ABORIGINAL MARRIAGE AND SURVIVAL

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Introduction

Recent studies of the demography of the Aboriginal population of Australia have demonstrated a recent steep decline in fertility (Gray, 1983), coincident rapid decline in infant mortality (Smith, 1980; Thomson, 1983), continuing very high levels of adult mortality (Smith and others, 1983; Gray, 1983: 95-128) and an overall slowing of Aboriginal population growth from the very high levels of the 1950s and 1960s (Gray and Smith, 1983). The changes have dramatically altered the age profile of the Aboriginal population already, although Smith and Gray (forthcoming) now argue that echo effects of high fertility of the 1960s may bolster short-run growth rates as the large birth cohorts of that period move through the peak child-bearing age groups.

It is important to emphasize that Aboriginal fertility decline is not merely a reflection of coincident decline in the fertility of Australian women in general. On the contrary, it appears that there are few similarities between the patterns of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal fertility change.

For instance, all non-Aboriginal age-specific birth rates fell more or less together and by similar proportions in the 1970s, while for Aboriginal women there was little change in age-specific birth rates below age 25 but very steep decline above age 30. In 1966-71 fertility above age 30 accounted for 38 per cent of the Aboriginal total fertility rate of 5.9, while in 1976-81 it accounted for only 17 per cent of the total fertility rate of 3.3. The age pattern of Aboriginal fertility was very different to that of non-Aboriginal women and remains different after the decline. And the absolute average level of Aboriginal fertility was and is higher than that of non-Aboriginal women.

Continuing high fertility of young Aboriginal women has resisted the influences which had such a dramatic effect on their fertility at higher ages. Attitudinal data from five Aboriginal communities in different parts of Australia (Gray, 1983: 217-39) show that Aboriginal women overwhelmingly disapprove of the use of family planning methods to delay the birth of a woman's first child, although they may approve of its use for spacing children or for stopping having children.

The reason that high levels of child-bearing at low ages have remained characteristic of Aboriginal fertility patterns is that child-bearing plays an essential part in Aboriginal family formation, rather than being just incidental or consequential to family formation (ibid.: 92).

(1) The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and not necessarily of the Australian Bureau of Statistics.
Analysis of the attitudes of Aboriginal women towards family size reveals that both reasons for wanting more children and reasons for not wanting more children have strong economic foundations (ibid.: 284-311). The economic advantages of having children and having no more children, moreover, now actually link together to promote small family size. There are three aspects to this. The first is that although care in their old age remains a very important benefit that Aboriginal women hope to gain from having more children, the quality of this care can be expected to depend on the future economic status of their children, which is now much more dependent on education. The second is that the economic benefit of assistance with housework, in which Aboriginal women place some store, is eroded by longer education of children and this erosion is reinforced by lower demand for this kind of assistance in households with smaller numbers of children. The third is that recognition of the costs of caring for children, substantially affected by education costs, tends to be associated with low parity among those women who want no more children.

The role played by change in educational opportunities, costs and benefits in this analysis is a central one: because of changes in education, the micro-economic costs and benefits of children shifted in favour of small family size and provided motivation for the acceptance by Aboriginal women of family planning services, through concurrently-expanding health services in Aboriginal communities.

This synopsis has left important questions unanswered. What is the economic significance of a method of family formation in which child-bearing is an essential component of the process? What changes in the micro-economies of Aboriginal households and families are occurring now, and what is their economic significance? Even to address these questions requires a much greater understanding of Aboriginal marriage and family formation than has been attempted so far in demographic studies. This paper is an attempt to lay part of this foundation.

The paper considers data on Aboriginal "marital status" as measured by Australian population censuses, in conjunction with adult mortality estimates. The aim is to model the lives of Aboriginal marriages and the attrition factors contributing to their ending.

Modelling the Dynamics of Aboriginal Marriage

A static description of Aboriginal marriage can be had from population census data. Doubts about the meaning of these data have resulted in avoidance of extended analysis of marital status in recent studies of Aboriginal demography. One reason that has been given for this avoidance (Grey, 1983: 69) has been the supposition that ABS imputation of marital status in cases of non-response could have substantially distorted the pattern of non-response in the Aboriginal population, if there was a difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal marriage customs. However, unpublished 1981 Census data show that while marital status was imputed for 11 per cent of Aboriginal males and 10 per cent of females, most of the non-response (78 per cent) was confined to the 0-14 age groups: for no age group