

From mother to daughter

The transmission of fertility

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Should a woman give birth to a child when she is old enough to be a grandmother? This question of the right time in life to have children was compellingly presented by the testimony of women who spoke to us within the framework of our research on menopause. Several of their stories mention scandals and highlight the tragedy of entire families in which the norm of the “right age” for having children was alleged to have been transgressed. This was the case, for example, in the 1960s in a Lot-et-Garonne village, when a 35-year-old mother and her daughter delivered at the same time and their relatives and friends stated that they were so ashamed and “put out” that they did not even want to visit them in hospital. Why did this cause such a reaction at that time, when today everyone says they “couldn’t care less”, as even the woman recounting the episode notes? And why talk about “shame”?

In order to cast more light on the content of implicit norms whose transgression is still a vivid memory for these women, we utilized a conjunction of methods from two fields, anthropology and historical demography. This choice, which might appear surprising, will be explained shortly. The present article, which combines an ethnographic inquiry with a statistical approach was conceived and written by three researchers allying their respective competences in ethnology and demography. But, first of all, we shall come back to the ethnological inquiries involved.

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- ¹ With the collaboration of Nadège Fabre. The ethnological sections of this article were written by Agnès Fine and Véronique Moulinié and the demographic section by Jean-Claude Sangoï. Daniel Fabre, who was Véronique Moulinié’s doctoral director, suggested the research idea to us (see her doctorate published in 1998 as *La Chirurgie des âges*. Paris, Editions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme) and we especially thank him for his unswerving encouragement in seeing this research project to its end. The demographic research was carried out by Jean-Claude Sangoï on the basis of his data on the Bas-Quercy area. Research in the Pyrenean area (Val d’Aran) was carried out by Nadège Fabre within the framework of a DEA degree she received in 2004, co-directed by Jean-Claude Sangoï and Agnès Fine. The demographic files for this region were kindly made available by André Sevin, a CNRS research engineer, whom we thank for his generous assistance.

Shame attached to a late pregnancy

Véronique Moulinié undertook research into ordinary surgical operations such as tonsillectomies, appendectomies and the kind of hysterectomies usually termed “total”, and analyzed the conditions in which they appeared, how they became widespread, and were subsequently much debated by the medical profession. She also recorded rather astonishing testimony about the last of the three operations. Her informants were women over 50 years of age, born between 1910 and 1940. They all lived in a small country town in the north of the French *département* of Lot-et-Garonne. These women belonged to the working class in the town, which still has a factory in operation, and all the ladies were quite familiar with the ethnologist from long and relatively continuous cooperation in her inquiries. So, what did they have to say about the “total” hysterectomy? Although it is an operation that completely changes a woman’s body, it was looked forward to with some impatience and, at the very least, it was neither dreaded nor refused. What is more, the women “sought after” the operation, interpreting all their menstrual troubles as linked to an imminent menopause, which heralded a “total” hysterectomy. When a doctor refused (a rare occurrence) to recommend the saving cut of the scalpel, they did not hesitate to consult another who was more cooperative. Once the operation was over, the comments were always the same: “I’m relieved now” or “good riddance”. Relieved about what? Rid of what? From a potential pregnancy? Or more simply, from the attentions of their husbands?

It is obviously difficult to ask older women about their sexual relations, a subject that people did not talk about in former times. An ethnologist can only attempt to grasp what people think in an indirect way, through what they say about their fears, shame or, more often, about the scandals caused by behavior judged to be unsuitable by their entourage. This is why Moulinié paid careful attention to the detailed stories about tragic individual fates that the transgression of implicit social norms were alleged to have entailed and to what these stories, far from being anecdotal, could cast light on. They reveal that late pregnancies are not at all welcome and there is no lack of terms applied to children who arrive several years after their older siblings. If people speak of them in an ironic tone that everyone understands as “a love child”,² they are also and less elegantly said to be “late for dinner!”³ The second expression

² The child of an uncontrolled love, in the physical sense of the term, of course.

³ Several pejorative terms are used for the last-born or ‘accident’. In Occitan, ‘lo gatcha nio’ (the ‘nest-spoiler’), in Provençal, ‘le caganis’ (‘nest-spoiler’) or even the ‘ravisé’ (‘second thought’), the ‘rédo’ (‘here-we-go-again’), the ‘tardillon’ (‘latecomer’), cf. Bessin & Levilain (2005:92).

clearly emphasizes these women's attitude about what they perceive as an anomaly, having either dreaded having or actually having had a late pregnancy at this time of their lives, which flowery medical vocabulary terms "the autumn of life." A woman, whose eldest child was 12, when she realized she was pregnant for the fifth time, complained in these words:

"When I found that out, I cried like a baby. A child every three years! No, it was too much. I didn't know what to do any more. What a shameful thing! Do you realize, twelve years afterwards! What were people going to think of me?"

In this case, the shame of having too large a family⁴ is compounded by the great difference in age between the eldest and the last. Another woman, whose period was late, immediately thought of what she considered to be the "worst":

"I was really worried, believe me. I thought: "This is a pretty state of affairs. What'll I do? And what's more, my oldest son was eighteen at the time. He could almost have been the father. You see what a mess that is."

In this case, the shame could in no case have been associated with being too fertile, since the "eldest" was in fact the couple's only child. He was at an age where he could become a parent himself. This is where the whole problem lies – it is because the children are "already almost grown" ("déjà grandets"), or even young adults, that these pregnancies are seen as shameful. In short, it is not because the mother's body is still fertile that she can continue to have children. An implicit rule dictates that she stop conceiving when her children have grown up.

However, for every rule there is an exception and there are mothers who do not manage to respect it or who do not care to, and continue to procreate when their first child is already grown. The comments on this – made possible by the trusting relations between the ethnologist and her informants – are rife, citing the unusual behavior of members of the families who get everything backwards. In families like these, the transgression of norms is considered to be the root of singular personal fates, sometimes even catastrophic ones. Here are some examples.

Louise, who today is quite elderly, is the head of a very large family that is also very complicated. In private conversation, the members of the village community enjoy attempting to describe the family, obviously wandering around with delight in their genealogical labyrinth, all the better to stigmatize them. One of the women remembers "something that struck me":

⁴ In this area, the trend for over a century has been to limit the number of children in a family.

“When I was in hospital for my first baby, Louise and Claudette, her eldest daughter, were both there: they had both had a baby at the same time. And they left the hospital at the same time, each of them with a baby carriage! You can imagine the shock! Let me see... Yes, Claudette is the oldest girl. It has to be the oldest girl for something like that to happen! I’d never seen anything like that, a mother having a baby at the same time as her daughter. And I wasn’t the only one, because everyone at the hospital was talking about it! So, that means there is an uncle who is older than the nephews. That must be Thierry and Laurent. No, I’m wrong, they’re the uncles! They’re Claudette’s brothers. Unless it’s Eric and Michel. Oh! I don’t know anymore, I can’t keep it straight. You’ve got to admit, that family is really mixed up.”

Forty years later, no one had forgotten about this surprising biological timing between mother and daughter. It is still brought up today as a matter of astonishment, but there is not much more to be said, since Claudette had left the village, thus keeping the details of her private life far from village commentary. The same thing is not true of the younger branch of the same family, the branch that our informant could not keep straight. Valérie, Michel and Eric are Louise’s last three children, who are hardly any older than Thierry and Laurent, two of her grandchildren: “Remember that Bernard, Louise’s son, that is, Claudette’s younger brother, and Sarah, his daughter-in-law, all got married early: they were 16 and 15! They both asked for a dispensation to get married.” Since they lived in the same village and had the same family name, Valérie, Michel, Eric, Thierry and Laurent grew up together, went to the same country school and then were in the same group of teenagers and young adults. Always together, taking part in the same circles of sociability like cousins would. This tangle takes on proportions in the next generation that would hardly escape the critical eye of the spectators. There is not much to say about Thierry, whose life seems to be going along smoothly – a companion his own age and a little boy named Léo – compared with Laurent’s life, which gives rise to endless commentary. His first relationship was mysteriously sterile and they broke up after a dozen years or so. The second time around, it became a focus of astonishment and biting irony: “This time, he can be sure he won’t have any children.” As a matter of fact, Monique, his second companion, is considerably older than he is and already has two children, Nicolas and Anthony, who are hardly any younger than Laurent. That is, Monique belongs to the generation of her parents-in-law, which the observers recall with treacherous glee:

“You can imagine, when Laurent introduced her to his parents! Bernard and Sarah with a daughter-in-law their own age! I don’t know how you can take that! People say Bernard didn’t take it very well in the beginning, he didn’t want to meet her. I can sure understand him.”

Monique, Laurent, Anthony and his companion lived under the same roof for a while:

“Mealtimes must be pretty weird. Imagine, with your father-in-law the same age as you are or almost and so your son-in-law is your age, too. And the daughter-in-law, Anthony’s friend, with a father-in-law and a boyfriend the same age. Frankly, you should have trouble keeping it all straight!”

