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

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## 5. HANGING UNDERWEAR AND FALLING MANGOES: ON IDIOMS OF DISTRESS, DESTINY, AND DECISION-MAKING

*Today, all or almost all girls can go to school. So they think, they believe, that they will be better able to direct their destiny. That they will be able to choose, finally tell men what they never could or dared to tell them. (...) But they just don't understand that that won't work.*

- Marie-Félicité Ebokea, 'Femmes fragmentées' (1994, pp. 25-26, my translation)

*There exists a contradiction between the theory that women have no voice and the fact that some of them 'speak'...*

- Philippe Laburthe-Tolra, 'Mínlaaba' (1981, p. 900, my translation)

**T**he previous accounts of Yvette, Sophie, and many others have shown the various ways in which Gbigbil women manage their reproductive interruptions within different social contexts and with different aspirations in mind. The particular make-up of previous pathways and of possible projects has been shown to affect the navigation of vital conjunctures around pregnancy interruption. This chapter aims to look *beyond* those particularities and shed light on some general discursive devices that women deploy in their reproductive navigations – irrespective of which direction they want their pathways to take, which hopeful horizons they wish to explore, or which personal projects they aim to pursue. It explores not *why* they make particular choices, but *how* they go about framing, asserting, and justifying these reproductive decisions within the social worlds of which they are part. As such, this chapter aims to unravel broader patterns of interaction between individual women and their social surroundings, and the ways in which these interactions evolve around or even 'optimize the occurrence of promising novelties' (Guyer, 2005, p. 379) during reproductive conjunctures.

Central to this chapter are the shared idioms of distress, destiny, and decision-making that women draw upon during their reproductive navigations.<sup>1</sup> These local perceptions and portrayals of suffering and agency not only shed light on the common pool of navigational tactics deployed by women with different reproductive experiences and aspirations; they also question theorized assumptions *about* this navigation – and the suffering and agency that supposedly direct it. First of all, they question the application of the suffering-agency divide to forms of interrupted fertility: namely, the association of

spontaneous loss with suffering and induced abortions with agency. Second, they challenge prevailing discourses of modernization and empowerment, which portray rural women as merely powerless and their urban counterparts – or, those with urban ambitions, for that matter – as powerful.

The stories of a village *mama* experiencing secondary infertility and of a young, educated, and urban-centred woman attempting to abort several pregnancies serve as a starting point for this chapter, because they would, according to the above assumptions, represent clear instances of suffering and agency respectively. However, I will throw a different light on this supposition by illustrating how both women use images of power and powerlessness in a similar way – despite their different pathways, pregnancy-related experiences, and projects. Further, as the two cases could be considered two extremes on a ‘reproductive continuum’, the analysis will form a starting point to generate more *general* insights about reproductive navigation and the ways in which (inter)personal dynamics affect its outcome – something that will be discussed more elaborately in the conclusion of this dissertation.

### **Hanging underwear: mama Rosie’s story**

Mama Rosie is one of the most prominent *mamas* in Asung; it is difficult for both outsiders and insiders to ignore this woman with her heavy body and loud voice, who lives right in the centre of the village. Her slow pace caused by painful and rheumatic knees stands in shrill contrast with her quick uptake of, and eager participation in, multiple activities in the village. As the *présidente* of the women’s association *Seying Ining* (‘We search our lives’) she is the first one to inform and organize women around crucial events in Asung and its surroundings;<sup>2</sup> as an *agent de santé* she is a regular visitor of all households in order to measure and promote mother and child health;<sup>3</sup> as an in-married wife in Asung she is renowned for her performances during village palavers and funeral ceremonies;<sup>4</sup> and as my ‘adoptive mother’ she offered me delicious meals and secret knowledge on a daily basis. My regular presence in her household allowed me to witness first-hand her personality, problems, and actions; our frequent conversations introduced me to the circumstances, worries, and decisions that had happened over the past fifty-two years of her life.

Unlike her complaints regarding her current marital situation, mama Rosie’s stories about her past are pervaded by good memories of the polygamy she was born into, in a Maka village some forty kilometres from Asung. As the third child of the second of her father’s three wives, she grew up in an extended family in which ‘you could not know who was the mother of which child, because no distinctions were made’. Things changed, however, after her father died, when mama Rosie was eight years old. Her mother left the marriage and remarried soon afterwards. Only the first wife – taken through levirate (widow inheritance) by her brother-in-law – stayed in the compound,

taking care of the thirteen children of her deceased husband. The resulting 'suffering', as mama Rosie calls it, induced this *maratre* (the co-wife of her mother) to write a letter to her former co-wife to convince her to come back and take care of her own five children, amongst whom mama Rosie was the only girl. Life became good again for mama Rosie; with not only her mother(s) but also many older brothers around, she was well taken care of and sent to primary school and the Catholic *école ménagère* – although with a serious delay because of the afore-mentioned familial problems.<sup>5</sup>

It was only at the age of seventeen that mama Rosie started to menstruate. Freed from her worries about the absence of a normal menstrual cycle, she now initiated a sexual relationship with a primary school teacher who had been pursuing her for some time. After she had 'started to like the taste of it', as mama Rosie smilingly tells me, she neglected her schooling and engaged with Etienne, the son of the village catechist. The true 'love relationship' which developed between them made him initiate bride-price payments, whereupon she moved into his house. 'I thought that this was the man whom God had given to me', mama Rosie admits with some regret in her voice. However, Etienne's mother, who argued that it took too long for mama Rosie to conceive with her son, opposed the relationship and proposed an albino girl who had already given birth elsewhere. This proposal was met with resistance; Etienne fled the village by joining the army, while mama Rosie's family members came to take their daughter – now exposed to the bad behaviour of her mother-in-law – back home. Nevertheless, the two lovers continued to write and occasionally meet in secret.

During Etienne's absences, mama Rosie engaged in sexual relationships with two teachers at the same time, Bernard and David. She conceived with Bernard at the age of twenty-one and rejoiced in the fact that, four years after the onset of menstruation, she had finally become pregnant. Bernard, however, left the village for a position elsewhere soon after mama Rosie had discovered her missed period. Etienne also put an end to their secret relationship as soon as he detected the pregnancy, and took another wife who turned out to be mama Rosie's maternal aunt – despite the claim of his mother that he must be the father and should take mama Rosie back into marriage. Although this marriage proposal was explicitly declined by mama Rosie, now that her kin resided in his house, the claim of Etienne's paternity was not. 'What could I say? Since we are in the same village, they could do wrong to my child if I would have said that it was not his. It is only God who knew to whom the child belonged'. Since the biological father had disappeared and Etienne was engaged in a new marriage, mama Rosie decided to also tell her other lover David that he was the father. 'I had to cling to somebody who could endure me with my pregnancy'. David was willing to engage and came with the layette after the birth of mama Rosie's son. His marriage proposal was nonetheless again declined by mama Rosie; 'I didn't want to marry anymore, because my first husband had deceived me and the father of my child had deceived me as well'.

Thus disappointed by men, mama Rosie started to focus on her work in the fields, petty trade, the care of her son, and her work as a housekeeper at the Catholic missionary station in Abong Mbang, a town some fifty kilometres away. Here, she continued her choral and catechist activities in the Catholic Church that she had initiated at a younger age, while she also earned a bit of money. 'I provided for my own soap and didn't think of men anymore. What can men offer me more than what I offer myself with my own hands?' Nevertheless, three years later, papa Gerie convinced her to come into marriage in Asung. He regularly visited his classificatory brother who worked as the *Chef de Poste Agricole* in mama Rosie's village, and was a descendant of the rather influential Bibakung family in Asung – thus known to and recommended by mama Rosie's aunt, who had gone into marriage in Asung. Having one son and one daughter from a deceased wife, as well as two daughters with a wife 'who showed small weaknesses in her habits', papa Gerie was searching for a new wife 'who would be able to cook for me', as he recalls to me later. After some doubt was removed when papa Gerie agreed to take care of her son and to transfer presentational gifts to her family, mama Rosie finally decided to 'go and see'.

Her arrival was met by the enormous resistance of her co-wife mama Cathérine. Mama Cathérine, heavily supported by her mother-in-law who originated from the same natal village and who had arranged her marriage with papa Gerie, accused mama Rosie of using indigenous remedies to take away her husband's love and her own position as a first wife. Many public judgments ensued in which papa Gerie's influential and respected older brother Albert – functioning as advisor (*conseiller*) and deputy mayor (*adjoint maire*) at the municipality of Bélabo – tried to ease the conflicts between mama Rosie on the one hand, and mama Cathérine and his mother on the other. Both in these *assises* and in her conversations with me, mama Rosie portrayed herself as a good-willing daughter-in-law who passively suffered the whims of her co-wife and in-laws. Her fertility problems reinforced this image of suffering:

My problem is a bit difficult to understand. I entered menopause at the age of twenty-nine, after four years of marriage. Before this menopause, I didn't feel any pain in my belly. Nothing. But then my menstruation suddenly stopped. You should have seen my breasts! The milk was even flowing. One would say that I was pregnant. Mama Cathérine started to fear that if I would bear a child for her husband, she would lose her place. She started to talk everywhere. But the pregnancy didn't come out [*la grossesse ne sortait pas*]. Only the breasts. People mocked with me and especially my co-wife's family accused me of inventing a pregnancy. Others suspected me of having aborted the pregnancy. I went to the hospital in Bertoua. They injected things to induce my period. When it didn't come they told me to wait a bit longer; they were not sure it was a pregnancy. I even went for an ultrasound in Ngaoundéré [capital of the Adamaoua Province]. They told me that I don't have a problem, that I should normally menstruate. They advised me to visit the traditional healers, because this was not at their level. And the traditional healers said that it is mama Cathérine who has blocked my menstruation. That she has taken my underwear stained with menstruation blood and attached it somewhere through witchcraft, so that I would not conceive anymore. That she is afraid that her husband wouldn't pay attention to her anymore once I would bear children. Really, I suffered a lot. But what could I do? I was only lucky because [my in-laws]

have seen how I had first given birth. So I was not sterile. I arrived here when my child was three years old. Of course this didn't mean that I shouldn't conceive from papa Gerie. But people couldn't really talk about me.

Whether in-laws and villagers *did* talk negatively about mama Rosie's childlessness or not at that time remains unclear; but surely mama Cathérine was put in a bad light by the accusations of different *marabouts* and mama Rosie. According to the latter, the accounts of hanging underwear were even confirmed by villagers who had seen her co-wife visit local healers to 'attach remedies' – something which was eventually publicly confessed by mama Cathérine.<sup>6</sup> Mama Rosie thereupon stopped searching for treatments, since nothing had ever worked and her husband had reassured her that he could not refuse her because of her childlessness:

I told my husband that I couldn't search anymore. I leave everything up to God. My life is in His hands. If it's God who made it stop, I will endure. If it's my co-wife, God will judge her. Because God himself has wanted people to be fertile and to multiply, so it should not be blocked by others. But since I had love for my husband and he took care of me... If I took the decision that I would make remedies to kill her, these remedies would not only kill her, but a lot of innocent people as well. I have been baptized and I cannot kill. I have love for God. And I have a heart of pardon.

This heart of pardon was, however, questioned by many outsiders, who were prone to recall the serious problems mama Rosie caused when papa Gerie took a third wife a few years later. Many stories recount how mama Rosie wanted to kill this co-wife with a machete and was sent back to her family – after years of marriage that had in fact *always* been pervaded by struggles and fights. Mama Rosie, who had initially hidden this incident from me, admitted the case when I asked her about it; but rather than elaborating on the exact cause of the separation, she focused on the reunion with her husband one year later – interpreting his demand for reconciliation as a sign of her own worth and indispensability within her family-in-law and the wider village. Encouraged by her relatives and this idea of personal significance, she had firmly decided to 'regain my place in marriage and never leave again'.

