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‘The vagina does not talk’: conception concealed or deliberately disclosed in eastern Cameroon

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In the East Province of Cameroon, respectable womanhood has long been intrinsically related to ethics of production and reproduction: women attain social standing through productive work in the fields and through the reproduction of children – preferably within a marital setting. Yet, in the face of current alternative ‘horizons of honour’ such as schooling, employment or relationships with rich urban men, women’s intentions with regard to marriage and motherhood acquire different meanings. On their pathways to urban forms of honour, formal engagements and childbearing are often postponed, while premarital sexual encounters proliferate. This paper explores the meanings of pregnancy within the context of these fragile relationships and women’s urban aspirations; fertility will be shown to be a ‘bet’ that may either disrupt or stabilize urban affairs and ambitions. As such, pregnancies can be strategically anticipated and deliberately disclosed or unexpectedly encountered and secretly disrupted. This paper sheds light on women’s strategies of concealment and disclosure of pregnancies and shows that these practices are often inspired by a notion of the ‘right timing’ of particular reproductive conjunctures – a notion that is of increasing relevance in current frames of female honour in Cameroon.

Keywords: pregnancy; sex; marriage; relationships; Cameroon

Introduction: respected womanhood reinterpreted

The centrality of production and reproduction to the daily lives of women all over the African continent in general, and Cameroon in particular, has been widely documented. Anthropological studies have long shown that women capable of realizing agricultural output and bearing many (live-born) children are likely to gain status and respect (Calvès and Meekers 1997; Goheen 1993; Nana-Fabu 2001; Wakam 1994), while those who are perceived to fail in their productive and, especially, reproductive duties are often surrounded by stigma and vulnerability (Boerma and Mgalla 2001; Leonard 2002; Richards 2002; Upton 2001). Yet, these productive and reproductive sources of status seem to acquire different meanings in the context of current societal developments. Rapid urbanization and economic developments, along with many other processes across the continent, have recently altered female production roles and fertility patterns and desires (Bledsoe et al. 1999; Bledsoe and Pison 1995; Shapiro and Gebreselassie 2008). New forms of respectability seem to have entered the arena of women’s activities and aspirations.

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This trend is clearly perceptible in Cameroon as well. In the rural East Province of the country, the region of interest in this paper, women's social standing is, and has long been, intrinsically related to their work on the fields and the number of children they bear. Ideally, production and reproduction should happen within a marital framework, after a woman has moved into the compound of her husband (and his family).¹ In line with these local ethics of production and reproduction, the most respected women in the community are those who expose their physical force through zealous work on the fields, who transform their agricultural products into rich meals with which to feed family-in-law and guests and who, by way of analogy, also 'cook' babies inside their uteruses (see, for similar analogies between field, fire and fertility in different Cameroonian cultures, Feldman-Savelsberg [1996], Goheen [1993] and Houseman [1988]).

Yet, the centrality of field, cooking fire and fertility to women's social standing is currently becoming altered in the face of alternative 'horizons of honour'.² Many rural women nowadays choose to alternate their stay in the village with shorter or longer periods in urban realms. Their specific reasons to do so are multiple, but underlying these decisions is a certain view of urban life offering more attractive possibilities and future imaginations than what is encountered in the village. As much as village life is pervaded by ethics of production and reproduction, so is urban life envisaged to be its antithesis. Its driving force is not subsistence but rather the accumulation of money. The pathway to respectability is not the exposure – and thereby, depletion – of physical force, but rather the exposure of financial capital and of social links with those who possess money. In the view of many women, a shift to such an alternative frame of *dignité* would ensure the preservation of force, youth and beauty and would also give them more rest, more time and more options with regard to productive and reproductive activities than could ever be attained in the village. Even if aspirations of an easy and honourable life in the city may not correspond with eventually encountered urban realities, such expectations *do* underlie women's decisions to leave the village and 'search their lives' elsewhere.

Several pathways are believed to enhance the realization of these urban ambitions. Apart from the much valued and explored routes of education and the formal job market – both making 'modern' forms of pecuniary honour directly accessible to women (Johnson-Hanks 2006, 2007) – urban *dignité* can be achieved through prestigious symbolic liaisons such as sexual relationships, marital alliances, kinship connections or clientism with urban elites.³ For many women in eastern Cameroon, the preferred pathway into an urban lifestyle is formed by relationships with rich men in the city. It is through the money of these men that women may attain the luxurious and respected lifestyle they are aiming for; with the connections these established men open up to them, they might be able to access formal jobs or other opportunities for themselves or their family members.