They did not live under the same roof very long, but village talk found a new object of interest: Monique became a grandmother,⁵ which brought up the question of how Laurent was related to the little girl:

“And the little girl, what’s she going to call Laurent? Grandpa? Thirty-five years old and never had any children, pretty funny business, isn’t it? So, how’s Bernard related to the little girl? Is he her great-grandpa? Things aren’t simple in that family.”

It is all the less simple, since another twist appeared recently. Jessica, Valérie’s daughter, has got a round belly over the last few weeks and she is only eighteen years old.

“And the new baby, how will he be related to the others, Thierry, Léo and the others? In that family, in the same generation, you’ve got several generations. I don’t know how to put it: those people are the same age but they are related differently. In fact, what I mean is, you see, you don’t even know how to say it.”

This kind of imbroglia does make it possible for the older people to explain the unexplainable, that is, the suicide of one of the “young uncles,” Eric:

“When he committed suicide, nobody understood. They said he’d always been depressive, he turned away from everything, he’d never been happy. But why was he that way, nobody could ever explain it. What I think is that it’s because of all that, you see. First of all, there’s got to be a problem in the family because of... I’m not saying they’re all crazy, but they sure don’t have much sense about things. And then, for him, maybe that traumatized him to see the whole family is in a mess. Because, when you’re

⁵ The birth of this granddaughter has even further repercussions, for some people, on the nature and even the meaning of the relationship between Monique and Laurent: “Imagine you end up with a grandmother in your bed. What are you supposed to do? No, a grandmother, can you imagine that? You can always say it doesn’t matter, but it does! She’s a grandmother. For me, that’s really weird! A grandmother!” Lurking behind the metaphorical expression of “sleeping with a grandmother” is the question of the sexuality of grandmothers, of course.

the age of your nephew, your father could be your grandfather, your brother is almost the same age as your father and you see it's all going on like that today, that must work on you. And he cracked. That's what I've always thought. But I'm not a psychiatrist."

Two elements are interwoven in this family history: the problems caused by a highly unusual recombination and the overlap of generations. We can point out a semantic detail of interest here. In French, the term "generation" has a genealogical meaning, on the one hand, referring to the set of relatives belonging to the same degree of kinship: the generation of the parents, the generations of the grandparents, what ethnologists call the "generational level" by numbering them in relation to Ego. However, it also refers to the set of people who are close in age. When I say of a person – who is not in my family – that he or she is in my generation, it is another way of saying that we are about the same age. This also means that people who are in the same kinship degree are about the same age. Nephews and uncles cannot and are not supposed to be the same age!

It is easier to understand the case in another family, where all the children were to be drastically affected:

"You might think it is an accident, but in the J. family, it's kind of the same thing that happened. Because the mother was married twice, she had two children and then she was widowed, and then she had another one at least fifteen years after the first two. And you see what happened."

What happened is that the three boys had unusual or strange experiences in their marriages. The eldest, who was already "traumatized" by the birth of the unexpected little brother, in addition to problems with the inheritance, slipped into being an alcoholic and a tramp. No marriage or children for him. For that matter, he does not seem to have had any romantic attachments. As for his brother, he became an inveterate bachelor, giving up on that lifestyle only when he was in his fifties to marry a girl hardly twenty years old, who had come to work on his farm and had a child by him before asking for a divorce – to marry a man much younger than she was, as people always remembered to remark! As for the youngest boy, the one who brought on all these problems, if you believe our informants, it looked as though he would be spared the unhappy fate of his two half-brothers. He got a good education, had an enviable profession and social status, was married and the father of a child, that is, he led both an ordinary and an ordered life. So his suicide would have appeared unexplainable, except for certain rumors going around: he committed suicide, it was said, to avoid the scandal that discovery of his deviant sexuality would have brought on.

However, the most striking scandal erupted on a different occasion, when part of another family came to attend the wedding of the youngest daughter and learned her mother was pregnant. This was truly a late pregnancy, since the eldest daughter had been married for several years! They had tried to avoid talking about it or had reassured themselves by saying that it was far better to have a birth than a funeral. Still, this news arriving on the wedding day could hardly create an overdose of joy! Our female informants have no words harsh enough to qualify this unacceptable behavior. Some even went so far as to say that, however unfortunate may have been the fact that the baby died at birth, still it brought things back into their natural order, and they felt no compunction at criticizing the mother's expressions of grief. However, there was no return to the normal order of things. The disastrous repercussions of a late pregnancy were soon to follow: the eldest daughter, wed just before this scandalous announcement, had to wait into her forties before becoming a mother herself, and only because of an in vitro fertilization. Her younger sister, victim of this unfortunate overlap in biological timing, never had children and was even more sterile than her sister, as people said "for her, they couldn't even do an IVF! It wouldn't have worked!"

In still another family, there is no story of suspicious suicide or of a woman's body that refuses fertility, but once again, a tale of overlapping generations. There is nothing but the avoidance of discussion ("non-dit") and the silence that attempts to cover this over. Nathalie and Pascal got married very young and had a daughter, Karine, then separated. People talked very little about the father, who went on quickly to another partner and had children. The opposite was the case for the lives of the daughter and her mother, which were strictly parallel. After staying single for a long time, Nathalie remarried when she was approaching her forties and had two children. Somewhat before that, Karine was also married and had children, so that the mother had a baby after her daughter, becoming a grandmother before being a mother again and the uncles are younger than their niece. This made for an uncomfortable situation for the actors in the story, who could only get around it all through a terminological manipulation:

"Nathalie didn't like it at all for Karine to have children at the same time she did! She thought Karine was too young! And you know what she said? She decided that no one would call her "Granny". She forbid them to and told them she wouldn't answer, if they called her that. She makes them call her "Nanou" and nothing but that. For the time being, it's all right, the little ones can't talk yet."

Without consciously claiming to do so, at least overtly, Nathalie has proceeded to a profound revision of the family architecture, subjecting it to some sleight of hand by replacing “Granny” with “Nanou”, which does not indicate any particular place in the succession of generations, but makes one of them disappear: her own, as grandmother. It is more of a displacement than a disappearance. The status of grandmother henceforth falls upon the biological great-grandmother, with Nathalie putting herself in the same rank as Karine, as if they were sisters or almost!

All four of these stories say the same thing. Generations should be clearly separated and homogenous insofar as the age of their members is concerned. It is unthinkable for them to overlap. Each of them should have children at the right time, neither too early, nor too late. This representation might appear surprising in light of a cultural context that formerly was familiar with the overlap of generations due to relatively frequent remarriage of widowers and widows (Le Bras 1982). However, being widowed became less frequent in the course of the nineteenth and, even more, the twentieth century, due to the decrease in mortality rates: the same is true of remarriage for the widowed. This means that, for the period our informants speak of, that is, 1950-1980, generational staggering like this also became rarer. Furthermore, this concerns men more than women.⁶ As a matter of fact, remarriage of widows, especially those with children, is far less frequent than for widowers.⁷ Generational overlapping is thus primarily due to men having children late in life. This is the same thing as we see today in recombinant families after divorce (Villeneuve-Gokalp 1994). There is effectively a strong asymmetry between men and women as regards remarriage, to which is added a physiological asymmetry insofar as fertility is concerned. According to statisticians, this means that late pregnancies (at 40 years of age and older) were relatively rare during the 1980s, representing only 1.1% of total births (Daguet 2002).

If generational overlapping due to late fatherhood is not rare, it is above all late motherhood that is avoided, especially for women who already have older children. This is clearly shown by these narratives: a mother is supposed to stop procreating when her own

⁶ In the Bas-Quercy, for example, remarriages represented 16% of all the marriages in the eighteenth century and 13% in the period of 1842-1872. In France, during the years 1951-1952, according to Roland Pressat, “for widows, being older is a clearly unfavorable factor at all periods in life and, from this standpoint, the contrast with widowers is striking. Only 20% of the widows aged 40-44 remarry, this decreases to 3% for the 55-59 age group, while for the same age, 25% of widowers remarry. According to the author, this is due to “the more rapid aging of women [?] and the presence of children to bring up.” See *Population*, 1956, 11 (1):52-53.

⁷ For the period 1842-1872 in the Bas-Quercy, remarriage in the civil registry stands at 11.3% for men and 4.4% for women, with the proportion of remarriage for widows with children is even less. In France, between 1901 and 1980, late pregnancies (40 years of age and older) went from 6.5% to 1.1% of the total number of births.

children are of an age to do so. This is another way of saying that there was a transgression of a taboo that can be summed up as: a grandmother cannot become a mother again, or, put another way, genetic power cannot be held at the same time by two successive generations.

This formulation is based on the work of Africanist ethnologists and demographers who had already pointed out the importance and logic of this prohibition some years ago.

