

AFRICAN BABY BOOM BRINGS HOPE AND FEAR

By Drew Hinshaw

LOKOJA, Nigeria—This was a small town on the docks where steamships stopped when a traveling young nut merchant named Ahmed Musa settled here in the 1940s. He didn't even lock his doors at night.

Now Lokoja is the fastest-growing city on Earth. His roof looks out over shanties and suburban estates tangling along the Niger River stretch where, a century ago, a British writer gazed across the water and coined the name Nigeria. Lokoja's metropolitan population of 473,000 is set to rise 78% in the next 10 years, the United Nations projects, quicker than every other sizable town in the world.

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The biggest human increase in modern history is under way in Africa. On every other continent, growth rates are slowing toward a standstill for the first time in centuries, and the day is in sight when the world's human population levels out.

But not here—not yet. Some 2.5 billion people will be African by 2050, the U.N. projects. That would be double the current number and 25% of the world's total, and 399 million Nigerians then, more than Americans. When the century closes, if projections hold, four out of 10 people will be African. Billions of them will be living in cities that

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A mother and child in Lokoja, Nigeria. Population growth across Africa is still strong, in contrast to every other continent, and by 2050, 25% of the world's population will be in Africa, the U.N. says.

MONIQUE JAUQUES FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Wall Street Journal

November 28-29, 2015

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Continued from Page One The are today small towns. The land of open spaces that was Africa will have blended into one big megalopolitan web.

Whether that makes Africa the next emerging giant, or giant emergency, one thing is certain: At 93, Mr. Musa has something to do with all this. In his seven decades as the reigning nut trader in town, he has had 21 children by five wives, and 118 grandchildren. They call him Baka Son Matsi: roughly translated, Mr. Cool.

It's because he is so relaxed, he said, perched in the armchair where he watches CNN.

"This makes me happy," said the old man, surrounded by dozens of children and grandchildren. "I makes me proud."

One of the great questions of the 21st century is unfolding outside his window: How will the world look with vastly more Africans in it?

Better, by some measures. Humanity is aging. By 2050, nearly a fourth of the people on earth will have passed their 60th birthday, compared with just one-eighth now. A swelling portion of the global economy will be spent hospitalizing or retiring old people.

By comparison, the average African will be 23. Some 1.3 billion people here will be both young and old enough to start a business, educate themselves, build new homes, embark on a career—and give the world's farms and factories a reason to grow.

Simply put: A baby boom will lift the poorest continent on Earth into the center of global affairs. Africa will soon become the world's most reliable source of new life: of college graduates, young workers and budding consumers.

The big question looming over all of this: Will Africa figure out a way to tap this fountain

So far, the prospects seem mixed at best. The developed world faces a coming shortage of workers—but a disinterest in taking more immigrants, especially Africans. Europe would be a natural destination for young Africans, most of whom speak a European language. But the continent is currently dialing back its intake of Africans to clear room for Middle Eastern refugees and to reassure voters worried about terrorists.

Africa isn't finding much use for its young, either. In Nigeria, just 9% of adults are employed full time by someone else, according to a 2012 Gallup poll. It is a number typical for the continent.

There is no clarity on where the next batch of jobs will come from. Africans have watched car dealerships and shopping malls land in their biggest cities after a decade of economic growth. But that is slowing, and what hasn't followed are factory jobs or modern farm work. If Africa is to follow East Asia's example and become a manufacturing base for the global economy, evidence is thin.

In the meantime, this continent is losing one of the great races of the century. Africa's population has been growing faster than governments can lay down the basics of a modern economy: power plants, roads and schools.

In Nigeria, electricity cuts out daily. The public schools are packed, their textbooks few, and teachers regularly strike. So many private schools have popped up in Lokoja that locals call them "mushroom schools." The local education board complains it can't count them all, because many are just a tin roof with a teacher underneath.

Banks barely lend. Nigeria has just 20,000 mortgages open for a country of 182 million. Ports are congested and mainly

ship out oil—and there isn't enough of that to support a population that grows by 13,000 people daily.

Hundreds of day laborers sit on a single strip in downtown Lokoja and periodically fistfight over gigs. "We are too many here," said Sani Mohammad, a 33-year-old watching cars drive past. Another day laborer, Jamid Mohammad, leaned on his shovel and agreed. "But if there's no work, what can we do?" he said.

Demographic dividend

This is just one of the 43 African cities that will cross the one million-person mark in the next 15 years, the U.N. says. It is a tremendous bend in the world's urban gravity.

A century ago, Africa had only one city of one million people: Cairo. Now there are 50 such towns, many housing more residents than most European nations. Lagos, Nigeria, is home to 21 million people. Just 762,000 lived there when Nigeria won its independence in 1960.

It is here in the cities where the next and paradoxical second chapter in Africa's demographic story is unfolding. The larger Africa's cities grow, the more families inside them shrink.

