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

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CONCLUSION

August 2009. Time to go home. After fifteen months of fieldwork in Asung, I depart from the village with a mixture of sadness and satisfaction, and board a minibus ready to take me and many others on the long and bumpy ride to the capital. In Abong Mbang we make our first stop, which is also the last one in the East Province. Our over-crowded bus immediately attracts a group of young Cameroonian girls who slowly stride alongside its open windows, doughnuts, banana chips, roasted nuts, and peeled oranges on the plates above their heads. A man sitting next to me buys some peanuts from a young girl, who looks him straight in the eyes before moving on, hissing to attract other customers. I hear how, with a tone of indignation, the man exclaims to his companion:

Did you see how she was making eyes at me [*elle me faisait les yeux doux*]? Girls here in the East Province are not children anymore. They know men at the age of eleven. They are ready to seduce men and teach them a lesson in bed. And they want to give birth quickly and abundantly. I tell you!

As we leave the East Province and its sandy roads behind us, I remember how often I was confronted with this image of East Cameroonian women during my research on pregnancy interruptions in the area. Despite its long, well-documented history of high infertility, both Cameroonians and ethnographic sources consistently report abundant sexual activity and reproduction in this rainforest region. Motherhood, they claim, is what matters here. With my Gbigbil informants still fresh in mind, I note how this view differs from the stories I had heard in Asung. Women's narratives there not only revealed other reproductive experiences, but also an amalgam of alternative ambitions. This thesis has been an effort to commit these narratives to writing, and to shed light on the dynamics, desires, and decisions around interrupted fertility.

The longitudinal character of my research – spread over five years – allowed me to follow my informants over time and to observe and discuss the many developments in their reproductive trajectories. This focus on, and participation in, women's life courses enhanced my understanding of their pathways and projects – that is, their ambitions, aspirations, and hopes (Ortner, 2006) – at different points in time. I saw that women's pathways and projects were constantly changing – entailing many moments of possible redirection that I, following Johnson-Hanks (2006), have called 'vital conjunctures'. Indeed, in a context where both immediate social interactions and larger social structures

are pervaded by uncertainty and unpredictability, the particular reproductive conjunctures that were central to this study are only part of a much larger and continuous spectrum of unexpected happenings that characterized daily life in this Cameroonian village.

Not surprisingly, then, the stories of my informants proved to be enormously diverse and in need of contextualization within Asung's local moral worlds and beyond. Yet, rather than concluding that everything is just variable and socially contingent, my aim was to try to trace some meaningful patterns in how women make sense of and give direction to their reproductive interruptions. What conclusions can we draw about reproductive navigation on the basis of the stories of Yvette, Sophie, Laura, mama Rosie, and the many others who appear in this dissertation? How do the concepts of 'vital conjunctures' and 'social bodies', as identified in the introduction, aid our insight into how and why Gbigbil women make their decisions around reproductive interruption? And how are the outcomes of such potential turning points informed by 'specific forms of sociality' (Guyer, 2005, p. 379) or by modes of individuality and corporeality?

This conclusion ventures some answers to these questions. The first section discusses how different forms of sociality in Asung affect women's reproductive ambitions; the second describes the possibilities individual women have to inventively assert their ambitions at moments of pregnancy interruption. In the last section, I point out how the body itself is involved during the 'periods of potential transformation' (Johnson-Hanks, 2006, p. 22) that evolve around interrupted fertility. Taken together, these discussions of sociality, individuality, and corporeality will inform my concluding reflections on what I, with reference to Vigh (2006), have called 'reproductive navigation'.