On this prohibition in some African societies

In a ground-breaking article published in 1978, the English anthropologist Meyer Fortes analyzed the nature of the antagonism opposing fathers and their firstborn sons, mothers and their firstborn daughters, on the basis of his own observations among the Tallensi in northern Ghana. There, the firstborn son must not eat out of the same plate as his father in order to avoid either one of them bringing bad luck to the other, even inadvertently. Similarly, the firstborn son must never wear the hat or the tunic of his father, use his bow and arrows, symbols of his virility, or look into his granary. These prohibitions are lifted clearly and explicitly the day of the father's funeral and take on all their meaning, when placed in relationship with the indigenous theory of the person. Since these paternal goods are supposed to be imbued with the person of their owner, the firstborn would be transgressing these rules and so suspected of wanting to usurp his father's status and even of attempting to take over a part of his person, thus shortening his life. In this society, it is said that the souls and fate of the father and firstborn son are engaged in a struggle throughout their lives, because the growing physical vitality and virility of the son inexorably entail the decline of those qualities in the father. According to Fortes, the process is seen in these societies as if there were only a set quantity of vital force, so that one must sacrifice one's own vitality until one's physical death in order to insure the succession of the following generation. If these prohibitions apply only to the firstborn and not the younger children, Fortes explains, it is because their birth is the event which projects their parents into a new status, that of father and mother, thus inaugurating a new generation. In other populations, in order to defuse the latent conflict between father and firstborn son, the latter is sent to live with his maternal grandparents for some years. Fortes also cites other examples observed in African societies that are different from these regarding their kinship systems, and social, economic and political organization,

which implies the broad applicability of this representation of the succession of generations. He adds that this is likewise the case in other societies around the world.⁸

As regards women, Fortes notes only, as is unfortunately so often the case in ethnological inquiries, that although he has provided the details of what takes place for men, he “must emphasize the fact that parallel rules apply to mothers and their firstborn daughters” (1978:134). Speaking of the Gonja of Ghana, he adds an interesting point, that is, that “a mother must stop having children when her daughter has her first baby, as if the fecundity of the daughter was “gained” at the expense of the mother’s fertility (*ibid*:137).

In an article about fertility and sterility in Africa that appeared in 1986, Françoise Héritier takes up Fortes’ conclusions in this fashion:

“The vital force of the son comes from the decline of that of the father, the fecundity of the daughter from the decline of the mother’s. It is not possible to mix generations in this role without signifying consent to that transfer, nor letting the rising generation enter without a minimum of precautions into the roles and functions of the outgoing generation, nor to allow the outgoing generation to hold a monopoly over these rights. In a certain sense, it is essential that none of the parties involved “overtake” the other, “cut across the path” of the other, “cross” or “straddle” it, “pass before him” or “take away” his share – all metaphorical expressions utilized in ethnographic reports” (1986:140).

It is neither our intention nor within our competence to make a systematic inquiry on Africanist ethnology, but it appears that few investigations have really focused on the end of the period of women’s fertility. In a more general way, in fact, Odile Journet and André Julliard have observed that Africanist research “dedicated to age, relations between elder and younger, and to primogeniture, hardly speaks of women” (1994:192). In the case of women, although passage into the age of a “woman” and initiation at puberty have been widely described and analyzed in a wealth of detail, the “change of life” has only been dealt with elliptically. A particular fact has essentially attracted the attention of observers and ethnologists, as summed up by Chantal Collard:

“The female cycle is also marked by menopause that carries women into the category of “women made men” and here, what women lose in fecundity, they gain in socio-political power” (1985:205).

Or, to cite Odile Journet and André Juillard:

⁸ In Oceania, Asia, and particularly in China. Cf. Meyer Fortes (1978:131-132)

“[...] although an “older” women is not actually assumed to symbolically change sex, she often appears to gain considerably in familial and social influence, thus more broadly taking on the prerogatives reserved to men” (1994:193).

From this point on, it is common to enumerate everything that was heretofore prohibited to women that had been the realm of men and which women now enter without limit. Regarding menopause, what is emphasized is its politico-social aspects, those that relate to public space, while the private sphere, and even more that of sexual practices, is never or rarely spoken of. Of course, we can cite the difficulties of making inquiries on the subject. However, in the interviews Jeanne-Françoise Vincent made with Beti women in Cameroon, the latter spontaneously engage in conversation without inhibition about the issue of sexuality at the approach of menopause. All these women agree: menopause means the halt to sexual relations on the initiative of women (Vincent 2003:128-132). Hence, this research area seems wide open for exploration of an issue that has thus far largely been neglected. Oddly enough, ethnologists’ interest has been attracted less by the reasons for stopping sexual relations than by the consequences for the social relations between men and women:

“The arrival of menopause for women – whose will is hard to impose in other domains – signals arrival of the means to impose upon men “no longer to be used” and thus an opportunity for women to lead their own lives. This new period is conceived of as a step ahead because, according to Beti women, the end of menstruation is a sign of access to a superior status: a woman in menopause is freed from submission to men and has become their equal [...] (*Ibid*:131).

Obviously, the sexuality of aging women has hardly attracted attention and the curtain rose only to fall as quickly!

Of course, we can deplore this silence, but we can also endeavor to explain it. If observers and ethnologists, for the most part Occidental, did not judge it useful to dedicate longer examination to what they observed about the practices relating to sexuality and surrounding this “change of life”, might it not simply have been because they appeared “obvious,” “ordinary,” “normal,” and even “natural”? Might we not put forward the hypothesis that, being themselves imbued with the idea that the end of menstruation is necessarily accompanied by the end of sexual activity and that the birth of grandchildren also means that the grandparents will give up on becoming parents again, observers spontaneously recognized in Africa what they were already familiar with in Europe and hence did not perceive it as an object of anthropological inquiry that was “good to think with” (“bon à

penser”)?⁹ Thus, they were not receptive to the fact that this prohibition concerned women who were still relatively young for our Western societies.

Whatever may be the reasons, we have not found any synthesis of work devoted to the question, even if interesting observations are to be found in many monographs, as Chantal Collard mentions for the Guidar in Cameroon:

“[...] succession from mother to daughter takes place in two stages. As soon as the daughter is pregnant, the mother must stop conceiving. Mothers and daughters must not give birth at the same time and, if the mother were to do so, she might endanger her own daughter. For the same reason, the mother cannot be present when her daughter gives birth. She can come to help her, but only afterwards” (1985:205).

It is regrettable that we do not know more about the “danger” this creates for the daughter. However, we might note that although the woman in her role as “mother” cannot be present at delivery of her daughter’s baby, still she can act once the child is born, that is, once she has become a grandmother. In this particular society, prohibition on sexual relations is so strong that, if it is transgressed, it suffices to undo matrimonial ties:

“It is interesting to note that several Guidar women told me they had left a husband because he wanted to make them sleep with him when they were already old; unfortunately, I did not ask them to be clearer about what they meant by “old” (*id*).

This last remark about regret is full of meaning. What is this old age, which prohibits sexual relations? How are we to date it?¹⁰ Does it coincide with the end of menstruation? Or with something else?

“The cycle of generational replacement among women is based more on the biological maturity of the daughter than on the mother: in fact, the mother’s period of fecundity can be considerably shortened, if her firstborn is a girl, if the child survives to adulthood, if she marries young and conceives early (NB the average age of girls at their first marriage is 17)” (*ibid*:206).

⁹ Inquiries into sexual activity in the West effectively indicate that into the 1970s, sexual relations in couples generally ceased with the arrival of women’s menopause. All the more so in that their relative frequency today after the age of 50 has been pointed out as a revolution, cf. Delbès & Gaymu (1997); as for the social character of “menopause” in our societies, cf. Véronique Moulinié’s bibliography (1998, 2000, 2005).

¹⁰ This question is at the heart of Caroline H. Bledsoe’s work, *Contingent Lives. Fertility, Time and Aging in West Africa* (2002). On the basis of fieldwork carried out in 40 villages in Gambia in 1992-1995, the author demonstrates that women declare themselves to be old, not in reference to a chronological age, but according to their perception of their general physiological state, which closely depends on the conditions of their past procreative career, in such a way that, at an equal age (35-39, for example), some of them feel they are fit to continue reproducing while others think they are too old to do so: “Menopause is not the cause of a halt to fecundity; it is the result, to some extent. Reproduction, by diminishing corporeal resources and making the body older, can bring menopause on” (*ibid*:213)

So, it is possible to be a grandmother at 35-36 years of age, quite far from physiological menopause. We can understand, as Chantal Collard notes, “that there is some tension between mother and daughter at the time of the latter’s wedding, whereas before that, the mother-daughter relationship was quite close” (*ibid*:205). In this system, it is not the mother who cedes her place to her daughter, insofar as fecundity is concerned; Rather, it is the destiny of the daughter to decide the fate of her mother, since the daughter pushes her mother towards the exit, so to speak.

In her outstanding monograph on the Meru of Kenya,¹¹ Anne-Marie Peatrik links the prohibition affecting mothers with the generational organization of this society and its specific relationship to time. In this case and on the contrary to the Guidar girls, it is not their age at puberty that determines their initiation and the social menopause of their mothers:

“Initiation is undertaken after puberty, as of about seventeen and until twenty-five, even older. Such delays, which particularly affect the eldest daughter, can be explained by the consequences of her initiation on her parents, because, like that of boys, the eldest girl’s initiation means that her parents must stop procreating” (1999:52).

