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Ambiguous ambitions: on pathways, projects, and pregnancy interruptions in Cameroon

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4. BIG FISH AND FOETAL BARGAINS: ON URBAN HORIZONS AND FERTILITY BETS

*Viviane, it's you who has done this to me
Viviane, it's you who has emptied my pockets
(...)
I have given my car; no, you didn't come
You have even taken my house; no, you didn't come
(...)
Every day she comes to say, 'Give me the sum of money
That I will use during the week'
I give her my money, the next day she comes back again
'Give me again the sum that you gave me;
I owed money to a friend, she has demanded [it], I gave it back
Please, give again'
She cries for money; I get it out, I give [it]*

- Prince Aimé – 'Viviane' (my translation)

*If men tell you they love you, they have already calculated something on you
If men tell you they love you, they have found something to profit from you
Men are like judges: you think he only treats your case, but he treated many other cases before
Men are like tailors: you think he only measures you, but he made many other clothes before*

- Gbigbil song, sung to me by mama Rosie

After having explored the reproductive experiences and ambitions of women like Yvette, who aim to fulfil the ethics of production and reproduction within a rural marriage, this chapter will turn to the visions and practices of villagers with other ambitions. It highlights the reproductive aspirations of Gbigbil women who want to move *beyond* the rural framework. In the face of alternative horizons such as schooling, employment, or flexible relationships with rich urban men, their intentions with regard to marriage and motherhood may be different. The meanings of pregnancies and their interruptions vary accordingly. This chapter will explore the dynamics and decisions around reproductive interruptions that happen when women's pathways and projects have turned towards such urban frames of reference. Again, it should be stressed that the difference between this and the previous chapter is an *aspirational* one – and not one based on different kinds of women or reproductive events. The ideas and circumstances

depicted in this chapter are therefore continuous and co-existent with the previous ones, and add to the complexity and variability of Gbigbil women's reproductive experiences.

On the pathways that I describe in this chapter, the meanings of fertility and its interruptions are not only multiple and changeable, but often also utterly contested. I will show how women attempt to manage these contestations through a flexible use of embryological and aetiological notions. The particular fertility-related frictions and women's inventive answers to them shed new light on the second predominant dichotomy that I traced in the literature earlier: the one between *spontaneous* and *induced* pregnancy interruptions. The uncertainty which surrounds questions of intentionality clearly appears in the story of Sophie, with which this chapter starts; it relates her experiences of pregnancy interruption in an urban context where fertility can be both a quest for stability as well as a possible factor of instability.

From worms to witchcraft: Sophie's story

It is mid-February 2008. Together with my informant Sophie, I am sitting on the floor of a small room in the house of a female Islamic healer, who silently watches us while her son Abdullah joins us for translation. Few words are exchanged, two coins are handed over from Sophie to the *marabout*, and the divinatory consultation starts. Immediately, the *marabout* starts posing questions in Fulfulde, translated by Abdullah:

Abdullah: Your husband, did he marry another girl?

Sophie: Hmm-mm [she smiles meaningfully at me, saying, 'You see?'].

Abdullah: Do you have any problems with your husband?

Sophie: Hmm-mm.

Abdullah: You are not with him, are you?

Sophie: Hmm-mm, I am not in his house.

Abdullah: How did that come to be? Why did you leave the house?

Sophie: Well, for the moment it is because I am ill. I came to my family because I am ill.

Abdullah: But your husband asked you to come back, isn't it? And you don't want to go back, do you?

Sophie: Hmm-mm. I am afraid.

Abdullah: Who gave you the medicines for your body?

Sophie: The medicines for my body? I went to the hospital and searched indigenously as well.

Abdullah: What do you want her to do?

Sophie: I would first of all like to *know*, since I am ill... Because when I am staying with my family, I am in a good state as you can see me now. But when I am there, together with my co-wife, I am regularly ill, it is not going well, there are problems; a lot of things.

Abdullah: She says there is a thing that they sent on you and that you have to treat.

Sophie: So... this thing, is this just on me or is it really in the house, the same house?

Abdullah: It is in the house. She says that you should not go back to your husband like this, without making some medicines.

Sophie [to me]: Erica, you see?

Sophie was the first person I met when I arrived in Asung for a second period of fieldwork. While I was anxiously descending from the car that had brought me to my final

destination, she immediately came to greet me and helped me with all the bags. As I looked at her face I experienced probably the same feelings of surprise, discovery, and recognition as she herself must have felt during the above described visit to the *marabout* a couple of months later, where she finally found some explanations for her unclear and lasting health problems. For both of us, this ‘aha feeling’ was reassuring and frightening at the same time; in my case, seeing Sophie vividly and unexpectedly reminded me of her look-alike sister Celestine, one of my former informants who had died during my two year absence (see her story in the prologue). Happy to see this ‘familiar’ face and at the same time uneasily confronted with the death of my beloved friend, I embraced Sophie, who would become my neighbour for the next seven months. I soon discovered that she had temporarily come to live with her mother next to my house, as she was ill and claimed to need some rest.

In taking this rest – being not ill enough to be bedridden but not healthy enough to go to the fields – Sophie had ample opportunity to spend her time with me and to share her worries which, according to her, would make her lose even more weight if she did not talk about them. Thus, the quick daily greetings that we exchanged when I passed by in order to go to the fields in the early morning and the casual talks in the hangar when I came back home at the end of the day gradually developed into long conversations about the mystic death of Celestine, lengthy stories about her own past life, confidential discussions about her current problems, and the serious weighing of thoughts when we explored the options in her search for future health and prosperity. Over time, the face that I had initially so much associated with Celestine revealed its own hidden personal story.

During one of my first visits to her mother’s house, Sophie smilingly started to tell me about her good memories of her childhood in this village where she was born twenty-seven years ago. As the third daughter of the fourth wife of her influential father – who had been a *Chef de Poste Agricole*¹ – she had many brothers and even more sisters, of whom especially one took care of her from the age of five onwards.² Remaining childless within her marriage, this sister took Sophie in order to ‘have someone around to help her out with household chores’. Next to her sister’s lessons in and around the house, Sophie also had the chance to enjoy formal education. She went to schools in different cities; as the husband of her sister had a mobile job, Sophie was taken along to Bélabo and the capital of Yaoundé where she did well in class. After finishing her primary education, her father, who had the financial means and the ambition to get all his daughters properly instructed, sent Sophie to secondary schools in the cities of Bélabo and Bertoua – an unusual but increasingly popular opportunity for girls at that time. Sophie loved especially her dactylographic courses, where she discovered her ‘talent’ and came to imagine a future as a typist. But then her father became seriously ill. The money that had enabled Sophie to pursue her education was now invested in his hospital visits and operations. School was over for Sophie.

In this indecisive period, in which future prospects were destroyed and Sophie experienced her daily activities as being ‘without any goal or development’, she became receptive to the temptations offered by boyfriends. Presented with their gifts and financial rewards, Sophie ‘started to like the taste of it’. Not long afterwards, at the age of seventeen, she conceived in one of these relationships:

He just helped me out, bit by bit, until the moment he would ‘have’ me. And then, it was over. For me, that pregnancy really came as an accident. I thought, ‘If my father will hear that I’m pregnant, what will happen?’ And my friends would make fun of me. I was so ashamed. So I told my boyfriend that I would search for people who would give me remedies to abort the pregnancy. He said that if I would do that, I would die. In that way, he cursed me and that made me afraid. I was forced to keep the pregnancy.

Next to feelings of fear and her boyfriend’s curse, a lack of financial means and knowledge of abortion methods hampered the actual realization of Sophie’s wish for an abortion. When her boyfriend eventually gave her money and told her to go to the hospital to have an abortion, most of these constraints suddenly seemed to disappear. However, her boyfriend’s proposal turned out to be a pretext to get her to attend prenatal consultations; considering the advanced gestational stage, the doctor instantly refused an abortion and proposed a medical follow-up of Sophie’s pregnancy instead – something her boyfriend had apparently anticipated. This incident made Sophie feel naïve, disappointed, and forced into keeping the unforeseen pregnancy; at the same time, however, it helped to appease the reaction of her parents. Although they did not like the news, what mattered most for them was that Sophie’s boyfriend had assumed this (financial) responsibility and care for their daughter’s pregnancy. This is not to say that they expected anything *more* from him; instead, they strongly supported Sophie’s explicit marriage refusal:

I did not want to marry him. I wanted to ensure my future first. This boyfriend didn’t have a stable job. So I told him that I couldn’t marry a man who doesn’t do anything. And what is more, he also had a wife and children. I don’t like polygamy. My boyfriend insisted that I should marry him, especially when he saw that I gave birth to a daughter. His wife had only given sons to him, so he really wanted me to come and join his family with my baby. But I resisted. Even if there is a child in between us now, that’s okay, but that’s it.

Especially Sophie’s father, who had invested his financial means in his daughter’s education, clearly envisioned another future for Sophie than this ‘down-and-out’ guy (*‘vanu-pieds’*) would probably have been able to offer her. He insisted that even if there was a child, Sophie should still be able to go to school or work without being burdened by mothering tasks or by entry into marriage. These ambitions were quickly realized when soon after the birth of her daughter, Sophie was unexpectedly proposed a teaching job as a dactylographer. She went to live with her maternal grandmother in the city, who took care of her baby whenever Sophie went to school to teach. Sophie’s motherhood did thus not interfere with her daily activities or projects for the future; to the contrary, it

even played a decisive role in the relationship with the man who would eventually become her husband. Seeing the ‘proof’ of her fertility, Alain became interested in Sophie. As he really longed for children at that moment – being the only child of his mother, and having no descendants since he had been together with several infertile women – he quickly started preparing the traditional gifts to her family as soon as Sophie carried his pregnancy. However, the then 18 year old Sophie considered herself too young to bear a second child and tried to abort the unexpected pregnancy:

I didn’t know that I would get pregnant that easily again and I wanted to get rid of it. Me again? Bearing a second child? Whereas my friends were still in school... I didn’t want that, because I knew that one day I would want to go back to school as well. I talked with Celestine about it and she agreed that I should abort. She said, ‘Look at your age. You want to bear your second child already? Don’t do it’. So I asked people to help me, but nobody gave me the right remedies. One woman gave me a thing to insert [vaginally] and open the uterus. I tried to find the courage to do this, all alone, in the middle of the night. I did it three times. But fear overwhelmed me and I stopped. I told myself, ‘Let it be. If I force, I might even die. In any case, it is also good to have children’. And my husband also told me, ‘If you abort, I will charge a complaint against you’. So he begged over and over again. He convinced me, since he wanted to have children. It is always like that with men: in the beginning, he deceives you and promises everything, so that you get nourished with hope. But as soon as he has you, it’s over: he doesn’t bother about you anymore. He has already finished you.