Ambitions affected: on intercontingencies and social stakes

This study has shown that pregnancies and their interruptions are *social* affairs in East Cameroon. The very definition of a pregnancy, its appropriation by others (all with different stakes and interests) once it becomes visible, its management, and the perceived causes and consequences of its interruption are all socially constituted – and therefore, at times, also socially contested. A similar sociality pervades the foetus as well. Not only are foetal bodies believed to be made up of the essential physical substances (blood and force) of social others, but their contingent development and demise are also subject to social definitions and negotiations. Both pregnant women and their unborn children can thus be said to have *social bodies* in the sense that they acquire meaning within, and are constituted by, the social (inter)connectedness of Gbigbil daily life. In our exploration of patterns of reproductive decision-making in Asung, the question is how this inherent sociality affects women's navigation of their reproductive conjunctures. In terms of Jane Guyer's proposition, we need to examine whether and how 'specific forms

of sociality' possibly 'optimize the occurrence of promising novelties' that women explore during vital conjunctures. Which social factors and interrelations affect Gbigbil women's reproductive pathways and (possible) projects, as well as their decisions to (not) alter these during moments of interrupted fertility?

Before delving into this question, it should be noted again that Gbigbil women's pathways and projects are multiple. So are the 'promising novelties' that present themselves, inspiring new projects or the redirection of previous pathways. To recount all the horizons, options, and directions that Gbigbil women explore within reproductive conjunctures – themselves multiple and situated in wider, ever-changing historical, political, and economic conditions – would be an endless enterprise. However, in broad terms, the pathways women embark upon can lead towards rural or urban respectability, and the most relevant projects that come into play around pregnancies and their interruption concern (the embracing or rejection of) motherhood and/or wifedom. In conjunctures around interrupted fertility, women typically make decisions regarding the initiation/continuation of motherhood (i.e. trying to conceive again or taking a 'rest'); the initiation/continuation of a (possible) marital relationship (i.e. staying with one's partner, or leaving to one's family or another man); and the continuation/alteration of broader pathways (i.e. clinging to one's formerly imagined future, or switching focus and possibly location altogether).¹

These decisions, in all their possible variations, are far from deliberate, 'free' choices. Women's pathways and projects, and their potential redirection in light of the constraints and horizons brought about by fertility interruption, are inherently related to several social configurations. These 'specific forms of sociality' are neither mutually exclusive nor always equally relevant. Yet, taken together, they form an insightful repertoire of significant interrelationships underlying the reproductive navigation of Gbigbil women.

First, a woman's position within a wider body of kinship relations affects her pathways and reproductive and marital ambitions over time. It matters whether a woman is her mother's first or last daughter; whether she was born in or outside marriage; whether she grew up in her own patrilineage or among maternal uncles; and whether she has few or many siblings ('from the same womb' and/or 'from the same father but different mothers'). Women who share the former characteristics – first daughters or ones with few sisters, born and raised within their own patrilineage – are more likely to have relatives involved in their reproductive affairs. One only needs to recall the stories of Laura, who was the only daughter of her parents, and Yvette, who grew up with her mother's maternal uncles, to see the difference. With their premarital reproduction considered an extension of their parents', and that of the patrilineage, women like Laura are more likely to be free (or even pressured) to bear children before marriage – and to give these children to their own mothers or fathers. The marital lives of such women are also more easily influenced by the interests and wishes of family members. As first or

single daughters are highly valued for the bride-price they are expected to bring to the family, their relatives often pressure them to ‘enter’ into and ‘endure’ marriage, and to bear children to encourage the husband and in-laws to fulfil their financial obligations. In the absence of bride-price payments, relatives will more easily enter into conjugal disputes and accept their daughters coming home to ‘rest’ after a reproductive interruption; they may even advise them to abort pregnancies or force them to leave the marriage altogether. In cases of fertility interruption, the decisions of women like Laura are more likely to be influenced by the wishes of relatives – especially their mothers.

Second, the position of a woman’s kin group within the village determines which pathways and ambitions are feasible. In the current atmosphere of political and economic patrimonialism, daughters from extended families in which important persons enjoy informal political power or formal employment are better positioned to profit from the established financial and social capital. As was shown in Sophie’s story, such daughters are more likely to embark upon pathways towards urban respectability from a young age – through schooling or well-off foster parents in the city, for instance. In cases of pregnancy interruption, these women may be less inclined to cling to motherhood and wifehood – and be supported by their family members and other villagers in this deviation from rural respectability. They may also enjoy greater access to *financial* support to pursue alternative ambitions and to seek medical treatment for their fertility interruptions.