In this paper, I focus on the implications of this aspirational shift from rural to urban forms of *dignité* for women's fertility management in the rural east of Cameroon. I explore how intentions and interpretations of marriage and motherhood change on women's pathways to urban forms of honour and how these changed aspirations in turn affect the concealment and disclosure of pregnancies right after the moment of conception. Pregnancies will be conceptualized as 'vital conjunctures', which Johnson-Hanks (2006) defines as 'socially structured zones of possibility that emerge around specific periods of potential transformation in a life' (22). The possible future scenarios that people imagine in such 'critical durations of uncertainty and potentiality' (22) are called 'horizons'. These horizons are socially constructed and inspire aspirations that underlie social action; they thus influence which choices are being made and which possibilities taken. A pregnancy opens up a vital conjuncture because its conception implies a potential transformation of a

woman's life that may or may not coincide with her aspirations at that moment; the conjuncture itself is then constituted by the different (socially structured) possibilities she has to act upon this event. This paper sheds light upon the particular possibilities of concealment and disclosure in such a vital conjuncture; it analyzes how concealing or confirming conception allows pregnant Cameroonian women to navigate towards a 'horizon' of urban *dignité*.

The focus of this paper diverges from what is most often centralized in the current body of literature on premarital sexuality and pregnancy. Rarely are concealment and disclosure practices a *central* focus of these studies; at most they are indirectly touched upon in discussions of stigma, shame and subsequent abortion decisions (Bennett 2001; Bleek 1981; Rossier 2007; Johnson-Hanks 2002a). Yet, centralizing disclosure-related dilemmas in eastern Cameroon brings to the fore that women's reproductive strategies are as much directed by negative notions of dishonour as they are inspired by perceived positive chances to pursue one's aspirations. To come to an understanding of these complex deliberations, I will, after some methodological notes, first describe the dynamics and desires underlying the urban relationships that women engage in, and then outline their childbearing intentions within these encounters. It will become clear how, in all this, a notion of 'right timing' inspires acts of concealment and disclosure and thereby gives direction to new interpretations of respected womanhood.

Methodology

The data presented in this article were gathered over 15 months between 2004 and 2009 during a research project focusing on women's experiences with pregnancy loss in the East Province of Cameroon (see Van der Sijpt 2010; Van der Sijpt and Notermans 2010). This research revealed a difference between the reproductive experiences and decisions of women who intended to stay in the village in which fieldwork was conducted and those who aimed for an urban future instead. The interactions with the latter group serve as the starting point for this paper. It concerns a group of 20 women belonging to the local Gbigbil community, all in their 20s (since it is especially the younger generation that aims for a future in the city) and with variable reproductive histories – having borne none, one or multiple children and having aborted none, one or multiple pregnancies.⁴

My interactions with these young women were largely informal; most of the time, I acted as a participant observer accompanying them in their daily activities – which in this specific context implied working on their fields, caring for their children, cooking and eating with them, participating during their deliveries and abortions or accompanying them to urban markets, churches, hospitals and healers. Most of these women also took part in the six focus group discussions that I organized for village youngsters. Further, I held 77 thematic in-depth interviews and 94 life-history interviews with these and other women and men in the village. In particular, the interviews and group discussions that dealt with issues related to pregnancy discovery, sexuality and marriage offered relevant material for this paper. All interviews and focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim in French – the regional *lingua franca* in which this research was conducted.⁵ The life histories were coded in Atlas-ti for systematic content analysis.

Informal insecurities: the 'big fish' bet

The stakes and aspirations surrounding premarital pregnancies in eastern Cameroon are informed by longstanding ideals and by currently changing ideas regarding the link

between childbearing and marriage. Women's deliberations about disclosure or concealment after conception should therefore be considered in the light of marital histories and horizons in this region. Ideally, childbearing should take place within a marital framework agreed upon by the extended families of both partners. This marital arrangement should be concluded 'traditionally' through a series of exchanges between both partners' families, whereupon the woman sets out to live with her husband and his relatives. With the continuation of bride-price payments to the family of the woman, every child subsequently born in this marriage should be considered as belonging to the father and his family. As such, childbearing constitutes one side of a reciprocal relationship; a woman's family can ask for several gifts and services to compensate for the 'loss' of their daughter and her childbearing capacities. In this ideal story, fertility thus forms the crux of an enduring alliance between two lineages.

