



BOOK REVIEWS

Review editor: Francisco Muñoz-Pérez
Assisted by Dominique Diguet of the INED Documentation Department

Fabian Franz DRIXLER, *Mabiki. Infanticide and Population Growth in Eastern Japan: 1660-1950*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2013, XVII+417 p.

Demographers are the first to understand that populations are social constructions, but just how societies invent and control (categorize, etc.) their populations, and above all how these processes change over time, are questions that have not yet been thoroughly answered. The idea (or model) of a near-linear demographic transition involving a shift from natural, uncontrolled fertility (better yet, fertility indirectly controlled—through nuptiality, for example) to socially regulated or couple-controlled fertility is still widespread. This understanding, which posits a link between modernity and birth control, is challenged by the work in question, whose subject is a mode of population regulation seldom if ever mentioned and very rarely studied: infanticide. Fabian Franz Drixler's book is a valuable contribution to the labour of historicizing fertility behaviours and investigating fertility control methods that has been under way for many years now in historical demography.

On the basis of considerable and remarkable archive study, it demonstrates just how frequent and ordinary infanticide was in certain regions of Japan up to the early twentieth century. It was perfectly acceptable, individually and socially, to kill babies immediately after birth, the reason being that they were not thought of as human beings. The work's second crucial point is that population is an object shaped by cultural practices (especially religious ones), policies and discourses. This is not really new, but here we are given an extraordinary empirical demonstration of the way discourses and practices around population feed upon each other: "A feedback loop between demography and discourse goes through several cycles in this book. Demographic outcomes were shaped by understandings of life and death, security and status, obligations and community, the nature of time and the boundaries of humanity. These understandings, in turn, were challenged or favored by the demographic context of each historical moment" (p. 20).

Infanticide—discreetly designated by various metaphors—often botanical like the one in the title, *Mabiki* (間引), alluding to "uprooting" rice plant seedlings—was how births were controlled during certain periods in some regions of Japan; specifically, the northeast region of the main island Honshu, the island of Shikoku,

and a considerable part of the island of Kyushu. In those places in the eighteenth century, infanticide was not only the norm but virtually an obligation. Parents raising many children were perceived as irresponsible; they reproduced “like dogs” (p. 60). The originality and strength of this book lie in its use of distinct, complementary methods to quantify infanticide: accounts by contemporaries and, from late in the century, published statistics, but above all statistical analysis of several thousand population registries—and therefore several hundred thousand individuals followed throughout their lives—preserved throughout northeast Japan. Overall, half of children born were not raised. And the selection criteria went far beyond sex or immediate economic difficulties, encompassing an entire set of beliefs and astrological rules that described the right period to be born as determined by child’s hereditary rank and sex. Infanticide thus appears to have resulted from two sets of representations and situations: the material constraints of raising a child—together with the spiritual logic of family stock (the future of the line could only be assured by a single heir) and the understanding that babies belonged to a different world than humans—dictated to parents the approximate number of children they could raise, while child’s predicted sex, moment of birth, calendar, horoscope and boy-girl sequencing in the family determined which children parents would keep.

The end result of this “culture” of infanticide was a considerable drop in the population. After reaching a peak around 1700, the population of northeast Japan fell sharply. The authorities were already concerned about the phenomenon (notably because of the fall in tax revenues), but it was the great Tenmei famine of 1783, due to volcanic activity in Iceland, that marked a turning point in awareness of the problem. The author’s study of pro-birth nineteenth-century Japan, with its judicious combination of cultural-historical discourse analysis, examination of local policies, and application of elaborate demographic analysis techniques, constitutes the centrepiece of the book. Opponents of infanticide worked simultaneously to demonize the practice and change the way humanity was defined so that children might belong to it. Numerous representations, pamphlets, votive tablets and other material, involving ideas of lost humanity and divine oversight as well as flower metaphors, worked to overturn arguments in favour of infanticide. Meanwhile the local authorities implemented policies that were both positive—financial aid for child raising—and repressive: pregnancy surveillance and punishment for suspicious deaths of new-borns (though sanctions seem to have been light and seldom applied). While the real effectiveness of such policies is debatable, the author maintains they had a clear impact on behaviours in that they changed people’s understanding of infanticide: what was once a norm became unacceptable. The practice continued into the early twentieth century but ceased to attract attention or drive policy in a country that was by then experiencing strong demographic growth. Infanticide gradually decreased, then subsided entirely when abortion was legalized in 1949. Abortion long remained the dominant contraceptive method.

In several respects—the combining of qualitative sources and quantitative data, its discussion of theory, contextualization and historicization of demographic behaviours, and long-term, critical perspective on population policies—this work is exemplary of historical demography research today. And like the wealth of recent studies that move beyond the monograph framework, it discusses population dynamics on a large spatial and temporal scale. The downside of its undeniable analytic strength, however, is a relatively weak discussion of more general demographic questions. The reader is surprised to find no mention of Malthus in a book on population regulation before and during the demographic transition; a brief discussion of his thought and the theories it engendered would have been welcome. At a more general level, while the work's arguments and conclusions definitely have implications for demographic transition theory, its presentation of that theory is too simplistic for the discussion to be genuinely useful. Because the work is so narrowly focused on Japan, it cannot reach a significant readership outside that country. To take a specific example, the idea that what fuelled pro-birth discourse was fear of depopulation is hardly exotic for French readers and demographers. It is a pity, then, that this idea was not related to developments in other countries and to similar demonstrations conducted elsewhere. At certain points, the author's worthy concern for empirical precision seems to have outweighed an interest in discussion and in putting demonstrated facts and ideas into wider perspective.

But these relatively minor limitations do not diminish the importance or quality of the study, one that questions classic understandings of population and leads us to reflect on the assumptions that shape analysis of it. In this respect it is a genuinely successful work and indubitably an important one for anyone interested in fertility or population history.

Lionel KESZTENBAUM