She adds:

“Over and above any generational system [...], there is a model of the person according to which there is a time for procreating: everyone takes on this duty in turn when their age class arrives in this category *ad hoc* [...]. The model for the time for procreating corresponds to practices signaling both the entry into the period of fertility as well as the end of this phase, and these practices reinforce the prohibition or strict disapproval of conceiving outside these time limits. These limits on procreation, thus set in time, are not directly related to the development of the body, even though they depend upon it in one way or another” (1999:484).

Among the Beti, the Meru and the Guidar, who are concerned not to let generations overlap, parents thus cease sexual relations when their children are old enough to reproduce. And what more effective means might there be, in the absence of modern contraception, than abstinence? However, we may well ask the following question: is this abstinence as strongly upheld in practice as in discourse? Does this unanimity not refer to a code of right conduct, which can be handled with some freedom in real life? Ethnologists are used to this kind of gap between words and practices. On this point, the contribution of demographers about the fecundity of African women is especially valuable: scientists are interested within the

¹¹ We thank her for the bibliographical references to Africanist ethnology that she kindly provided to us.

framework of their own discipline's perspectives, that is, as regards the impact of traditional and modern ways of controlling fertility. Among the traditional limits on fertility, they have attempted to measure the effects of a halt to sexual relations in two situations: in the postnatal period and in the so-called "terminal" period. The first concerns sexual abstinence (from six months to a year among the Yoruba, for example) following the period of lactation, which is itself long, a period deemed to be necessary to restore the complete procreative health of the mother. This is thus added to a period of amenorrhea usually coinciding with breast-feeding. "Terminal" abstinence in conjugal relations concerns older women. The statistical inquiries carried out by John and Pat Caldwell among Yoruba women in Nigeria show that, in the city of Ibadan in 1974-1975, 55% of women aged 40 to 44 no longer have sexual relations and that this percentage rises to 70% for those 45 to 49 years old.¹² In rural areas, women are affected by this final cut-off in marital sexual relations as early as 35 years of age. Women interviewed about the reasons for this abstinence mention the fact that they are too old or do not want any more children. However, the major factor, according to authors, is that they have become grandmothers and reports explain it in these terms:

"In traditional Yoruba society, women are expected to have very strong relationships with their grandchildren, as close as with their own children, and these women would run the risk of being compromised by competition from their own children of the same age. The only way to insure family stability is for grandmothers to abstain from all sexual relations..." (Caldwell 1977:200).

These authors do not give any further information and do not refer to ethnologists' work to lend meaning to their observations, but their statistical results are valuable in light of how rare inquiries into the sexual activity of women are. Among women 40 to 44 years of age who were not yet grandmothers, three quarters of them continued to have sexual relations, as opposed to the quarter who had become grandmothers. The authors conclude that "2/3 of conjugal abstinence among grandmothers is directly associated with their status as grandmothers, which amounts to a considerable proportion, when we recall that most Nigerian women become grandmothers around 43-44 years of age and that over three quarters of them are grandmothers at 50" (*id.*). One result of this inquiry should be noted for its research implications for our own societies: the decision about stopping conjugal relations

¹² The statistical enquiry carried out by John and Pat Caldwell in 1974 and 1975 included 420 Yoruba women, of whom 280 were in a rural area and 140 in the city of Ibadan, among the latter of whom, 70 were poor and 70 were better off.

was made by the wives in 59% of cases, by their husbands in 27% and by wife and husband together in 14% (*ibid.*:201).

Although the close relationship between grandmothers and grandchildren is a phenomenon well-known to Africanist ethnologists (recalled by Fortes, for that matter), the two demographers highlight the rivalry between children and not that between mothers and daughters. In this sense, they stick closely to what women say about believing that they cannot carry out their function as mother and grandmother at the same time, as is also emphasized by recent research by Africanist ethnologists.¹³ Paul Wenzel Geissler and Ruth Prince, who carefully studied the close relationship between grandmothers and grandchildren in western Kenya, note that a woman having sexual relations cannot hold on her lap, feed and care for a grandchild, nor can she sleep with the child, without having him run the risk of contracting a serious illness. Here, the authors cite a boy born while his mother was in middle school. Although his maternal grandmother was still of a reproductive age, she decided to stop sexual relations with her husband and become “old” in order to take care of her grandson (Wenzel Geissler & Prince 2004).

Although the research by demographers appears often not to be informed by that of ethnologists, the latter now seem to be aware of the impact of what Africanist demographers have termed the “grandmother’s effect” or “grandmother rule”.¹⁴ Does what has been observed in various African societies, and measured in the Yoruba area, exist in our own societies? Are we capable of measuring it?

Feminine fertility between demography and anthropology

This question would entail pursuing the dialogue between historical anthropology and historical demography, a dialogue that both goes back a long way and is especially rich in France, most particularly in the analysis of female fertility. We can provide a general outline here.

From the 1960s to the 1980s, the refinement of techniques to effectively carry out serial analyses on parish registries and civil status records by Louis Henry, a demographer at the INED (Institut National d’Etudes Démographiques), made possible the development of a French historical demography that, within the space of a few years, was to revolutionize the field of studies of movements in earlier populations, thanks to statistical analysis of the major

¹³ See most particularly the fascinating issue of *Africa* (2004, 74) focusing on grandparents (especially grandmothers) and their grandchildren.

¹⁴ According to note 12 in Anne-Marie Peatrik’s article “La règle et le nombre” in *L’Homme*, 1995, 134 :36.

life-cycle events such as births, marriages and deaths. Reconstitution of families by analyzing the files on women's marriages enables us to attribute each birth to a married woman and to calculate the fertility rate by age, which provides information for the first time on the fertility rates in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In order to analyze them, demographic historians enlist the life sciences¹⁵ on the one hand, and anthropology on the other, but most frequently the two together. In fact, female fertility is not strictly a natural fact, since it does not depend solely on physiological age at puberty and menopause, but on marriage, which, in the majority of cases, provides the strict framework within which fertility operates, most especially in a Christian society with strong disapproval of sexual relations outside marriage. Among people who do not practice contraception, fertility depends on age at marriage, which is known to have been late under the Old Regime, since girls wed on average between 24 and 25 years of age in the eighteenth century. It is also linked to an ensemble of cultural representations of children, how they are fed and grow, of the female body, of relations between the sexes and of sexuality. Hence, the customary length of time breast-feeding lasts tends to space out births, due to the amenorrhea that generally goes along with it. However, fertility also depends on the frequency of sexual relations and the control over their fecundating power. Much interest was devoted to dating, measuring and analyzing contraception in relation to social groups, regions, place of residence or religious affiliation.

The methods utilized in birth control have also been a matter of speculation: withdrawal (coitus interruptus), conjugal abstinence and abortion. In regard to some points concerning the representations of female and male sexuality and specific beliefs attached to them, demographic historians have also willingly turned to anthropology, deemed more able to respond to some unanswered questions. This was the case for relations among young people, which the historian Jean-Louis Flandrin suggested were not chaste for the most part, based on nineteenth-century ethnographers' work describing "courting" customs that were fairly free among young people, quite in contradiction with the Christian rule of female virginity before marriage (see Flandrin 1975). Highly familiar with ethnological work and convinced that young people are inventive, Flandrin upheld the idea that sexual relations were probably fairly

¹⁵ Life sciences (biology, medicine) make it possible to explain the decline in fertility with the age of mothers (a well-known phenomenon and measured by contemporary demography), but also elucidate the lesser fertility of young women, termed "relative sterility of 'adolescents'", which is generally linked to the time lapse between their puberty and their first pregnancies (for age at puberty in the past, cf. Edward Shorter [1984]). The seasonal shifts in conceptions among populations with no contraception practices and the characteristic rise in the spring remains more mysterious. Life sciences also enable us to examine the relationship between amenorrhea and breast-feeding and thus to explain the intergenerational intervals in societies where women breast-feed longer.

frequent before marriage and that the youngsters knew how to make sure they did not lead to pregnancy. This idea was contested by Jacques Dupâquier and Pierre Chaunu, demographic historians, who were basing their arguments on the relatively low number of premarital conceptions and illegitimate births.¹⁶ Another area propitious to dialogue was the study of methods and frequency of abortions in the nineteenth century. Lawsuits concerning abortion effectively provide a particularly rich source in the record of the accuseds' statements to their judges. How do women explain not having their period, a fact noticed by their entourage and making them suspected of being pregnant? And then, the sudden return of their menstrual cycles? Compared with the testimony of older women that it was still possible to record in the 1970s, these statements enable historical anthropologists to see how coherent knowledge of the body and female physiology was among women but also among their doctors. This is also elucidating for practices and the history of the repression of abortion (Fine 1986).