Alain proposed to flee to his parents in a village in another province. Not only would they be at a safe distance from Sophie’s parents – whose reactions to this second pregnancy both partners feared – but they would also be able to find some financial means that would enable Alain to announce the news ‘officially’ – i.e. with gifts and red wine – to Sophie’s parents, to convince them of his serious intentions and appease their reactions to the situation. What is more, Alain had already informed his parents about Sophie’s pregnancy and wanted to present her to them as well – something that is rather uncommon in this very early stage of pregnancy. He thus attempted to inhibit Sophie from aborting an already publicly known pregnancy and to quickly satisfy his parents, who were impatiently waiting for their only son to produce offspring. Things were done as proposed; Sophie left her grandmother, daughter, and the job that she felt nevertheless unsatisfied with, since ‘I didn’t develop myself in this teaching job and knew that this was not something I would like to do all my life’. In this critical period where abortion failed, fear of her parents prevailed, and her daily life activities were not a satisfactory reason to stay, fleeing to apparently approving and well-positioned parents-in-law – Alain’s father was a well-known healer in the region – seemed to offer a suitable way out.

And indeed, she was warmly received by her new in-laws, who once again discouraged her from aborting her pregnancy. Her father-in-law made serious efforts to arrange proper gifts and promised to accompany his son to Sophie’s family. Reassured by this eagerness of her husband and in-laws to take her as a wife, Sophie was convinced of the privileged position this marriage could grant her; after all, Alain had an official job as a

teacher at a missionary school and could satisfy her needs with his financial capital, while she could satisfy his and his parents' need for children with her childbearing potential. Their promises with regard to a future marriage eventually also changed the reactions of Sophie's parents – initially menacing because of the secret flight of their daughter with an unknown man. The birth of a daughter, the quick transfer of *medokh meyal* (the wine of birth), the resulting 'friendship' between Sophie's father and father-in-law, and Alain's tactic to move Sophie into his house in the city soon afterwards, finally concluded the marriage.

During the beginning phase of this marriage, a prolonged post-partum taboo was respected for the sake of the well-being of the baby (see also Chapter 2). However, soon after weaning her daughter, Sophie wanted to get pregnant again, for 'since I was a married woman now, it was good to bear a lot of children, even a hundred'. She adapted her sexual practices accordingly:

I myself know that this or that month, whatever happens, I will conceive. And when I say no, I won't because I will avoid it. Or when I say no but the man says he still wants [to have sex], I have an alternative system: I often take *nivaquine* pills. I either swallow them or insert them down there after sexual intercourse. Or I put some salt in water and I insert it. It removes all the dirt that is inside. After five minutes, I go to the toilet and it will evacuate everything. But if I want to get pregnant, I don't do these things. I just calculate my fertile period and then, automatically, it [the pregnancy] enters. I learned all these things at school.

One month after she had weaned her second daughter, Sophie became pregnant again. However, she miscarried after two months. She relates the incident to me as follows:

My miscarriage was caused by the women's worm³ that often picks in the lower abdomen. Even if you are pregnant, the pregnancy will leave [when the worm picks you]. It started picking me when I was already pregnant for two months. When I wanted to urinate, I only saw some spots of blood. Although my aunt had given me some barks [of a medicinal tree] to stop the bleeding, it did not help because the worm was alive. I should first kill it. It is the *mectizan* medicines⁴ that have treated this for me. I had gone to the hospital to ask if the *mectizan* that we should take would only kill simple worms. They told me that it even kills the women's worm. I decided to try to take this and it killed the worm. The same month I got pregnant again.

My husband was angry when he heard that I miscarried. He thought it was me who had tried to abort this pregnancy. I told him, 'No, of course I know the methods, but I could never do that. It is a worm'. I also told this to his family members who asked me, 'What is the cause?' When I told them I suffered from the women's worm several people there gave me some remedies, but these were not as effective as the *mectizan*. And then they saw it themselves, because I got pregnant immediately after I took the *mectizan*. That's what they wanted. In the end, they didn't consider it too much, since it was a pregnancy of two months that contains only water.

Her next pregnancy, bringing another daughter, was gladly received by Alain and his parents – to the extent that they proposed a formal, municipal marriage to Sophie. With the prospect of a marriage certificate which would allow her to 'profit even more from his wealth', Sophie was happy to conceive again in the hope of quickening this process. It

was during this fifth pregnancy, however, that, as Sophie tells me, ‘everything got spoiled’ because of the extramarital affair that her husband became engaged in. It drastically changed his attitude towards Sophie and her children; he was absent most of the time and discarded his financial responsibilities. When Sophie found out that her husband was seeing another woman – who was married, had four children, and was said to have borne a son with Alain – she felt shocked and disappointed. Although she accused the woman of falsely claiming that Alain was the father of her son in order to win his attention, Sophie saw that these lies *did* have an effect on her husband. Alain even denied being the father of Sophie’s pregnancy, while taking full responsibility for ‘that child outside which is not even his’. Seeing no positive prospects whatsoever and thinking of the burden of her three daughters, Sophie tried to abort this fifth pregnancy but failed again:

After two weeks of pregnancy I told him that I didn’t see my period anymore. He told me, ‘If it is a pregnancy, I won’t be there. Go and search for someone else to take care of you’. Erica, when a man already has another wife outside, he doesn’t pay attention anymore to the one inside his house. Really, I don’t refuse to give children, but I won’t give them in such a situation. So with this anger, I started drinking [a concoction of] leaves. It didn’t work. And people around me did not want me to abort. My mother started screaming that it’s far too risky. Even Celestine told me to keep the pregnancy now because a child doesn’t last [*l’enfant ne dure pas*]. And many other old women encouraged me to give birth, just like all other married women do. Everyone has problems within marriage, but that shouldn’t be a reason to abort. They said that things would get better as soon as I would give birth. One aunt even gave me certain leaves and barks. Some of them I had to eat, others I had to bury in the river, or wash my face with. These would lead to a separation between my husband and his girlfriend because it would undo the effect of her charming remedies. I had understood the message of all these women and kept the pregnancy. But I still call it a ‘pregnancy of suffering’.

I wondered why Alain’s attitude had changed so drastically – considering that he had first proposed a formal marriage to Sophie. Why would he turn his attention away to the extent that he even denied paternity of Sophie’s pregnancy? Had he been pushed by others to do so? Had there been problems that Sophie tried to hide from me? Had her previous miscarriage raised suspicions? Was he afraid of the promised formal engagement? Or was it the son of his *copine* that attracted him more than Sophie’s daughters? It never became entirely clear to me. Posing the question directly to Sophie only provoked heavy accusations towards her co-wife, who she claimed was using charming powers in order to totally possess Alain – making him a passive follower of her whims, without any clear reason connected to his relationship with Sophie. When I asked her about the role her in-laws had played in this affair – knowing that tensions in marriage often involve the husband’s kin as well – she once again turned the attention to the evil-doings of her co-wife: her in-laws strongly disagreed with the situation and reproached their son for having taken a second wife, but the charming power of this woman made their words ineffective. ‘They love me a lot and they pity me’, Sophie assured me when I

inquired about her relationship with them. Frictions between herself and her in-laws – so common in the stories of other informants – were downplayed; instead, all attention was turned to the tensions with her co-wife.

It was only when Sophie participated in one of my focus group discussions that I gained a more nuanced understanding of the behaviour of her husband and his mother – both of whom remained abstract personalities to me as I had never met them in person. The discussion focused on the topic of jealousy between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, both competing for the attention of one man. To my surprise, Sophie cried out that she would advise everybody to marry a husband without a mother, because mothers are so greedy and men are obliged to give in to their wishes. She explained how she used to see her mother-in-law only towards the end of the month when her husband received his salary. Later in the discussion she elaborated:

I have a mother-in-law who likes to eat (*bouffer*) whenever she can. So when she finds that her son has a mistress and that this mistress is willing to give her something, she will constantly go and visit that girl. That is happening now as well. This woman [her co-wife] is in the house. My mother-in-law hoped for this, because she wants her son to bear many children. Now it appears that it doesn't work out. This woman doesn't produce. She gave all her children in a previous relationship. And automatically, she [mother-in-law] returns to me in order to complain about my co-wife. Now she says, 'No, the other one is not good. When I arrive in my son's house, I don't eat and I don't wash myself anymore. But when you were there, I had nothing to complain about.' But she was the one who wanted this woman in the first place! I, in turn, told her that I wouldn't bear any children anymore.

Was Alain's extramarital affair a search for more descendants influenced by the wishes of his mother? Having only one son, she might indeed have wanted to compensate for her lack of children by fully exploiting him: not only did she claim his financial resources, but also the services and childbearing capacities of his mistresses. If his mother's search for descendants could in itself explain Alain's extramarital relationships – a well-known and dreaded influence of mothers-in-law – his unwillingness to recognize Sophie's pregnancy remains surprising. If he – and his parents – were in desperate search for children, he would have been more than willing to embrace the new pregnancy of his wife.

That there was even more to the situation, I discovered after an unexpected incident. One morning, while Sophie and I were waiting for one of the haphazardly passing cars to take us to an indigenous healer, we 'missed' the occasion while we were drinking tea inside her mother's house. Seeing the car pass by at high speed, Sophie started loudly regretting that we were not outside at this moment, since the taxi-driver was actually one of her recent lovers. Surprised, because she had never mentioned her extramarital affairs to me in our conversations, I asked her whether she had many such lovers. Unequivocally she answered, 'Yes of course, since my husband was only floating outside, I decided to search *'ma part'* as well'.

Though the relationship with Alain improved once her fourth daughter appeared to be 'his picture' and paternity could no longer be denied, problems with her new co-

wife increased after the latter moved into the house. Sophie related how the many fights and harassments between her and her co-wife made the situation unbearable for her. Rather than 'suffer inside', she ran away several times, seeking refuge with her older sisters and mother in Asung. From this time onwards, her mother becomes more visible in Sophie's narrative. Having been raised by her sister, Sophie did not seem to have had a particularly intimate bond with her biological mother during childhood. Things had changed, however, when her mother was chased away to her own family after the death of Sophie's father. Due to the disputes over inheritance that ensued between her and the sons of her three co-wives, Sophie's mother had returned to the *quartier* of her Bibakung brothers on the other side of Asung. Here, her relationship with Sophie improved. Both women defended each other's interests now: Sophie, as a 'sister's daughter' (*mo kal*), had the traditional position to demand certain privileges for her mother in her maternal family, while her mother acted as an important marriage broker and safe haven for her daughter. Nevertheless, despite her help, Sophie's mother insisted on Sophie's eventual return to the marriage. She had various reasons for doing so: she was subjected to the demands of her brothers, who could eventually contest the prolonged stay of their *mo kal* in the compound; she herself felt burdened by her regularly returning daughter and grandchildren; and, most of all, she would be more likely to receive some bride-price payments (especially the *monni niana bon* given to the mother and her sisters) if Sophie endured in the marriage. 'Since there were already children, she said it was not good to really leave them behind like that'.

