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## DID THE AKAN RESORT TO ABORTION IN PRE-COLONIAL GHANA? SOME CONJECTURES

*Wolf Bleek*

In his survey of abortion in 400 pre-industrial societies, Devereux (1955: 161) concludes:

... there is every indication that abortion is an absolutely universal phenomenon, and that it is impossible even to construct an imaginary social system in which no woman would ever feel at least impelled to abort.

Where the universality of abortion is equated with the *urge* to abort, one can hardly disagree with such a statement. The question, however, of whether or not abortion ever actually *occurred*—or still occurs—ubiquitously and to a demographically significant extent is difficult to answer. Among the Akan in Ghana, where I did anthropological fieldwork intermittently between 1969 and 1973, abortion was widespread, a practice which seemed to have roots in precolonial traditions. People referred to abortion as *sɛɛ adeɛ* ('spoiling the thing').

The Akan, a matrilineal people who live mostly in southern Ghana and number approximately six million, consist of several culturally and linguistically related subgroups, for example Asante (Ashanti), Fante, Akuapem, Akyem and Kwahu. My own research was carried out in a rural Kwahu town, in the Eastern Region. Within that town, let us call it Ayere, most observations and interviews were limited to one matrilineage of nearly 50 adults, supplemented by a non-random sample survey of 100 male and 179 female town residents. Although in this article I interpret my findings about one rural community rather freely as if they can tell us about the Akan in general, a rough comparison between national census figures and data relating to my Kwahu research community suggests that such extrapolation may more or less be acceptable (Bleek, 1976: 300–303).

Various evidence encourages the initial supposition that abortion has been practised in Ayere for many generations. Perhaps the leading indication I found to support such a belief was the sheer frequency of abortion at the time of my research. In the lineage sample of women who had ever been pregnant, 10 out of 19 reported having induced at least one abortion. My somewhat impressionistic view is that in the generation of young women (up to about 25 years) nearly 100 per cent attempted an abortion during a first pregnancy. One can argue that such a high frequency is unlikely unless abortion was common in earlier generations. Extensive knowledge of abortifacients can be taken as a further indication of the historical origin of the practice: I counted 53 methods for inducing abortion in Ayere (Bleek, 1976: 212–14); a total which rose to 79 once supplementary data from other Akan researchers was included (Bleek and Asante-Darko, 1986).

Some observations of early ethnographers at work among the Akan also suggest that abortion may have been practised in the precolonial era. Rattray, for example, quoted by Devereux (1955: 183–4), makes a somewhat obscure statement about an abortion induced to save the life of a pregnant

adulteress. The abortifacient was a drink decocted from the leaves of the plant called in Twi *abini duru*, mixed with salt. Rattray also mentions that witches (*abayifo*) and others used supernatural means to bring about involuntary miscarriages. Jealous co-wives were particularly inclined to resort to such practices. One medicine to counteract this kind of evil meddling consisted of a drink prepared from the pounded bark of the *opam* tree mixed with eggs and cold water (Rattray, 1927: 55).

Fortes, who conducted fieldwork among the Akan (Asante) in 1945, mentions abortion briefly. Although 1945 cannot be regarded as precolonial, we may assume that information advanced by Fortes's older informants does in fact reflect precolonial customs. Fortes (1954: 265-6) writes:

The idea of an unwanted pregnancy in marriage is unheard of. An Ashanti country-woman would be horrified at the suggestion of an induced miscarriage. This applies even to an unmarried girl, provided she has celebrated her nuptial ceremony. The only cases of induced abortion I heard of concerned married women impregnated in adultery, which is a very serious private wrong against the husband.

Fortes's remark implies that in precolonial times abortion was probably practised in the event of pre-initiation or adulterous pregnancies. One may argue that abortion is also likely to have been induced under other circumstances, given that the knowledge of necessary techniques was available. Here Devereux's (1955: 161-2) analysis seems apt: he warns us that the fact that no abortion cases are reported does not mean abortion was not practised. Where abortion is regarded, socially, as extremely reprehensible, researchers may never hear about it. The non-availability of case histories, according to Devereux, 'is certainly no proof that abortion is not part of the official or clandestine cultural tradition of a given group' (p. 162). It seems plausible that among the Akan abortions did sometimes occur within ordinary marriages or in the premarital situation but were considered too shameful to be talked about with foreign ethnographers.