While marriage norms and expectations have probably always diverged from actual conjugal practices in the region,⁶ several recent developments have certainly contributed to a discrepancy between the above marriage prescriptions and reality. First, in the context of a long-lasting economic crisis that started in the second half of the 1980s, payment of (parts of) the bride-price is often delayed or completely discarded. As a consequence, definitions of marriage have become more flexible (with bride-price no longer its *sine qua non* condition) and the belonging of children born in the union more contested (with the family members of the woman claiming the descendants of their daughter in the absence of any matrimonial compensation). Second, in the face of multiple urban horizons and alternative forms of honour related to schooling and formal employment, marriage and parenthood have ceased to be the only means to attain *dignité*. They seem to become relevant only later in life. As several studies have indicated, especially from the mid-1980s onwards, there is a visible trend of rising marriage ages for both men and women in urban areas all over Cameroon (Calvès 1999, 2000; Garenne 2004; Johnson-Hanks 2007).

Both developments have engendered a proliferation of premarital sexual relationships, which might or might not culminate in what is finally agreed to be a marriage. Such relationships may attain different intensities, serve different interests and acquire different meanings for women and men alike. The most common and volatile form of sexual interaction is called a 'simple friendship' (*amitié simple*). Such a friendship is constituted by a gendered exchange of food, sex and money: men give money for food and other gifts, women cook for and sleep with men. The relationship persists as long as some kind of reciprocity is maintained between the partners; clear future visions or further commitments are mostly absent. Both men and women often have multiple friendships, which they are free to bring to an end if they lose interest for some reason or another.

While such *amitiés* are common in both rural and urban areas, they acquire particular meanings for unmarried women who aim for a future in the city. These women often explicitly attempt to be involved with the most respected and well-to-do men in urban environments – preferably older men with formal employment. Such partners are called big fish (*gros poissons*); 'a good catch which might be able to fill your stomach'. The 25-year-old Laura explains:

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

Through the material and symbolic advantages accruing from 'friendships' with these rich men, women aim to attain their goals of urban luxury and dignity. In this, they are often encouraged by their family members. With the eventual transfer of a bride-price far from

secured in the current era of economic and conjugal instability, relatives try to profit from – if not some parts of the bride-price – at least the gifts and connections these rich men could possibly offer their daughter and themselves (see also Guyer 1994). Not surprisingly, then, big fish are solicited by many women and their families alike and have to distribute their attention and money over multiple partners. Long-term reliable relationships with big fish are therefore considered unfeasible; most lovers rather seek instantaneous advantages. As Laura noted above, formal engagements are also not necessarily what women aim for; a hypothetical entrance into marriage is by many of them conceived as a possible obstruction to other non-marital ambitions.

At the same time, the unconditional exchanges taking place in simple friendships could also serve as a basis for a 'deep friendship' (*amitié profonde*) or 'serious engagement' (*fiançailles*) since the exchange of sex, food and money is currently part of *every* intimate relationship in eastern Cameroon – also those that *are* intended to be serious and long-lasting. Male attention in the form of money and gifts serves, as it has always done, as an indicator of his potentialities as a future spouse; it is considered a proof of his love, responsibility and serious intentions (see also Bhana and Pattman 2011; Sølbeck 2010). As such, the 'commodification of sex' before marriage and the value women attach to men's financial generosity should not only be placed in the current conjuncture of economic crisis – as transactionalist interpretations tend to do (Dunkle et al. 2007; Hunter 2002; Kaufman and Stavrou 2004; Leclerc-Madlala 2003) – but also in a historical context where 'the social structure of marriage exchanges centred on bridewealth, in which a man's commitment to a relationship is measured in the frequency and extravagance of his gifts' (Johnson-Hanks 2007, 651).

Relationships with big fish are thus ambiguous: while they might be instrumental for the achievement of other urban goals like schooling, employment or modern *dignité*, their stabilization might at the same time become a goal in itself for those women who aspire to an urban marriage with a promising husband. For marriage *does* remain the ultimate goal in life, as other studies have also noted (Calvès 1999; Goheen 1993; Johnson-Hanks 2006, 2007). Even if longstanding gendered reciprocities have become reconfigured into new forms of partnerships in urban zones, marriage as an ultimate framework for respectability remains intact.