Third, social connections to urban zones – whether through family members or through strategic alliances such as those with *big fish* as described in Chapter 4 – can affect a woman’s pathways and reproductive or marital ambitions. Formal education and exposure to urban horizons can change visions of womanhood, wifehood, and motherhood, while acquaintance with biomedical health models and means of contraception and abortion – formally taught at school and informally shared among women – enables one to prevent or interrupt pregnancies and to prioritize other aspirations. This does not necessarily mean that the reproductive discourses and tactics of such women differ from those who remain in the village. Nor does it mean that they are more ‘empowered’ than their ‘suffering’ rural sisters, as argued in Chapter 5. What it *does* mean is that women with access to urban zones may have a wider frame of aspirations and possible horizons, and thus more options at hand in their reproductive conjunctures.

Fourth, a woman’s reproductive navigation depends on the particularities of the sexual or marital relationship with the (potential) father of the child to be born. Chapter 4 showed that it is not so much the volatility or stability of the relationship – as both informal and formal unions are highly fragile – but her partner’s (perceived) ambitions and reactions to the pregnancy (interruption) that inform a woman’s marital and maternal projects, her imagination of rural or urban futures, and her course of action within reproductive conjunctures. Especially when her partner recognizes paternity and is

willing to commit financially after her pregnancy has proven her fertility and worth as a (potential) wife, motherhood and marriage can become immediate priorities, before and after the interruption of a pregnancy. In the opposite case, where reciprocity and signs of commitment are absent, pregnancy interruption may open up other horizons. Indeed, the presence or absence of (parts of the) bride-price – given by the current or previous partners – is often a decisive factor in a woman's decision-making.

Fifth, a woman's reproductive navigation is influenced by the proximity of unrelated others with stakes in the children born to a particular relationship. The co-presence of in-laws – in virilocal marriages where women live with their husband's kin – can lead to increased *control* and *encouragement* of reproduction as these in-laws are generally eager to see their patriliney expand. Fertility interruptions that occur in such a setting will usually be surrounded by more suspicion, conjugal complications, and involvement of in-laws than those happening in neolocally residing couples; consequently, a woman's navigational decisions will be more influenced by the wishes and demands of her husband's kin. The existence of co-wives may also affect a woman's reproductive management since these female competitors are often experienced as a *threat* to continued reproduction. While the presence of co-wives can in fact strengthen a woman's marital and motherhood ambitions, it can also make her lose interest in a particular conjugal arrangement and abandon its associated aspirations. Either way, fertility interruptions occurring in a context of direct female competition are generally surrounded by more contestation and explicit reconsideration of one's previous pathway and current ambitions. The happening is almost certain to become an *event*; we only need to recall the differences between Sophie's two pregnancy interruptions (happening in the absence and presence of a co-wife, respectively) to see this.

Finally, the possibility of certain pathways and projects, and their redirection during reproductive conjunctures, is informed by a woman's personal reproductive trajectory, and the social status she derives from it. While the absence of children and 'mother' status may allow young women to focus on ambitions unrelated to maternity – education, employment, small-scale trade, relations with affluent sexual partners – too prolonged an absence of pregnancies may actually heighten a woman's aspirations for maternity and marriage. Although pregnancies do not necessarily imply motherhood or marriage – thus offering women the possibility to remain focused on alternative projects – social pressure to find a suitable husband and take care of one's children increases with the number of childbirths. Thus, over time, marriage and motherhood are likely to increase their saliency as aspirations directing women's reproductive navigation. Nevertheless, ambitions may change again when a history of successful and respectful childbearing has been established. The presence of (live) children confirms one's worth as a woman, (potential) wife, and mother, and can thereby open up new horizons that are less related to maternity. In cases of interrupted fertility, this proof of (previous) willingness to bear children can contribute to an image of innocence – and leave women's

conjugal ambitions intact. In contrast, a long history of unsuccessful fertility and/or marriage attempts can foreclose marital options or diminish marital and maternal ambitions. Women with such experiences more easily turn their focus to urban horizons or virtues unrelated to motherhood. This was seen in Nadine's explicit aim to move to the city after several failed marriages and repeated child deaths in Asung as well as Mama Rosie's emphasis on her good character and organizational skills rather than the absence of children in her life.

