.
Ages known	283 (35%)	193 (24%)	126 (16%)	198 (25%)	800 (35%)
Ages unknown	192 (13%)	272 (18%)	279 (18%)	764 (51%)	1,507 (65%)

COMMENT AND DISCUSSION

From these figures it can be seen that about two-thirds of all African women having a child in this hospital do not know how old they are, and one-third make a statement as to their age. We have no method of determining the accuracy of this statement in the African, as there is no compulsory registration of births as yet, and consequently no birth certificate can be produced. It is obvious that knowledge of age must to some extent be a reflection of the state of education of the parents, because the child is dependent on them for being told the date of birth in the absence of a documentary record.

Examination of Table I reveals that more than 50 per cent. in the unknown age-group were having their fourth or more pregnancy, while in the age known group more than a third were having their first pregnancy. We may infer from this that the older women belong to the

SUMMARY

1. A study of the age of the African in child-birth is described.
2. Of 2,307 cases investigated, 35 per cent. knew their age, and in 65 per cent. the age was unknown.
3. No woman over 28 years of age was bearing her first child and, with three exceptions, no woman over 40 bore a child.
4. Pregnancy supervenes at a very early age, primipara being most frequent in the age 18 group.

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