

Date: Tue, 27 Nov 2001

Subject: Virtual Conference

Dear Etienne

Sorry to be dropping in and out so inconsistently (but I am reading when I can) and want, in the light of more recent comments, to continue my earlier remarks about 'fitness of purpose'. The comments of various people highlight a need, perhaps, to look separately at papers using national census material and those from developing DSS sites (especially those in S Africa). I accept that this conference was set up to look at the former but the DSS movement IS growing and both the AC and Agincourt papers make important comments on the problems of the SA census (both data and methodology) (see below). I agree that the Senegal example seems unique in sitting 'somewhere in between' a more typical census and what the DSSs are doing, but it also seems to me that Michel's very excellent paper must be based on a more intimate than usual knowledge of what I would refer to as the anthropology of the area and especially of the Sereer - and a genuine interest in the complexities of kinship! This must also have been behind the way the census in Senegal was set up - rather like the anthropological/initial qualitative work in the cases of the Agincourt and Africa Centre DSSs. (But I do appreciate Labov's very clever machinations to make up for what is not in the census data) I do think there are lessons for all of us there and if one is interested in kinship in its own right (as Michel MUST be!) and/or what advantages it may bring in terms of survival 'safety nets' {esp in the era of HI/AIDS}, such work will be critical.

What is interesting is the suggestion/claim that more detailed data can be collected on a large scale - but on a national scale??? The current (and I use the word current advisedly as great gaps are still coming to light!) SA census suggests we cannot manage what we are doing at present, let alone embark on the kind of training, which more complex questions and questioning might entail. Perhaps it would be easier if the categories being used were more "emic" and fewer counters intuitive for most of us (my recent experience of answering the census questions which had to be filled in by a far from skilled or confident interviewer, was confusing and baffling to say the least). I have sympathy thus for Ian's various comments (and agree about the mother's brother) - another convert to Anthropology? By the way another example, which is well authenticated, is the refusal of early survey takers (maybe even the early census?) to credit woman-to-woman marriage which is institutionally among the Lobedu - so all the de facto and de jure female heads were designated wives of hypothetical men!! Jokes aside, Etienne's strictures on how census interviewers are or are not trained

and what is done 'in the field' are very well taken also! Vicky and Mark can tell us how much training has gone into preparations (manuals as well as field based) for their DSSs and the continual quality control.

Perhaps we need to distinguish three discussions:

- (1) On purpose and real possibilities
- (2) On conceptual and methodological issues
- (3) Logistics

and keep them separate from

- but clearly all these are also all related in practice and in terms of 'quality control' and this is where the going gets tough.

I think this is also what Tukupfu is getting at in what seems to me, Etienne (am I missing something?) his eminently sensible contribution in reply to Ian and Michel around co-residence and 'family' * parsimony seems the essence of the debate. At another level, however, I really find it hard to make sense of some analyses based simply on census material - I think I have already registered a complaint about limited use of contextual literature to help make sense of some census based work and clearly this is another theme coming out of this discussion (Labov).

Let me now hastily express my deep appreciation of Michel's paper on the Sereer. Bravo - it is an anthropologist's dream! The use of basic m-c building blocks is eminently sensible given the size/complexity you describe and (MOST NB?) the bi-linearity (Is this the same as what anthropologists of the British school used to call dual descent?). Even in predominantly Patrilineal SA married women in polygynous hhs (and their children esp. sons) are distinguished by their 'house' which has property and independence assigned to it. This is what Townsend et al refer to as well. Sons of the same father may be distinguished by their mother and her house, (even importantly in giving the support of her paternal kin to the man against the sons of other houses and their patrilineal kin). I do not see any necessary conflict between the Agincourt (or Africa Centre) data gathering systems and his building blocks based on mother-child units- in fact Michel gets to the same place eventually as they are linked into the higher order categories of household and compound through marriage etc. In SA we have similar complexity in Soho speaking societies which practice cross cousin marriage esp. with the multilateral cc (mother's brother's daughter/ father's sisters son (I hope I have got this right - it is ages since I worked with all these cousin marriages) Michel have you read the Kroger's stuff on the Lobed - all those brides going one way and cattle the other in different generations (including Leach's comparisons) and Shaper on parallel cousin alliances? Class, power and keeping property i.e. cattle in the old SA 'in the family'. Who was it (Leach again or even