What does all this mean for our understanding of women's reproductive navigation in Eastern Cameroon? Obviously, the different social configurations affect women's reproductive trajectories in different ways: while some are enduring and define which pathways and projects are feasible for women from the outset, others change over time and inspire women's projects at particular moments. Yet, all of them define the availability of options in reproductive conjunctures and, as such, form *possibilities* and/or *constraints* to women's realization of their ambitions. Reproductive decision-making, then, is a socially contingent affair, embedded in different forms of sociality and power relationships. And since the influence of relevant others – parents, siblings, partners, in-laws, co-wives, other villagers – in a particular conjuncture depends in turn on *their* life contingencies, *their* previous pathways, and *their* stakes at that moment, one could further argue that decisions are *intercontingent*.² In other words, life stories intersect; women's navigation never happens independently from the navigations of those around her. The outcomes of reproductive conjunctures are not the predictable result of individual deliberation and design, but the contingent result of the involvement of social others, and of the ways in which women constantly reconfigure their choices in relation to these others.³ Unsurprisingly, this is particularly true for navigations around pregnancies and their interruptions, which are *inherently* social affairs.

Yet, all this does not mean that women lack individual aspirations or room for individual 'tactics' (de Certeau, 1984) that enable them to manipulate the social order. In the reproductive navigation of Gbigbil women, structured sociality is always confronted by equally present notions and expressions of individuality – to which we now turn.

Ambitions asserted: on individuality and tacit tactics

The life stories in this study have shown how Gbigbil women – whatever their background, marital status, social network, or future aspirations – find room to manoeuvre through complex social situations when striving after their own goals. Women often have clear ideas about what is at stake for them and the desired outcomes of their vital conjunctures – even if such ideas are sometimes tactically disguised under an idiom of powerless suffering. Indeed, it is exactly through what I have called the 'paradoxical portrayal of powerlessness' that women find individual and inventive ways to assert their interests and try to influence the course of events. Idioms of suffering and

submission are (re)interpreted and used in such a way that they allow women not only to comment upon the dominant order but also to manipulate it and tactically attain their own (reproductive) goals. Thus, rather than understanding women's complaints of powerlessness as reflections of oppressive patriarchal regimes or of other forms of social subjugation, I have argued that we can comprehend them as 'hidden transcripts' (Scott, 1990) reflecting on this order and enabling individual reproductive management within it. Such hidden transcripts, as well as some less hidden challenges to the dominant order, are used by women in both urban and rural areas alike, pointing to a common narrative ground drawn upon by individuals irrespective of their particular social context. But given the inherent sociality of reproductive experiences and decisions, how should we understand these individual tactics?

First of all, it should be pointed out that notions of individuality are not unheard of in the social fabric of Asung's daily life. In fact, they have a long history in this region, where social relations prior to colonization were organized according to principles of separation and resettlement: once individual men attained a certain age and independence, they would leave their kin group to found an autonomous village (and thereby a new patrilineal segment) elsewhere in the rainforest. Even if a central authority beyond the village level was often lacking, constant power struggles within groups were certainly not absent. Indeed, on the basis of personal talents and characteristics, men attempted to enlarge their group of followers and gain wider power and influence – which could easily be lost to others (see Chapter 1). Social organization was based upon what Guyer (1996, p. 7) has described as a 'self-valuation/realization process whereby the singular pathways of personal expertise were competitively/performatively valued and validated'. Individuality *mattered* for the attainment of social status and power.