While for men it is thus often uncertain whether women interact with them for the sake of instantaneous pleasures and profits or with longer-term intentions in mind, women have similar suspicions about the actual ambitions of their male partners who maintain several girlfriends without clear promises of formal engagements. Consequently, sexual and marital relationships are fraught with mutual mistrust. Whilst this might be true everywhere in Cameroon, the relational uncertainty becomes exacerbated in urban settings, where alternative horizons create more independence between partners. The presence of forms of respectability beyond the marital framework, the high level of competition on a flexible marriage market where men and women explicitly aim for the most profitable partners, as well as a general lack of bride-price payments once engagements become more serious, all imbue urban partnerships with ambiguity. It is in this ambiguous context that women's decisions around their pregnancies should be situated.

Conception concealed or confirmed: neg(oti)ations around beginning pregnancies

- Charlotte: It is very simple to mislead men. A man only knows that he has a wife. But he doesn't know how his wife often conceives a pregnancy.
- Nadine: You only tell him you are already pregnant.
- Charlotte: He will ask you when it has entered. It is up to you to tell him the day and the date that you did something together. And he will have to believe it.

- Dorine: Haha, a woman? A woman is very strong!
- Nadine: Criminal! First devil!
- Dorine: Because there are things that a woman does and a man can never know. You pretend that you walk together, but ...
- Nadine: The vagina does not talk. And yet, it has already worked!

Although the above excerpt forms part of a focus group discussion on women's strategic behaviour in general, it is not surprising that the particular youngsters (between 19 and 25 years old) speaking here had all been in relationships with big fish. It is especially in the more or less informal sexual liaisons with urban men that women's manipulation in affairs of love, sex and reproduction is warranted. With these ambiguous relationships being as easily dissolvable as possibly leading to more formal engagements, pregnancies often have a major impact on the direction and steps taken in the partner play. Depending on the circumstances and the aspirations at hand, they can do both – immediately disrupt a relationship or stabilize it into a deeper friendship or even marriage. As fertility is not always explicitly aimed for in these encounters, nor necessarily leading to engagement, pregnancies constitute a 'bet' in a wider partner play. Meanings and implications of conception for such relationships are subject to constant negotiation between the two partners and their families; the decision to either disclose or conceal one's pregnancy is therefore imbued with particular stakes and dilemmas.

For many women with urban aspirations, conception is perceived to stand in the way of the realization of their ambitions. Although pregnant youngsters in Cameroon are legally allowed to continue schooling after maternity leave, in practice many school-going women fear to lose their educational opportunities – or subsequent employment chances, for that matter – once they are confronted with a pregnancy.⁷ Disclosure of conception might induce parents or (rich) partners in unstable relationships to withdraw their financial support or, in the opposite case, encourage them to formalize marriage arrangements now that a proof of fertility has been given. Many young women prefer to conceal and abort their pregnancies in order to avoid either result – even if, in practice, possibilities *do* exist to circumvent social motherhood or wifehood (by relinquishing parental rights to other relatives or by acknowledging the paternity of the child's father without marrying him) and to continue education after birth (Johnson-Hanks 2002b, 2006).⁸ Such 'secret strategies' (Koster 2003) do not necessarily imply that these women reject the idea of motherhood or wifehood altogether, yet, within the vital conjuncture that this particular conception opened up to them, alternative aspirations offer more interesting horizons than the scenario of pregnancy disclosure and development. Now is not the time to become a mother or a wife; in the future more appropriate pathways into parent- or partnership may be encountered.

For others, a pregnancy – just like a sexual relationship – forms exactly a means to realize urban ambitions since it might ensure financial support from and a symbolic link to a respected man in the city. Especially when a relationship with a certain man seems profitable to a woman, a pregnancy might be a worthy try to 'stick' this partner to her – at least temporarily. In this sense, the best strategy is to conceive with a big fish and disclose the pregnancy to him as soon as possible – or, otherwise, strategically allot a pregnancy to 'the best positioned' lover who is *not* the biological father of the child. Even if a marriage is not directly what is envisaged, a woman who succeeds in convincing her partner of his fatherhood expects herself reassured of care and financial support during pregnancy and her child's first years. In the current absence of bride-price payments (which used to establish a husband's paternal rights over all the children his wife would bear), some unwritten rules have developed which ensure

a man's *de facto* right over his descendants as long as he acknowledges his paternity and provides financially for mother and child. Women 'play' with their partners – especially those who express a wish for children – accordingly. Charlotte tells:

When I was pregnant for one or two months, I told my sisters, 'Don't tell anybody. I myself will know to whom I will give my child. If that person really wants a child, he will look after the baby and me. I won't suffer any more like I suffer now'. I had two lovers in the city. So I asked both of them for the baby presents – both the father of my child and the other whom I had also told that he had impregnated me. And both of them have come! We first saw one car arrive with soap, fish, and meat. And then the second father came with another car full of rice, soap, food, everything! He thought it was his child. We didn't want to deny it, so we said, 'Well, here is your child. Do you see how he resembles you?' He looked at my son and said, 'This is my blood'. I thought, 'Ah, if only you knew'. But my people have drunk, my people have eaten.

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

Other women, however, do try to enforce marriage after they disclose their pregnancy to a man – who might or might not be the biological father – and recognize a certain willingness in him to engage. In these cases, what is aspired to is the honour of being married in general (for, as stated, marriage remains an ultimate framework of *dignité*) or of living with an urban big fish in particular. In order to obtain these marital goals, women often strategically deploy the longstanding norm that links childbearing to a marital framework; they portray marriage as an unpreventable outcome of a pregnancy conceived in an urban affair. Although this norm is largely not adhered to in practice, it *is* employed in women's disclosure discourses so as to alleviate the uncertainty of, and give direction to, indeterminate relationships. The 23-year-old school-going Joséphine, for instance, who conceived with a well-to-do urban lover, turned her initial disappointment about her pregnancy – which she feared would 'spoil her future' – into the hope that her disclosure and subsequent demands would help her to still realize her ambitions:

I'm not sure whether he will marry me. He has his wife. But they have only two children. So I hope to profit from the child that links us already. My education should not fall in the water. I didn't study for nothing. And I don't see how my parents here will be able to send me to school again. So I hope, I impose, I insist with him. If he agrees that I should marry him, I will do so. What can I do? We already have a child.

Joséphine's last two sentences show how she presents marriage as the unpreventable outcome of an unanticipated vital conjuncture, while in fact it might be the most promising horizon at hand. Indeed, the prospect of realizing her educational ambitions by marrying a well-to-do man may have contributed to Joséphine's seemingly passive acceptance of this option. A marriage is now desirable because it can safeguard her urban aspirations; the disclosure of her pregnancy is a first step in the right direction.

Some others go even one step further: they take their ambition of an honourable marriage as the starting point and strategically disclose their pregnancies accordingly – in the hope that at least somebody would take fatherhood as an incentive for more formal marriage arrangements. Nadine's story, below, shows how strategies of concealment and disclosure might serve such a higher goal.

Nadine's story

Nadine has borne six children with four men, and lost all her three boys and one girl. Her two remaining daughters live with her ex-husband. The death of her last son has triggered a situation

in which she is left with no children to care for, no stable relationship with the boy's father, Didier, and no clear future perspectives. When she is offered a job as a servant in Douala, Cameroon's economic capital, Nadine gladly leaves the village behind to 'search her life' in the big city. Finding only hard working conditions and poor lovers unwilling to assume a responsible relationship, however, she decides to return to her natal village nine months later. Here she detects that Didier has had relationships with two other women, and that she missed her period. She concludes she must have conceived from a married man she used to date in Douala.

After an initial wish for abortion, Nadine decides to keep the pregnancy; it will enable her to undergo a treatment for the affliction (*iwō*) that she suspects caused her previous children's deaths.⁹ At the same time, this pregnancy can help her find a marriage; now that gossip about her marital instability abounds in the village, Nadine would like to restore her *dignité* through marrying a respectable husband. The question is to whom to 'give' her pregnancy. Three men enter the stage: next to the biological father from Douala and her socially recognized husband Didier, she thinks of another promising candidate: the driver of the car she travelled with on her way back from Douala. As a city dweller with a job and without a wife, this driver had quickly turned into a lover worthy of imagining a shared future with – more than the two other men at this moment. She therefore concludes that, 'If the chauffeur wants to continue, I will tell him he should take me, including my pregnancy. But not now, because we just started and he will not believe this pregnancy is his. I have to wait a bit first, then reveal my pregnancy, and see what he decides'.