Demographers and historians have also debated the relations between intervals between births, maternal breast-feeding and child mortality. On this point, their work has been inspired in part by that of contemporary Africanists who have shown that the interval between births is linked to sexual taboos during maternal breast-feeding. Might European women in past centuries also have been concerned by this prohibition? That hypothesis was rapidly set aside, since many sources and above all a statistical fact tend to prove the contrary: the shortening of the intergenetic interval after the death of an infant. Was it the death of the breast-fed child that led to the return of the menstrual cycle and thus to the mother's fertility, increasing the risk of a new conception? Or was it the other way around, conception of another child leading to a woman stopping breast-feeding, thus a sudden weaning of the infant which could entail an increased risk it would die? This second hypothesis supposes that the couple concerned continued to have sexual relations and that when women realized they were pregnant, they stopped breast-feeding. If this was indeed the case, what could have been the reasons? An appeal to anthropology (direct inquiries, medical sources...) makes it possible to reply to this question. This analysis is based on knowledge shared by the women interviewed, but also by their doctors, about female physiology, maternal milk, periods and pregnancies. It turns out that women did immediately wean their infants, when they discovered they were pregnant, since they were convinced they were "poisoning" them with their milk.¹⁷

¹⁶ See especially Jean-Pierre Barder & Jacques Dupâquier (1981).

¹⁷ According to narratives recorded by ethnologists, there were three sorts of circumstances that were supposed to cause the metamorphosis of good milk into poison : strong emotions (fear, anger, sorrow), some physical shock (heat or cold), and another pregnancy or the return of menstruation, each of these phenomena indicated by

In the 1980s, the history of families took up the subject of fertility, which enabled demographic historians to take inspiration from anthropologists' work on household groups in order to make their own inquiries (Bourdelaïs & Gourdon 2000). Today, the interest in individuals seen in their demographic, social, cultural or economic environment has enabled research highlighting the relations between generations, the behavior of couples and women's attitudes (Lorenzetti & Neven 2000). For example, what kind of sexual behavior is seen in the face of demographic events? Do they not affect decisions that individuals make about the number of children and the frequency of births in the family? People's lives do not follow some straight line, but more often a zig-zagging one. Does this not have repercussions on fertility? Individual lives within a family are punctuated by crucial times such as one's own marriage, of course, but also the marriage of one's children, the death of parents and parents-in-law. Thus, comparing life cycles and the fertility of married women is at the heart of our research and converges with present-day orientations in historical demography.

Here, we must note an obvious point: the question of later pregnancies has not aroused much interest on the part of demographic historians. They calculated the average age of women at their last pregnancy with the sole intention of measuring, in a synthetic manner and for a given population, the progression of voluntary birth control. Lowering of this average age is interpreted as a sign that couples are using birth control, not only by spacing out pregnancies, but also by stopping procreation when they have as many children as they want. No one has taken an interest in the broader fabric of family relations affecting the end of women's reproductive life.

Consequently, it appeared possible for us to attempt a statistical measurement of the behavior of couples regarding fertility when women had a daughter old enough to reproduce. This is why Jean-Claude Sangoï, a demographic historian, assisted by Nadège Fabre, re-examined in this light family records he had previously utilized in order to respond to the classical questions in his field. What did they discover?

Measuring a prohibition

a caloric transformation of the blood that "boils" or "freezes". In short the immediate effect is to make milk go off. The sources utilized here are direct inquiries with women in the Pays de Sault (Pyrénées audoises, an area east of the city of Foix in the southwest), who told about their mothers' and their own breast-feeding during the 1930s and 1940s, as well as testimony from medical dissertations, medical dictionaries or folklore inquiries about milk and breast-feeding. See the article by Agnès Fine in *Annales de démographie historique* (1994) as well as the bibliography cited.

This research work concerns two areas in southwestern France, one in the Pyrenees and the other in the Quercy. They are part of a larger region that is highly varied in many ways, but with the point in common – aside from the language (Occitan) spoken there – of the predominance of small-holding agriculture based on the framework of the *ostal* house.¹⁸ In this system, the domestic group, constituted on the basis of intergenerational residence, is rooted in a dwelling transmitted with the real estate heritage, ideally from father to eldest son, with the younger children being given an endowment and having to leave in order to marry.¹⁹ The inheritor marries a younger daughter, stays on in the parental residence and insures the social reproduction of the household. This system suffered from establishment by the Civil Code of egalitarian successoral division, but managed to survive throughout the nineteenth century, the chronological basis for the study. This is the century of a transition in which the hill-lands of the Bas-Quercy practiced voluntary birth control that was attested as early as the end of the eighteenth century, whereas the Pyrenean countryside did not participate in this until the mid-nineteenth century. The fertility study was carried out on the basis of Louis Henry's method for reconstituting families, mentioned above. This provided us with files that we could search from a perspective proposed by ethnologists. Our main question was formulated in this way: do women less than 50 years of age²⁰ have the same fertility at 40-49, as women whose child marries when they are in their fifties? Put in another way, does marriage of the daughter or arrival of a daughter-in-law put a halt to these women's fertility?

How were we to proceed? It was indispensable to set out a genealogy by crossing the parents family file with that of the married children. Only the MD-type (marriage date + death of a spouse date) family files were utilized.²¹ This applies to post-marital conceptions, that is, births that occur at least 8 months after the wedding is celebrated.

There is also the question of whether the marriage is the first among the siblings. Weddings can be celebrated in another place and thus not be retrievable for the family reconstitutions. The best solution would be to consider only families for whom the marriage

¹⁸ The study concerns the Bas-Quercy (1751-1872), the Pays cordais northwest of the Tarn (1793-1913), the Haut-Comminges (or French Val d'Aran) between 1793 and 1900 and the Luchon valley. The works referred to are by Estoup (2002), Fabre (2003), Sangoï (1985) and Torres Pradayrol (2003).

¹⁹ However, in the Haut-Comminges, when inheritance is preciputary, it lends no systematic advantage to the eldest son (cf. work by Michel Bayard, 2005).

²⁰ Demographers take as a convention that, after a woman's 50th birthday, she can no longer hope to give birth (as exceptions to this are negligible statistically speaking).

²¹ The MD (MF in French) files concern couples for whom the marriage date (M) is known as well as the death date (F = 'fin'; i.e. D = date of death of one of the spouses). This method has the disadvantage that only sedentary families are taken into account. However, in the Southwest, the household system supposes sedentarity, at least of the elder children.

dates of each child are known, but this would involve eliminating too many and the results would suffer from narrowing the eligible information to this extent. More pragmatically, we take into consideration the mothers for whom at least one of whose children married before the mother was 50. So, how many mothers have a child that marries before the mother reaches the age of fifty and how many marry after the mother is fifty?

Table 1 – Distribution by age of mothers one of whose children is married²²

Age of mothers when they married	Mothers with one child who married before the mother was 50 (absolute number)	Mothers with one child who married after the mother was 50 (absolute number)
Before 15 years of age	14	5
15 – 19 years	135	93
20 – 24 years	287	402
25 – 29 years	54	385
All together	490	885

Only one third of the files can be utilized, since 64.4% of mothers were already in menopause when one of their children first married. As a general rule, it appears that a child marries when the mother is no longer fertile.

Distribution by age group at marriage varies from one female population to another. For example, 30% of mothers, with a child who married before the mother was 50, were themselves married before the age of 20, whereas the percentage is 11% for women with one child who married after they were 50. Likewise, 11% of the mothers married between the ages of 25 and 29 have a child who marries before the mothers reach 50. Thus, the earlier a woman marries, the greater her chances are of having a child that marries before she is 50.

Does birth rank influence the marriage sequence among siblings? Does the eldest child usually marry first? In 81% of the 490 cases examined, marriage takes place in the order of birth. In households with girls only, the inheriting daughter usually takes the nuptial path first in 34 out of 37 cases, that is, 92%.

²² Mothers who got married at 30 or later are not counted, because none of them had children who married before the mothers reached the age of 50.

There is another criterion to be considered and that is the sex of the children. All the studies indicate that the girls marry on average younger than the boys.²³ Thus, younger daughters may marry before their older brother, and in the Bas-Quercy *ostals* with children of both sexes, the male heir is married first in 24 out of 35 cases, that is, 69%. Hence, a woman who married young and had daughters first is highly likely to see her eldest daughter marry before she herself reaches menopause.

The main question is thus whether the daughter's marriage or the arrival of a daughter-in-law puts a halt to the mother's fertility. In order to reply, it suffices to consult the family files and check whether the mother gives birth after the 9-month interval following the wedding of one of her children.

Table 2 – Age groups and fertility of mothers with a child who married before the mother was 50 (absolute numbers)

Age of mother at child's marriage	Son		Daughter		Total	
	a*	b*	a*	b*	a*	b*
35-39 years	2	0	20	4	22	4
40-44 years	17	0	106	6	123	6
45-49 years	82	1	251	1	333	2
Total	101	1	377	11	478	12

*a mothers who do not give birth after their child's marriage.

*b : mothers who give birth after their child's marriage

The women not yet in menopause see their children marry when they are 45.7 years old on average, at 45.4 for daughters and 46.5 for sons. Non-menopausal women whose children marry are usually at the end of their reproductive lives: 26 women (5.3%) are at least 40, 129 (26.3%) are between 40 and 44, and 335 (68.4%) are over 44.

²³ In the Bas-Quercy between 1816 and 1872, age at first marriage is as high as 28.6 years old for sons and 25.1 for daughters, that is, a gap of 3.5 years.