Thus foreseeing an unpreventable return to her husband, Sophie started to secretly take contraceptive injections in order to prevent another pregnancy with him.⁵ But she forgot to attend a follow-up consultation for the contraception and became pregnant again. It was within this context of conjugal turmoil that Sophie experienced another miscarriage:

It started with pain in my back, around the kidneys. It got really warm. The warmth reached my uterus. I went outside, because I thought that I wanted to urinate. When I squatted, a ball of blood fell down. I looked at it and I said: shit. I stayed for at least thirty minutes in the WC because the blood was flowing. Then, I stood up, went to the house, and changed my clothes. In all this, my husband was there. But he neglected, as always. I suffered a lot afterwards and bled a lot as well. I could only lie down. So my husband told me, 'Take this money and go to the hospital for some injections'. But after this, my husband didn't say anything about it anymore. Because when I ask him, 'What could be the cause of all this? I do not even work hard like women in the village, because we are in the city. So what is it?', then he only tells me to go to the hospital. There, they say I suffer from typhoid. But even now that I am under treatment for this typhoid, my belly is very warm inside. Why doesn't it go away if I take the proper medicine? And look, when I am here in the village, far from my husband and that woman, the situation tends to ameliorate. But when I get back in the city, in my house, problems worsen again. I will never enter that house again as long as that woman resides there. I will not bear children anymore. But my husband does not care about my situation. It is this woman who charmed him.

Although this second miscarriage occurred at a similar phase of pregnancy as the first one, Sophie's experiences were clearly dissimilar. Asked to compare the two events, she reflects:

There is really a difference. The first time, we found out [about the cause], we treated it, and it cured me. I never encountered the problem again. But this time, even until now, I still feel the pain. And it remains very warm inside. I don't know. I went to the hospital and they say it is typhoid. They prescribed five examinations, but I don't have the [financial] means at the moment to undergo all of them. I would like to start with the hospital and finish these examinations. And then, I will go and see ahead. Because she [her co-wife] practices day and night and she succeeds in it. And I only practice during the day.⁶ I searched [for indigenous medicaments] here in the village, but that doesn't work well. It tends to help a bit and then it releases again. So what I want is to go to a *marabout*. I will hear everything that she [her co-wife] is doing and I will be treated.

Indeed, visiting an Islamic healer with me on that day in February proved to be a turning point in Sophie's illness episode. As illustrated above, this *marabout* confirmed that her co-wife had charmed her husband and practiced witchcraft to destroy Sophie's health and conjugal future. She promised to help Sophie in three ways: by restoring Sophie's health and childbearing capacity; by undoing the effect of the co-wife's harmful remedies on Sophie and instead letting them work on the co-wife herself; and by making her husband listen to Sophie again and accept all her proposals. Sophie's search for help had become a contest for power: deprived of financial and social security within the conjugal sphere, she felt compelled to make use of the *marabout's* offer to 'combat the evil with evil' – the only promising horizon that would enable her to regain her powerful position as a first wife within an urban marriage. When I left the village, Sophie was hopeful about the healer's interventions: her physical ailments were disappearing and her husband seemed willing to listen to her wishes again. Soon she would leave Asung's fields behind and return to the city again. Thanks to her mother, who acted as a broker in this affair, Alain had promised to search for a separate apartment, where Sophie could live on her own – married but far away from her co-wife.

One year later, during my last fieldwork period, Sophie is living together with her daughters in a small wooden two room apartment in Bélabo. Still relying on her petty trade and her mother's help, she relates to me that Alain's moves nevertheless seem promising:

Since he wants another child, he is trying to come back to me for that, because his wife still didn't bear any children for him. She invented some pregnancies, though, but these always turned out to be lies. My husband doesn't believe her anymore, but he knows that when I say I am pregnant, it is true, because I am so fertile. So I told myself that I should maybe try to give in to him now, despite my anger. Look, I am suffering here outside while she is inside. If I conceive, I know that he will ask me to come back to his house and I will regain my place. And she will be behind me. Maybe he will even chase her. So now that he is deceived by the other, it is time for me to try to get pregnant again. And then, when all things will be settled, I hope to take up my dactylography again and find a real job. The thing is: I need a typewriter to get started and where will I find the money if I'm not even close to my husband?⁷

This firm hope for reconciliation and conception is inspired by her family members, who repeatedly remind her of the need to be married and to raise children in the presence of their father; by her friends, who tell her that her fertility may ‘go far away’ as she has not carried a pregnancy in the last five years; and by another *marabout*, who provides Sophie with powerful medicines for a future legal monogamous marriage and urban prosperity. With reconciliation with her husband becoming desirable again, Sophie has abandoned her previous boyfriends – not only because of the risks of transmissible diseases, but also since a pregnancy from ‘a man outside’ would definitely foreclose the still precarious prospect of a return to Alain. The certainty with which she relies on her reproductive capacities now strikes me. When I ask her how she looks back at the previous years in which she feared a permanent loss of fertility, she reinterprets the lack of a pregnancy as a likely result of her own separation from her husband, and of God’s approval of her constant prayers asking for Him not to send her another pregnancy. With Alain’s return and God’s understanding that she is now receptive for another child, Sophie considers a reversal of the situation to be easy and highly probable. And *if* it really was her co-wife who had caused her sub-fertility, her evil powers will soon be eliminated by the remedies of the *marabout*, she reasons. New horizons and hopes thus ask for new reproductive ‘*politiques*’, and a rethinking of former ones.

Just before my final departure from the field, I leave Sophie behind in her mother’s house, where she has temporarily come to spend the holidays with her children. Being in the same place and carrying the same bags as upon my arrival a few years earlier, we again look at each other with a mixture of happiness and uncertainty – glad that our paths have crossed in the past, but unsure whether they will continue to do so in the future. As if to take part of the uncertainty away, Sophie reassures me that she will cling to her new project:

I, I am here [*moi, je suis là*]. I decided that I won’t go into another marriage. I am here with my family and I wait for him. I exerted my politics by always keeping my children with me. Unless I die, I know he will always come back, because I have his children. Men just want children, and so they become children themselves in a sense: it is easy for a woman to play with a man in that way. I know that I will be fine in the end. I will leave the fields soon and return to my husband in the city.



Even if Sophie’s final depiction of her complex experiences as just ‘play’ may seem simplistic and only part of the story, many urban marriages in this area are in a way indeed a ‘bet’ – with different ambitions and stakes involved.⁸ With more horizons and alternative possibilities present in urban areas, marriage and fertility often acquire different and more volatile meanings than in the village setting described in the previous chapter. These altered meanings and ambitions in turn affect men’s and women’s

management and interpretations of reproductive interruptions. In order to comprehend these dynamics, the following will first explore what it is that attracts Gbigbil women like Sophie to urban areas in the first place. I will then describe and contextualize the marriage and fertility ‘bets’ in these settings, and outline how pregnancies and their interruptions might confirm or contradict the ‘rules of the game’. An overview of the multiple explanations and negotiations around the (lost) foetus will finally enhance our understanding of why Sophie interpreted and managed her pregnancies and their interruptions in the way she did – during her particular pathway towards urban honour and within the particular marital ‘bets’ that she encountered along the way.

Urban attractions and ambitions: possible pathways

Gbigbil women from Asung are in many ways confronted with town life. Some, like Sophie, move beyond the rural realm from a young age onwards. Parental liaisons or flexible fostering practices make them accustomed to a mobile lifestyle, in which they regularly stay in urban households and encounter educational, biomedical, juridical, and religious institutions in the surrounding neighbourhoods. Others may only decide to ‘search their lives’ in the city after having spent considerable time in the village. With Bélabo and Bertoua within reachable distance in both directions of the paved road that traverses the village (see Figure 2), and with Gbigbil acquaintances and bigger markets present in those two cities, these women might at a certain point seriously consider following those who have preceded them and ‘try their luck’ elsewhere. Whether from the beginning or only later in life, many Gbigbil women thus alternate their stay in Asung with periods spent in urban realms.⁹ Their specific reasons for doing so are multiple; but underlying these decisions is a certain view of urban life as offering more attractive possibilities and future prospects than those encountered in the village.

As much as village life is pervaded by the ethics of production and reproduction, urban life is considered its antithesis. Rather than to prioritize ‘work in the fields and births of many children’, life in cities is thought to centre on other activities which offer alternative future scenarios. My informants claim that its driving force is not subsistence but rather the accumulation of money. The pathway to respectability is not the exposure – and thereby, depletion – of physical force (*ngul*) but rather the exposure of financial capital and of social links with those who possess money. According to many Gbigbil women, a shift to this alternative frame of honour would ensure the preservation of force, youth, and beauty, and would also give them more rest, more time, and more options with regard to productive and reproductive activities than could ever be attained in the village (see Chapter 3).¹⁰ Even if aspirations of an easy and honourable life in the city may not correspond to urban realities, such views and expectations do underlie women’s decisions to leave the village and ‘search their lives’ elsewhere.¹¹

In this search, several pathways are believed to enhance the realization of urban ambitions. The first and most frequently mentioned route into city life is the educational one.¹² Ever since schooling became widely accessible for both boys and girls during the economically flourishing decades of the 1970s and early 1980s (Johnson-Hanks, 2006, 2007), it has broadened the scope of ambitions and possible futures beyond the village level for men and women alike. With scholastic training perceived as a way to attain formal employment and modern honour, many Gbigbil parents, like Sophie's father, have come to consider the education of at least some of their children a worthwhile investment for an uncertain future.¹³ Especially those children who show a particular seriousness or aptness during their first years of life are encouraged to develop their inborn talents and characteristics in school, and thus become a 'real person' (*fan mod*) through self-realization (see also Chapter 3).¹⁴ This pro-educational stance is widespread in Southern Cameroon and has been described to logically follow from the 'wealth in knowledge' paradigm long existent in the region. Several sources note how individual talents and characteristics were already an important source of power and respect in the acephalous groups that were scattered through the forest in pre-colonial times; on the basis of outstanding personal qualities and inventive activities, men could attract many followers and wives – and thus, gather 'wealth in people' (Guyer, 1996; Johnson-Hanks, 2006, p. 34; Laburthe-Tolra, 1981).¹⁵ Schooling only reinforces this process of becoming a 'real person' in modern times, for men and women alike. It offers new pathways to respectability and inspires aspirations for other forms of wealth and respect than those related to the village ethics of production and reproduction.¹⁶

Second, it is through the job market that money, and thereby urban respectability, can be accumulated. The employment that is envisaged here is ideally formal and acquired through a certain level of education. A salaried job is, in the current atmosphere of economic decline, an increasingly rare form of capital. Ever since 1994, the year in which the Cameroonian currency devaluated, civil servant salaries have drastically decreased (with cuts of up to 70-80%) and unemployment rates have been on the increase. Those who succeed in being formally employed are therefore likely to be surrounded and respected by the many others who have not; it offers them not only financial, but certainly also symbolic and social capital. But even those who do not succeed in getting a formal job – people with a lower educational level, or who are well-educated but hampered by current high unemployment rates – might still be enviable from the villagers' point of view. They can become successful through inventive income generating practices on the Cameroonian informal markets, which are related to state institutions in complex ways (see also Geschiere & Konings, 1993; Goheen, 1993; Guyer, 1996; van Santen, 1993). Gbigbil women who have less experience with schooling than with work in the fields and in the kitchen may aim for exactly such a career; they become involved in small-scale trade, prepare dishes to sell at urban roadsides, or try to compete

with *bayams* from Yaoundé and Ngaoundéré by buying products in surrounding villages and reselling them in town markets.