Indeed, her immediate accusation of harassment by mama Cathérine and the new co-wife, both before and during her absence, helped her to re-establish herself; it eventually led to the departure of the third wife, as well as papa Gerie's refusal to have sexual intercourse with mama Cathérine – who had just given birth to her fifth child – for the rest of his life. The situation improved for mama Rosie; after some time, papa Gerie even married her officially. Who exactly initiated the request for a formal marriage – papa Gerie, mama Rosie, or mama Rosie's brother – and whether mama Cathérine also obtained a marriage certificate, remains contested. According to mama Rosie, it was papa Gerie who wanted to consolidate their union and, in order to prevent problems, proposed a formal marriage to his first wife as well.<sup>7</sup> However, in contrast to mama Rosie's own relatives, who considered the *acte de mariage* as a source of security for their daughter

who had remained childless in this marriage, the family of mama Cathérine had refused to sign the certificate as long as the bride-price for their fertile daughter was unpaid – thus leaving mama Rosie ‘the only wife in the household with a marriage certificate’.

Although the lack of an *acte* for mama Rosie’s co-wife is denied by papa Gerie and mama Cathérine herself – both claiming that a marriage certificate *does* exist – what is clear is that, over time, mama Rosie’s position in the village and family-in-law solidified, while mama Cathérine’s condition gradually degraded to a situation which was openly pitied by many villagers. Looking dirty and angry, walking barefoot, dressed in old rags, never going to the fields, rarely preparing food, and always carrying around her mentally retarded granddaughter who was allegedly ‘spoilt’ by witches, she was said to ‘have no voice anymore’ and believed by some to have been mystically ‘destroyed’ by mama Rosie. Although she did not directly invoke suspicions of her co-wife’s witchcraft herself, mama Cathérine acknowledged her downfall when I succeeded in talking with her about her current marriage – which was often impossible due to the physical presence of, or my symbolic association with, mama Rosie. Somewhat guardedly, she declared:

I don’t like it. I had everything. When he was a driver of the Ministry of Justice, my husband wasn’t poor like he is now. When a second wife comes to spoil the marriage, it is never good. But there are already children and I wanted children. Rather than to leave, I stay. People would say I’m not even here. I only watch everything with my eyes, I take care of my children, and wait for my grandchildren. You need patience in polygamy. If another woman enters and you see that she has a high heart [*un coeur haut*], you should only lower [*abaisser*] your own heart. You should stay calm while the other speaks loudly. It doesn’t make sense to insert your own mouth as well. Only patience can create concord.

Others admitted more openly that my ‘adoptive mother’ was considered a great witch in the village – for many reasons. First of all, mama Rosie’s lack of children and absence of a normal menstrual cycle were considered suspect; ‘maybe it is because her witchcraft eats all her blood inside’, some informants speculated. Second, mama Rosie’s ‘power to speak’ while she had rendered her co-wife mute must have been a result of her occult powers. Third, papa Gerie’s preference for his infertile second wife over his fertile first wife must have been engendered by the former’s malevolent use of remedies. And finally, even my daily interactions with her were interpreted by some as a sign of the mystical powers she had exercised over me. Mama Rosie never contested this powerful image, or the fact that her co-wife was worse off than herself; she just explained it in a completely different way:

I always knew that God would punish my co-wife. And there she is now, punished by God. It is difficult for her to even have five francs or one piece of soap. For more than five years, she hasn’t been working in the fields. And I, I help myself. Even if I’m ill, I go to the fields. It is me who feeds her children every day. And these children come to me as well; they fetch water, they search for wood, they do everything for me. I leave everything up to God. But I know I also have this power which my family-in-law gave to me. The women who firstly arrived as wives in this family have a lot of power because they are the eldest. They are able to give me respect and dignity and power if they want. With their own power they can tell me, ‘I was the

first to arrive here and I give you my power to govern'. That's what they did. They appointed me as a president of the women's association. They gave me a power which makes all people listen to me when I speak. And next to these women, there is my brother-in-law Albert. When I arrived here, I gave him a lot of respect. I always gave him the first products of my field [tjɔ̃ŋ].<sup>8</sup> When I did this, he gave me 1,000 francs and told me, 'Even if I die, you will always govern my *quartier*'. So that's why, even if there were problems with my husband, Albert always wanted me to stay and blamed my co-wives. Because he had already appointed me as the governor of his *quartier*. It followed from my good behaviour. Albert always said that I am the one who helps to raise the children. I am hospitable to the visitors. I have good habits. I prepare a lot of food. The whole family eats. So I am a wife of the family. And it is the work that you do in front of the people and your husband that makes a marriage and that makes you a woman. Even if you don't bear children.

Thus confirmed by official and unofficial acknowledgments, but also contested by many villagers, mama Rosie's powerful position had always been surrounded by ambiguity. The sudden death in 2007 of her thirty year old son, who had lived with his biological father Bernard in a coastal city ever since Bernard had come to claim his child, exacerbated this insecurity. 'Formerly, I knew that if somebody insulted me, my child was alive and would come and defend me at a certain point. But now, even if somebody wants to hit me, who will respond for me in the place of my son?' That there was much more to it than only physical defence became clear to me during a chat with my informant Laura, her father, and her blind uncle (a preacher of the Jehovah's Witnesses) one afternoon. While discussing general problems of polygyny, these neighbours and classificatory brothers of papa Gerie started to denounce mama Rosie's behaviour as they had witnessed and interpreted it over time:

*Father:* Their marriage certificate was even signed in secrecy after mama Rosie had asked for it herself. Imagine! And afterwards, papa Gerie said that, since his own children do not [officially] belong to him, mama Rosie's son will be his heir.

*Laura:* And now the child is dead.

*Uncle:* A deception created by God. God has seen that if He would leave things to happen, it would end very badly.

*Laura:* God doesn't forget anybody. You do your things and think you have won, but you don't know what will happen to you later.

*Uncle:* To the contrary, you will lose.

*Laura:* She has lost. She doesn't even have any grandchildren. Mama Cathérine's children will stay with the wealth of their father. Mama Rosie wanted to take this, but she hasn't succeeded.

*Uncle:* Rosie doesn't even have any right to speak if papa Gerie dies.

*Laura:* She really doesn't. Government is government; family is family. The family will decide. And the government cannot do anything at this level. They don't know anything; they can only hold a pen and write. But we, here in the village, we know everything. Who will accept her?

*Father:* A woman who leaves her own village to come and dominate another village...

*Uncle:* It's the force of remedies! She is a bad demon – a real Satan.

*Laura:* And that's how it is with many people who say they love God. People who are frequently in the church, are often the greatest witches. We're afraid of her. And therefore, she's all alone. Eke.



Like many other villagers, these three neighbours pointed to mama Rosie's increased insecurity with regard to her inheritance rights. Now that mama Cathérine had one son and mama Rosie had none, the latter would, even with a marriage certificate that she claimed her co-wife did not have, possibly encounter problems upon her husband's death. The recent deaths of all of papa Gerie's siblings, as well as his eldest son, made the question of inheritance even more pressing, and radically altered the prospects and positions of both co-wives. To be sure, mama Rosie was both literally and symbolically one of the biggest *mamas* in the village now; surrounded by many foster children, namesakes, and people demanding her advice during my evening meals in her *hangar*, she would proudly state that she was 'the mother of everybody' or would be called 'my wife of *ambiance*' by papa Gerie. However, whether this *ambiance* will continue after his death, is something 'only God knows'.



In many ways, mama Rosie's story reveals dynamics and contingencies that have been discussed in the previous chapters – with her particular pathways and projects directing her particular reproductive and marital decisions. But the way in which she *talks about* and *justifies* these decisions is more than only particular; it also appears in the narratives of many other Gbigbil women – even those with more room for reproductive decision-making or with alternative (urban) ambitions. All of them invoke suffering and agency in similar ways; mama Rosie's story is, contrary to what one would maybe expect, not more about suffering than theirs is about agency. There seems to be a common narrative framework that is drawn upon by women with different social and educational backgrounds, different reproductive experiences, and different ambitions alike.

To shed light on this narrative repertoire I continue to present the story of somebody who can be considered mama Rosie's opposite: Laura. As a young educated woman aborting pregnancies while building up a life in the city, her life course and conditions are clearly dissimilar from those encountered by mama Rosie. Yet, the framing of her reproductive experiences is not. Her story will therefore allow for the exploration of common languages of distress and decision-making that pervade and direct women's navigations of a variety of reproductive conjunctures in completely different social situations. This, in turn, will shed new light on common assumptions that portray infertility in a patrilineal village in terms of suffering and that celebrate abortions of urban women as proofs of autonomy, empowerment, and resistance against the existing order.

### **Falling mangoes and falling foetuses: Laura's story**

It is a chilly morning in August 2009. After an icy trip on a motorcycle taxi, which brought us to the city centre, I descend from the vehicle together with my informant Laura, who wears a blue dress with a pink flower print, and carries a pink handbag. We quickly enter the labyrinth of unpaved paths in the neighbourhood where we have an appointment with a mutual acquaintance. Laura quickly reciprocates greetings from others, but leaves questions about our direction unanswered. I ask her whether she feels nervous; her answer is negative. Upon arrival at our destination, we find that the man in question has unexpectedly left his house – which from the outside looks so similar to all the other houses in this slum area. While waiting for him, we watch – together with some children, patients, and neighbours – a popular soap opera on TV. Laura, like the others, reacts animatedly to the plot of a certain Anita trying to spoil the marriage of her lover Deniz. She seems to feel more comfortable than I do. Her relaxed attitude changes a bit, however, once our acquaintance enters the room after an hour. He puts on his white coat and invites us into his small consultation room, which is only separated from this living room by an old, torn curtain. Laura takes a seat on the only chair in front of a desk, while I install myself on a low wooden bench placed against the mud wall of this small, dark room.

Although we are both acquainted with this doctor, our conversation unfolds in an atmosphere of unease. With her head leaning on her hands, Laura declares that she missed her period. The doctor asks whether she has already done a pregnancy test. Laura takes a small jar filled with urine out of her pink bag and places it in front of the doctor, asking him whether it could be done now. After the transaction of money for the test, which needs to be retrieved from some unknown source in the city by a young male assistant, and more soap opera drama for Laura and me while awaiting his return, Laura's fear is confirmed when the doctor shows us the two blue lines which clearly appear on the urine-drenched strip. He starts to pose several questions about Laura's menstruation, reproductive history, and the moment of conception – as I have heard him do when I accompanied other informants before. He concludes that Laura's pregnancy has attained eight weeks, and explains that an interruption will therefore require two phases: one in which the foetal tissue will be purposefully damaged, and one in which curettage will be performed. In between these interventions, Laura will have to go back to the village and wait for the blood loss to commence and gradually intensify. Laura agrees. She stresses that whatever the proposed treatment is, she will undergo it. After some financial negotiations, a deal is made for at least the first part of the intervention. We are asked to return towards the end of the afternoon, when all the other patients will have left.

And so we do. Laura is immediately asked to undress and to climb upon a table. She removes her underwear but keeps her flowered dress on. The doctor opens a wooden window to let in some light and fresh air. Few words are exchanged. The next few minutes are filled with only the sounds of the doctor's metal instruments, the

dripping of Laura's blood from the table into a bucket on the sandy floor, and the voices of playing children in the courtyard outside. Laura keeps silent, but has her mouth wide open in order to breathe in and out deeply. She covers her face with her left arm. Suddenly a considerable blood clot appears on the table in between Laura's legs. The doctor examines it, removes the speculum from Laura's vagina, and gives her an injection in her upper left leg. He orders her to descend. While she stands in front of me, silently raising her dress to let the doctor clean her genitals and legs, I ask her whether she feels okay. She points towards both sides of her belly: 'my fallopian tubes'. The doctor does not react; Laura silently puts on her underwear and picks up her pink bag.

Armed with a prescription for antibiotics and clear instructions as to the expected process and the envisaged return for curettage, we leave the room a few minutes later. Laura immediately starts complaining about how this abortion was much more painful than the others she underwent, but firmly states that she will endure all pain from now onwards. She doubts whether she will go back for the required curettage, especially since financial means are lacking. She does not even have money for sanitary towels and the required antibiotics – which, after our return to the village, appear to be out of stock in the health centre anyway. When I visit her in the evening to give her my own sanitary towels and some antibiotics, she immediately takes me inside her mother's dark kitchen where she is preparing a vegetable sauce that will be served with *couscous*. For a second time today, she lifts her dress in front of me – this time to put a sanitary towel in her underpants on which some first drops of blood are already visible. While pulling up her underwear, she whispers with a mixture of doubt and relief, 'We will see what will happen now. Since my blood is very strong, it often has difficulties to release. My pregnancies don't fall quickly...'