While this self-realization could historically only be achieved by adult men, nowadays it finds its expression in all stages of the Gbigbil life cycle, for men and women alike. The foetus, once it has attained enough force (*ngul*), is already believed to be an agent with its own wishes, initiatives, and realizations. Newborn children are carefully examined for individual traits; later in life, they are encouraged to exploit their inborn talents to differentiate themselves from others. Women are constantly preoccupied with their personal 'force', needed to direct their (reproductive and marital) pathways and to pursue their particular projects. Individual inventions and improvisations are even considered constitutive of good and successful womanhood, as Chapter 5 has shown. Self-realization – and its attendant preoccupation with one's pathways – is thus a historically rooted 'social asset' (Guyer, 1996, p. 6) that is highly valued in Asung's contemporary social fabric.

As for the relationship between such particular pathways and social structures, Guyer (1996, p. 23) claims that 'to the degree that the creation of a life trajectory is a prominent principle in the social organization of assets, to the same degree will agency and improvisation have structural salience'.⁴ Indeed, this study found Gbigbil women's

focus on individual inventions and interventions to be related to some structural configurations that make up their daily lives.

First of all, women's valuation of individuality is a result of their ambiguous positions as women and wives in society. Due to long-standing virilocal and patrilineal norms, and the reality of bride-price payments often not being honoured, women are not only considered 'outsiders' in their partners' households, but are also often moving between multiple, fragile partnerships and their own families. This situation both demands improvisation from women and offers them space for manipulation.

Second, *beyond* the marital framework, women and men face structural circumstances that require constant individual creativity. The fluid and uncertain 'terrains' described in Chapter 1 can only be navigated through individual improvisation. In the present era, when the economic crisis seems never-ending, (urban) opportunities are rare and unpredictable, the practice of witchcraft is believed to be omnipresent, and long-standing norms of social interaction are often breached, 'horizons' may vanish as quickly as they appear. The mechanism underlying women's navigation of their vital conjunctures is therefore one of *judicious opportunism* (Johnson-Hanks, 2005) – a matter of pragmatic improvisation rather than following a pre-established, rationalized itinerary. Instead of having clear trajectories in mind, my informants take promising chances – and appeal to promising discourses and explanatory models. Perhaps paradoxically, this improvised decision-making in the inherently *social* domain of reproduction is often an *individual* affair, with women exploring and evaluating promising horizons individually, inventively, inconsistently – and often also secretly.

Individual initiative has often been portrayed as a source of tension in Eastern Cameroonian communities, which have long been pervaded by clear ethics of sociality and egalitarianism (Copet-Rougier, 1987; Geschiere, 1982, 1997b, 2003; Geschiere & Konings, 1993; Guyer, 1996; Laburthe-Tolra, 1981). It is hardly surprising that this tension between individuality and sociality is especially evident in matters of reproduction and its interruption – in this Gbigbil village and elsewhere. By ensuring continuation of the social order and by imbuing parents with social status and power, nothing is more *social* than reproduction. Yet, nothing is more *individual* either. Especially in a cultural context where women are considered outsiders to the patrilineage to which their children officially belong, and where the first few months of pregnancy are shrouded in silence and denial, fertility remains largely in the hands of individual women. It is this very individuality and privacy that offers pregnant women a secret space for decision-making – even if these decisions are never 'free choices' but informed by social interests and horizons. Secrecy – through the *individual* pregnancy interventions it enables – is often crucial for attaining one's *social* goals; it creates room for social navigation. Due to this potential tension between the individual experience of and influence over fertility on the one hand, and social norms, interests, and expectations on the other, reproduction – and even more its interruption – is an extremely ambiguous affair.