Third, urban honour can be achieved through prestigious liaisons such as sexual relationships, marital alliances, kinship connections, or clientism with urban elites (see also Abega, 2007, p. 126). For many Gbigbil women, the preferred pathway into an urban lifestyle is based upon relationships with rich men who have already established themselves in the area. Through the money of these men, women may attain the luxurious and respected lifestyles they are aiming for; through the connections these established men open up to them, they may access formal jobs or other opportunities. What has been described for elite women in the West of Cameroon is exactly what is aspired to by my city-oriented informants in the East:

Elite wives also assume household responsibilities, but contrary to their poorer sisters, they can access resources that allow them to directly contribute with money to the accumulation of the household. Elite men invest voluntarily in the career and enterprise of their wife, paying costs for school or training, or lending them money to help them in their affairs. Wives of elite men often have a salaried employment and, moreover, can invest more in commerce and hire workforce in the household. (...) Elite wives can expand their own networks of accumulation and reciprocity and, with their husband, reproduce a 'modern' lifestyle, often characterized by 'western' or 'modern' commodities such as clothes, television sets and padded furniture (Goheen, 1993, pp. 263-265, my translation).

Goheen argues that with altered material conditions, ideas and ideals of gender and marriage are likely to change as well. Along with different 'relevance rules' (Holtedahl, 1993, p. 275)¹⁷ and 'repertoires of possibilities' (Guyer, 1996)¹⁸ in urban zones, partnership and parenthood are thus presumed to acquire different meanings. The following will explore whether this is the case in the urban surroundings of Asung as well. It will first delve into the dynamics and desires behind the relationships that Gbigbil women engage in during their pathways to urban respectability. Then, women's childbearing intentions within these encounters will be discussed.¹⁹

Informal insecurities: the 'big fish' bet

As noted before, marital habits have long been in flux in the East Province of Cameroon. Chapter 1 indicated that marriage norms and expectations have probably always diverged from actual conjugal practices in the region (now and in the past), and Chapter 3 exemplified how this discrepancy can work out in the village; the following will explore how marital relationships acquire different meanings again in the face of multiple urban horizons and alternative forms of honour. Where schooling and formal jobs are present and explicitly aimed for, marriage and parenthood cease to be the only means to attain respectability; they seem to become relevant only *later* in life. As several studies have indicated, there has been a visible trend, especially from the mid-1980s onwards, of rising marriage ages for both men and women in urban areas all over Cameroon (Calvès, 1999,

2000; Garenne, 2004; Johnson-Hanks, 2007). This has in turn engendered a proliferation of premarital sexual relationships, which might or might not culminate in what is finally agreed to be a marriage, in these zones.²⁰ Such relationships often attain different intensities, serve different interests, and acquire different meanings for Gbigbil women and men who face multiple horizons and aim to pursue particular urban projects.

The most common and volatile form of sexual relationship is called a ‘simple friendship’ (*amitié simple*).²¹ Such a ‘friendship’ is constituted by a gendered exchange of food, sex, and money: men give money for food and other gifts, women cook for and sleep with men. Yet, the two ‘friends’ do not live together. The relationship persists as long as some kind of reciprocity is maintained between the partners; clear future visions or further commitments are mostly absent. Most women stress the attention, gifts, and support these friendships might offer them. As Sophie indicated for the father of her first child, ‘He just helped me out, bit by bit’ – but a marriage with him was out of the question. ‘We just want wealth’, my informant Diana once told her husband Baudouin when he complained to me that many women these days maintain multiple *amitiés* simultaneously. Indeed, if financial support is what is aimed for, the best strategy for women is to engage in ‘simple friendships’ with more than one man – since all ‘friends’ will face economic shortages now and then, or at least claim to do so. These men might have several other girlfriends, who all ‘demand their parts’, or even be married with children. Likewise, not only ‘free’ girls (*ngon sí*) but also married women who feel (financially) unsatisfied with their husbands might engage in extramarital ‘friendships’ with other men – provided that these are veiled in secrecy. Thus, both men and women have multiple *amitiés* and are free to bring these to an end if they lose interest for some reason or another.

While such pre- or extramarital ‘friendships’ are common in both rural and urban areas, they acquire particular meanings for unmarried women who aim for a future in the city. These women often explicitly attempt to be involved with the most respected and well-to-do men in urban environments – preferably older men with formal employment. Such partners are called *gros poissons* (‘big fish’) by my informants; ‘a good catch which might be able to fill your stomach’.²² Laura explains:

A big fish is somebody who has financial means. People like the prefect, the mayor, a commandant, or chauffeurs are all big fish. We engage with them for the honour to live with somebody who earns money. It is not necessarily a marriage with them that we want.

Through the material and symbolic advantages accruing from reciprocal ‘friendships’ with these rich men, women aim to attain their aspired goals of urban luxury and dignity as outlined above. In this, they are often encouraged by their relatives. With the eventual transfer of a bride-price far from secured in the current era of economic and conjugal instability, family members at least try to profit from – if not some parts of the bride-price

– the gifts and connections these rich men may offer their daughter and themselves (see also Abega, 2007, p. 86)

But even if they are aspired to by women and their families, relationships with ‘big fish’ are often surrounded by ambivalence as well. Due to their wealth and status, these men are solicited by many women (and their families) alike and have to distribute their attention and money over multiple partners. Long-term relationships with ‘big fish’ are therefore considered unfeasible; most lovers rather seek for instantaneous advantages. As Laura noted above, intense engagements are also not necessarily what women *aim for*; a hypothetical entrance into marriage is by many of them conceived as a possible obstruction to other non-marital ambitions (verbalized by the phrase ‘*c’est fini pour toi*’, meaning ‘it is finished for you’; see also Goheen, 1993, p. 267).

Consequently, as much as they are a source of temporary pride and respect amongst women who wish to embed themselves in urban circles, these relationships are often considered appalling examples of women ‘selling their bodies’ by others – especially elders in the village. Even relationships with ‘*va-nu-pieds*’ (‘down-and-out’ guys), as Sophie called the father of her first child, which are all too clearly based on material interests – or in other ways violate the reciprocal ‘rules of the game’ – might be labelled as despicable instances of *escroquerie* (exploitation) or *bordellerie* (prostitution).²³ The first epigraph to this chapter shows part of this story. It is the beginning of a song by the blind Cameroonian artist *Prince Aimé* (‘Beloved Prince’), who describes how he spent all his money on gifts for his demanding girlfriend Viviane. However, when he fell short of money, she suddenly disappeared. Recognizing her passing by on the street in the company of another man, *Prince Aimé* was ignored, insulted, and pushed away by Viviane. The deception described in the end of the song underlines the materiality, volatility, and distrust that pervade many current *amitiés*. Online reactions to the clip on *YouTube* show a general acknowledgment by Cameroonian men and women alike of the depicted situation, and reveal some moral ambiguities that surround the image of women’s use of strategic sex:²⁴

We women, we are very strong! We pretend to love whereas to the contrary, it is only the money that we love. Let’s change our behaviour.

What you are saying is very true!!!!!!!!!!!!!! People please beware of all the Vivianes.

Today everybody is Viviane in a way, even men. Let’s pray every day that this spirit of *escroquerie* disappears, because it’s better to take the money of a man that you love.

Cameroonian girls are CameRUINear, so what? Is it only us? Let us be!

Everywhere on the world women are the same. In fact, it is the nature of a human being. Too bad for the unlucky ones. Just use your brains and not your emotions.

While the first two reactions acknowledge but implicitly condemn Viviane’s attitude, the latter two naturalize and celebrate it. As seen above, both extremes were uttered by my

Gbibgil informants as well. The middle comment is more nuanced; it indicates that this behaviour applies to both men and women, and to both relationships based on *escroquerie* and those characterized by love. It is exactly this nuanced remark that sheds light on the ambiguities of relations with ‘big fish’; for, as much as the unconditional exchanges may constitute a factor of instability, they could serve as a basis for a ‘deep friendship’ (*amitié profonde*) or ‘serious engagement’ (*fiançailles*). The exchange of sex, food, and money is part of every intimate relationship in Eastern Cameroon – whatever its duration and outcome. It is thus a cornerstone of relationships that *are* intended to be serious and long lasting as well. Male attention in the form of money and gifts serves, as it has long done, as an indicator of his potential as a future spouse; it is considered a proof of his love, responsibility, and serious intentions. Women’s sexual relationships with ‘big fish’ are thus ambiguous: while they can be instrumental for the achievement of other urban goals like schooling, employment, or pecuniary honour, their stabilization can at the same time become a goal for those women who aspire to an urban marriage with a promising husband.

The sexual behaviour of Cameroonian men shows similar ambiguities. Like their female counterparts, urban men have several reasons to postpone and keep informal their marital engagements. Multiple, volatile sexual encounters offer them the possibility to ‘search a life’ before getting married and having children; they may lead to financial benefits (especially from older, well-to-do women); they provide status among peers and family members, who generally value the display of masculinity and potency;²⁵ or they exist simply because men have limited capabilities to fulfil formal marriage obligations. This is not to say that marriage in itself is not valued by these men. For, in the midst of their ‘*multipartenariat*’, they are prone to search for the ‘best girlfriend’ (*meilleure copine*), who might sooner or later become a spouse.²⁶ Apart from behavioural characteristics, women’s educational level is hereby often explicitly taken into account (Goheen, 1993, pp. 263-265; Holtedahl, 1993, p. 287; Meekers & Calvès, 1997). A Gbibgil student in Yaoundé explained his deliberations after he had interrupted our conversation when a young girl walked by. With a low voice, he had asked her whether she could tell her older sister that he wanted to meet her that night. When I inquired whether that sister could be considered his girlfriend, he said:

You know? Many girls here are *zam zam*: they go from one guy to the other and are not really serious. I don’t like that. I want a serious girl and an educated one, like this one. I hope she will become my best girlfriend. But for the moment, I have several girlfriends. Oh, as a man you cannot stick to one girlfriend only. Maybe you would say that she’s your everything and that you only go for her. Well, and after some time, you’ll find out that she is not the way you initially hoped she would be. She can display certain characteristics that you hadn’t expected or she seems not well educated. Briefly, you can’t imagine a marriage with her. And then you have no alternatives. So it is better to have different girlfriends at the same time. And women do the same, you know. They have several boyfriends and choose the most serious one amongst them.