In the days that follow, Laura suffers from constant abdominal pain but loses no blood. Hidden in her dark bedroom in order not to attract people's attention, she is only visited by me and her mother, who offers her indigenous remedies to quicken the 'fall of the foetus'. During the many hours that I spend by Laura's side on her bed in the dark room, she reconsiders the previous abortion attempts she had undertaken, and always shared with me, from the very moment I had met her – some five years ago now. Indeed, during my first fieldwork period in 2004, Laura had been the only informant who had openly stated that she *herself* had tried to abort the pregnancy with which I had found her. Most other informants, still in the process of becoming acquainted with me, had only talked about induced abortions in hypothetical terms. But with my age-mate Laura – twenty-one years old back then – things had gone differently. She immediately shared with me how she had been made pregnant by Omar, a Muslim from the North of Cameroon, while she followed a full-time sewing training at the Women's Empowerment and Family Centre (*Centre de Promotion de la Femme et de la Famille*) in Bertoua.<sup>9</sup> After having been pursued by Omar for two years, Laura had 'fallen in his trap' by accepting his money and cooking for him in exchange. Despite her fear which followed a forced

defloration during one of these encounters, Laura – encouraged by her friend’s words that ‘it hurts for all women’ – had returned to Omar and invested the money she received from him in her education. Not long afterwards, however, she conceived a pregnancy with Omar:

I went to him because they had asked for money at school and I wanted him to help me out. He didn’t want to give me his money. Instead, he asked me for love [i.e. sex]. I refused, since I was in my period of ovulation. Then, I asked him to protect himself. He refused as well. He said he would not use condoms with me anymore. Whatever I did, he wouldn’t protect himself. Well, I thought, ‘Leave it then’. The pregnancy has entered.

Immediately after the intercourse, Laura started to regret her negligence. Fearing that a pregnancy might interfere with her sewing training, she asked her schoolmates how to get rid of this accident. She used everything she was advised to swallow, insert, or purge: *nivaquine* pills, salty water, *Nescafé*; nothing helped. That same month, she left to Asung to spend the holidays with her parents. Leaving a letter to Omar announcing her pregnancy and abortion plans, she continued to take remedies upon her arrival in the village. Her practices were, however, soon detected by her mother mama Denise, who, upon hearing the news of a probable pregnancy with Omar, agreed with her daughter’s abortion attempts. ‘My mother was afraid of the reaction of my father, she didn’t like Omar at all, and she wanted me to finish school first’, Laura states. No blood loss was achieved, however, and Laura started to feel ill instead. In the village hospital where her mother took her, her activities were soon discovered and heavily reprimanded by the doctor. ‘He told me that my blood was dying already and I should stop immediately’. He gave her injections to prevent the pregnancy from leaving.

Mama Denise, whether convinced by the doctor’s warnings or afraid to reveal her own complicity, started to publicly scold her daughter as well. ‘I told her there is her own body and there is a growing child in her body, and that I didn’t want to lose any of these two!’, mama Denise recalls to me later. She insisted that Laura should keep the pregnancy and give the child to her instead. Since mama Denise herself had only one daughter and two sons, and had experienced three additional reproductive mishaps, she would consider this first grandchild as an extra child for herself. This proposal made Laura furious; it had gone against all her expectations that her mother had in the first instance *agreed* with her abortion attempts – and even more that she now wanted to claim ‘the child she had refused from the very beginning’. Nevertheless, Laura quit her abortion attempts. As much as this decision was inspired by her mother’s change of heart, it was also related to other reasons:

My friend had reminded me of something. Pope John Paul II had come to Cameroon once. He said that all Cameroonian women who try to abort their pregnancies in this country should die.<sup>10</sup> My friend asked me whether I had forgotten about this curse. I thought, ‘What have I done? Will I die like all the others?’ Initially, I had thought that God would understand my situation, but now I got afraid of the Pope’s curse. And I started to think of a friend of mine, who always told me she would not bear a child since she was still young and wanted to play

life. And then she died during an accident. She didn't leave a child whatsoever. So I thought, 'If one day I will also encounter an accident, I will just die like that. My mother will lose a lot indeed. It's better to leave at least one child behind who will remind people of me. And imagine that this first child that I want to abort is the only one in my belly, what will I do if I will never bear children again? Or if all other children who would follow will get angry because I abort this first pregnancy? They will flee and they won't come back. I might not bear any children anymore. No, even if my school will stop here, it is also good to have a child'. So I decided that, even if everybody hated my pregnancy, I would keep it. I was curious to see what God had envisioned for the child.

Mama Denise's proposal that Laura give this child to her – which was gradually supported by Laura's father and two brothers – remained heavily contested by Laura. Her argument that she could not leave her child in '*la souffrance*' of her family's poverty led to the indignation of her father and older brother, who had always borne the burden of financing Laura's training in Bertoua. 'We walked barefoot here in the village to send our children to school, and then we were reproached for being poor; it made me very angry and especially my eldest son also blamed his sister', Laura's father admits to me. While the two men stopped their financial contributions to her education, Laura's relationship with mama Denise also rapidly deteriorated 'until we even seemed to be co-wives, since we didn't talk to each other anymore'.

It was after these failed abortion attempts that I entered the field for the first time, and approached Laura who was by then visibly pregnant. Fed up with the tensions within her family, she immediately told me the whole story and announced her plans to flee from the village. And so she did – but not without giving me clear indications of where she would reside in Bertoua. When I visited her a few weeks later in the indicated house of her classificatory maternal aunt, Laura told me how Omar had become furious upon discovering that she had not aborted. In fact, an abortion would have suited him, since he wanted to invest his money in the house he was building, and not in a girlfriend and a child. Laura, in turn, asked him for 25,000 CFA Francs (around 38 Euros)<sup>11</sup> which she claimed to need for an abortion in a hospital. While Omar accepted to give this financial contribution, Laura had other intentions and used the money to pay for prenatal consultations instead. Omar's discovery of this situation infuriated him even more, and he broke all contact with Laura. She therefore decided to charge a complaint against him. 'I had warned him to never underestimate me. I haven't spent my time for nothing in the training centre. I learned a lot about women's rights'. She thus declared Omar's neglect to the police – without, however, mentioning a word about the abortion attempts and agreements. The policemen summoned Omar and advised that they try to arrange the affair informally, before resorting to formal procedures or even Omar's imprisonment.

Things were settled in the end; Omar provided for the demanded medication and the layette even before Laura gave birth to her son Stéphane. However, after the return of mother and child to Asung, Omar was quickly out of sight – no visits, no financial contributions. These were also discouraged by Laura's mother, who refused to receive Omar and told him that she was able to take care of her daughter and grandchild by

herself. The first years of Stéphane's life were therefore pervaded by familial contestations about his belonging. Trying to circumvent the constant claims her parents laid on her child, Laura moved back and forth between friends and family members in Asung and its surroundings. She also arranged for a birth certificate through which Omar's paternity over his child was legally established – to the great frustration of her parents.<sup>12</sup> Omar, from his side, not only ignored his son, but also married a Muslim woman. Finally, with the prospect of marriage with Omar thus being blocked – since Laura strongly refused polygamy – and with the conflict with her parents becoming too intense, Laura decided to leave Stéphane behind with her mother and to move to a nearby city, where she had been offered a job in a tailor shop. She started to concentrate on schooling again – this time aiming for a dye training – which she financed with petty trade activities and the money she received from temporary boyfriends. In the relationship with Jean, she conceived again:

I lived with Jean, a typical big fish as we say here. I did it only for the honour to live with somebody who has a paid job. When he impregnated me, he wanted me to keep the child. But I only thought, 'I still love Stéphane's father. If he will come back to take me into marriage, what will he say if he sees me with another pregnancy?' Because I had made this decision in my life that I would only bear children with one man. And what is more, Jean told me he would take my child, but not me. So why would I keep this pregnancy? Two children, without a marriage? Imagine the suffering. I told the good God, 'Pardon me, I want children, but not with this kind of person. Help me make the pregnancy leave'. So I went to the hospital after three weeks. It was quickly done by a doctor in the evening: with a needle, he removed the water and blood that surround the foetus. He cut the cord that links the foetus to my back; the rest would release automatically. This all happened in the dark; there was no electricity that day. He did everything with a torch. I tell you, that was a moment in which I felt that God was really with me. It didn't hurt and everything went okay. After one week, I started to bleed. It was like a normal menstruation, but it augmented every day. I took a bucket of ten litres. When the blood came, I squatted, and it would pour into the bucket. When I felt how a big ball descended, I warned my cousin, who came to assist me. She was the only one who knew about all this. I had told all other people that I simply suffered from the women's worm. So my cousin came and told me to remove my underpants. I told her I had no force anymore, I felt very tired. As soon as my cousin removed my underwear, I squatted. Plop. At nine o'clock in the evening, it has fallen! In the bucket. At once, with the placenta. The whole package had come out at once. Afterwards, we went to bury the foetus at the garbage dump. That's our tradition. If you would throw it in the toilet where it will rot away, your childbearing leaves. But at the garbage dump, the wind passes; you will continue to give birth.

That Laura was indeed able to conceive again was proven after another year, during my second fieldwork period. I initially found her living in Bélabo together with her son Stéphane – who was now circulating between Laura, mama Denise, and the childless daughter of mama Denise's co-wife – and her new boyfriend Michel. When, after a period of disappearance, I coincidentally met her on the market in the city, she revealed that Michel had publicly hit her and that she had taken him to court. In the meanwhile, she had gone into a new marriage with Philippe, with whom she already conceived. When I asked for her opinion about these sudden changes, she told me that she felt there was

nothing she could do. In fact, this marriage had been arranged by the two mothers. Philippe's mother, as the sister-in-law of Laura's boss, had spotted Laura in the tailor shop where she worked. She had kept on telling Laura that she wanted her as a wife for her son. While Laura's mother had been flattered by this promise, Laura took it as a joke; she did not even know this son who lived at that time in Yaoundé. But one evening, her boss called her into the tailor shop and presented her to Philippe. After a forced conversation, Philippe had convinced Laura to accompany him to his house, as a proof to his mother that they had really met. Hesitantly, Laura had agreed. Once inside his house, they discovered that Philippe's mother was already asleep. Laura, eager to go back to Michel, who would be awaiting her at home, was suddenly confronted with a radical transformation in Philippe's intentions:

He told me I would not go home. He took a key, closed the door, and put the key in his pocket. I told him I had come to show respect to his mother, not to sleep with him. He said that he is the one who speaks. He wants me to sleep with him. I was afraid! And I knew that I was in my fertile period, so I started to beg him not to touch me. He started to undress. I told him I was in my fertile period and I hadn't brought along anything [i.e. a condom]. He said, 'Is that true? Well, since you're fertile now, that's very good. I will condemn you to me just in one moment. Undress!' We started to fight. I ended up only in my underpants and bra. 'Take off your bra'. I did so. 'Take off your underpants'. I did so. 'Lie down'. I refused. He took his belt and threatened to hit me. He forced me to open my legs. He penetrated me. I told him that he had raped me now. He said, 'Take it as you want. But from today onwards, since I climbed upon you, know that you are my wife. And *voilà* my baby that you carry in your belly'. I told him that I would take some pills [to evacuate] as soon as I would arrive at home. He refused. I said, 'Why wouldn't I abort this? To make a child is firstly a question of agreement. But you do it like this and you want me to keep it? I can't. And anyway, it is not even an abortion, because there is not even a pregnancy yet. You can only abort something that is already a pregnancy. I just want to go and take my products to simply evacuate the sperm'. He locked me up in his house for several days so that I couldn't do that. He told me, 'No, God has written that it is already somebody from the moment of conception. Don't even try!'.