This ambiguity finds its clearest expression in the many accusations of witchcraft that follow cases of interrupted fertility. The idiom of witchcraft allows people to comment on individual forms of accumulation (and all other anti-social practices that favour social inequality and power hierarchies) that contravene the region's long-standing ethics of social egalitarianism.⁵ To accuse someone of the witchcraft variant *ivū*, for instance, is to insinuate that this person's actions are led – through a dominant occult force – by an enormous individual appetite for blood, flesh, and wealth that is detrimental to social, and especially familial, stability. Tellingly, such accusations surround fertility interruptions in particular. That *both* pregnant women *and* their social surroundings might possess *ivū* and harm the developing baby points to the tension between sociality and individuality in reproductive matters. On the one hand, women's conviction that malevolent witches may pose a threat to their pregnancies shows the inherent sociality of reproduction, possibly endangered by individual competitors in the social world. On the other hand, the many suspicions that surround the women *themselves* once their pregnancy is interrupted shows how reproduction is at the same time considered an individual affair, amenable to negative influence by some hidden anti-social power in one's belly. The many witchcraft stories that appear in this dissertation should thus be read as reflecting a local and historically embedded preoccupation with forms of individuality that have long been recognized but also feared – in society in general, and in reproductive matters in particular (see also Geschiere, 1997b).

Apart from the ambiguous associations with supernatural forces, fertility interruptions also induce women to worry about their own natural, bodily force (*ngul*). These idioms of *ngul* represent another set of commentaries on the complex interrelationships between individuals and their social surroundings. One's amount of force is considered individually unique and contingent; it is innate and subsequently altered through life experience. Next to constituting an individual's physical strength, *ngul* seems to denote one's power to adapt, to make decisions, to alter ambitions, and to navigate unforeseen vital conjunctures within constantly changing social situations. As such, it is directly related to one's agency. At the same time, it reflects one's status within, and interconnection to, the social world. As Chapter 3 has clearly shown, most complaints of 'lack of force' tellingly come from those who are deprived of a social network or social acknowledgement of one's identity as a woman, wife, or mother. Due to *ngul*'s direct link to childbearing, complaints of forcelessness can moreover be critical commentaries on the social norms to give birth, or on the lack of social support and care after delivery or pregnancy interruption. Such portrayals of physical powerlessness can, as I have argued, paradoxically create room for individual manoeuvring within the very social order that is implicitly denounced. As such, complaints of forcelessness can be used to justify individual decision-making that runs counter to social norms and expectations. Yvette's firm resolution to resort to contraceptive use and abstain from sexual relationships with her husband after her body had grown 'old' and 'weak' is a case in point. Idioms of force

thus form a complex commentary on existing tensions between individual and social affairs; that reproductive experiences are translated into preoccupations with *ngul* shows how fertility forms the ambiguous crux between these two domains.

By highlighting these tensions around fertility interruption, this study unites stances in a debate that has long divided those who focus on the social dependency and interconnectedness of reproductive decision-makers, and those who stress the potential for individual autonomy in fertility matters. I have shown that, at least in the Gbigbil case, one does not exclude the other. Women can be intrinsically tied to social others and at the same time enact forms of individuality that are rooted in, and even encouraged by, that same social order. These dynamics are best captured through a conceptual combination of ‘vital conjunctures’ and ‘social bodies’ – as each of these terms makes up for shortcomings in the other. The concept of the vital conjuncture (Johnson-Hanks, 2006) allows us to lay bare the minutiae of individual decision-making *within* social contingencies but tends to overlook the *intercontingencies* and sociality of agents as well as of the pathways and projects that guide their navigation; the concept of the social body as proposed by Africanists (Piot, 1999; T. Turner, 1995) stresses exactly this state of interconnectedness but often ignores its impact on individual decision-making. Taken together, they allow for a more comprehensive view of the tactics of reproductive navigation.

Such comprehensiveness matters for the anthropological study of reproduction, as it highlights the intricacies of the actual happenings around critical reproductive moments without falling into the trap of reducing these to abstract dichotomous categories such as the ones between ‘social’ and ‘individual’ or between (social/structural) ‘suffering’ and ‘agency’. It thus allows us to come closer to the everyday lived experiences of women who carry, avoid, interrupt, and lose pregnancies within the local moral worlds that surround and constitute them. Yet, if *lived experience* is what we want to describe, we need to consider another aspect that is often ignored by both this individual-social dialectic and the concepts – ‘vital conjunctures’ and ‘social bodies’ – proposed to capture it: namely, the *material* body. The following section points out why focusing on the material body is particularly relevant to the study of fertility interruption, and how it enhances our understanding of women’s navigation of the conjunctures around these interruptions.