Only a minority of these women give birth themselves when their children have married. Out of 490 women, only 12 (2.4%) reproduce after the marriage of their own children. Very few women have children at the same time as their own offspring do. The older generation hands over fertility to the younger one and thus fertility flows from generation to generation.

Nonetheless, there are some regional variations. In the Pyrenees, 7 women out of 156 (4.5%) have a child after their own daughter has married. In the hill country, only 5 women out of 334 (1.5%) continue to reproduce. This distinct difference might be due to voluntary birth control ordinarily practiced in the hill country, though this is more rare in the mountains.

Does a mother transmit her fertility more readily to her own daughter than to her daughter-in-law? Mothers continue to reproduce in 2.8% of cases when their daughters are married, as compared with less than 1% when it is the son who has married, a difference that is related to the fact already mentioned above, that mothers are older, as a rule, at the time their sons marry and the latter marry somewhat later, in the majority.

Do mothers go on reproducing after the heir (male or female) marries? May two women belonging to two different generations share the powers of fertility in a household? Out of 95 cases observed,²⁴ no mother has a baby after the heir marries, so two generations living under the same roof cannot have children at the same time. In the *ostal*, the mother gives up her power to reproduce in favor of her daughter or daughter-in-law.

Comparing the fertility of women whose children marry before the mother is 50 with those whose children marry after she is 50 enables us to verify this result.

Table 3 – Age of mother at marriage and age of mother (less than 50 years old) when her child marries (absolute numbers)

Age of mother at marriage	Age of mother at marriage of her child		
	35-39 years old	40-44 years old	45-49 years old
Before 15 years of age	4	5	5
15-19 years	16	48	71

²⁴ Nominative lists were only found for the Pays cordais and the Bas-Quercy. The name of the heir is known in 72 cases for the Bas-Quercy and in 23 for the Pays cordais.

20-24 years	6	71	210
25-29 years	0	4	50
Together	26	128	336

This double-entry table shows the age of the mother at marriage and her age when her child marries. For example, 16 women who married between the ages of 15 and 19 have children who get married when the mother is between 35 and 39.

Several conditions have to be met for a woman to have children who marry before the end of her own reproductive life. She must get married before she is thirty, have children quickly and have at least one child who gets married young. If these criteria are all satisfied, then the mother's fertility will come up against that of her daughter or daughter-in-law.

Table 4 – Comparative fertility rate (in %)²⁵

Age of mother when her child marries	Age of mother						
	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49
Before 50 years (490 cases)	349	384	294	207	130	56	6
After 50 years (885 cases)	340	373	367	295	220	96	16

The two groups observed shared a low fertility rate. For each of them, the rate decreases regularly after a slight increase at 20-24 years of age, the time of greatest fertility.

²⁵ For a given age group, the fertility rate is calculated by dividing the number of births in the group by the number of total years that the women studied spent in the group. It suffices to multiply the result by 1000 to have the rate. For example, in this table, 1000 women whose 20-to-24-year-old children married before their mothers were 50 years old, have 384 children per year.

Table 5 – Complete descent group²⁶

Age at marriage of mother	Mother with a child who marries before she is 50	Mother with a child who marries after she is 50
15 – 19 years	6.26	7.69
20 – 24 years	4.43	5.90
25 – 29 years	2.73	4.05
30 – 34 years	1.48	2.40
35 – 39 years	0.64	1.11

Women whose children marry before their mother is 50 have a much smaller descent group. Considering that the two groups get married on average at age 25, calculation of the complete descent group indicates 3.32 children for women whose children marry before they are out of their forties and 4.79 children for the others.²⁷ From 30 years on, the fertility of women whose children did not get married before their mothers reached their fifties is constantly higher.

Another approach consists in calculating the average number of children that these 490 women aged less than 50, when their children married, had after the marriage of their children. This amounts to 43.3 children.²⁸ If they had had the same fertility as women whose

²⁶ The calculation method used was set out by Louis Henry, who considered that a woman who gets married in an age group marries on average in the middle of the age group. Thus, the complete descent group of women married at 15-19 years of age is $(2.5 \times 0.349) + 5 \times 0.384 + (5 \times 0.294) + (5 \times 0.207) + (5 \times 0.130) + (5 \times 0.056) + (5 \times 0.006) = 6.26$. The result indicates the number of children each woman would have in her fertile lifetime when no children die.

²⁷ In the Bas-Quercy from 1793 to 1872, the average age for the first marriage of girls was 26.2.

²⁸ It suffices to calculate the complete descent group of women after the marriage of their children.

26 women have children who marry at 35-39: their complete descent group is $(2.5 \times 0.13) + (5 \times 0.056) + (5 \times 0.006) = 0.635$ per woman. Thus, these 26 women have 16.51 children.

128 women have children who marry at 40-44: for each of them, the complete descent group amounts to $(2.5 \times 0.056) + (5 \times 0.006) = 0.17$. These 128 women consequently have 21.76 children.

336 women have children who marry at 45-49, that is, a complete descent group of $(2.5 \times 0.006) = 0.015$ per woman. The total for these 336 women is 5.04 children.

To sum up, these 490 women have 4,331 children, or 0.09 children per woman.

children marry after their mothers are 49, they would have had 83.3 children. The difference is significant.

The Southwest is not a homogenous ensemble, as is shown by the following tables:

Table 6 – Fertility rate and complete descent group for women whose children marry after their mothers are 50

	Age of the mother							
	15-19 years	20-24 years	25-29 years	30-34 years	35-39 years	40-44 years	45-49 years	Complete descent group ²⁹
Pyrenees (156 cases)	300	470	298	231	155	90	15	7.05
Southwest Hill Country (334 cases)	349	361	293	194	116	42	2	5.91

The limited numbers of the population involved calls for caution here. In all cases, the complete descent group is larger in the Pyrenees, a region where fertility is less controlled.

For a woman whose child marries before she is 50, the complete descent group from 35 years of age on is 0.91 children in the Pyrenees and 0.51 in the hill country. For women over 49 at the marriage of their children, the complete descent group amounts to 1.46 children in the mountains and 0.96 in the hill country.

Table 7 – Fertility rate and final descent group for women whose children marry before they are 50

	Age of the mother							
	15-19 years	20-24 years	25-29 years	30-34 years	35-39 years	40-44 years	45-49 years	Complete descent group
Pyrenees (156 cases)	208	344	376	317	235	144	31	7.76

²⁹ According to the calculation hypothesis indicated in note 25.

Southwest Hill Country (334 cases)	390	382	361	283	214	72	12	7.60
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Women in the Pyrenees still have more children than the others. Mothers who see their children married before they themselves are 50 are still less fertile, but the difference between these two sub-groups is higher in the hill country (1.69 children compared with 0.71 in the mountains). Prohibition on the mother reproducing when her child has married is thus all the more respected when birth control is known in the group concerned.

In the great majority of cases, marriage of a child thus marks a turning point in the fertile lifetime of a woman. Is this the time for a mother to transmit the torch of reproduction to a younger woman? The marriage of a child who lives with his or her parents is a highlight of life in the *ostal*, a point that all the historians dealing with the French Southwest agree upon, but our results reinforce this observation. When the heir gets married, the *ostal* is reorganized and the roles are redistributed. Although the daughter or daughter-in-law alone now takes on the power of insuring the descendance of the household, they do not trespass on the domestic power that the mother or mother-in-law continues to hold. Perhaps the elder woman gives up even less to the extent that she hands over the reproductive functions of the household to the younger female. The often bitter rivalry between the two women is played out on another scene, that of access to cooking and the way tasks inside and outside the house are shared out.

Does this break with fertility mean that the older couple will bring sexual relations to a halt? What methods are utilized by the older couple to ensure they do not reproduce? In a society where birth control means were long unreliable, is there anything more effective than not having sexual relations? This hypothesis is probable, when we refer to the information to be gleaned from what older women say today. This is doubtless the point at which an interview reaches its limits, even when the process is based on real confidence between the ethnologist and the informant. Nonetheless, some details enable us to think that sexual abstinence was the regular solution. Some of Véronique Mouliné's informants, who were faced with an undesired late pregnancy, made no secret of the drastic solution they opted for: "I can tell you, I really bawled my husband out, I called him every name you can think of. But I can tell you, after that, I didn't have to worry about getting pregnant" or "I told him he could

go check out our neighbor woman, if he liked”. The ways of saying this are varied and make it possible to explain, without having to say it explicitly, how people settled the matter once and for all! There is a set expression in Occitan to talk discreetly about this death of sexuality: *Aï metut l’esclot dedins lo let!*³⁰ (“I put a wooden shoe in the bed.”) People could put something else in the bed, provided that it stopped the couple from getting together. As early as the seventeenth century, Madame de Sévigné advised her daughter, Madame de Grignan, not to trust simply in separate beds, but to bring a third person into the bedroom (Flandrin 1976:210-211). In the case of the mother of Pierre Rivière, a parricide studied by Michel Foucault, she had brought two people, her son Jules and her daughter Victoire into the marital bed to keep her safe from her husband. (“Moi, Pierre Rivière ayant égorgé ma mère, ma soeur et mon frère...” “I, Pierre Rivière, having cut the throat of my mother, my sister and my brother...” [Rivière 1973:135-136]). Some children were still being offered this form of “hospitality” right into the 1950s. Faced by this fortress or this refusal of sexual relations on the part of his wife, a man had to “put his tools in the attic” (“deposer les outils au galetas”) (Lavigne 1876:372-373).