Laura thus found herself 'stuck' with another pregnancy, which led to immediate symptoms in the days that followed. Philippe therefore started to doubt whether the pregnancy was really his – a question that in turn raised fury in Laura. It strengthened her wish to abort this unforeseen, and now also unacknowledged, pregnancy – out of fear of bearing a second child outside of marriage. However, abortion remained out of the question for Philippe and his mother. Since Philippe already had seven children – mostly daughters – but no wife, and he was the only son of his mother, the two did everything to keep the pregnant Laura (and even her son Stéphane) with them. Their constant supervision, as well as their hasty presentation and pregnancy announcement to Laura's family, not only prevented Laura from aborting the now publicly known pregnancy, but also pushed her into marriage with Philippe. This marriage was especially encouraged by Laura's mother, who told her daughter that a second child should be borne within a marital framework, that Laura should abandon all her informal sexual affairs, and that the willingness of Philippe and his mother to engage was rare to find these days. 'This is what

I had hoped for in my heart', mama Denise repeatedly admitted to me. Even Laura's father seemed pleased; while he had blamed his daughter for 'spoiling her school' during her relationship with Omar, he now told me that 'we all know that daughters are there to finally leave into marriage and bear children'.

Laura thus went into marriage. Nevertheless, her pregnancy remained contested and surrounded by the suspicion of her husband and in-laws, who still feared she could have been pregnant before entering the house. This fear culminated when Laura started to experience pregnancy-related illnesses – the treatments of which were supposed to be paid for by Philippe. Anxious about investing financially in what could possibly turn out to be 'false fatherhood', Philippe suggested terminating the pregnancy:<sup>13</sup>

He proposed to go to a hospital in Yaoundé where they would open my cervix. I told him, 'How can I abort now? I won't. It will stay. Do you know the man whom we call God? God has wanted us to keep it, and we will do so. Haven't you seen those couples that abort a pregnancy because they don't want it yet and wish to search their lives first? And when they finally want [a child], it doesn't come anymore. I don't want that! And imagine if it's a boy, who will lose? You will lose. I know you want a boy. And I also want another child. Do you want me to stick to Stéphane only? What will I do when he will return to his father? No, even if you don't want the pregnancy, I will keep it. I will go and find my mother in the village. We will take care of the child.

To convince Philippe to take this risk, Laura finally uttered a curse: if this child was not Philippe's, it would die right after delivery. If it stayed alive, it would prove Philippe's paternity. In preparation for this crucial moment, Philippe – who had disappeared to Yaoundé quickly after the curse was uttered – and his mother did not arrange for a layette, but wanted to first await the outcome of the birth. Laura's daughter stayed alive; Philippe's paternity was confirmed. It took him months, however, to send money to his wife and daughter for a trip to Yaoundé – which eventually happened during my last fieldwork period. Although excited about finally leaving her severe mother-in-law behind so as to 'go and see the habits' of her husband in the country's capital, which had always attracted her, Laura also remained ambivalent about the possible outcomes. Her opinion about Philippe was heavily influenced by the extramarital affairs, alcohol abuse, and several violent acts he had displayed before his departure:

I asked him whether he had ever heard that the human rights comprise the right of a man to hit a woman. That doesn't exist! He always claims that the Bible says that the woman is created after the man and that she should therefore undergo his whims. But the Bible only says that the woman 'accompanies' the man. This means she is not subordinate, but she goes with the man out of her own will. I tell you, I will first go and see how I like his behaviour. If it doesn't please me, I will be gone. You know, I am not dependent on him. I am trained as a tailor and I have my own income. I can have a future without a man.

Laura's fears proved justified. In the two months that followed, I received a couple of phone calls from both partners separately. While Philippe complained to me that Laura had apparently come for '*l'aventure*' rather than marriage, since she was 'walking a lot on



the street', Laura confided to me that upon her arrival in Yaoundé, she had found Philippe engaged in a relationship with an old, rich woman. Her refusal of this situation had been met with severe violence by Philippe. She now wanted to flee her marriage. While mama Denise – almost always present during these phone calls since it was the only opportunity for her to talk directly with Laura – first advised her daughter to just 'take her heart off' and 'endure the suffering', she ended up supporting Laura's marriage refusal; after all, Philippe had not only abandoned Laura during her pregnancy and in her current marriage in a big, unknown city, but he had also neglected his obligations towards his parents-in-law. Her initial encouragement of Philippe's bride-price transactions and Laura's childbearing within marriage turned into a refusal of quick engagements and support for Laura's contraceptive plans – thus keeping the option of separation open.

Yet, contraception came too late; during the next phone call Laura told me how Philippe, in order to prevent her departure, had forcefully given her another pregnancy, which she desperately wished to abort. 'I already tried everything: salt, quinine in whiskey, *kangwa* with lemon, cytotec from the hospital; nothing works!<sup>14</sup> But I really can't keep a second pregnancy for him. I suffer here and I am sure he will kill me one day'. Mama Denise added that a third child would not only diminish her chances of separation with Philippe, but also those of a marriage with another man. Mother and daughter therefore agreed that, if only Laura could succeed in fleeing to the village, I would accompany her to a well-known abortion specialist and get it done.

And so we did, on that chilly morning in August 2009. Lying on her bed in her dark bedroom during the days that follow, Laura thinks back on all these experiences with mixed feelings. Her joy of having successfully fled the disappointing marriage with Philippe becomes mixed with insecurity about her marital future; her joy of having parents who, after all, seem to support her in her current decisions becomes mixed with resentment about past decisions negatively influenced by them; her joy of having successfully undergone her first abortion intervention becomes mixed with insecurity about the final 'fall of the foetus'; and her joy of having her two children at her side becomes mixed with insecurity about the moral implications of having aborted others. She contemplates:

After my abortions, I often fast. During a whole day, I do not even swallow my own saliva. I don't drink and I don't eat. Oh, how the day is long then! I try to sleep and let the day pass. And I pray a lot. Like this, I demand God's pardon, because I aborted. Even now. I ask him to help me, to not let me fall, to understand my situation. I don't refuse to bear children, but it is my current situation that does not allow for childbearing now. I suffer. So I pray at whatever moment of the day. It takes me like that. It is like a small voice in my head, which tells me, 'Laura, pray!' Even in the middle of the night, when I wake up, there is something that tells me I should pray. I can't neglect. I tell Him what I have to say. Sometimes, when I'm really touched, I start to cry. My tears flow. And afterwards, it stops and I go to bed and sleep. I tell myself that it is really God who calls me at such moments. Since he has many children, he cannot listen to everybody at the same time. Therefore, He sends me the message that He is free to listen to me. So I need to respect it when he calls upon me.

In the ensuing discussion on divine judgment and life destinations, I ask Laura how she envisages her future. Surprisingly, she invokes her past, short-lived relationships to come to the conclusion that she would like to end up with the one she loved most: Omar. While her mother still claims that a marriage between the two would be impossible – invoking Omar’s ‘lack of love’ for Laura, the birth of a daughter with another man, and her own love for Stéphane, whom she would refuse to give back to his father – Laura’s father had recently displayed a more positive attitude towards Omar. It creates new hope in Laura, who speculates:

Here, we often say, ‘You never pluck a mango to leave it behind on the spot’ [*wādipong adókh wolík a tyin*]. If you pluck a mango, it is to eat it immediately. If you store it or let it fall, you will not find it back. Somebody else who will pass will pick it up and eat it in your place. It is like that with relationships as well. If I found other men, that is because Omar had plucked the mango, but let it fall. Others have come and have picked it up. But I know that if destiny has written that I will be together with Stéphane’s father, I will always end up with him. There have been some *marabouts* who told me that he still wants to take me as a wife. And he himself says that he will be the one who will finally marry me. When he will come and claim Stéphane, he will take me in his house as well. He predicted that all the other relations that I have will never last. And you know, Omar is the one who deflowered me. So everything he will tell me will be realized, since he is now like my father and mother who brought me into this world. It is like a curse. What can I do about it? The only thing I know is that I cannot make the error of becoming pregnant again. Because I took this decision in my life that I don’t want to give all my children with different fathers. I would even want to take *Norplant* or injections and stay calm.<sup>15</sup> I won’t move. But at the same time, I don’t feel like staying too long here in the village with my parents. I feel like going to the younger brother of my mother in Douala. I would like to start a small trade in jewellery or in wrappers there, for instance. Even in Ngaoundéré. There, I might meet Stéphane’s father [who originates from this city]. Who knows? It is the destiny of God.

It is in this indeterminate situation that I leave Laura behind. A few days later, after my arrival in the Netherlands, she tells me on the phone that, due to some injections given by the doctor in the village’s dispensary, the foetus has finally fallen. She will soon start with contraceptive pills and take time to see what the future will bring to her. With Stéphane reaching the age for return to his father, she might follow her son and end up in a marriage with Omar. Now that this foetus has fallen, the fallen mango might be picked up again.



The stories of mama Rosie, who remained childless in the village of Asung, and Laura, who interrupted her pregnancies while living in the city, could be considered each other’s opposites in at least two ways: in terms of the narrated reproductive experiences and in terms of the geographical areas in which they are situated. Many international and academic debates have taken these differences as a starting point for theorizing women’s agency and suffering. Yet, such theorizations do not reflect the ways in which

Gbigbil women manage, talk about, and give direction to their lives in general, and their reproductive experiences in particular. In looking *beyond* those respective differences, I will show how both stories reveal a shared narrative ground upon which women draw to make sense of their (reproductive) suffering and decision-making, and which helps them navigating their vital conjunctures within complex social situations.

Before delving into those local idioms, however, the next section will first outline some dominant understandings of agency and suffering in lay and scientific thinking. I will show how different fertility events and geographical locations are often associated with one or the other, which, in turn, creates a conceptual divide between female victims and agents. This dichotomous thinking is equally present in writings about, and official discourses in, Cameroon – despite the fact that Cameroonian women themselves, at least those in Asung, seem to hold completely different ideas about their ‘*souffrance*’ and their abilities to exert ‘*politiques*’ in order to attain their goals. The second part of this chapter will expose these Gbigbil ideas, and illuminate how they direct the navigation of different reproductive conjunctures, by women with rural and urban aspirations alike.

### **On patriarchal powers and modernized *mamas*: agency and suffering reinterpreted**

Infertility and abortion stories like the ones presented above have, although both increasingly researched (see Introduction), often been approached as dissimilar events. The reproductive *ambitions* of women who involuntarily remain childless and of those who voluntarily abort their pregnancies are perceived to be opposite: *wanting* versus *not wanting* children. Psychologists have argued that these different underlying desires result in clearly dissimilar physical and emotional experiences in both cases.<sup>16</sup> Some feminists propose going one step further. For them, both these different ambitions and their respective effects should be considered in the light of a supposedly dominant patriarchal order<sup>17</sup> that prescribes women to produce offspring, imbues them with a ‘natural’ desire for children, and grants them social status only if they succeed in realizing this desire through live births and successful motherhood.<sup>18</sup> Women who remain childless would want to adhere to, but be unable to attain, these norms;<sup>19</sup> to the contrary, those who interrupt their pregnancies are perceived as explicitly contesting them (J. M. Fischer, 2003; Hanigsberg, 1995; Hewson, 2001; Kim, 1999; Meyers, 2001; Petchesky, 1980; Thomson, 1971). Infertility has thus been interpreted as the ultimate form of (physical, emotional, and social) suffering within patriarchal structures, while abortion is often celebrated as the ultimate form of agency.<sup>20</sup> Many anthropologists, even if they do not explicitly cling to a feminist agenda, have implicitly reiterated this association.<sup>21</sup> Such a conceptual framework divides women into victims and agents respectively.

I have already argued in the previous chapters that reproductive ambitions and the desirability of a pregnancy are in themselves often changeable and contradicting; to

attribute fixed desires to either infertile or aborting women is therefore always problematic. To conceive the one in terms of mere suffering and the other in terms of agency further reduces the complexity that characterizes vital conjunctures at both ends of the reproductive continuum. This is of course not to say that women – in this Eastern Cameroonian society and elsewhere – are not embedded in patriarchal systems or gendered power relations; yet, the mere existence of such frameworks and women's divergent reproductive experiences within these frames cannot form the sole basis on which to predict women's ambitions and levels of agency. Matters seem to be much more nuanced in the individual stories of my informants. Not only their ambitions, but also their notions and experiences of suffering and agency, are in practice often blurred.