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

However, when Didier traces Nadine's lovers on her mobile phone, his uncertainty about his paternity is exacerbated and he breaks all contact again. This, together with the subsequent curses Nadine receives from several family members, strengthens Nadine's wish to leave the village forever. When she coincidentally receives a phone call from the taxi driver, she tells him she carries his pregnancy. The guy is overwhelmed and asks her for time to reflect. In this undecided period I ask Nadine about her hopes for the future, whereupon she answers:

The ball is still turning. My chance will fall wherever it falls. If it is with Didier, I will return there. But he knows my conditions; I decided not to work on the fields anymore and to go to the city. And if I succeed at the other side [i.e. with the driver], I will block him [i.e. Didier]. It's very simple: if a man gives you a pregnancy, and you see that he's not well situated, but you see that another one is better off, you can balance them. So I balance the two and will see where it will end.

Nadine's story shows how, within a time frame of only a few weeks, several opportunities and obstructions can present themselves on the pathway to a much wanted married life in the city. Nadine adapts her strategies of concealment and disclosure accordingly, without, however, losing sight of the bigger urban aspirations that she aims to achieve through this pregnancy.

Recognizing all too well that women like Nadine might strategically conceal or deliberately disclose conception, men are often reluctant to acknowledge paternity of a pregnancy conceived in an uncertain relationship. After all, it is only the woman who knows for sure whose pregnancy she carries and to whom she wants to 'give' it. Confronted with a pregnancy of which they are not certain to be or want to be the father (since they, too, might have aspirations other than parenthood), men have several options: abandoning the pregnant woman, acknowledging the relationship, acknowledging the pregnancy or acknowledging both. With no formalities established, no financial obligations yet fulfilled and often even no stability of the relationship with their pregnant girlfriends, men are relatively free to decide what to do when they are appointed as future fathers. Especially in unstable urban relationships where other aspirations might be at play for both partners, paternity often becomes contested by men and their families (Calvès 2000).

Even those men who do explicitly aim to find (or keep) a suitable marriage partner and/or her children acknowledge that there is little that they can do to prevent false fatherhood. Some try to calculate the menstrual cycle of their partners or use condoms in risky periods or relationships. Others, like Nadine's 'husband' Didier, threaten to conduct a blood test on the newborn baby – which they almost never do in practice. Still others rely on the 'force of blood' that will show common physical traits between father and child or direct the latter to its biological genitor even years after birth. Finally, those who are desperate for children resign themselves to the fact that women have a final say in these affairs; since 'the vagina does not talk' – something that men are well aware of – it is only the talk of the woman that counts for them. Her pregnancy disclosure and claim of fatherhood are then acknowledged and accepted – even if everybody knows that the disclosure might be deliberate and the fatherhood false.

Discussion

While it becomes clear from the above that pregnancies might impede or enhance urban aspirations, and are concealed or disclosed accordingly, this is not to say that women's reproductive decision-making is a mere individual affair. As vital conjunctures, pregnancies – or the conception thereof – open up many possible pathways into a (more or less transformed) future. These pathways are always socially structured; which possibilities or horizons pop up depends on larger socio-historical dynamics as well as one's position within wider social networks. Disclosure-related options and decisions are therefore inherently social as well. In the stories above, we saw that Charlotte decided for a double disclosure so as to satisfy her own material needs as well as those of her relatives; Joséphine capitalized on probable marriage prospects since her family seemed financially incapable of sending her back to school; and Nadine chose to reveal her pregnancy to partners who could take her away from gossip and family curses in the village.

That especially family members are of considerable influence in disclosure strategies is not surprising. In the current era, where bride-price transactions are precarious and premarital relationships proliferate, childbearing is often not only contested by both partners but also by their families. Relatives of a pregnant woman are prone to interfere in the reproductive affairs of their promising daughter for whom certain future horizons had been anticipated. In line with their own needs and aspirations, they sometimes reject premarital pregnancies, while at other times they encourage them; they sometimes focus on the financial and marital duties of the father, while at other times they align a child to their own family. Parents of promising sons similarly have interests in influencing the reproductive outcomes of their (potential) daughters-in-law. Women's ambitions,

negotiations and decisions around disclosure dilemmas should therefore always be considered in the light of the social dynamics during the particular conjuncture at hand.

Due to this social complexity, but also the very unpredictability of vital conjunctures, reproductive decision-making does not follow a pre-defined pathway; strategies of concealment and disclosure are not *a priori* calculated. Most of the time, things just happen without anticipation, future visions are unclear or inconsistent and goals get shaped after conception by the decisions of family members or partners (see also Cornwall 2007). Nadine's story shows how experiences and perceptions around early pregnancy can flexibly change within the time span of only a few weeks. While navigating opening and closing pathways, women constantly adjust their ambitions with regard to fertility and marriage – and thereby their concealment and disclosure strategies.