The statistical difference observed between the Pyrenean mountains and the Bas-Quercy countryside suggests that, in the former, where birth control only came in later, the older couple ceased to have sexual relations after the marriage of their first child, whereas in the Bas-Quercy, withdrawal or coitus interruptus was also practiced, since this is the means that makes control of fertility possible from the very beginning of marriage. In other words, in an area where voluntary birth control had been usual for several decades and familiarity with withdrawal was widespread, it would have been especially shameful for the older couple not to avail themselves of this technique and to have a late pregnancy.

Is this shame due to openly displaying to everyone that, in spite of their age, the older couple continued to have sexual relations, a shame that would especially fall on the husband? As a matter of fact, in the 1930s, people used to say that another baby too close to the first, or especially unwelcome, was a “wedding night baby”, which meant that the drunken husband was not able to master himself! However, associating shame with the weaknesses of the husband or with continuing marital sexuality would be too restrictive a way of interpreting a prohibition that the people directly involved have difficulty speaking about explicitly themselves. It would be wiser to take at her word a mother, recently interviewed by the

³⁰ Phonetic transcription

sociologist Marc Bessin, who had this to say about her desire to have a child with her new husband:

“I thought it was indecent to think about having a baby at my age.. I was 46 [...], I was ashamed, really ashamed [...] I felt like it was indecent, like I was doing something taboo, at a time when I could only be a grandmother, because I could very well have been a grandmother. My first daughter was 22-23 at the time. I really had trouble accepting that.”³¹

She said, in her own way, the same thing as other women interviewed by the same sociologist about their late pregnancies, which they expressed in an embarrassed way: this feeling of shame comes from the fact of transgressing a rule that is as constraining as it is implicit.³²

No one actually states this as such, but this rule, revealed by Yvonne Verdier for our own societies, involves the necessary transmission of the genesic power from mothers to daughters. While listening to the “ways of saying and the ways of doing” of women in Minot in Burgundy, Verdier gave meaning to this by elucidating the significant networks of relationships, especially clustered around the life cycle passages including birth, marriage and death (Verdier 1979). In the case of these women’s destinies, her analysis was enriched by the interpretation of certain popular tales: Little Red Riding Hood takes on a quite special meaning through Verdier’s examination (1980). For those anthropologists who might still doubt the scientific value of an ethnology of symbolics thought to be poorly adapted to analysis of our own societies or suspected of over-interpretation, our statistical research provides a form of proof of the rigorousness of Verdier’s analysis. We can recall the main steps in this here.

Transmission of genesic power

Yvonne Verdier’s analysis

Her ethnological analysis of Minot [the fictional name for a community in Burgundy that was the object of a pioneering study in French ethnology] led Verdier to study three women *passeuses* [people who attend “passings”], who bring their skills to bear in activities such as washing, sewing and cooking in connection with the rites of passage that punctuate

³¹ Interview cited by Marc Bessin (Bessin & Levilain 2005:84). The lady speaking, Joséphine, from the working class and born in 1950, adopted a little girl in 1996.

³² In his study of late pregnancies today, Marc Bessin cites several interviews with women, often of the working class, that mention their shame at being pregnant too late. This is the case of Yvette, a farmer’s wife, or Roberte, a winegrower’s wife who was pregnant at 42 and said she held it against her husband (Bessin & Levilain 2005:90); the same was true of Myriam.

the life cycle of individuals. The washerwomen steps in at births and deaths, the seamstress contributes to “making the young woman” through her sewing skills right up to the time when she dresses the bride, while the cook steps in at another crucial time in a woman’s life, to prepare the wedding feast that marks the entry of women into sexual fertility. The daily cooking duties are themselves strictly bounded: the young woman never undertakes this, nor is she allowed to do so, she must not touch the pots, kettles, ladles and other containers that are entirely the realm of her mother. However, these maternal instruments re-emerge again at the time of the wedding in a highly singular custom. This accompanies the wedding of the last child in the family – though in some areas, the wedding of each of the children – that is, the rituals during which the pitcher, the pots, kettles, soup serving bowls, cups and all kinds of other containers, many and various, are broken on purpose. We cannot describe all these customs, but can certainly note how often they have been observed. They often constituted an announcement of the future: however many pieces there were, that is how many children the couple would have, as if there were some link between the broken pots and the fertility of the bride. This association is confirmed by a popular expression: speaking of a woman who can no longer have children or of a child who obstinately demands a little brother that he will never have, people say “the mold is broken.”³³ In the words of Yvonne Verdier:

“[...] we can suppose that this applies to the dishes of the mother, utensils that are symbolic of her power to procreate [...]. When a young woman acquires the attributes of wife and future mother [...], they entail somehow the destruction of her mother’s attributes, although this destruction is accompanied by transmission of what we might term the genesic power of the mother.”

Verdier’s rigorous and thoroughly argued demonstration concludes in these words:

“[...] daughters get their procreative force from their mother, and this quite physical property is something given to them: it does not come just like that [...] Thus, [marriage] involves the feminine generation that precedes the new bride: having a daughter get married means, for a mother, losing her own procreative forces and nourishing functions: when the young woman moves into the class of future mothers thanks to her union with a man, she puts her mother and her mother-in-law into the category of old women. This means that, in the sequence of generations, it is not a

³³ Cooking implements often stand out when it is a question of sexuality, in a metaphoric way. People console a man or woman who despairs of finding a soulmate by assuring them that “every pot has its cover”. Somewhat less elegantly put, “you make the best soup in old pots”.

question of simply integrating the young women into her rank as future mother, but involves substitution and replacement” (Verdier 1979:312-313).

Verdier brought her analysis still greater depth by conferring upon it an even more general impact in her interpretation of Little Red Riding Hood, a widespread tale in Europe that orchestrates a feminine biography or life story around the figures of the little girl, her mother and grandmother. This is not based on Perrault’s literary version of the tale in the eighteenth century, where the wolf eats the little girl, or on that of the Brothers Grimm in the nineteenth, where the wolf, after having devoured the grandmother and granddaughter, is killed by a providential hunter. It is based on entirely different versions, transmitted by oral tradition, the many variants of which Verdier analyzes. As in the versions we are familiar with today, Little Red Riding Hood goes to see her grandmother and, along the way, she runs into the wolf, who sends her the wrong direction so he can skip off to Grandmother’s place and kill her, while the little girl goes off on the “path of pins”, as a little girl must [referring to the custom of sending a young girl off to live with a seamstress, who teaches her both skills and refinement, literally “making” a young woman]. However, the end of the story is not like those we know today. The wolf eats part of the grandmother and keeps the blood and part of the flesh in the kitchen. When Little Red Riding Hood arrives at her grandmother’s house, where the wolf is in her bed, the little girl is hungry and the wolf invites her to cook the blood and flesh she does not know is that of her grandmother. This goes on in spite of the repeated warnings from a little bird (or the cat) who tell her what she is doing. This is followed by a cannibal meal of which the girl is unaware, of course, in which Little Red Riding Hood eats her grandmother (or her mother)! Is this a simple, if horrible, tale to frighten little girls? Or is it an educational tale that shows them their destiny? As Yvonne Verdier notes, it is the second interpretation that should be preferred:

“After the “pubertary” motif of the pins, this sentence in the story concerns acquisition by the little girl of the power of procreation. Hence, the macabre meal motif in Little Red Riding Hood can be understood in relation to female destiny that is played out in three stages: puberty, motherhood, menopause. These three periods correspond to three genealogical classes: young woman, mother, grandmother. From the societal standpoint, the reproductive cycle forms a full circle when a young woman becomes a mother and so her mother becomes a grandmother: this game is played by three figures. The little girl has eliminated her mother a bit when she becomes nubile, a bit more the day she has sexual relations, and definitively when this leads to reproduction, in other words, as

her genesic functions are affirmed. But a vampirical image is also proposed to us here: when a girl's blood begins flowing – the primary condition for her genesic destiny – that blood must leave the mother, who will then find herself dispossessed of her power to have children, as in a game of communicating vessels. The tale says even more here: the girl takes this power over from her mother, she absorbs it in the most literal sense. Furthermore, the tale sometimes confuses, as if in a short-cut, the genealogical levels of the mother and the grandmother, and it is often the mother who plays the role of the grandmother and is eaten [...]. This is what the tale is telling us, that the necessity of feminine biological transformations will lead to the elimination of the old by the young, but during their lives: mothers are replaced by their daughters, it will come full circle with the birth of the children of my children. Moral: grandmothers will be eaten!" (Verdier 1989:43-44).³⁴

Various forms of the rule

The tale, certain phases in the wedding ritual and the stories of scandals spoken about by our lady informants lead us to note that in Europe, as in Africa, the succession of generations is thought of as a nodal issue. Meyer Fortes emphasized the universal character of this pivotal time of the first birth that moves people from one genealogical position to another and that marks the first split between the family of the parents and the families of their children, a paradoxical time because it is awaited and highly desired, while it also means that every parent will be replaced and will disappear one day.