Some feminists have rightfully started to question this strict dichotomy between victimization and agency (Connell, 1997; Mahoney, 1994; Pollack, 2000; Schneider, 1993), as well as the decontextualized, essentialist notion of a widely 'shared female experience' (Petchesky, 1980) defined by some sort of universal patriarchy (Inhorn, 1996; Kandiyoti, 1988; Lock & Kaufert, 1997, p. 9). These feminists have, like some anthropologists, called for 'a more textured and contextual analysis of the interrelationship between women's oppression and acts of resistance in a wider range of women's circumstances' (Schneider, 1993, p. 397).<sup>22</sup> In this chapter, I do not only aim to answer this call and to overcome the 'incomplete and static view of women as *either* victims or agents' (ibid., p. 387, emphasis in original); but by taking my informants' practical realities and discursive practices as a starting point, I will also scrutinize the assumption that this dichotomy should be understood within, and is actually the result of, some fixed patriarchal order. In line with Lock and Kaufert (1997, p. 3), I criticize the 'one culture/one gender system' in terms of which women's positions have too often been interpreted.<sup>23</sup>

There is yet another way in which dominant thinking divides women into victims and agents. Influenced by modernization theories and development thinking, international and academic debates on womanhood in developing countries have come to postulate an important difference between rural and urban women – or women with rural and urban aspirations, for that matter. Urban residence, education, and exposure to modernity are considered key contributors to both the development and the empowerment of non-Western women.<sup>24</sup> As such, those residing in the village are generally depicted as poor and powerless sufferers, whereas their urban counterparts have become icons of development, knowledge, and autonomy. Not surprisingly, such images are often quickly married with the afore-mentioned distinction between women as *reproductive* victims and agents. Thus, women in villages suffer under patriarchal and pronatalist demands, whereas those with more money, knowledge, and power in the city are able to resist those 'traditional' schemes and resort to modern methods of contraception or abortion.

Both lines of thought have been applied to the Cameroonian context as well. Over time, a whole body of knowledge and practice (created by scientists, clergy,

governmental and non-governmental organizations) has contributed to an image of Cameroonian women as (reproductive) sufferers under patriarchy, who could (and should) be empowered through their acquaintance with modern, urban frames of reference. The earliest anthropological accounts of the Eastern region of the country, for instance, never failed to emphasize the existence of male dominance and the resultant exclusion of women in the local communities they studied. Most ethnographic descriptions relate how male positions as household heads, warriors, or exchangers of wives granted men material power and symbolic authority. Invoking local sayings like ‘a woman has no voice’ or ‘a chicken does not sing in front of a cock’, they indicated that women were not only considered subordinate to the orders of men, but also – deprived of their speech – excluded from socially acknowledged powerful positions in these communities (Balla, 1991; de Thé, 1970; Laburthe-Tolra, 1981, pp. 821-823; Vincent, 1976). Laburthe-Tolra speaks of an extreme ‘objectivation’ of women, who are:

... at most reduced to the state of economic instrument deprived of subjective expression. In all circumstances, she first has to shut up, to keep silent. Won, sold, lost at a game, hired, lent, deprived of every capacity in the juridical sense of the term, not able to possess anything, the woman is held at the margins of all domains, without any other bond to humanity than the connection more or less held with her lineage of origin and the advantages associated with maternity (Laburthe-Tolra, 1981, p. 890, my translation).

It is often noted how the rights of women were virtually absent in these wife-exchanging communities where men established rights over women – and their fertility – through bride-price transfers (see, for instance, de Thé, 1970, p. 32). In such a context, as also indicated by Laburthe-Tolra’s last words above, women would only be able to assume subjectivity as ‘producers of food and reproducers of people’ – contributing to men’s status with their labour force and childbearing capacities (de Thé, 1970; Laburthe-Tolra, 1981). These sources have consistently portrayed motherhood as highly valued – by patrilineal and, by implication, also by women themselves, who thereby acquired a place and status within this patriarchal order. Not surprisingly, accounts of induced abortions are strikingly absent in these early ethnographies, and infertility – a widespread phenomenon in the region until the late twentieth century (Cates et al., 1985; David & Voas, 1981; Ericksen & Brunette, 1996; Frank, 1983; Larsen, 1995; Nasah, 1978; Retel-Laurentin, 1974; Romaniuk, 1961, 1968) – was merely interpreted in terms of social vulnerability and stigmatization.<sup>25</sup> Depictions like these rendered women speechless in a system that grants them ‘no voice’, and portrayed them as victims who suffer the burden of the patriarchal yoke.

Several colonial interventions and post-colonial institutions have taken up, and contributed to, this image with their discourses of empowerment. To begin with, Christianity aimed to play a pivotal role in this process. Ever since the first Christian missionaries arrived in Cameroon in 1890 and reached the East Province in the 1930s, they have been preoccupied not only with conversion to Catholicism but also with the

eradication of local habits that they deemed incompatible with the Christian dogma. Structural social issues such as gender relations and marital arrangements were combated by missionaries who held other views on social life and relationships. A 1972 diary excerpt of a Dutch Catholic Father who worked in the diocese of Doumé (which, at that time, comprised Asung) notes the ubiquity of four local habits which proved irreconcilable with Christian doctrine: premarital sexual relationships and cohabitation; divorce; polygamy; and levirate (widow inheritance).<sup>26</sup> Apart from the incompatibility of these issues with Christian conceptions of marriage as a life-long sacred union and exclusive framework for monogamous sexual relationships, they raised moral questions about women's roles and positions in society. In order to both regulate women's sexual and marital lives, and teach them about their positions vis-à-vis men, the Catholic missionaries created an institution called *sixa*, which became widespread in the Southern part of Cameroon from the 1930s onwards.<sup>27</sup> Next to its goal of directly linking conversion with monogamous marriage, it aimed to 'liberate' women from local male-dominated and 'dehumanizing' institutions. Over time, this discourse of Christian emancipation was reiterated by Western anthropologists and their informants alike. On the basis of conversations with Beti women, for instance, Vincent claims that:

the veritable liberation brought by Christianity to women was the new possibility to make themselves heard: Christianity gave voice to women (...). It is Christianity that gave them the dignity of a human person. Their first way to express themselves was refusal (Vincent, 2001, p. 56, my translation).

Recent developments and institutions have further fed the image of women being in need of 'liberation' and 'empowerment'. Over the last three decades, Cameroon has witnessed the creation of a Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Family (MINPROFF);<sup>28</sup> certain laws concerning women's rights (with regard to physical integrity, marriage, divorce, or inheritance); educational programs; women's associations and NGOs; and the yearly International Women's Day on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March. These institutions proclaim a specific focus on women as individuals, who should be independent and have the same rights and possibilities as their male counterparts. The discourse on women's suffering is, again, one that takes male oppression and female speechlessness as a starting point, and that posits the adoption of urban, modern frameworks as the key strategy to attain autonomy – in reproductive as well as other domains of life.

Yet, many studies have by now revealed that this image of female speechlessness is often far removed from daily life realities in Cameroon.<sup>29</sup> They have indicated that in practice, and especially in the domain of reproduction, a clash between patriarchal norms and practices is clearly recognizable – both in urban and in rural settings. Furthermore, they have called for a more detailed focus on the varieties and power differentials *between* women – of different generations or families, for instance – within the same setting (Abega, 2007; S. G. Ardener, 1973; Barbier, 1985; Copet-Rougier, 1985; Geschiere, 1985; Nkwi, 1985; Notermans, 1999). The life stories of mama Rosie and Laura, as well as

those of Yvette and Sophie in the previous chapters, similarly show that much more is at stake than the mere rural subordination to, or the urban contestation of, a supposedly dominant patriarchal framework that renders women speechless. In comparing both narratives, portrayals of rural infertility as mere suffering and urban abortion as pure agency become questionable. What, then, can be said about Gbigbil women's reproductive suffering and agency? The following sections will address this question by looking into women's own perceptions of suffering, fate, and decision-making potential – and the ways in which these play a role in their reproductive navigations.

### **The paradox of powerless portrayals: situating idioms of suffering and fate**

Utterances of speechlessness and powerlessness are commonplace in Asung.<sup>30</sup> Whatever the topic of conversation, my female informants would often repeat that they have 'no mouth to speak with' ('*on n'a pas la bouche à parler*'; '*munka atəka num a jo*') and that they are obliged ('*on est obligé*') to do what others demand from them; what else can they do ('*on peut faire comment*')? Any outsider might be tempted to comprehend these complaints in terms of male authority and female submissiveness – consistent with earlier ethnographic accounts and modern discourses of empowerment. Women's idioms of powerlessness would then be interpreted as representing their gendered oppression and lack of agency.

A more thorough investigation of practical realities in the village, however, reveals a discrepancy between women's utterances of powerlessness and their relative independence in both the productive and reproductive domains.<sup>31</sup> For, while land is the property of Gbigbil men (and their lineages) in Asung, all married women receive their own plot and work on it individually. Although they may cooperate with either their husbands or other women in times of economic shortage or field abundance, in general women enjoy practical and economic independence in their roles as producer (see also Delpech, 1985; Geschiere, 1985; Goheen, 1993, 1996; Vincent, 1976). Similar liberties appear in the domain of fertility. The previous chapters have already indicated how women *do* have room to manipulate men, exert power, or engage in 'secret strategies' (Koster, 2003) – despite the proclaimed control of men over their wives' fertility. Further, Gbigbil women are not afraid to charge informal or formal complaints against their husbands or to publicly express themselves in village palavers, police stations, or courthouses. Thus, more must be at stake when women portray themselves as powerless and without a voice. How is this paradox to be explained? What do Gbigbil women imply and imagine when they talk about their powerlessness?

Depictions of powerlessness are expressed in multiple ways. At least four discursive themes can be discerned in women's common complaints: suffering, fate, resignation to religious dogma, and submission to patriarchy. First of all, women deploy a widespread, pervasive idiom of suffering (*diuk*). In commenting on all sorts of negatively

experienced life contingencies, but especially their encounters with men in sexual and marital relationships, women never refrain from stressing the '*souffrance*' they face. Rather than corresponding to a patriarchal image of women as oppressed inferiors, however, such complaints of speechless suffering paradoxically create a common denominator of womanhood that grants my informants a feeling of female solidarity and even superiority. Indeed, it is exactly the capacity to suffer that marks them as good women and wives. Perseverance and endurance – both physically (through working in the fields) and emotionally (through 'taking the heart off' [*enlever le coeur*], as mama Denise advised Laura on the phone) – are highly valued traits inculcated in women from a young age onwards (see also Chapter 3). The ability to suffer in marriage is a focal point in girls' education, and presented as *strength* rather than *weakness* – something to be proud of as a woman.<sup>32</sup> It proves not only one's capacity to endure, but also the efforts one is willing to make to attain a valued goal.<sup>33</sup>

Yet, this is only part of the story. If women's reinterpretation of suffering as a form of shared, *hidden* strength might still create the impression of their passive compliance with the dominant framework, in practice it becomes also *explicit* and *instrumental* in their daily life navigations. The *religious* meanings and merits with which Gbigbil women often imbue their complaints about suffering in particular create this possibility for instrumentality. Comparing their ordeals to those undergone by Jesus, women often talk about their '*souffrance*' in terms of a cross they have to carry. During a focus group discussion on agency and suffering, Peggy, who worked as a nursery teacher at the Catholic missionary station, noted:

People often say that you carry the cross that God has given to you. And you should carry it to the bitter end. You should always endure your suffering. You should dominate your suffering. Suffering is a school of wisdom, it is part of life. You should abandon discouragement. You should be strong. You should be perseverant in order to succeed, in order to dominate this suffering.

Not only do notions like these make unexpected daily life adversities more meaningful and acceptable, but they also endow women with 'feelings of moral superiority' (Notermans, 1999, p. 174). The idea that women carry their personal 'cross' during life is often complemented with a notion of divine judgment upon death. On Judgment Day, God – perceived as the sender of ordeals and the omnipresent 'observer' of daily life events – will reward those who showed persistence in their suffering. Victims during life will turn into victors after death. Religious rhetoric thus adds a moral element to idioms of distress; suffering is not only an expression of shared female strength but also of individual 'moral superiority' that will be rewarded in the future.