Yet, there is a time limit to these strategies. With the development and increasing visibility of the pregnancy, concealment becomes more difficult, abortions become more dangerous and the question of whether or not to disclose one's state becomes eventually irrelevant. Women's reproductive navigation is therefore always constrained – by social circumstances, but also by the passage of time. Situations should be assessed and stakes asserted before the pregnant belly starts to grow.

During these post-conceptual navigations, women seem to search for the right timing, the right person and the right circumstances – that is, the right vital conjuncture – for childbearing. Well-timed reproduction has been noted to be a major occupation and responsibility of women in the region and elsewhere in Africa (Izugbara, Ochako, and Izugbara 2011). For educated Beti women in the south of Cameroon, for instance, Johnson-Hanks (2002a) has claimed that 'an ill-wrought entry into the social status of mother, such as when a young woman leaves school with no prospects for marriage or employment, constitutes a severe dishonor' (1337). Likewise, for my Gbibil informants, motherhood becomes especially *digne* (honourable) when it occurs in synchrony with accomplishments in other life domains, such as education, employment or a modern marriage. It is through strategic acts of concealment and disclosure that women attempt to establish this synchronization. Such acts furthermore show female 'self-mastery', independence and control – sources of respect that were formerly only reserved for men, but that have become an indispensable characteristic of modern womanhood in contemporary Cameroon (Johnson-Hanks 2007; Laburthe-Tolra 1981). As such, concealment and disclosure strategies are not only means to, but also manifestations of, modern and respectable womanhood.

Interestingly, in trying to turn their ill-timed pregnancies into pathways to 'modern honour', women often resort to longstanding norms and discourses that link childbearing to marriage. Through this discursive display, they transform their pregnancy into an opportunity – a possible incentive for a promising partner to initiate marriage arrangements and offer a respectable conjugal framework. Yet, the same rationale linking fertility to marriage can also be invoked to portray a pregnancy as an obstruction on one's pathway to urban honour; it is exactly the wish to avoid the entrance into marriage that is taken as a justification for concealment and abortion. In still other cases, women may discard these longstanding norms altogether. They may focus on the current practical reality in which premarital pregnancies do not necessarily lead to motherhood or wifehood. By claiming that a child eventually belongs to the father or the wider maternal family, for instance, they minimize the impact of childbearing on their personal lives while still trying to maximize their chances for a respectable fate in the future.

Women (and others around them) thus strategically deploy different disclosure discourses in order to bring their hopes in line with the encountered horizons. They have the possibility hereto since current sexual and marital relationships are ambiguous and

surrounded by different norms and practical realities – which can all be invoked as justifications for concealment or disclosure. Since ‘the vagina does not talk’, it is up to women themselves to decide if, how and to whom they talk about their pregnancies on their uncertain pathways to urban *dignité*.