This indeed was the view I held for some time. My thinking on the subject changed gradually, however, as I encountered an increasing amount of contrary evidence both during my fieldwork and afterwards, when reflecting on the paradoxes in my field notes. I then reached the conclusion that abortion in precolonial Akan society must have been exceptional. In this brief article I shall list arguments both in support of my present position and against it. There are three of the former kind: (a) certain circumstances that now provoke abortion did not exist in the precolonial era; (b) the cultural and economic situation before colonisation made abortion a useless, absurd practice for women; (c) reliable fieldwork interviews fail to disclose any significant incidence of precolonial abortion. In my conclusion, on the other hand, I will raise some questions that continue to inspire uncertainty about my present stand.

#### CIRCUMSTANCES THAT NOW PROVOKE ABORTION DID NOT EXIST IN THE PRECOLONIAL ERA

The most crucial circumstances encouraging the present practice of abortion involve formal education, the postponement of marriage and the economic

burden of children. None of these played a role in the precolonial period.

School learning has become a major avenue for achieving social status in Ghana as it has nearly everywhere else in Africa. For young women still in school, pregnancy represents a serious threat to their future aspirations. Although no formal rules stipulate that a pregnant woman should be removed from school, let alone be barred from continuing her education after giving birth, in practice many pregnant women do discontinue their education in such circumstances. Authorities in middle schools and secondary schools may press this matter 'for disciplinary reasons', but most female pupils leave school of their own accord when they get pregnant because, as they say, they 'feel ashamed' (Bleek, 1981). Male pupils who are implicated in a pregnancy hardly ever leave school for that reason.

It is little wonder, therefore, that abortion is often attempted in order to salvage a girl's education and her future prospects. Of twenty-five abortions in the Kwahu matrilineage about which I collected detailed information, eight involved schoolgirls. Ampofo (1971: 94) interviewed eighty-eight women admitted to the Accra hospital with complications after an abortion; half mentioned 'desire to complete school or training' as their reason for terminating the pregnancy. The same motive is also stressed by Akuffo (1987) and Van den Borne (1985). Paradoxically, the very factor which forces women to postpone procreation—school—also facilitates early sexual contacts both between pupils and between teachers and pupils.

Education succeeds in enhancing the prestige of an Akan woman only if no children are forthcoming during the school period. Postponement or termination of an early pregnancy are necessary for female school-goers who wish to attain a respected social position. This contradicts sharply with the precolonial situation before schools existed when an early pregnancy was the method of choice for a woman out to win social respect.

Postponement of marriage is clearly linked to the importance of a girl's completing her education. Formerly girls were given in marriage after they had undergone certain puberty rites which, as a rule, took place after first menstruation (Sarpong, 1977). In modern Ghana this scheme of things has changed drastically. In Akan communities, puberty rites to indicate that a woman is sexually mature and ready to become a mother are scarcely held any more. Marriage, which used to be a relatively unimportant event that almost automatically followed the puberty rites, has now become a more prominent ceremony, and may be contracted at a much later age than was generally true in the past. The postponement of marriage does not in itself mean that the bearing of children should be delayed as well. It is conceivable indeed that a premarital pregnancy is socially acceptable, even welcome, as proof of a woman's fecundity. In a matrilineal society moreover, children, whether or not born in wedlock, are considered members of their mother's lineage. Illegitimacy, one might say, is a 'biological' impossibility.

In actual practice, however, an increase in the age at which people marry has led to delays in reproduction. In addition to the education factor, marriage itself has developed into an institution inimical to premarital deliveries. Attractive males tend to prefer a female partner who does not yet have a child. Education and a 'good marriage' are both important for a woman's social position. Both require the avoidance of an early pregnancy

and so encourage abortion if an inconvenient pregnancy occurs.

As for the increasing economic burden represented nowadays by children, the situation in Akan society is much the same as elsewhere in Africa. The traditional adage 'the more children, the better' no longer holds true. The cost of children may be an additional reason why young women delay their first pregnancy and why married women limit their total number of offspring even, if need be, through abortion.