This moral projection of religious salvation is tactically deployed in social relationships in women's daily lives. For, while it promises sufferers to be rewarded, it also posits that those who *inflict* suffering upon others will be punished relentlessly. The discourse of divine judgment is thus often used to comment upon the bad behaviour of



others; claims of one's own moral *superiority* imply others' moral *inferiority*, just as claims of one's own victory imply others' defeat. These supernatural associations of suffering are often evoked in a context where women's reproductive lives are characterized by power struggles with men or other women – either in polygynous households (see also Chapter 3), or in informal flexible relationships (see also Chapter 4). Mama Rosie's story illustrates how such a discourse becomes shaped within a competitive polygynous setting. Her invocation of marital and reproductive suffering not only confirms her own strength and worth as a (religious) woman, but also comments upon the moral weakness of her (evil) co-wife, who, by inflicting this suffering upon mama Rosie, is doomed to be severely punished afterwards. By strengthening her point through witchcraft accusations and mystical accounts of hanging underwear, mama Rosie's portrayal of suffering becomes a translation of daily life struggles into supernatural competitions – from which she will eventually emerge as a good winner, and her co-wife as a bad loser (for similar discursive dynamics among the neighboring Mkako, see Notermans, 1999).

Second, instrumental dynamics are at play in women's idioms of *fate* – which, in their view, is intrinsically linked to God's will. As noted in Chapters 2 and 3, women's marital and reproductive life stories are pervaded by an all-encompassing idea of predestination and divine determination. Paradoxically, however, this idea is tactically deployed – uttered at moments when it can give appropriate meaning and direction to the vital conjuncture at hand. The narratives of mama Rosie and Laura, for instance, show how a certain idea of marital predestination co-exists with explicit management of conjugal situations and futures. Mama Rosie considered Etienne as 'the man whom God had given to me', while at the same time she maintained relationships with different men, gave her pregnancy to another candidate, and explicitly refused marriage with that same Etienne some time afterwards. Likewise, Laura justified certain partner choices as 'written by God', while she also acknowledged her active sexual and marital search through the metaphor of the fallen mango – an expression which, just like the Gbigbil sayings 'you should never throw bones to a dog' (*'bādibu biya iveey'*) or 'a woman is like a *menyenge* leaf' (*'munka ane da akei menyenge'*), touches upon the quick (re)entrance of single or divorced women into a new union. Indeed, the motivation invoked by both women to 'go and see' upon entering marriage underlines their imagined possibility of leaving the union if it is not in accordance with their wishes – a decision that may again be justified through notions of predestination or God's approval afterwards.

Intentional interventions in the domain of *fertility* are similarly justified through ideas of predestination. Mama Rosie repeated that she had put her reproductive outcomes in the 'hands of God', while at the same time she actively searched for different treatments, uttered witchcraft accusations against her co-wife, claimed the children of her siblings, and assured her childless future through the (secret) demand of a marriage certificate. Laura started to interpret her pregnancies as being sent by God – predetermining the life of her first child, and making her keep the second one – after her

abortion attempts had failed and prospects of bearing a child had become more attractive. Her expression 'God has wanted us to keep it [her third pregnancy], and we will do so' shows how the deployment of passive notions of fate is as tactical an option as her decisions to take contraceptives, or to alleviate her current or imagined future suffering through abortions.

Third, more specific than notions of divine predestination are the particular Biblical passages that are resorted to in order to explain circumstances or justify decisions. Again, the image of resignation and powerlessness that such expressions portray covers the pragmatism with which they are selected and deployed. Insightful is the discussion between Philippe and Laura concerning the passage in Genesis 2:18-24 – often invoked by my informants – depicting God's creation of a woman out of the rib of a man in order to give him accompaniment; while Philippe saw it as justification for women's subordination, Laura inverted its sense to a situation of equality where a woman 'goes with the man out of her own will'. Similar tactical interpretations surround the biblical passages that are invoked as justifications for gendered divisions of tasks and responsibilities. The commandment in Genesis 1:28 to 'be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it' – repeatedly stressed by missionaries ever since they arrived in the 'under-populated' East Province in the 1930s<sup>34</sup> – is often cited by villagers to support local patrilineal ideals and to remind women of their reproductive duties. Yet, mama Rosie mentioned it to strengthen her witchcraft accusations and Laura contested it by her abortion attempts and her conviction of God's situational understanding. Both women claim to resign themselves to the 'word of God' as ultimate truth directing their lives and decisions, while they constantly interpret it differently in contingent situations.

Fourth, just like Biblical passages on gendered relations, local patriarchal notions are situationally used as justifications or contestations of certain circumstances. In line with what I described in the previous chapter, I argue that patriarchal notions are certainly existent but seem to form a normative framework – an official 'kinship idiom' (see Geschiere, 1982, and Chapter 1) – that is sometimes confirmed and sometimes contested by practical realities. Both Laura and mama Rosie refer to the norm according to which they should marry with one man, endure his whims, and bear children for him – while always recognizing the discrepancy with their actual situations. As such, Laura's repeated claim that she wants to 'only bear children with one man' is more an ideal tactically mentioned in the face of discrepant realities than a passive acceptance of an imposed order. Likewise, it is in a situation in which Laura is unexpectedly faced with Philippe's proposal for an abortion – a proposal that in itself violates patriarchal ideals – that she suddenly refers to the supposedly male desire for male offspring to make Philippe accept the child that she herself actually wants. Patriarchal and pronatalist frameworks, rather than to be taken as a fixed starting point informing women's powerlessness and suffering, should thus be considered idioms that are as flexibly deployed as idioms of powerlessness and suffering themselves.

Notions of suffering, fate, religious resignation, and patriarchal submission thus contribute to a general portrayal of powerlessness, but veil as much as they publicly reveal. They are often more *instrumental* to women's navigation of vital conjunctures than they seem to be *obstructive*. They give reproductive conjunctures not only *meaning*, but certainly also *direction* since they can be turned into justifications for decisions made and (overt or covert) projects pursued – irrespective of what these actually are. This leads to a paradoxical situation: while women portray themselves as powerless, such portrayals are actually empowering, and even a manifestation of women's power itself.

This paradox works in two ways. First, portrayals of powerlessness create room for *tactics*. In the sense given to the word by Michel de Certeau (1984), these tactics allow women, who might not have the power to define and impose dominant frames of reference, to inventively use and reinterpret these very frames in order to pursue their own goals – without upsetting the dominant order.<sup>35</sup> As such, de Certeau defines tactics as 'the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong' (ibid., p. xvii). As an 'art of the weak' (ibid., p. 37), tactical behaviour requires constant adaptation and improvisation; people 'must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into "opportunities"' (ibid., p. xix). Gbigbil women's flexible use of dominant discourses about suffering, fate, religious dogma, and patriarchy can be considered tactical because it is enacted at moments and in situations where clinging to the dominant frame (in its original or reinterpreted form) allows women to pursue their projects and to justify their actions or their explorations of certain horizons. This is not necessarily to say that women *are* weak, however, but that they are best able to deploy these tactics when they *portray* themselves as weak. The portrayal of weakness is thus a tactic in itself.

Second, these discourses, and especially the complaints about suffering, allow for a critical self-awareness and a *shared* self-perception in terms of 'superior womanhood'. They can therefore function as *hidden transcripts*, a term used by James Scott (1990) to designate 'discourse that takes place 'offstage', beyond direct observation by powerholders' and that 'consists of those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript' (ibid., p. 4). In this sense, the term draws attention to the room for, and capacity of, subordinates to define their own subversive worldviews that might *challenge* the dominant order, even if they seem to passively comply with the public transcript of domination. Often, this hidden transcript is the complete opposite of what is proclaimed in the public transcript. In the Gbigbil case, the hidden transcript seems not so much to consist of completely different *notions* than those that appear in the public transcript of patriarchal domination and female submission; rather, it attaches completely different *meanings* (allegedly hidden and shared by women only) to this very public transcript – through which statements of powerlessness paradoxically become empowering.

There is yet another, less hidden, way in which portrayals of powerlessness can become a source of challenge and power. This happens when the different themes of

powerlessness (but especially the ones invoking suffering and patriarchal submission) become vehicles to overtly denounce undesired situations through appeals to official authorities (such as the police or court of justice). As shown in Laura's story, idioms of suffering and submission are effective elements of such public charges because the authorities to which women resort employ frameworks of female victimhood that are responsive to such complaints. Based on (inter)national paradigms of women's subordination and the fight for empowerment and equal rights, such frameworks imbue suffering with completely different connotations than the women themselves (secretly) do. Yet, again, in making their complaints compatible with the dominant discursive frame that pervades these public spaces (that is, in exploiting the Western public script that is so critical of female suffering) women search to pursue their private projects and even openly challenge the *status quo*.

To draw attention to these tactics and hidden, or less hidden, transcripts is to counter the ideas about women's lack of voice, as present in certain strands of literature and development thinking. In the process of enacting the above outlined paradox, women not only *have* a voice, but also make it *heard*, and through this, are sometimes even in actual power. Idioms of powerlessness thus veil different kinds of agency that are often considered the exact antithesis of powerlessness: having a voice (i.e. using and reinterpreting dominant frames), making one's voice heard (i.e. actually attaining one's goals through such use and interpretation), and having actual power (i.e. being able to challenge the dominant framework and its power holders, through sharing hidden transcripts or charging public complaints). Different situations allow for different forms of agency; sometimes women can only operate through exploiting the 'cracks' in the dominant framework, while at other moments they are able to challenge it altogether. Women may not always have actual power, then, but they rarely lack a voice.

Most of my female informants are aware of these different kinds of agency that can be attained through tactically clinging to particular passive discourses. It is what they call their '*politique*' and they are proud of it. While men would tell me that 'women are like children' because they can be easily satisfied, women would readily reciprocate this stance towards their male counterparts, saying that they could be easily misled under the veil of suffering or other expressions of powerlessness. Successful exertion of these discursive 'politics' requires skills of anticipation and adaptation, as one should always take into account the social contingencies during one's life course. Towards the end of the focus group discussion on agency and suffering, Lianne metaphorically concluded:

We shouldn't have constrained visions, but look a bit ahead. A woman should walk like a cat. Why? Because before posing her feet, a cat knows whether it's good or not good to walk where she walks. If there's a mouse, she knows how to walk. If there's no mouse, she knows how to walk. So a woman should be like a cat. She should know where to walk, what to do, with whom to walk, and what to say, in order to attract people who will form her physically and spiritually. Some women spend a hundred years somewhere without being able to

change. But there are others who know how to adapt their lives and language right upon their arrival somewhere. It's these women who will succeed.

For Gbigbil women, whose lives are characterized by constant geographical, marital, and social mobility – moving from their own families into those of their husbands, from rural to urban areas and back, and changing their social positions along the way – adaptation and anticipation might long have been a key to their 'success'. These characteristics are even more warranted in the current environment of increasing political and economic instability and social precariousness, as described in Chapter 1. Given that 'contingency contributes significantly to the creation of experiential uncertainty' (Johnson-Hanks, 2005, p. 370), and that women nowadays live within a 'routinized state of uncertainty' (ibid., p. 376), it is not surprising that they formulate their (different kinds of) agency as *judicious opportunism* at most; their 'politics' are immediate reactions to the contingent, sometimes constraining, circumstances they encounter during vital conjunctures – rather than rational calculations based on prior intentions, educational background, or fixed hegemonic frameworks.

To focus on these possibilities of judicious opportunism (in the form of tactical behaviour, hidden transcripts, or more overt forms of pursuing one's projects) is thus not to say that women are not at all constrained in their navigations, or not subject to power hierarchies; rather, they use their idioms flexibly according to the particular power relations at hand. Nor is it to say that the display of these idioms of distress cannot by itself be constrained or precarious; especially in periods of contestation, they can easily be inverted and work out in negative ways. In uncertain and ambiguous reproductive conjunctures, for instance, portrayals of powerlessness and power are no less uncertain and ambiguous. The following sections will explore these uncertainties and ambiguities; they will trace how both suffering and agency are at play in specific narratives on infertility and abortion.