Notes

1. This is so even if, in practice, young or divorced women can also work independently on land belonging to their patrilineage and pre- and extramarital pregnancies are rather accepted in the region.
2. While I will use the terms honourability, respectability and dignity (or the French *dignité*) interchangeably to designate a certain appreciated and aspired way of being, I aim to give precedence to the latter notion, as it was mostly used by my Gbigbil informants.
3. Throughout the paper, the word ‘modern’ will be used as an emic category. In line with the local meanings and associations of the word, it captures the urban lifestyle and pecuniary *dignité* that my informants aim to achieve.
4. Although I do not have specific quantitative data with regard to the total number of pregnancy disclosures and concealments during the reproductive trajectories of these 20 women, the demographic survey I held in 2008 among 290 village women (including these 20 informants) showed that of all 1300 reported pregnancies, 1077 had resulted in live births (and were thus necessarily disclosed at some point) and 223 had ended in an abortion (of which 25 were explicitly stated to be provoked, and thus probably concealed from others).
5. Although people speak the local Gbigbil language, most villagers were able to express themselves fluently in French. The citations presented in this paper have been translated from French into English as accurately as possible.
6. The quantity, quality and actual initiation of bride-price payments seem to have always been subject to change and negotiation (Guyer 1986). Studies among the neighbouring Beti show how men often preferred to postpone bride-price payments until they had seen a proof of fertility of their wives and how women exerted considerable influence on marriage negotiations and pre- or extra-marital sexuality (de Thé 1970; Houseman 1988; Laburthe-Tolra 1981; Ombolo 1991).
7. While Circular Letter No. 10/A/562/MINEDUC/ESG of 10 January 1980 stipulates the readmission of a pupil suspended in connection with a case of pregnancy, several studies note relatively high pregnancy-related dropout rates in secondary schools in Cameroon (Eloundou-Enyegue 2004; Lloyd and Mensch 2008) – thereby justifying my informants’ fears.
8. It should be noted that in their search for abortion, women often do reveal their pregnancy to a limited number of closely related people – mostly female friends or cousins (see also Rossier 2007). This disclosure is often necessary for obtaining (knowledge of) abortifacients, such as indigenous remedies, biomedical medicines or dilation and curettage (D&C) services. Disclosure can, however, also unexpectedly ensue from dramatic failures of abortion attempts in which (medical) help from others is indispensable for survival (see also Renne 2006, 1996; Koster 2003; Schuster 2005). Yet, although women are aware of these abortion-related dangers and disclosures, they prefer post-conceptual fertility management to contraceptive usage, which is feared to induce life-long infertility.
9. *Iwō* denotes a condition in which a woman’s children repeatedly die. Indigenous treatments of *iwō* should be initiated during pregnancy.

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Résumé

Dans la Province de l'Est au Cameroun, la féminité respectable est depuis longtemps intrinsèquement liée à l'éthique de la production et de la reproduction: les femmes obtiennent un statut social en travaillant de manière efficace dans les champs et en faisant des enfants – les deux, de préférence dans le cadre du mariage. Pourtant, face aux alternatives existantes pour atteindre «les horizons de l'honneur», comme la scolarité, l'emploi ou des relations avec des hommes riches dans les villes, les intentions des femmes en ce qui concerne le mariage et la maternité prennent des significations différentes. Sur la voie des définitions urbaines de l'honneur, les fiançailles formelles et la maternité sont souvent différées, alors que les rencontres sexuelles pré-maritales sont de plus en plus fréquentes. Cet article explore les significations de la grossesse dans ces contextes de relations fragiles et d'aspirations liées à la ville des femmes; il sera montré que la grossesse est un «pari» pouvant, soit perturber, soit stabiliser les liaisons ou les «ambitions urbaines». À ce titre, les grossesses peuvent être stratégiquement anticipées et délibérément dévoilées, ou se présenter de manière inattendue et être secrètement interrompues. Cet article apporte un éclairage sur les stratégies employées par les femmes pour cacher et dévoiler leurs grossesses, et montre que ces pratiques s'inspirent souvent d'une notion de «moment adéquat» pour les circonstances reproductives particulières – une notion qui est d'une pertinence croissante au regard des conceptions actuelles de l'honneur féminin au Cameroun.

Resumen

En la provincia este de Camerún, la condición de mujer respetable ha estado durante mucho tiempo intrínsecamente relacionada con la ética de la producción y la reproducción: las mujeres alcanzan su posición social mediante el trabajo productivo en los campos y a través de la reproducción de hijos,

ambos preferiblemente dentro del matrimonio. Sin embargo, ante los actuales 'horizontes de honor' alternativos tales como la escuela, el empleo o las relaciones con hombres ricos de la ciudad, las intenciones de las mujeres con respecto al matrimonio y la maternidad adquieren significados diferentes. En sus trayectorias hacia formas urbanas de honor, muchas veces se posponen los compromisos formales y la maternidad mientras que proliferan los encuentros sexuales antes del matrimonio. En este artículo analizamos los significados de embarazo en el contexto de estas relaciones frágiles y las aspiraciones urbanas de las mujeres; demostramos que la fertilidad es una 'apuesta' que puede perturbar o estabilizar las aventuras y ambiciones en un ámbito urbano. Por este motivo, es posible que las mujeres anticipen estratégicamente los embarazos y los revelen deliberadamente, o bien que se queden embarazadas de modo inesperado e interrumpan los embarazos en secreto. En este artículo arrojam luz sobre las estrategias de las mujeres a la hora de ocultar o revelar los embarazos y mostramos que estas prácticas están muchas veces inspiradas por la noción del 'momento correcto' en las coyunturas de reproducción, una noción que es cada vez más relevante en los actuales esquemas del honor femenino en Camerún.