What becomes clear is that sexual relationships are fraught with mutual mistrust. While this might be true everywhere in Cameroon, it becomes exacerbated in urban settings where alternative horizons create more independence between partners. The presence of alternative projects, the high level of competition and competence on a flexible marriage market where men and women aim for the most profitable partners, as well as a general lack of bride-price payments once engagements become more serious, all imbue urban ‘partner plays’ with ambiguity. This does not, however, do away with the *ultimate* goal of marriage in life, as other studies have also noted (Calvès, 1999; Goheen, 1993; Johnson-Hanks, 2006, 2007; Yana, 1998). Nor does it alter long-standing expectations of gendered reciprocity between possible marriage partners (and their families). To the contrary, the ‘commoditization of sex’ before marriage and the value women attach to men’s financial generosity should not only be placed in the current conjuncture of economic crisis – as transactionalist interpretations tend to do (Dunkle et al., 2007; Hunter, 2002; Leclerc-Madlala, 2003; Nyamnjoh, 2005; and criticized by Poulin, 2007; Tawfik & Watkins, 2007) – but also in a historical context where ‘the social structure of marriage exchanges centred on bridewealth, in which a man’s commitment to a relationship is measured in the frequency and extravagance of his gifts’ (Johnson-Hanks, 2007, p. 651). Even if long-standing gendered reciprocities may have become reconfigured into new *forms* of partnerships in urban zones, marriage as an *ultimate framework* for respectability remains intact. It is just no longer necessarily the *only* aspiration, and therefore might be put within a larger frame of projects.

The next section explores the place of pregnancies in this ‘larger frame of projects’. It describes the consequences of conception for the direction taken both within women’s particular partner plays and on their broader pathways to urban respectability. Insight into the stakes and projects around these pregnancies allows for an understanding of the meanings and management of fertility interruptions. This, in turn, will help us make sense of Sophie’s reproductive decision-making, as recounted in the beginning of this chapter.

‘The vagina doesn’t talk’: flexible motherhood and false fatherhood

Charlotte: It is very simple to mislead men.

Dorine: Especially women can easily mislead men, since women are wiser than men.

Charlotte: A man only knows that he has a wife. But he doesn’t know how his wife often conceives a pregnancy.

Nadine: You only tell him you are already pregnant.

Charlotte: He will ask you when it has entered. It is up to you to tell him the day and the date that you did something together. And he will have to believe it.

Dorine: Haha, a woman? A woman is very strong!

Nadine: Criminal!

Angélique: First devil!

Dorine: Because there are things that a woman does and a man can never know. You pretend that you walk together, but...

Charlotte: If God will succeed to put me in a marriage, I will be with my husband. But when another man flirts with me and my heart also wants to go there, I will run very fast as soon as my husband is at a minor distance. And nobody will know what I have done.

Nadine: The vagina doesn't talk. And yet, it has already worked!

Although the above excerpt forms part of a focus group discussion on women's general forces and tactics, it is not surprising that the particular youngsters speaking here had all been in relationships with 'big fish'. It is especially in informal sexual liaisons with urban men that women's manipulation in affairs of love, sex, and reproduction is warranted. With these ambiguous relationships being as easily dissolvable as possibly leading to more formal engagements, pregnancies often have a major impact on the direction and steps taken in the partner play. Depending on the circumstances and the aspirations at hand, they can do both – i.e. either immediately disrupt a relationship, or stabilize it into a 'deeper friendship' or even marriage. As fertility is not always explicitly aimed for, nor necessarily leading to subsequent engagement, pregnancies, even more than these sexual relationships themselves, constitute a 'bet'. The meanings and implications of conception for such relationships are subject to constant negotiation between the two partners and their families; once a pregnancy 'enters', previous pathways may be rethought, new projects considered, and shifting situations manipulated.

For many women with urban aspirations, conception is perceived to stand in the way of the realization of their ambitions. The often related expression '*c'est fini pour toi*' (see also Goheen, 1993, p. 267) verbalizes the idea that a pregnancy, just like a marriage, might prevent the fulfilment of one's projects and foreclose the horizons that had appeared on the pathway towards city life. Although pregnant youngsters in Cameroon are legally allowed to continue schooling after a maternity leave²⁷, in practice many school-going women fear losing their educational opportunities – or subsequent employment chances, for that matter – once they are confronted with a pregnancy. Their fear seems justified by the reportedly high pregnancy-related dropout rates in secondary schools in Cameroon (Eloundou-Enyegue, 2004; Eloundou-Enyegue et al., 2004; Lloyd & Mensch, 2008). It is further reinforced by public advertisements against 'untimely pregnancies' (*grossesses précoces*) that the Cameroonian media disseminate. The poster below shows how, of two school girls called Clarisse and Angeline, the former ends up poorly after she conceives with a temporary lover, whereas the latter, who finishes school while abstaining from sex, faces a bright future as a good looking, motor-riding (and thus probably employed) woman.

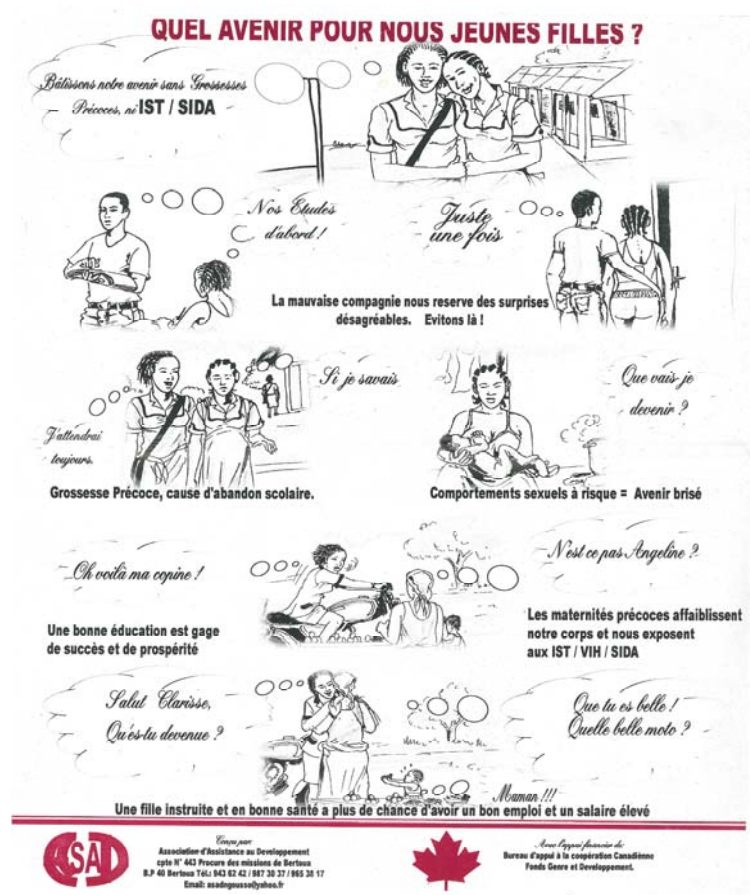


Figure 8 Poster disseminated by the NGO ASAD (located in Bertoua)

The headlines on the poster state the following: ‘Which future for us young girls?’, ‘Bad company reserves us unpleasant surprises. Let’s avoid them!’, ‘Untimely pregnancy, cause of school abandonment’, ‘Risky sexual behaviour = broken future’, ‘A good education is guarantee of success and prosperity’, ‘Premature maternities weaken our body and expose us to STD/HIV/AIDS’, ‘An educated and healthy girl has more chance to have a good job and an elevated salary’.

It is the fear of ending up like Clarisse and missing the chances of Angeline that underlies the stories of my school-going informants relating (failed or successful) abortion attempts – stories which feed into research findings showing relatively high abortion rates among school-going women in southern Cameroon (Calvès, 2002; Johnson-Hanks, 2002a). This is not to say, however, that the link between school enrolment and fertility desires and outcomes is straightforward or unambiguous, as others have also acknowledged (Basu, 2002; C. Bledsoe et al., 1999; Jejeebhoy, 1995; Johnson-Hanks, 2006; Lloyd & Mensch, 2008).²⁸ The entrance of a pregnancy does not automatically imply an entrance into motherhood or wifehood for Gbigbil women. Stories of informants like Sophie, as well as other studies in the region, show the possibility for young women to send their children to their father’s household or to relinquish parental rights to other relatives in order to circumvent motherhood or wifehood and continue education after birth (Johnson-Hanks, 2002b, 2006). With sufficient social capital and support – either from their partner or family, or both – a pregnancy does not necessarily interfere with urban projects, even if it might initially be perceived as such.

For others, a pregnancy – just like a sexual relationship – forms exactly a *means* to realize urban ambitions since it may ensure financial support from and a symbolic link to a respected man in the city. Especially when a relationship with a certain man seems profitable to a woman, a pregnancy might be a worthy try to ‘stick’ this partner to her – at least temporarily. In this sense, the best strategy is to conceive with a ‘big fish’ – or, otherwise, tactically allot a pregnancy to ‘the best positioned’ lover who is not the biological father of the child. Even if a marriage is not directly what is envisaged, a woman who succeeds in convincing her partner of his fatherhood – and gets him to openly acknowledge it – expects herself more or less reassured of care, financial support, and increased contact during pregnancy and the first years of her child’s life. In the current absence of bride-price payments (which used to establish a husband’s paternal rights over all the children his wife would bear), some unwritten rules have developed which ensure a man’s *de facto* right over his descendants as long as he acknowledges his paternity and provides financially for mother and child (see also Chapter 1). Mere impregnation is not sufficient; fatherhood should be socially achieved. Women ‘play’ with their partners – especially those expressing a wish for children – accordingly. The experience of Charlotte, a pretty woman who worked in a city bar and was tellingly nicknamed ‘the hot one’, resonates with the stories of many others:

When it was still a pregnancy of one or two months, I told my sisters, ‘Don’t tell anybody. I myself will know to whom I will give my child. Then, I know that I won’t suffer anymore like I suffer now. If the guy to whom I will give my pregnancy really wants a child, he will look after me and the child’. Because there were two of them in Bertoua. One was married and the other was not. So I asked both of them for the layette – both the father of my child and the other whom I had also told that he had impregnated me. Both of them have come, hey! We first saw a car arrive with soap, fish, and meat. And then the second father of my child came with a car full of food as well. Sacks of rice, boxes of soap, food, fish, meat, everything! Just to come and see the child. He thought it was his child. And we didn’t want to deny it. So we said, ‘Well, here is your child. Do you see how the child resembles you?’ He looked at the child and said, ‘This is my blood’. Haha, I thought, ‘Ah, if only you knew’. Oh, I have played with men! But my people have drunk, my people have eaten.

Charlotte did not envisage marriage *per se*; she contented herself (and her family) with the material benefits as well as the symbolic liaisons that this deliberate allotment of her pregnancy could offer her. She capitalized on the strong wish for offspring that several lovers had apparently expressed – without necessarily expecting further formal engagements.

Other women *do* try to enforce marriage once they recognize a certain willingness in a man to engage – even if he is not the biological father of the child she is carrying. In these cases, what is aspired to is the honour of being married in general (for, as stated, marriage remains an *ultimate* framework of respectability, also in cities) or of living with an urban ‘big fish’ in particular.²⁹ This last motivation was suspected by Sophie to underlie the sudden entrance in the house of her co-wife, with a child claimed to be Alain’s. Indeed, in order to attain their marital goals, women often tactically deploy an age-old

norm that links childbearing to a marital framework; they posit marriage as an unpreventable outcome of a pregnancy conceived in an urban affair. Although this norm is mostly not adhered to in practice, it is resorted to in women's attempts to alleviate the uncertainty of, and give direction to, indeterminate relationships. A case in point is the story of Joséphine, who conceived with a well-to-do lover while she was following education in Bertoua. Her initial reaction to her pregnancy was one of disappointment: it would 'spoil her future'. But once this lover had openly declared that he 'did not want to flee the pregnancy' and assured his accountability in front of her family members, Joséphine reflected about the option of a future marriage with him:

I'm not sure whether he will marry me. He has his wife. But they have only two children. I carry his third child. So I pray to God that I will profit from the child that links us already. Because I don't see how my parents here will be able to send me to school again. So if I could only profit in that respect... My education should not fall in the water. I didn't study for nothing. I hope, I impose, I insist. If he could at least help me find a job, I will search my life. And he will search his part of life as well. That's fine. But if he tells me now that I should even marry him, I will do so. What can I do? We already have a child.