Perhaps we can interpret some customs involving mothers and daughters and this transfer of the first child in light of this ensemble of representations. In the French West Indies, for example, a daughter often gives her first child to her mother to help her in her daily life. The child will not come back to her own mother until she is an adolescent. Stéphanie Mulot interprets this gift as a compensation to the mother from her daughter, as if "motherhood of the younger woman endangers the motherhood of the older woman to such a point that the latter demands compensation by being able to extend her maternal function by usurping her daughter's child" (2000:372). Josiane Massard spoke of the "preemptive right" of grandparents over their children's firstborn in relation to adoption in Malaysia (1988). Might it not be possible to interpret adoption of the first

³⁴ This theme is also to be found in the Greek versions of Cinderella, cf. Jean-Louis Siran (1989).

grandchildren, often imposed by the parents, as a form of compensation demanded by the mother in exchange for giving up her genesic power? This might also entail re-examining adoption and fosterage customs of children by their ascendants from this standpoint, since we know such customs are very widespread, especially in Africa and Oceania.³⁵ Thus, in a society in northern Benin studied by Erdmute Alber (2004) and characterized by a high frequency of fosterage, the custom takes on a very particular hue in this patrilinear society: 60% of the children brought up outside their parents' home are taken in by their paternal aunt and 30% by their maternal grandmother. Generally, the first child is given to the patriclan and, according to Alber, this gift closes out the cycle of matrimonial exchanges. The second child goes off to live with his or her maternal grandmother who "claims" the child, because she has full rights over her daughter's child, a fact that the ethnologist analyzes as a form of compensation for the loss of her own daughter, given in marriage. Alber's interpretation does not seem to exclude the one we propose here.

In contemporary European societies, the overlapping of generations caused particularly by recomposed families due to divorce nearly always leads to some comments, and at times to a malaise, as is evident from the studies that Agnès Martial carried out with children from these families.³⁶ The taboo, as we have seen, seems to be focalized on women. The persistently negative reputation of late pregnancies, especially those due to medically assisted conceptions that entail odd overlapping of generations may well be an avatar of this rule. There are more and more women who are pregnant at forty today,³⁷ and make no secret of it, but this does not necessarily mean that the prohibition has evaporated. The remarks made in response to announcement of these late pregnancies abound. People talk about psychological capacities: will the mother have the patience necessary to bring up a child? The question would not be asked about a grandmother in relation to her grandchildren. Most of the comments refer to medical

³⁵ Much research into this subject has been carried out in the last thirty or so years. See especially Suzanne Lallemand (1993), and more recently Isabelle Leblic (2004). Ethnological inquiries rarely explicitly note the exact relationship of the adopted child to his or her ascendants. Do these adoptions apply more specifically to the firstborn of the following generation? While they provide help for the elder people, the separation of the firstborn from his or her parents might also have as its objective avoiding the antagonisms cited by Meyer Fortes.

³⁶ Agnès Martial (2003 :67-74) notes, on the basis of what she hears from her informants, that children from recomposed families feel a sort of malaise about generational "confusion". She does not give any psychological or moral meaning to this term, which is simply descriptive. On this point, Marc Bessin's critique of this work seems to have missed the point (Bessin & Levilain 2005:102).

³⁷ On this point, cf. Fabienne Daguët (2002) and also the demographic part of the report by Marc Bessin and Hervé Levilain (2005).

issues: will the child be normal? Isn't this kind of pregnancy "risky"? Doctors, who are undoubtedly influenced by this prohibition, hesitate and say quite contradictory things: some of them affirm that the risks involved increase with age (Down's syndrome, the danger of strokes for the mother...), while others claim that these pregnancies are at the lowest risk of all, precisely because they are monitored with the greatest care. Discussions that are based on serious medical arguments doubtless provide a new rationale for an old prohibition. On the subject of adolescent pregnancies, Charlotte Le Van notes that "the learned discourse in fact takes over and fills out a very precise socio-familial norm, that of the age one should be for a first pregnancy" (1998:31). We could bet that the same is true for the age one should be for the last pregnancy.

The norm about the proper succession of generations is also shifted, it seems, over to the individual realm of psychological relations between mother and daughter, where people tend to express this in terms of the rivalry between two women, for example, rivalry over the daughter's child. Frank Fürstenberg (1981), one of the first American sociologists to have carried out in-depth work on teenage pregnancies, suggested examining the position of the mother in her own life cycle in order to interpret her reactions. He proposes that, if the daughter's pregnancy comes at a time when the mother knows she will not have any more children, she will tend to put pressure on the girl to keep the baby, so her first grandchild will be her last child. On the contrary, when a mother thinks she has not reached the end of her own fertility, she will push her daughter to abort.

However, this rivalry does not concern only appropriation of the child. Fiction provides still other situations, particularly the idea of loving the same man. Caroline Eliacheff and Nathalie Heinich, the former a psychoanalyst and the latter a sociologist, have explored contemporary Occidental fiction, both in the cinema and literature, which generally examines situations of relational crisis, and notice that this subject came up in several novels in the last twenty years of the twentieth century (2002:131-133). Does this bring up the question of the right time for passionate love when one is the mother of a young girl? What happens when the mother refuses to let go of her capacity to seduce or to accept that her beauty is fading, while that of her daughter is blooming? Several novels have taken up this very old theme of the jealousy of the mother towards her daughter, embodied by the evil stepmother of the Snow White tale.

The moral of this sort of fiction seems to have been picked up in the advice to be found in women's magazines, which is usually based on a popularized psychoanalysis.³⁸ Mothers are encouraged to recognize the passing of time and not to try, by some self-indulgent complicity, to erase the difference between generations, either by refusing to let their daughters grow up or, more often, by putting themselves in the same generational category by adopting the same kind of behavior and the same fashions. Perhaps, in our societies, this discourse on the universal issue of the succession of generations is shifting towards the subject level of the construction of personal identity.

These brief observations obviously cannot exhaust the immense anthropological issue at stake. This is why we shall conclude, without concluding our thinking, by formulating a few methodological and epistemological remarks. We can note that, in the dialog between disciplines set in motion in our research, anthropology has not been content to simply provide interpretation tools for demographic data, as was the case in earlier work. It has provided the source of new questions for the traditional sources of historical demography. Of course, our statistical results must be enriched, made more precise and be extended to other population groups, so we cordially invite our demographer and historian colleagues to test out our questions on their own data and to refine our measurement tools.

As for the basic argument, we cannot avoid being struck by the way a largely implicit social rule was sufficiently widespread among the country population of southwestern France in the nineteenth century so that it was expressed in behavior that can be measured statistically. Yvonne Verdier's symbolic approach and the statistical approach are doubtless the best suited to reveal the depth of "unconscious" structures that impress themselves on people and make them act. The social sciences themselves have tended over recent years to neglect this kind of approach, although its heuristic impact is evident, and have preferred contextual analyses emphasizing conscious action and the strategies of the actors involved.³⁹ Far from being opposed, these two approaches seem to us to be complementary. Of course, women can either not know about this prohibition or simply not care, depending on their age, social group, area of origin or personal history. Endeavoring to analyze the determining factors in their

³⁸ Véronique Moulinié has addressed this question in her work, but an in-depth study remains to be carried out, cf. Moulinié (1998, 2005).

³⁹ For a recent re-examination of this debate, see Alban Bensa (2006).

singular position is of great interest. Marc Bessin and Hervé Levilain do this, in part, in their recent study of late parenthood in France. They cite testimony from women who admit the shame they felt at being pregnant, or wanting to be, too late in life, and they conclude “that once the realm of representations has been set aside”, these families demonstrated a “great capacity for adaptation” (Bessin & Levilain 2005L:101-102). We have no doubt about this point. However, we must continue examining the content of these representations, which the people involved hardly make explicit and about which sociologists have remained silent. In this task of elucidating a feeling of “shame” or understanding the content of ritual, recourse to the ethnology of symbolics and the comparative method characteristic of anthropology seem to us to shed light on facts that other approaches have not addressed. Furthermore, this is a case of demography contributing to the support of anthropology by statistically measuring the relative importance of a prohibition in a given society at a precise time.⁴⁰ Might we not extend this approach to other questions that have remained unanswered?⁴¹

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⁴⁰ The representations revealed by ethnologists are obviously not shared by all people in the societies they study, hence the interest of statistics.

⁴¹ This makes us think of the prohibition on marrying in May. The demographer Jean Bourgeois-Pichat raised this question as early as 1956 in his excellent article ‘Le mariage: coutume saisonnière. Contribution à une analyse sociologique de la nuptialité en France’, but his invitation to ethnologists to pursue this analysis has not yet been taken up. Another demographer, Michel Dupâquier, took up the question without really making much progress (1977).