Africans in town are having fewer children these days than their village compatriots. Many have broken away from extended families, into nuclear abodes. A new African suburbia is branching out as young parents try to buy distance from their elders and siblings.

That suburbia looks like Lokoja. "In the past there were areas where you hardly see five or 10 houses," said Tritis Ojo, head of Lokoja's population commission. "You see thousands of buildings there now."

This shift is what economists call the demographic dividend. It is the moment when big families become small. Parents find themselves with fewer mouths to feed, and more money on hand at the end of the month.

Invariably, many spend it educating their children, creating a workforce that will earn higher wages—and one day pay for their retirement. It is a phenomenon that has already helped push Latin America and East Asia up from poverty.

The next candidate for that economic miracle is Africa. And yet the continent is still a ways off.

In every African country, women are averaging fewer children now than their mothers had in 1990. But not by much: In Nigeria, it has taken 25 years for the birthrate to fall from 6.8 children per woman to six. Meanwhile, millions of

mothers are giving birth in a delivery room for the first time in their family's history. So their children are surviving more often, and growing up to have more children.

Birth control has been slow to catch on. Women in Nigeria who choose it are typically waiting until their 30s. Mariam Andu, a walk-in to Lokoja's state family planning clinic, waited until she was 34, when she finally convinced her husband. A few weeks after he agreed,

he announced he was marrying a second wife—a teenager—so he could keep bringing children into the world.

"It's our culture," said the mother of five. "I didn't want it, but as God brings it, I accept it."

Family planning remains a delicate subject in this conservative country, which is almost equally divided between Muslims and Christians. Women need permission slips from their husbands to take birth control in the city of Kano.

whose metropolitan population nears 10 million. All of the files from all the women who went on birth control last year in the largest hospital in the state don't fill a single filing cabinet drawer.

Still, the idea is spreading, slowly, privately. In Lokoja, nurses at the state hospital have helped women hatch elaborate plans to covertly begin contraptions. On a recent day, a new mother purposefully left her purse in the office—then ran

back without her husband, for a quick and surreptitious birth-control shot.

"Some people are with seven children, and their husband still wants more, but the strength of the woman, they can't take it," said Esther Arabo, the head nurse here. "So they come in secretly."

Fisherman's camp

If there's a preview into how the world will be remade by Africa's baby boom, it is to be had in Lokoja.

Much of the economy here revolves around petty trade—outdoor markets, or salesmen stepping through traffic. What's for sale is largely for children. Youngsters' clothing and cribs line the streets. A galaxy of small shops sell satellite-TV packages.

Nickelodeon is the most popular channel. "They will tell you, if it doesn't have Nickelodeon, they won't buy it," said Samuel Alaph, who sells satellite-TV packages in a roadside shop. In the back, he also runs a family portrait studio.

Once, this was a fisherman's camp at the confluence of Nigeria's two largest rivers, and a small dock for slave galleys. Then the British sailed here in 1841, aboard four howitzer-strap steam vessels. They

Infrastructure has worn thin. Trash gathers in open gutters and streets flood so bad that neighbors here have called the BBC to report hippos swimming in their living room.

There is only one public playground: Teenage vandals smashed it up years ago. Police smoke marijuana there.

"Redemption from decay," reads a nearby billboard for a local politician.

And yet the social life of this small city on the river bank—baptisms, weddings, and graduation parties—continues apace. In September, Mr. Musa partied at the christening of his 16th great-granddaughter, Miriam.

Sitting in his living room, the old man had a word with Yuman Abbas, her father, his grandson.

It was time to break with family tradition, he said: To have fewer children, marry fewer wives, and move out from the crowded center of Lokoja.

"It isn't easy to have this kind of family," said the nonagenarian, jabbing a finger at his grandson. Cackling in Nigerian pidgin English, he teased: "If he get plenty children, plenty problems go come!"

For the next few decades, steam ships carried gunpowder, liquor, mirrors and Victorian-era clothes into port. Briefly, Lokoja was the capital of northern Nigeria. The British and French both opened their own grocery stores.

But it remained a community of a few thousand.

Then Mr. Musa turned up, in 1947, riding the top of a truck packed with cola nuts. The village made his money stockpiling harvests by the dock: "Business was good," he said. "Things were really cheap."

With the money, he bought a blue suit, a white suit, a black suit, then a gray suit. He paid just seven shillings to rent his first flat.

And then he started building his family.

Over the next four decades, he married four women—and when his first wife died in 1987, he married a fifth. A few years later, in his early '70s, he had his 21st and final child.

By then, his progeny were growing up in a changed city.

Ships no longer come to the dock here—the river has filled up with muck. The airstrip has fallen into disuse, and the supermarkets closed. Most of the factories in town have been shuttered, including a government steel mill, and the goods for sale arrive from China.

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