### **Infertility: accusations and alternative forms of agency**

Infertility violates patriarchal norms to bear live children for the family of the husband, and is on that basis often described by existing literature and my informants as surrounded by suspicion, accusations, and public insults. The Gbigbil word for an infertile person (*kun*) has been translated as 'rubbish', 'rocky', and 'prisoner' in related Beti languages (Guyer, 1984; Tsala Tsala, 1996); an infertile woman might also be called 'a woman of nothing' ('*munka asumba*'), 'a sterile thing like you' ('*kun yom da we aná*'), or faced with questions like 'when will you give birth, huh?' ('*wibial dī e?*'), 'have you only come to fill the toilet with excrement?', or 'who will bury you when you die?' ('*abok a wiwa, zá nye opum?*'). In a context where female worth is ideally considered in terms of successful motherhood, the burden of childlessness is said to fall largely on women; though many informants would admit that male infertility exists, they would also state

that it remains hidden under public accusations towards women. Similar attitudes have been found elsewhere within and outside of Cameroon (Bleek, 1976; Copet-Rougier, 1985; Feldman-Savelsberg, 1999; Inhorn, 1994, 1996; Kielmann, 1998; Leonard, 2002; Nahar, 2007; Njikam Savage, 1992; Sundby, Mboge, & Sonko, 1998); they tend to confirm the overall image of infertile women as passive sufferers of a patriarchal hegemony (see also Gerrits, 2002).

Within this setting, infertile women are often preoccupied with the portrayal of an image of innocence. Hereto, they tactically deploy an aetiological repertoire that presents different levels of culpability. Just as in cases of pregnancy interruption (see Chapter 4), the aetiological explanations for infertility are multiple and pervaded by ambiguity – always acknowledging the possibility that the childlessness might be *intentionally* brought about. Although some informants would invoke the ‘wish’ or ‘creation’ of God to account for childlessness, others contest this contention on the basis of God’s commandment in Genesis 1:28 to ‘be fruitful and multiply’. They rather focus on the circumstances that may have rendered certain women childless. These can be externally imposed, beyond the will or intention of a woman; both first-hand and second-hand accounts of cruel witches destroying the fertility of their co-wives or competitors – like in mama Rosie’s story – abound in the village.<sup>36</sup> I have already argued how mama Rosie’s idiom of suffering under the attacks of her evil co-wife should be considered tactical in different respects – one of them being the display of the self as innocent. For, very often, sterility is perceived to be ultimately caused by childless women themselves: they must have consciously ‘blocked’ their childbearing; their witchcraft must have ‘eaten’ all the foetuses in the uterus; their disobedience must have provoked a curse by family members; or their sins – like previous abortion attempts – must have led to a punishment by God. For outsiders, the question of intentionality, as well as the distinction between suffering and agency, becomes blurred and contested in cases of infertility.

Apart from creating an image of innocence, idioms of suffering also form justifications to actively search for (indigenous and biomedical) help after too long a period of childlessness. A portrayal of innocent suffering might rouse compassion and induce (financial) help from social others and thus increase the chances of obtaining infertility treatment. As mama Rosie’s story showed, multiple healing sources can be consulted at the same time. Popular in the region are methods which are believed to ‘wash the stomach’ – both indigenous medicines and dilation and curettage (D&C), a potentially damaging biomedical intervention that is no longer considered as an infertility procedure by the World Health Organization (Hunt, 2005, p. 431). The procedures that are considered appropriate within the biomedical framework are much less used by Gbigbil women. Although infertility is now recognized as a component of reproductive health, and the fight against it is an explicit objective of the 1992 ‘National Population Policy’ in Cameroon, biomedical infertility care faces problems and limitations on the ground. Detection in Asung is, according to the local doctor, based on simple tests and

speculations – after which patients will have to be referred to provincial hospitals in Bertoua or Ngaoundéré to have an ultrasound done. Few are the women, however, who, like mama Rosie, actually follow such a biomedical path.<sup>37</sup>

Due to a predominant aetiology that recognizes disruptions in social harmony as important contributors to fertility problems, and due to a resulting idiom of suffering which is essentially *social*, biomedical examinations are often replaced or complemented with healing and detection methods that take these social causations of infertility into account. Healers and *marabouts*, who are believed to constructively draw upon occult powers (see also de Rosny, 1974; de Thé, 1970, p. 48; Johnson, Thompson, & Perry, 1990; Mallart Guimera, 1981; Van Beek, 1994), are especially deemed effective if supernatural forces are suspected to cause the infertility. Women with fertility problems, like mama Rosie, often resort to different healers, who provide them with different explanations for their suffering – and deploy these utterances tactically, within the social relations and power differentials at hand.

However, violation of the normative framework and the ensuing inventive search for, and use of, aetiological explanations is just one side of the infertility story. I have already argued above that the patriarchal, pronatalist framework in itself can be tactically deployed, utterly contested, or ignored in specific vital conjunctures and social situations; this is also done by infertile women. They may downplay their lack of biological motherhood in favour of other identifications or sources of status. Mama Rosie, for instance, claimed that respectful womanhood derives much less from one's childbearing capacities than from 'the work that you do in front of the people and your husband'. And indeed, in practice, barren women often occupy important positions – within their marriage and within the village (see also de Thé, 1970; Laburthe-Tolra, 1981). Mama Rosie's use of modern knowledge and official positions as well as traditional forms of authority illustrates this clearly. Gbigbil men seem to confirm that infertile women are able to hold certain positions *despite* or exactly *because of* their childlessness; mama Rosie's brother-in-law appointed his dynamic sister-in-law as the governor of his *quartier* and papa Gerie told me more than once that mama Rosie was not only the wife he loved most, but also his 'wife of *ambiance*' – able to host his guests, to animate communal gatherings, and to 'talk in his place when he is absent' (de Thé, 1970, p. 386).<sup>38</sup> Even if some people – like Laura and her kin – might contest this explicit challenge to the normative order, such contestations can easily be countered with portrayals of suffering and infertile victimhood that logically follow from the same set of norms.

Lastly, it should be noted that images of infertility-related suffering as depicted in the literature are often based on notions of exclusive biological motherhood. They overlook the possibilities for social motherhood through fosterage – a widespread institution in Cameroon and other West African countries (Alber, 2003; Carsten, 2004; Einarsdóttir, 2006; Eloundou-Enyegue & Stokes, 2009; Goody, 1984; Notermans, 2003, 2008; Verhoef, 2005). The stories of mama Rosie and Laura illustrate that these

possibilities are omnipresent in Asung, especially when women remain biologically childless: they show the vigour with which mama Rosie claimed the children of her brothers, gave her own name to newborn babies, and portrayed herself as a ‘mother of everybody’, as well as the ease with which Stéphane circulated between Laura and the childless daughter of Laura’s *maratre*. Rather than viewing these social forms of motherhood as ‘precarious solutions in crisis situations, with somewhat ‘deviant’ connotations’ – a view which is noted by Alber (2003, p. 488) to be predominant in fosterage literature – they should be considered the expression of a widespread notion of belonging in which ‘the child of your sister is your child’, as my informants often told me. Claims on these children may be tactically strengthened by an idiom of suffering; expressions like ‘when you suffer all alone in the house, you can take the child of your sister to come and help you out’ or ‘when you see the child of your brother suffer, you can always come and take it, right?’ are commonplace in the village. The results of my 2007 household survey confirm the ease with which children circulate. As many as 49% of the 286 women responding to the question of whether they cared for children other than their biological offspring did so affirmatively (see Appendix VII). This is well above the estimated Cameroonian fosterage rate of 25% (Eloundou-Enyegue & Stokes, 2009, p. 282).<sup>39</sup>

Fosterage options and tactics defy not only notions of biological motherhood, but also portrayals of infertility-related suffering caused by an exclusive patriarchal order. Alber (2003, p. 492) has pointed out how flexible fosterage arrangements might in fact weaken patrilineal ties and virilocal norms. Thus, by widening the scope from narrow, predefined, hierarchical gender relations to relevant social bodies and social interactions in women’s daily lives – within and beyond patrilinealities – new light is shed on the suffering which is supposed to surround infertile women in so-called patriarchal societies. These insights allow for a critique of the ‘narrow, distorted and presentist frame of individualized suffering’ around infertility which has also been denounced by Hunt (2005, p. 432). Women’s invocation of suffering here should be considered as inherently social, and therefore inherently situational and tactical – not *exempt of* but *exemplifying* their agency. The same holds for cases of abortion – to which we now turn.

### **Abortion: prevention and proof of suffering**

As noted, social scientists, and feminists in particular, have often situated abortion practices within patriarchal, pronatalist frameworks condemning any limitation of women’s fertility. Debates on abortion in Cameroon often invoke two other condemning discourses as well: a legal and a religious one. First, the voluntary interruption of a pregnancy is considered a criminal offence within a national legal framework. Considering the pronatalist population policy of Cameroon (see Chapter 1), it is unsurprising that its abortion laws are highly restrictive; section 337 of the Cameroonian Penal Code only



allows for abortion when a pregnancy results from rape, or when at least three professionals agree that a pregnancy endangers the woman's life. These situations rarely manifest themselves in practice, since rape is often kept secret – as Laura's story confirms – and the procedures to obtain the agreement of three independent professionals are long and complicated (GTZ, 2009; Henshaw, Singh, & Haas, 1999; Rahman, Katzive, & Henshaw, 1998). With most pregnancies thus falling beyond these two exceptional categories, almost all induced abortions are illegally conducted – and thus, formally, condemnable and punishable.

Second, every termination of a pregnancy is strongly condemned by the Christian church. To consciously interrupt a pregnancy is considered a moral offence against God given life, which should be protected and valued instead. Both abortions of fetuses that have already been formed or are considered to have a soul and terminations of pregnancies in the most preliminary stages of embryonic development are considered instances of murder by the church.<sup>40</sup> All those interruptions violate the individual right of the unborn to eternal salvation (Spruit, 1991). While on an international level, pro-choice movements have countered this strict dogma – even *within* the Catholic Church<sup>41</sup> – such lobby groups are virtually absent in Cameroon.<sup>42</sup>

Despite this environment of multi-level condemnation, induced abortions are widespread in Asung. Of the 223 pregnancy interruptions reported by 172 village women in my survey, 11% were indicated to be induced (see Appendix VII).<sup>43</sup> Numerous methods were cited: 60% of those 25 abortions had been provoked with indigenous products or chemical liquids, almost a quarter had been induced through clandestine curettages performed by biomedical staff in hospitals or informal neighbourhood offices, one was the consequence of a conscious overdose of biomedical medicines, and most of the other pregnancy interruptions had been brought about by the vaginal insertion of sharp objects or needles in order to open the cervix. All of these methods have also been applied by Laura, and were found in many other studies in Cameroon and elsewhere (Abega, 2007; Bleek, 1976, 1981; Calvès, 2002, 2004; Feldman-Savelsberg et al., 2008; Guttmacher Institute, 2003; Johnson-Hanks, 2002a; Renne, 1996, 2006; Schuster, 2005).<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, many respondents declared taking measures to prevent a pregnancy from developing right after sexual intercourse or when detecting a missed period. The concealment surrounding the first trimester of a pregnancy as described in Chapter 2 offers women the possibility, space, and time to secretly bring their still invisible and unconfirmed condition to an end – if at least they know of the above methods or have access to this knowledge. Many pregnancies are managed in the discrete period after conception rather than *a priori* prevented through contraceptives.

Numerous circumstances and motivations can make a woman decide to terminate ('the development of') her pregnancy. Often cited reasons include the young age, fear of parents, the desire to complete education or fulfil other aspirations, instability of premarital sexual relationships, non-recognition of paternity by the partner (see Chapter

4), difficult economic situations or, for married and older women, conjugal problems, extramarital pregnancies, health concerns, or birth spacing – reasons that can be found in the stories of my informants (including those of Yvette, Sophie, and Laura), as well as in other studies on the topic (Bleek, 1976, 1981; Calvès, 2002; CEPED, 2000; Feldman-Savelsberg et al., 2008; Guttmacher Institute, 2003; Henshaw et al., 1999; Koster, 2003; Renne, 1996, 2006; Schuster, 2005). These stories and studies show that abortion decisions are far from being made by autonomous agents acting *against* condemning systems – as celebrated by some feminists – but should be situated within the social bodies and structural constraints or horizons which make up the vital conjunctures around pregnancy termination. In fact, once examined within their social contingencies, abortion decisions seem to relate much less to (universalist and individualist) condemning discourses which are present in Cameroon and elsewhere, than to local idioms of suffering. These idioms of suffering appear in Gbigbil women's abortion narratives in several ways.

