

Communications to the Editor

TO THE EDITOR:

In "Infanticide in Early Modern Japan" (*JAS* 55:1, 22–50), Professor Laurel L. Cornell states on page 46, "The source of moderate fertility in early modern Japan was not primarily *deliberate* control of *fertility* by individuals through *infanticide*, but instead *unconscious* control by *society* through *cultural practices* of child feeding and spousal separation" (emphasis in the original). Yet unlettered village women on several continents who were interviewed for the World Fertility Survey in the 1970s clearly recognized that their own lengthy use of frequent lactation and/or their husbands' livelihood-related absences materially lessened their frequency of birth-giving. To my admittedly individual-and-family centered mind, this calls into question an assumption that these widespread practices have not resulted in the main from a large number of individual choices made within families by men and women who are quite aware of their choices' potential results, either in twentieth-century Africa, Asia, or in Latin America, or in Tokugawa Japan.

Professor Cornell also states on page 45, "infant homicide is deliberate and neglect is not," in her explanation of the gap between theoretically expectable birthgiving levels and actual numbers of registered births. Certainly, many Tokugawa-era infants would never have been registered because they were born after Year A's registrations but died before the registration of year A + 1. Yet eighteen years ago, Robert Cassen was already noting in *India: Population, Economy, Society* (London: Macmillan, 1978) that among the infant population of ages six to twelve months observed in a 1974 survey of malnutrition in son-preferring irrigated-agriculture Punjab, eight out of nine of the malnourished ones were female. Furthermore, Monica Das Gupta showed in "Selective Discrimination Against Female Children in Rural Punjab, India," in *Population and Development Review* 13 (1987) 77–100, that the second or later daughters of mothers with some schooling were even more disproportionately likely to die before their first birthday during the period 1965–84 than the second or later daughters of mothers with no schooling who would presumably know less about modern hygiene than their schooled neighbors. To my mind, this calls strongly into question an assumption that whatever infant neglect may have occurred among a society's members has never been either intentional or selective, whether in twentieth-century north India or in Tokugawa Japan.

In addition, I would like to suggest that Professor Cornell's statement on page 27 "The demographic transition is the major historical event in human population history," is an arguable assumption about human experience in the past few centuries rather than an unarguable fact. The increase in human population growth rates which preceded and accompanied the rise of agriculture—sometimes called the neolithic demographic transition—was even more significant, I believe, for without it we would probably have remained a hunting-gathering species. Moreover, current medical concerns about drug-resistant pathogens are calling into question the permanence of the low-mortality low-fertility regime into which individuals and families around the world have been transferring since the eighteenth century C.E.

I thoroughly enjoyed Professor Cornell's persuasive marshalling of her excellent collection of data to demonstrate that indeed, the deliberate smothering, drowning,

or burying alive of newborn infants need not be postulated as a population control measure for Tokugawa Japan. However, I do wonder how provable the three assumptions questioned in the preceding paragraphs actually are. I therefore also wonder whether her statement on page 46, “individuals . . . made simple and short-term choices rather than large and long-term ones,” is provable, or merely another arguable assumption.

G. ROBINA QUALE
Albion College

TO THE EDITOR:

Robina Quale asks an important question: what part of behavior is individual choice and what part is social constraint? This, of course, is one of the central questions of the social sciences. The balance—towards individual or society—varies among the disciplines, from economics on one end to anthropology on the other. My predecessors in Japanese historical demography located themselves far at the “individual choice” end of the scale: peasants made carefully-considered deliberate decisions about everything. I believe that they neglected the social context. Thus I argue that these decisions, whether about migration, coital frequency, breastfeeding, infanticide, or neglect, were far less “deliberate choice” and far more “ordinary human behavior” in the society in question.

A contemporary example may demonstrate the point. Consider cohabitation—living together before marriage—among middle-class young adults in the United States. Twenty-five years ago cohabiting was unusual; now it is a usual step in the process of marrying. What does this mean for the couple who is deciding to live together? Twenty-five years ago it was a radical act, undertaken with deliberation and as a challenge to marriage as an institution. The details of renting an apartment and figuring out how to share the housework and the checkbook are the same now as they were in 1970, but the meaning of the act is entirely different: serious couples are expected to live together. Since the social context is different, the decision is neither so carefully considered nor so weighty. I believe the actions of Japanese peasant couples relative to fertility were far more like living together in the 1990s than like living together in the 1970s.

Of course, scholars will differ on this point. We are both individuals and beings who live in a social context. Thus we can only weigh the relative balance of individual versus society, and can never completely disentangle one from the other.

LAUREL L. CORNELL
Indiana University