Joséphine's last two sentences present marriage as the unpreventable outcome of an unanticipated reproductive conjuncture, while in fact it might be the most promising 'horizon' at hand. Indeed, the prospect of realizing her educational ambitions by going into marriage with a well-to-do man may have contributed to Joséphine's seemingly passive acceptance of this option. A marriage is now a desirable new project because it might safeguard her urban aspirations; her pregnancy is used as a first step in the right direction.

Some others go even one step further: they take their ambition of an honourable urban marriage as the *starting point* and strategically disclose their pregnancies accordingly – in the hope that at least somebody in the city would take fatherhood as an incentive for more formal marriage arrangements. Nadine's story shows how her pregnancy was turned into a possible pathway to an urban future even before concrete horizons in that direction had opened up:

Nadine has borne six children with four men, and lost one girl and all of her three boys. Her two remaining daughters live with her ex-husband. The death of her last son has triggered a situation in which she is left with no children to care for, no stable relationship with the boy's father Didier (considered as her informal 'husband'), and no clear future perspectives. When she is offered a job as a servant in Douala, Cameroon's economic capital, Nadine gladly accepts and leaves the village behind to 'search her life' in the big city. Finding only hard working conditions and many poor lovers unwilling to assume a responsible relationship, however, she decides to return to her natal village nine months later. Here she detects that Didier has had relationships with two other women, but also that she has missed her period. She concludes that she must have conceived with a married man she used to go out with in Douala.

After an initial wish for an abortion of what would become a 'bastard child', Nadine decides to keep the pregnancy; this pregnant state might enable her to undergo treatment for the affliction (*iwō*) that she suspects caused her previous children's deaths.³⁰ At the same

time, this pregnancy might help her find a marriage somewhere in a city; now that gossip about her marital instability abounds in the village, Nadine would like to restore her honour through marrying a respected man elsewhere. This might at the same time prevent her child from being the 'bastard child' she initially feared it would become. The question is thus to whom to 'give' her pregnancy. Three men enter the stage: next to the biological father from Douala and her socially recognized husband in the village, she thinks of another promising candidate: the driver of the car she travelled with on her way back from Douala. As a man without a wife and with a formal job in the provincial capital, this driver quickly turned into one of Nadine's lovers worthy of imagining a shared future with – more than the two other men at this moment. For, Nadine contemplates, the man in Douala would never believe in her being pregnant; instead, 'he will only think that I want to eat [*bouffer*] his money'. A formal engagement with this married man is thus highly unlikely. Didier, on the other hand, has proven to be promiscuous and is moreover based in the village – a place that she seriously considers leaving now that it is associated with deception, child death, hard work, and gossip. She therefore concludes that, 'If the chauffeur wants to continue, I will tell him he should take me, including my pregnancy. But not now, because we just started and he will not believe this pregnancy is his. I have to wait a bit first, then reveal my pregnancy, and see what he decides'.

Starting her treatment itinerary while still contemplating about a possible father, Nadine is then told by an indigenous healer in the village that, to heal her affliction effectively, she needs the cooperation of the father of the pregnancy – which is assumed to be Didier. Due to his physical proximity and her desire to be treated, Nadine switches focus and tells Didier that the pregnancy she carries is his. Didier agrees to cooperate in the treatment. But when he later finds out that she conceived the pregnancy in Douala, he breaks all contact. With no other men in the direct neighbourhood to run to, and with the burden of shame and family curses caused by her capricious marital behaviour, Nadine decides for an abortion. Yet, after some failed abortion attempts, Didier begs her to keep the pregnancy, despite his ambivalence regarding his paternity. A future marriage with him is again envisaged and negotiated: Didier proposes to fully engage once a blood test on the newborn baby confirms his paternity; Nadine demands his future faithfulness and their relocation to the city.

However, when Didier traces several of Nadine's lovers on her mobile phone, his uncertainty about his paternity is exacerbated and he breaks all contact again. This, together with the subsequent curses Nadine receives from several family members, strengthens Nadine's wish to leave the village forever. When she coincidentally receives a phone call from the taxi driver, she immediately tells him she carries his pregnancy. The man is overwhelmed and asks her for time to reflect. In this undecided period I ask Nadine about her hopes for the future, whereupon she answers: 'The ball is still turning. My chance will fall wherever it falls. If it is with Didier, I will return there. But he knows my conditions; I decided not to work in the fields anymore and to go to the city instead. Even if he doesn't agree, I will leave. And if I succeed at the other side [i.e. with the driver], I will block him [i.e. Didier] for sure. It's very simple: if a man gives you a pregnancy, and you see that he's not well situated, but you see that another one is better off, you can balance them. So I balance the two and will see where it will end'.

Within a time-frame of only a few weeks, several opportunities and obstructions presented themselves to Nadine. She constantly adapted her ambitions with regard to fertility and marriage accordingly – without, however, losing sight of the bigger urban aspirations that she aimed to realize through this pregnancy.

While it has become clear that pregnancies might impede or enhance urban aspirations and be managed accordingly, this is not to say that women's reproductive decision-making is *a priori* calculated. Though some pregnancies may seem to be

strategically anticipated, many women do not make rational decisions or calculations about marriage and childbearing – at least not *before* becoming pregnant. Most of the stories of my informants show how things just happen without anticipation, how their own wishes or future visions are often unclear and inconsistent, or how their pregnancy-related projects are shaped only *after* conception by the decisions of their family members and partners.

Relatives influence the negotiations around sexuality and reproduction considerably. Even if they are located some distance away in the village, they often actively interfere in the reproductive affairs of their promising daughters, for whom certain future pathways had been anticipated. In line with their own needs and aspirations, they sometimes reject premarital pregnancies, while at other times they encourage them; they sometimes focus on the financial and marital duties of the father, while at other times they strategically align a child to their own family. Sophie's story shows that the same holds for parents-in-law, who may influence the marital choices and fertility wishes of their sons who have become 'big fish' – and thereby also those of their girlfriends and (potential) wives. Women's ambitions, negotiations, and decisions should therefore always be considered in the light of the social bodies and social capital established *before* and *during* the reproductive conjunctures at hand (see also Van der Sijpt, 2010b; Van der Sijpt, forthcoming-b).

This navigation is also influenced by the behaviour and intentions of male partners. Like their female counterparts, Gbigbil men might have multiple aspirations at the same time – contrary to the Gbigbil song in the epigraph which presents all men as only calculating for, and desirable to profit from, women's fertility, and contrary to patrilineal ideals which proclaim a persistent male desire for offspring. A pregnancy may be considered a burden by those who still want to 'search their lives', who lack financial means to raise the future child properly (since 'everything needs to be paid for in the city'), who have money but prefer to spend it on other things, or who do not feel like engaging with the woman who claims to be pregnant. Reluctance to acknowledge paternity may also derive from their recognition of women's manoeuvres with regard to motherhood and wifehood; after all, it is only the woman who knows for sure whose pregnancy she carries – and to whom she wants to 'give' it (see also Cornwall, 2007b, pp. 245-246). It is this worry that bothers all three appointed fathers in Nadine's story.

Confronted with a pregnancy of which they are not certain to be the father, or to want to be the father, men have several options: abandoning the pregnant woman, acknowledging the relationship, acknowledging the pregnancy, or acknowledging both. With no formalities established, no financial obligations yet fulfilled, and often even no internal stability of the relationship with their pregnant girlfriends, men are relatively free to decide what to do when they are appointed as future fathers. While this is the case for men with rural and urban aspirations alike, a study by Calvès (2000, p. 452) shows that this decision seems most related to both the desirability of conception and the

characteristics of the union – that is, men’s aspiration to have a child or not at a particular moment and the (in)formality of the relationship in which the pregnancy appears.³¹ Paternity is more likely to become contested by men with urban aspirations or in informal urban relationships – even if contestation also occurs in the village or, as Alain’s sudden misrecognition of Sophie’s pregnancy illustrates, after a considerable amount of time has been spent together and childbearing had become a common project.

Men who *do* explicitly aim to find (or keep) a suitable marriage partner and/or her children acknowledge that there is actually little that they can do to prevent ‘false fatherhood’. Some try to calculate the menstrual cycle of their wives or girlfriends as accurately as possible or use condoms in risky periods or relationships; in this light, it may not be surprising that urban Cameroonian men report a higher willingness to use a condom in their sexual relationships than do their female counterparts (Meekers & Klein, 2002a, 2002b).³² Others, like Nadine’s ‘husband’ Didier, threaten to conduct a blood test on the newborn baby – which they almost never do in practice. Still others, such as Sophie’s husband who rejoiced in the fact that his last daughter turned out to be ‘his picture’, rely on the ‘force of blood’ which will either show common physical traits between father and child (see also Chapter 2) or direct the latter to its biological genitor even years after birth. Finally, those who are desperate for children resign themselves to the fact that women have a final say in these affairs; since ‘the vagina doesn’t talk’, it is only the talk of the woman that counts. Baudouin, who returned to the village after several relationships with urban women who appeared to be infertile, explains:

The majority [of men] is very often just happy to follow the words of the woman: ‘He is the one who gave me this pregnancy’. And directly, you are proud to hear that this child belongs to you. Even if there are ten men... girls of these days ‘balance’ men. The one has a bit more means, the other is too poor. Even if it is the poor one who made her pregnant, she will say that it’s the other. And since we [men] are lonely, we are thirsty for children. Even if we have ten [children], we always want even one more. So when they come to tell you that ‘You have made me pregnant’, it always brings joy. You know that you have another child. Even if, in reality, it is not yours.

According to my informants, this pattern of ‘selective recognition and support’ (Calvès, 2000, p. 446), in which various options and degrees of paternal acknowledgment are possible, differs substantively from former times in which bride-price payments automatically ensured paternal rights over the children born in a union – even those conceived with another man outside of marriage. Once men had initiated their bride-price exchanges, all the children their wives would bear would by default belong to their lineage. ‘Bastard’ children, even if ranking lower socially, would still have a place of belonging in society (Calvès, 2000, p. 444). As one older male informant told me:

If your wife would suddenly be pregnant, you could never know whether it was your child. But that didn’t matter. Especially if there was a bride-price, every child that would be born would be your child. You would take it. We men didn’t have any problems with that. It is our child.