Body basics: new notions of navigation

To say that fertility-related pathways and projects are both *socially affected* and *individually asserted* is to point to the different (inter)personal dynamics that underlie women’s navigation of reproductive conjunctures; to say that the tensions between the two are often verbalized in symbolic idioms of metaphysical powers and physical powerlessness is to point to the meanings women give to these (inter)contingencies. But

this is not to say that the actual *physical* experiences around fertility are to be discarded in the study of reproductive meanings and management. Even if bodily concerns – like the ones about physical force – constitute social commentary, bodies also matter *in themselves*. As Margaret Lock (1993a, p. 136) once stated, ‘The question of the body requires more than reconciling theory with practice. It brings with it the difficulty of people both having and being bodies’.⁶

And these bodies sometimes appear to have a will of their own. Especially when it comes to fertility and its interruptions, they do not always do what is wanted of them. The stories in this dissertation revealed many possible unanticipated situations: in Chapters 2 and 3, Diana and Yvette tried to ‘prevent a pregnancy from entering’ but nevertheless missed their periods repeatedly; Chapters 4 and 5 described how Sophie, Nadine, and Laura attempted to ‘prevent a pregnancy from developing’ but failed as their interventions to interrupt foetal force-filling had no effect. The stories of mama Rosie and Yvette showed how both women, while young and desperate for children, were suddenly confronted with bodily states (infertile and ‘old’, respectively) that made any future reproductive success highly unlikely. Bodies like the ones of Yvette and Celestine unexpectedly collapsed during deliveries or after pregnancy interruptions that turned out to be more ‘complicated’ than anticipated. Such physical signs and surprises affect the meanings women attach to their bodies and the fertility-related projects they pursue in their lives. Reproductive decision-making is therefore not only possible or constrained because *others* and *individuals* act, but also because *bodies* act.

Such an acknowledgment asks for an even *more* comprehensive understanding of reproductive navigation – one that adds the primacy and praxis of the body (or ‘body basics’) to the individual-social dialectic discussed above. The body does not only enable or constrain women’s navigation, but it needs to be navigated *itself* as well; it both *directs* and *demands* navigation. Since acting bodies are unpredictable, women have to constantly manage the broad range of options, outcomes, and obstacles that their bodies present to them. They are confronted with a material world in which anything can happen – the incoherent logics of the body varying between women and over time. Judicious opportunism is thus as much at play at the level of the body as in the uncertain and unpredictable social situations that Gbigbil women encounter.

This bodily navigation – individual and intimate in nature – is always dialectically related to *social* navigation as women try to align their unpredictable bodies with their social projects. Women constantly supervise, manipulate, and redirect their bodies – and their unexpected workings – in order to successfully navigate vital conjunctures and socialities. They do so within certain limits, however; methods to redirect bodily workings are neither endless, nor always effective in the face of the body’s inherent – and at times, persistent – capacity to become pregnant or to release a pregnancy. Nadine’s story in Chapter 4 is a case in point: after trying in vain to abort her unexpected pregnancy, which did not fit with her plan to find a rich husband in the city, she used her pregnant state as a

potential incentive for three appointed ‘fathers’ to engage – an alternative route into the urban marriage she was aspiring to. By refusing to release the foetus, Nadine’s body circumscribed her reproductive navigation; at the same time, this very bodily condition was inventively transformed into a new project on Nadine’s pathway to urban respectability.

Such body basics contribute to our understanding of reproductive decision-making in ways that the concepts proposed above can not. ‘Acting’ bodies have been largely ignored in the notion of vital conjunctures and they are more than only social bodies constituted by interrelationships as Africanists like to stress. They are the very basis of reproductive experiences and, through it, form a bridge between individual decisions and social situations. In cases of interrupted fertility, this nexus between body, self, and society is disturbed and re-evaluated. Physical well-being, personal pathways and projects, and social situations are possibly redefined in the process; reproductive interruptions can turn into events or be purposefully downplayed as non-events. Only when we acknowledge this interplay of the body, the individual, and the social can we come to fully understand the meanings and management of interrupted fertility.