First, many abortions paradoxically ensue from a perceived clash between patriarchal ideals and encountered practices. As much as the patriarchal framework prescribes women to bear children for their husband's patrilineage, it prescribes men to take financial care of their wives and children – reciprocal expectations which are, as we have already seen in the previous chapters, often contradicted by conjugal fragility and insecurity in practice. It is in these circumstances that women might tactically invoke patriarchal ideals and idioms of suffering as justification for their abortion practices: with men (and their families) failing to assume their financial responsibility, suffering women may decide to neglect their prescribed duty of childbearing. Attention is thus diverted from what is expected from *women* – that is, children – towards the duties normatively prescribed for *men* – that is, the exchange of bride-price payments or at least financial care for their wives and children. The statement of my informant Angélique, who aborted her twins out of 'anger' against her neglectful husband and in-laws, is comparable to the complaints of many others:

I aborted, because I was very angry with my husband and his parents. My family hasn't eaten anything! So I told myself, 'If I conceive another pregnancy, I will suffer a lot'. And we were already with two women in the house. My co-wife had already entered. Life was not good when I was all alone; how bad will it become when my husband has already two wives? No, I preferred to abort. My mother supported my decision. She has first suffered to bear and raise me. Now I bear my own children already and she suffers again with them. He should really thank her for her efforts. So I told myself and my family, 'I will not bear a child anymore before he pays his debt to my parents and treats me better as well'.

Angélique refers to an age-old patrilineal framework that takes bride-price exchanges between two families, and the resulting childbearing of a woman for the patrilineage of her husband, as a starting point. The absence of the fulfilment of these normative expectations in practice, as well as the appearance of a new co-wife in the household, are invoked by Angélique to account for her own suffering and that of her family. Suffering

then becomes a socially acknowledged incentive for further decision-making – in this case, inducing an abortion. Hence, abortions are resorted to in reaction to certain *realities* that clash with the norm, rather than in reaction to *the norm per se*. Contrary to what is often uncritically assumed, Gbigbil women do not terminate their pregnancies because they want to act *against* patriarchal norms, but precisely because they take these norms as a starting point – a sort of ideal – against which they interpret encountered practices in terms of suffering. Laura’s repeated statement, ‘I want to bear children, but not in this situation’ indicates how norms and practices can become compromised through an idiom of suffering, and how patriarchal notions are tactically deployed in the process. Again, a discourse that supposedly oppresses women is transformed into a discourse that enables and entitles them.<sup>45</sup>

Second, aborting women also transform religious dogma from a condemning into a supportive framework. This was made clear to me when I was spending time with my informant Charlotte and her *maratre* mama Justine. I witnessed how they were paid a visit by Laura’s uncle on his weekly ‘door-to-door’ preaching tour as a Jehovah’s Witness. They offered the blind man a seat and interacted with him for a few minutes, but only pretended to listen to him afterwards; mama Justine continued her cooking, Charlotte started to put out her washed clothes to dry in the sun, and both women constantly yelled at children. Laura’s uncle departed not long afterwards, but not without having left the message which he had probably intended to discuss at length:

*Preacher:* I would like to talk about abortion today. Abortion is bad. You should know that sexual relationships are blessed by God. With the Grace of God, He will make sure that your sperm and the man’s sperm form a child. At the moment your bloods cross, there is already a child. So if you abort, even a few days after sex, you kill a person. It’s bad. And not only do you kill that person, but you also kill yourself. Or if you don’t die, you will at least suffer a lot.

*Mama Justine:* I would like to ask what to do if you conceive from a man who maltreats you?

*Preacher:* In that case you should keep the child. For whom do you think this child will be?

*Charlotte:* For the two of you, right?

*Preacher:* But especially for the woman. She will profit a lot from her child. So if your husband maltreats you, you should leave him and endure. Because, if you would abort now, who will suffer? For whom is the suffering? For the woman, right?

*Mama Justine:* The pain, indeed! But if I would have an abusive husband and I see I’m over time, I abort it! Why would I keep it? To suffer even more afterwards?

This interaction suggests that the practical social relationships – and their inherent power relations – in which pregnancies are conceived and contested are far more pertinent to abortion decisions than the existence of the condemning normative discourses of Christianity – or law, for that matter. Indeed, *if* women relate to a condemning supernatural force in the face of abortion practices, it is exactly the idiom of suffering within these social relations that they invoke. Laura’s repeated claim that God will be able to *understand* her decision to terminate a pregnancy in certain situations is an example. Again, a condemning discourse does not seem to constrain women, or make them act

against it; rather, it is tactically suppressed, incorporated, or altered in favour of a discourse of social suffering.

But while abortions may be *induced* because of women's discontent with (present or future) suffering, they can also *induce* suffering. As the expressions of the preacher and mama Justine show, this '*souffrance*' is mainly considered to be physiological – with possible social implications. Far more relevant than legal or religious menaces seem to be the physical risks and damage of abortion practices (see also Bleek, 1976; Schuster, 2005). According to many informants, attempts to 'wash the stomach' or to interrupt what is considered a pregnancy – especially when this is done with indigenous medicines – could, due to their intrusive effects, 'burn the cord of children' or 'make the children flee from your belly'. It thus endangers a woman's reproductive future – if not her life (Koster, 2003, 2010; Renne, 2006). The fear of this danger is not unwarranted: the most recent statistics from the Cameroonian Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) in 2004 show a maternal mortality rate of 669 per 100,000 live births (Barrere, 2005, pp. 232-233), of which a considerable part is probably caused by abortion-related complications.<sup>46</sup> Further, in a setting where women's fertility may always turn out to be wanted or necessary in the future, any damage purposefully inflicted is heavily frowned upon as unwise – a form of '*politique*' possibly leading to future suffering. Reactions to several cases of abortion-related deaths in Asung tellingly ranged from pity and lamentation of women's marital and reproductive suffering (which must have caused the abortion attempts), to commentaries like '*elle n'était pas sage*' ('she wasn't wise'), criticizing the risky reproductive behaviour that resulted in suffering and death.

Idioms of physical suffering *after* abortion may also be deployed on purpose – especially when the abortion attempt should remain unknown to outsiders. As noted in the previous chapter, induced abortions can be presented as spontaneous miscarriages. Related idioms of physical suffering divert attention from questions of culpability; they convey an image of innocence that is often warranted in a context where both marriage relationships and fertility stakes are uncertain and contested. Further, like in cases of infertility, idioms of suffering can inform, and raise (financial) support for, tactical treatment itineraries. Since induced interruptions are considered to provoke more and heavier blood loss than spontaneous abortions or childbirth (see Chapter 3), both indigenous and biomedical treatments (such as blood-producing concoctions, vitamin substances, cleaning purges, or anti-inflammatory biomedical injections) are deemed indispensable to replenish the blood reservoir and to prevent further reproductive suffering. Post-abortion care – officially included in Cameroon's 2001 'Policy and Norms of Reproductive Health Services' (see Chapter 1) and aiming to alleviate abortion-related suffering *irrespective* of its provenance – is designed to allow for such 'hidden' instances of health-seeking. Practically, however, post-abortion services seem not only materially limited – especially at the level of the village dispensary – but also largely unused by Gbigbil women. As the local doctor admitted to me:

Depending on the stage of the abortion, I can treat it. In case of simple contractions, I can try to calm them down. And if the foetus comes out already, I can treat it like a normal delivery; it's simple. But if the woman bleeds, I have to refer her to Bertoua for an ultrasound to see the position of the placenta. Similarly, in terms of post-abortion care, I can only offer her some medicines if she doesn't bleed anymore. If she is still bleeding, I again have to refer her to a specialist. But it is rare that women come here after their abortions. They prefer to give birth at home and don't come here anymore if things went okay. I only receive complicated cases. What also happens is that women do ask their husbands for money for treatment because they claim to suffer so much, but put it in their pockets and never come to the hospital.

The doctor went on to cite the case of my informant Géraldine, which I had closely followed. When she had lost her pregnancy of four months, an enormous commotion developed around the 5,000 CFA Francs (around 7.5 Euros) that she had demanded from her husband for post-abortion care and alleviation of her suffering. While she claimed to me to have spent this money on cheap medicines from ambulant sellers and 'some good food since you should eat well after a miscarriage', others – including the doctor, who had prescribed some medications but never saw Géraldine back for treatment – blamed her for having used her husband's contribution for her own purposes. Her subsequent request to me to finance her curettage was met by the warnings of others that she not only wanted to 'eat' my money, but was also probably deploying an idiom of pain and suffering to cover the fact that she had induced this pregnancy interruption herself. Indeed, women's complaints about heavy blood loss, abdominal pain, or other forms of suffering after pregnancy interruptions are likely to encounter the suspicions of outsiders, who are always aware of this possible intentional aspect underlying interrupted fertility (see Chapter 4). Suffering and agency thus relate to each other in complex ways; like cases of infertility, reproductive interruptions are never exclusively associated with either the one or the other.

### **Conclusions: the stakes behind shared sorrows**

This chapter has illuminated some common grounds that underlie the navigation of the various reproductive conjunctures that have been mentioned in this dissertation. Its aim was not to reduce the complexity of women's particular processes of navigation of reproductive conjunctures – which have been shown to vary along with their socially constituted pathways and their personal projects, as well as other particularities. Rather, it has attempted to reveal some discursive mechanisms that underlie multiple modes of fertility management. These discourses touch on women's own conceptualizations of their capacity to give direction to reproductive conjunctures, to 'optimize the occurrence of promising novelties' (Guyer, 2005, p. 379), or to exploit local 'habits of pragmatism' (Lock & Kaufert, 1997, p. 2) in order to pursue their personal projects. The apparently opposed stories of a childless village *mama* and an aborting urban youngster have revealed how women deploy this 'shared narrative groundwork' (Gammeltoft, 2006, p.

595) in comparable ways while navigating the amalgam of normative frameworks, social specificities, material constraints, reproductive aspirations, alternative projects, and hopeful horizons that come together in vital conjunctures.

This common narrative ground encompasses what I have called paradoxical portrayals of powerlessness. Idioms of suffering, fate, resignation to religious dogma, or submission to patriarchy paradoxically create room for tactics (de Certeau, 1984); under the veil of powerlessness, women exert their '*politiques*' – within their marriages, within their families, or within diverse health care systems. Dominant discourses about distress, religion, gender, or patriarchy – in terms of which women's reproductive experiences have often been understood by outsiders – are appropriated and reinterpreted in order to make one's voice heard and pursue or justify one's projects without upsetting the dominant order. Sometimes – when mobilized as 'hidden transcripts' (Scott, 1990) of female worth and power, or when deployed in formal institutions advocating women's empowerment – such idioms of powerlessness enable women to actually *challenge* the dominant framework and gain power in the process. Irrespective of its particular manifestation, however, this 'shared narrative groundwork' always reveals a dialectical relationship between agency and suffering; as Gammeltoft (2006, p. 600) has pointed out, 'suffering implies agency just as agency implies suffering'. Contrary to common assumptions, in Eastern Cameroon this holds for both abortion and infertility, and for women with rural and urban aspirations alike.

By drawing attention to the commonalities in the ways in which Gbigbil women negotiate their (overt or covert) projects within the social order around them, this chapter has touched upon some interpersonal dynamics at play in women's reproductive navigation. By showing that such negotiations are subject to 'judicious opportunism' – contingent on the particularities of the moment and the social surroundings – it has at the same time illuminated the individual inventiveness within changing webs of interrelationships. Further, the stories of mama Rosie and Laura have shown how material bodies (refusing pregnancy conception and pregnancy interruption, respectively) are also at play in fertility management and its outcomes. What, then, can be said about the role of the social, the individual, and the body in reproductive conjunctures? What interrelations and mechanisms of reproductive navigation can we discover in the midst of contingency and controversy? The following, concluding, chapter aims to answer these questions.