Nowadays, with the decrease of bride-price payments, and with several law reforms that disconnect legal partnership and paternity from monetary matrimonial exchanges³³, fatherhood needs to be explicitly acknowledged in marital unions which are not legally established – i.e. the majority of current Cameroonian conjugal relationships.³⁴ It has thus become more precarious and, as outlined above, contested – especially in urban affairs where men may have other projects than parenthood in mind. The conclusion for the *children* born in such unions is that ‘whether the parents have actually concluded a marriage is considerably less important than whether a man is willing to acknowledge fatherhood and to claim the social and economic responsibilities of that role’, as Bledsoe and Cohen (1993, p. 80) have observed. Indeed, according to Calvès (2000), paternal recognition is crucial in establishing the economic status, social identity, and access to wealth and inheritance of children born in unstable unions in Cameroon. Without any recognition, these children are more likely to be raised by their maternal grandparents or by their mothers, who, despite their urban ambitions, often lack formal employment or other sources of regular income. While the dependence of these children on their maternal family members is in some cases wished for, in many other cases it is not. Nadine’s insistence on finding a possible father out of fear of bearing another ‘bastard child’ proves that, even if *bâtards* are commonplace these days, the fate of these children are often as unsure and ambiguous as the (urban) relationships in which they were conceived.

It is within these ambiguities around partners, parents, and possible children that the meanings and management of pregnancy interruptions should be situated. The next section aims to do so; it explores how cases of interruption relate to the above described negotiations around the unborn foetus.

Foetal fights: neg(oti)ations around interruptions

The multiple stakes and ambitions that guide women’s reproductive navigation after conception are even more at play – and possibly altered again – when these pregnancies are interrupted. The following will demonstrate how such fertility interruptions exacerbate the suspicions that usually surround pregnancies within precarious urban relationships. At the same time, it will become clear how this heightened ambiguity may enable women to state their stakes and assure their aspirations in a more explicit way.

In post-conceptual periods in which reproductive decisions are rarely straightforward, interruptions might first of all appear as imagined *possibilities*. Apart from those instances in which abortion decisions are effectively made (discussed in the next chapter), women may *threaten* to interrupt their pregnancies for multiple reasons. First, it can be a way of putting more pressure on a man to engage; if he is not yet convinced to accept paternity, the prospect of the removal of the unborn foetus may persuade him to do so – either for the sake of the offspring or for the sake of the

relationship with the woman. In this sense, invocations of a possible abortion become a means to 'test' a partner's intentions. Yves, a male informant who was in the process of becoming a 'big fish' for many women, encountered such a situation. During one of our conversations, he received a phone call from a girlfriend, who told him that she had aborted the pregnancy she claimed to be his. After a long story about how the two of them had maintained an informal sexual relationship in urban hotels, he related:

At a certain point she called me to say that she was pregnant. From me. And if I wouldn't take her in the house, she would abort it. I told her, 'Do not abort, because that is risky and you could die'. But I told her as well that she couldn't come and live with me. I have a wife and four children and that's enough for me. I told her so. Because maybe it was just her way of binding me to her. Maybe she had become pregnant from another man and told me that it was me, because she wanted to marry me. Well, and now she just called to say that she has evacuated the pregnancy. She asked me [rhetorically] whether she could have really kept it, in this situation. Well, that's fine with me. Thank God that she succeeded without any problems.

Second, a woman's invocation of abortion may also be a tactic to receive money from a rich partner who seems from the outset *unwilling* to engage, or with whom she herself is reluctant to intensify the relationship. Whether or not this money is indeed used for an abortion is contingent on subsequent situations or reflections. The next chapter will show how my informant Laura, for instance, rather started prenatal consultations with the money she received. Men, in turn, also find ways to tactically negotiate the demands for abortion money by their pregnant partners. We have seen how Sophie's first boyfriend only gave this money in such an advanced stage of the pregnancy that doctors would surely refuse the abortion and start prenatal consultations instead. Both men and women can thus use the hypothetical option of pregnancy interruption to strengthen their stakes and pursue their projects within (and beyond) the ambiguous partner play. In this, they flexibly deploy existing embryological notions, which on the one hand consider a beginning pregnancy to contain only 'water water', but on the other hand acknowledge the gradual development of a human being (see Chapter 2). Shifting interpretations of what a pregnancy actually *is* inform negotiations of why it should be kept or 'evacuated', and of the implications for previous pathways, present partner plays, and future projects.

When such interruptions become an *actuality*, then, these questions become even more relevant since they determine the degree of *eventfulness* of the reproductive happening. In line with their particular projects, women and their surroundings can either downplay the interruption as a non-eventful 'late' or 'disturbed' period, or make it into an event in which causes and consequences become negotiated, and previous pathways reconsidered. The first option is often deployed when women fear that public knowledge of their pregnancy interruption would interrupt their wider urban ambitions – e.g., schooling that is financially supported by one's parents, or a relationship with a 'big fish' who seems longing for offspring. Especially if they have a mobile lifestyle and maintain volatile relationships that do not imply a constant co-presence of partner, co-wives, in-

laws, or relatives, these women, more than if they had (continuously) lived in the village, have more *possibilities* to hide and dismiss their blood loss – at least in the early stages of a pregnancy.

Sometimes fertility interruptions *cannot* or *should not* pass unnoticed. Once a pregnancy interruption is conceptualized as such, it becomes enmeshed in negotiations and explorations of possible causes. The aetiological repertoire is vast; people might invariably invoke the will of God, heavy work, abrupt body movements, numerous diseases (both ‘indigenous’ and ‘biomedical’), malediction, the administration of indigenous remedies (by themselves or by malevolent others such as jealous co-wives or female competitors), or the manifestation of (their own or others’) witchcraft powers (see further Van der Sijpt, 2007; Van der Sijpt & Notermans, 2010).³⁵ These different naturalistic and personalistic aetiological categories imply various degrees of culpability and possibilities of accusation; they therefore allow for a flexible idiom that can be differently employed at different moments. Depending on the social situations and personal aspirations, women whose pregnancy has been interrupted can turn the attention either to something negligible (‘work’ or ‘the women’s worm’), to an abstract agent (‘God’ or ‘the witches’), or to specific people with whom social relations have been distorted (‘my jealous co-wife’ or ‘my mother who cursed me’).

Such tactical and situational aetiological allotments are even more warranted since pregnancy interruptions raise implicit questions of one’s *own* intentionality. Many informants, when asked what could possibly interrupt a pregnancy, immediately stressed the point made by Solange:

Most of the miscarriages are in fact provoked by the woman herself. She thinks, ‘I will take remedies which will provoke the child to leave’. And it will leave indeed. Instead of saying that it was her who has provoked, she is afraid and will say, ‘I had a miscarriage’. Whereas it was provoked by herself. That is really an aspect that you have to take into account when people say that it happened accidentally.

What becomes clear is that the dichotomy of spontaneous and induced pregnancy interruptions that dominates the existing literature on reproductive loss is in practice rather blurred. Spontaneous interruptions are often suspected to be provoked; induced abortions are often presented as spontaneous; direct attempts to terminate a pregnancy might fail but bring about interruptions later in pregnancy or in a woman’s reproductive career; or, conversely, well-intended practices during pregnancy might unexpectedly lead to its interruption. The question of intentionality, though considered extremely relevant in cases of pregnancy interruption, is often complex and indeterminate for outsiders and even for the aborting women themselves. To portray oneself as a passive sufferer of external causes of loss may thus be a woman’s tactic to alleviate this ambiguity and to divert attention from this possible intentional side of pregnancy interruptions.

While such aetiological manipulations happen everywhere, they become of specific relevance in urban zones, where pregnancies are from the outset surrounded by

more ambiguity and mistrust. Since fertility is often not the primary aim in relationships, since multiple alternative aspirations and loyalties are present, and since abortion methods are generally more easily known and accessed in town, the possibility that an interruption might in fact be induced by the woman herself is, if not explicitly acknowledged, always implicitly suspected. This is not to say that women necessarily abort their pregnancies more frequently when they have urban aspirations and lifestyles than when they do not; rather, it demonstrates the degree of distrust characterizing interactions between partners who find themselves in a zone of multiple horizons. This distrust, inspired by the uncertainty about a partner's reproductive goals, blurs the question of intentionality even more; when *pregnancies* are not clearly (known to be) 'wanted' or 'unwanted', their *interruptions* certainly occupy a grey zone between 'wanted' (i.e. induced) and 'unwanted' (i.e. spontaneous) extremes. Reproductive interruptions thus confirm *and* exacerbate the distrustful ambiguity that surrounds fertility matters in urban zones offering alternative aspirations to men and women alike.

This heightened ambiguity is not always disadvantageous. It can offer both partners room to negotiate their stakes in the social situation at hand. While the *acknowledgement* of this grey zone makes threats before possible interruptions more effective, its *actuality* afterwards creates room for the manipulation of others' suspicion or for the tactical appointment of aetiological explanations. The indeterminacy of the causes and consequences of pregnancy interruption makes the vital conjuncture around the event one in which many outcomes are possible and different directions can be taken. It is here that women in particular have space to bring its course in line with their aspirations – urban, marital, reproductive, or other. As Piot (1993) has argued in his study among the Kabre in Togo, ambiguity, as part of a cultural repertoire in daily life, allows for individual strategizing. In agreement with Comaroff and Roberts (1981), who write about the dynamics in Tswana disputes, Piot states:

It is precisely the open-endedness of the normative order that facilitates, indeed encourages, individual strategizing and mobility in the everyday. Playing off of the ambiguity inherent in experience, Tswana disputants construct competing interpretations of events and thereby attempt to enhance their positions in hierarchies of power and wealth (1993, p. 356).

However, not everybody can turn this ambiguity to his or her hand; certain forms of capital and other conjunctural circumstances define which options are available or attractive at certain points in time. The last section of this chapter will explore Sophie's room for manoeuvre, and relates this to the pathways and projects that she encountered and envisaged in life.

Ambiguous ambitions: Sophie's experiences reconsidered

While the previous sections have depicted possible marital and reproductive options for Gbigbil women with urban aspirations, particular forms of fertility management can only

be fully comprehended when situated within the specific vital conjunctures and webs of relationships in which they occur. Contrary to a common depiction of urban women – or women with urban aspirations, for that matter – as individuals having required a certain independence in (reproductive) knowledge and decision-making, and therefore being predictable in their behaviour,³⁶ I agree with Bledsoe et al. (1999) that also for them ‘a certain fertility dynamic has been set up well before the women themselves take any reproductive decisions’. Which fertility dynamic had been set up for Sophie, then, and how can we make sense of her navigation of the different reproductive conjunctures in her life?

As Sophie was born as the third child of the fourth – and youngest – wife of her father, many siblings (from different mothers) had preceded her; most of them had already borne children as well. Motherhood was therefore not presented as a priority for Sophie; since the *quartier* was already full of descendants and her relatively wealthy and educated father aspired to alternative futures for his children, she was neither expected to bear children for her own lineage, nor obliged to quickly do so for a family-in-law. Sophie’s mobile lifestyle, exposure to urban influences, and attendance of different schools during the years in which she was fostered by her sister further enhanced an image of future womanhood inspired by ambitions beyond those of rural production and reproduction. Motherhood and wifeness were thus not only potentially postponed, but also made part of a larger repertoire of projects. This amalgam of aspirations offered Sophie room to negotiate different ambitions and interpretations regarding the role of fertility and marriage at certain points in her life.