Such an understanding of reproductive navigation brings new insights to existing studies and interventions in the domain of reproductive health. First, it allows us to see beyond the analytical dualities that underlie current thinking on interrupted fertility. The complexity of Gbigbil women’s reproductive navigation questions common assumptions about early and late pregnancy interruptions (Chapter 3), spontaneous and induced abortions (Chapter 4), and suffering and agency, often linked to rural and urban realms respectively (Chapter 5). Due to the tensions between body, self, and society that underlie interruptions of fertility, these categories (addressing physical, individual-intentional, and socio-structural issues respectively) are far from clear-cut in everyday practice. This study has revealed that it is their very *blurriness* that makes experiences of fertility interruption in Asung so ambiguous. At the same time, this study has shown how these very ambiguities allow women to pragmatically turn to (partly hidden) possibilities and differing discourses. All vital conjunctures around interrupted fertility are ‘socially structured zones of *possibility*’ (Johnson-Hanks, 2006, p. 22) – because they generate socially structured zones of *ambiguity* that women can pragmatically navigate.

Second, the comprehensive conception of reproductive navigation proposed in this study sheds further light on these pragmatics – which have also become a focus in the recent (and valuable) body of literature on ‘reproductive politics’. Inspired by feminism and Foucault, this recent work emphasizes the power relations and discursive body politics that infuse reproduction. Bodies are certainly present in these ethnographies, but largely as arenas in which multi-level power relations and discursive struggles are played out. While this study showed the human body to be a site for ‘negotiating contradictory forces’ (Ginsburg & Rapp, 1991, p. 314) and a ‘forum for the expression of dissent and loss’ (Lock, 1993a, p. 141), the body is also more than this. In

being active and unpredictable agents *themselves*, material bodies both direct and demand pragmatic management. A broader understanding of navigation that incorporates the workings of material bodies will bring back into view the ‘body basics’ that risk being overlooked in overly political analyses of reproduction.

Finally, the conceptualization of reproductive happenings and decision-making proposed here questions many of the ideas informing the reproductive health programs and policies implemented in present-day Cameroon and elsewhere. The past decades have witnessed growing international attention to, and advocacy for, women’s reproductive rights and choices. But implicit assumptions about how decisions are made seem to be at odds with practical realities as observed in Asung. The stance that women should *a priori* be able to control their fertility and fertility outcomes becomes untenable once we acknowledge that personal reproductive ambitions are always inherently related to largely unpredictable socialities *and* physicalities. Contrary to the stability that family planning campaigns attribute to women’s fertility desires, this study has shown that reproductive projects change with the hopes and horizons that emanate from women’s individual and social bodies. As such, this study has also highlighted how certain situations are initially *not* chosen but eventually accepted; how some choices are *not* made or *impossible* to make despite one’s aspirations; how certain options are explored but abandoned again; and how some decisions forcibly ensue from the unexpected actions of women’s bodies or interactions with other social actors. Women’s reproductive pathways can be strewn with obstacles or lead to hopeful horizons. The directions women take along the way are less a matter of control than the result of a contingent interplay of connectedness, creativity, and corporeality.



Undoubtedly, many more dynamics than the ones suggested above could be explored in further research on reproductive interruptions. My trip out of the field as described above was by no means a definitive one, leading to final conclusions without need for return or reconsideration. Perhaps the gradual opening up of ambiguous moments of interrupted fertility can itself be considered a ‘vital conjuncture’ – full of possible entrances and new explanations with the ability to transform previous lines of thinking on the subject, both scientific and popular. The exploration of new horizons will undoubtedly lead to deeper understandings of interrupted fertility in the future. With reproductive interruptions being *vital* conjunctures that can have life or death consequences – as witnessed by the stories of Celestine and many others – this itinerary, though still uncharted, is clearly warranted. The margins of motherhood are not matters to be marginalized.