Her two premarital pregnancies were associated with very different interpretations of motherhood. Initially, the pregnancy conceived in the informal ‘friendship’ with the father of her first child was anxiously equated to motherhood and marriage with a *va-nu-pieds* – both of which were considered final obstructions to a still hoped for future educational path. The failure of Sophie’s abortion attempt and the influence of her parents, however, led to a reconceptualization of the implications of this pregnancy; stressing the temporary character of pregnancy and nursing, all of them rather minimized the consequences of childbirth for other future projects. In the face of alternative aspirations they concluded that now was not the time to become a (socially recognized and enacted) mother or wife: neither the present circumstances nor future images suited that. ‘Pregnancy is one thing, motherhood another’ (Paxson, 2004, p. 123).

Another notion of motherhood suddenly appeared when Sophie conceived with her husband-to-be Alain. Despite her initial abortion considerations, the wish for children of both Alain and his family made her reconsider the value of this pregnancy in the absence of any other hopeful horizons for the future. After all, with his salaried job as a teacher, Alain was a good ‘fish’ to catch. The pregnancy suddenly turned into a means to bind an influential man to Sophie and enable her to still attain a form of urban respectability – a project that had become increasingly endangered by the sickness and

financial shortcomings of her father. With the willingness of her in-laws to initiate bride-price payments and the approval of her family, Sophie went into marriage after the birth of her second daughter. This is not to say that her previous ambitions related to educational and personal development had disappeared; rather, these were put in a different time-frame. Instead of postponing motherhood for the sake of education, this unanticipated marriage situation made Sophie postpone her educational ambitions for the sake of motherhood. Her priority was now to give some children to this 'big fish' who seemed desperate for offspring, in the hope that it would offer her marital respect and financial security (especially through a marriage certificate), as well as the possibility to continue schooling afterwards.

These ambitions were altered again when conjugal conditions worsened and promises of urban respectability (as the only wife of a 'big fish') and financial comfort (through a legal marriage) vanished. Anger about a sudden unfaithfulness and the neglect of expected duties by her husband pushed Sophie to take 'revenge' by also depriving Alain of what he expected from her: children. Her repeated stance that 'I don't refuse to give children, but I won't give them in such a situation' transforms a married woman's duty to bear children for her husband into a *conditional* one. Even if the timing and her social status as a wife would allow for, and even encourage, motherhood, the mere *context* of marriage was not enough to make Sophie unconditionally adhere to the childbearing norm; the *content* of the relationship – suddenly characterized by distrust and disappointment – also mattered to her. The possibility to make such a firm fertility-related resolution seems based upon several forms of capital that she possessed. After all, she had borne some healthy children for which she knew Alain was longing, she had found alternative lovers who could financially maintain her, she had a safe haven in the village where her mother and sisters would allow her to come and 'take rest' whenever she wanted, and she had an educational basis which would, even in the absence of a marriage, allow her to search for employment and thus an alternative source of urban honour.

Yet, over time, most of these alternatives seemed less advantageous than anticipated. Acknowledging that support from her own kin had become limited since her widowed mother resided with her own family, that relationships with outside lovers were not able to give her the long-term prospects that she could find 'inside' a marriage, and that she could only draw on her dactylographic knowledge if she owned a typewriter, Sophie turned her fertility into a horizon again: as her co-wife had remained childless, conception would revive Alain's (and his parents') interest in her and assure her re-entrance into marriage and her restoration of urban respectability. Such sudden changes in perspective show the importance and complexity of conceptions about the 'right' timing of childbearing, motherhood, and wifeness, and how these are negotiable and changing – contingent on previous pathways, present circumstances, and projects for the future. While a similar argument has also been forwarded by Johnson-Hanks (2002b,

2005, 2006, 2007) with regard to entry into motherhood and wifehood, Sophie's case shows that the 'indeterminacy and innovation' of which Johnson-Hanks speaks extend *beyond* initial childbearing and marriage. Indeed, since, according to Johnson-Hanks, it is women's aspirations that inform the appropriateness and appreciation of pregnancies, it is not surprising that women with multiple but uncertain urban aspirations – which might switch to rural projects again at any point in time – constantly shift their notions of the right timing for motherhood and wifehood throughout their entire life course.

Shifting fertility aspirations also underlie Sophie's management of her two pregnancy interruptions. These happened in two completely different social situations. In the first instance, Sophie had been the centre of attention of her promising husband and in-laws, who seemed able to offer her a comfortable urban lifestyle. Becoming pregnant in this situation was desirable; a pregnancy interruption instead raised suspicions of induced abortion – especially since everybody remembered the initial conflict between Sophie and Alain's childbearing intentions. In order to appease the distrust that now characterized the relationship with this 'big fish' who seemed worthy of clinging to, it was in Sophie's interest to externalize the cause of her misfortune by exploiting a 'neutral' aetiological discourse regarding the 'women's worm'. After showing her 'goodwill' and 'innocence' by killing the worm and conceiving again, the incident was soon disregarded; 'people didn't consider it too much, since it was a pregnancy of two months which contains only water'.

In the second case of pregnancy interruption, the situation was almost the reverse: Alain had turned his attention to another wife and no longer cared about Sophie's childbearing capacities; he neglected Sophie and her family financially; Sophie's ambitions of a future formal marriage had been destroyed by the coming of the new co-wife; and becoming pregnant was something that she initially had not hoped for. Her pregnancy interruption triggered an evaluation of – and was also interpreted in terms of – unmet expectations and rejected reciprocities by Alain. It touched on Sophie's marital insecurities as well as her reproductive (in)competence in the current conjugal competition. Not surprisingly, Sophie externalized the cause of the interruption and depicted herself as a sufferer again, but with totally different connotations: simplistic, naturalistic explanations – like the 'typhoid' diagnosis she received in the hospital – were no longer adequate but were replaced, or at least complemented, by personalistic accounts of the co-wife's witchcraft practices. These accusations and Sophie's active search for remedial counter-attacks show how the event became a trigger for Sophie to publicly denounce the insecure marital situation and to reassert her ambitions. What was at stake now was the preservation of the union with, and loyalty of, a 'big fish' – the only feasible horizon towards a restoration of urban honour.

Together with a shifting aetiology, notions of embryology shifted in such a way that this second incident became much more consequential. This time, what was lost in early pregnancy was no longer negligibly described as 'only water', but was considered a

potential human being and even Sophie's childbearing capacity in general. Yet, her repeated utterance of 'I will not bear any children anymore' remains highly ambiguous: it could indicate an undesirable consequence of affliction as well as a conscious decision to stop childbearing. Maintaining this ambiguity around the intentionality of her interruption allowed Sophie to strategically shift positions and power relations – sometimes lamenting a lasting dependence on others in marital and reproductive domains, while at other times asserting her 'fertility halt' to be a deliberate way of punishing her husband. Contrary to Yvette, who, in her deprived situation as described in the previous chapter, tried to downplay all ambiguity connected to her fertility interruptions, Sophie turned this ambiguity into a resource. Indirect allusions to induced abortion strengthened her demand for marital responsibility from her husband and in-laws; they were in turn strengthened by the presence of supportive family members as well as a record of successful childbearing and conjugal dedication.

Sophie's pregnancies and their interruptions were pervaded by changing and sometimes even contradicting feelings, rationalizations, and ambitions – even if her wider project of living in the city remained intact. The presence of alternatives and of different forms of social support and capital offered Sophie freedom for these interpretational shifts. Pregnancies turned from unwanted to wanted or vice versa; interruptions were sources of grief or relief. In the face of multiple, quickly changing, and often ambiguous relationships and horizons, Sophie's reproductive decisions were indeed 'bets' on an uncertain pathway to urban respectability.

Conclusions: negotiating hopes and horizons

This chapter has shed light on the sexual and reproductive navigations of Gbigbil women who, at some point in their lives, aim for a future in the city. In the face of alternative ambitions such as education or employment, the village ethics of production and reproduction cease to offer the only framework of respectability. Rather, formal engagements and childbearing are postponed, while premarital sexual encounters proliferate. I have argued that the volatility and pursued profitability of these relationships create a mutual distrust between men (especially the promising ones, called 'big fish') and women, while at the same time they may lay the basis for a future marriage – which, after all, remains an *ultimate* project in life.

Within these ambiguous relationships in which both partners have multiple ambitions, fertility is often a 'bet' that might either disrupt or stabilize an urban affair. Crucial in this bet is the notion of the 'right timing' of reproductive events. This notion is in itself contingent upon previous pathways and present projects, and subject to post-conceptual negotiation with many social others. As a result, pregnancies are rarely clearly 'wanted' or 'unwanted'; rather, fertility desirability is *temporal* (i.e. a pregnancy might be initially wanted and unwanted afterwards, or vice versa); *contradictory* (i.e. a

pregnancy might be wanted for one purpose and not for another); or *situational* (i.e. a pregnancy might be wanted with one man and unwanted with another). Contrary to what family planning campaigns and posters like the one shown in Figure 8 (targeting young educated women) presume, fertility desires are never stable, but – especially in unstable partnerships and during unstable pathways – change flexibly in accordance with one’s hopes and horizons, and the negotiations thereof during reproductive conjunctures.

In the process of such pregnancy negotiations, the fate of a foetus becomes explicitly bargained – *foetal* bargains that might turn out to be *fatal* bargains, for the foetus or for imagined urban futures. The ‘fall’ of the unborn foetus can be either the *consequence* of relational uncertainties (in case of provoked interruptions), or the *cause* of further ambiguities (and possibly the end of an urban relationship) since it raises suspicions with regard to women’s fertility desires. As the intentionality behind interruptions often remains indeterminate – especially when women (are known to) have unclear fertility aims or clear alternative aspirations – a strict divide between spontaneous and induced loss becomes blurred. This blurriness not only follows from, but also allows for, women’s tactical deployment of existing aetiological notions, as well as other opportunities, to assure certain stakes. Contrary to the story of Yvette in the previous chapter, Sophie’s case has shown how reproduction and interruptions can turn into opportunities to denounce certain circumstances and assure individual aspirations – especially when women possess different forms of capital such as a respectful background in the village, education, employment, childbearing capacities, or living children.

As previously stated, the distinction between this and the previous chapter is not one between different types of women; rather, both chapters have focused on different projects that women may pursue at different points in their lives, and the ways in which these projects are at stake when previous pathways possibly derail due to pregnancy interruptions. Both chapters have shown the amalgam of horizons and new aspirations that may appear in vital conjunctures happening on different pathways, and have analysed *why* women might prefer to explore one or the other. The next chapter will continue to focus on this reproductive navigation, but with a different question in mind: it sets out to describe *how* women make, negotiate, and justify their navigational choices within the particular webs of social relationships in which they are embedded. It will show that, irrespective of their particular trajectories and choices, women often have a common way of portraying their projects to those that surround them – with paradoxical effects.