THE CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC SITUATION BEFORE COLONISATION MADE  
ABORTION A USELESS, ABSURD PRACTICE

Before colonisation brought about radical changes, matrilineal Akan communities favoured high fertility for two principal reasons: the political, and sometimes military strength of the lineage depended on population increase and additional births meant more available labour, thus economic advantage. Strength in numbers may have been a predominantly male interest, however, since most formal political authority rested with male members of the lineage. Yet since women derived their prestige and political influence to a large extent from the number of children they produced, it is likely that they too, under the circumstances, were proponents of high fertility.

Fortes's (1954: 226) remark that 'the influence of a lineage in public affairs is proportional to its numbers' succinctly conveys the political importance of high fertility as long as decisions were reached through democratic palavers attended by all members of the community. The views of eloquent elderly male members carried the most weight at such meetings. A large lineage was a formidable political asset on the local level: male children became influential speakers at community gatherings and if need be served as the military arm of the lineage or of a larger segment of the community; female children became the procreators of the next generation of men—although the direct political influence of women in precolonial Akan society should not be underestimated.

In present-day Ghana, by contrast, most crucial political decisions are taken outside the local community by an opaque state bureaucracy. The size of individual lineages may have no direct, traceable impact on these decisions. In the present situation a lineage that seeks political advantage must instead have its representative in crucial positions within the bureaucracy. To succeed in placing such an 'ambassador' where he can be valuable to lineage interests is largely a matter of securing higher education and of making a considerable investment. Sacrifices may be in order on the part of the lineage or—more likely—the nuclear family, in particular the mother. Both education and accumulation of economic resources for investment, as pointed out above, nowadays may require the *limitation* of fertility, even by abortion, where other methods fail.

The advantages of high fertility in a virtually self-sufficient economy are apparent without elaborate discussion. Both the political and economic situation in precolonial Akan society encouraged large families but under contemporary circumstances for a woman to have many children has in general become a political and economic handicap.

It is not surprising that the precolonial situation was buttressed by a

cultural ethos which extolled fertility. 'When a woman gave birth to her tenth child (*badu*), she was specially honoured with a public ceremony at which a sheep was slaughtered. Rattray (1927: 73) quotes an apposite prayer recited at the old puberty rite: 'May the elephant give you her womb that you may bear ten children.' Among the Akan, twins have traditionally been welcomed and considered a sign of luck. Rattray (1927: 66) remarks, 'The parents of large families and mothers of twins or triplets are held in special esteem . . .' It was further regarded as auspicious for a woman to have another child (*tawia*) after bearing twins, however many children she might have had already. I could not trace the exact significance of this belief, but several informants explained to me that a *Tawia* made the number 'complete'.

Conversely, infertility was once regarded as just about the greatest misfortune that could befall someone. Both a barren woman (*obonini*) and a childless man (*skrawa* or *kukuba*) were viewed with a mixture of compassion, contempt and suspicion. Asare-Opoku (1977: 108) quotes an Akan proverb that a woman without children is pitiful: *Wunni ba a, due!* According to Rattray (1927: 67):

Not so very many years ago the childless man or woman after death had great thorns . . . driven into the soles of the feet. . . . At the same time the corpse was addressed with these words, *Wonwo ba, mma sa bio* (You have not begotten—or borne—a child: do not return like that).

During my own fieldwork an old male informant described to me the treatment formerly imposed on an impotent man:

They would put a big pan full of water and leaves on your head and march with you out of the house into the town. At the gate of your house they would tell a small child to slap you twice on the face and that child would ask you whether you have ever produced a child and insult you. After this they would let you march through the streets and make a mockery of you while singing '*kote krawae*' (wax penis). [Bleek, 1976: 58]

In present Akan society barrenness is still viewed as a grave misfortune. It is the most common reason behind visits to traditional priest-healers (Field, 1960: 105–106) or Christian prophets (Meerts, 1974: 175). School pupils writing about a childless woman during my Kwahu research called her lonely and sad, incomplete and useless ('a pen without ink', 'tea without sugar') and questioned her morals ('a witch', 'a prostitute'). Only a mother is a true woman. In striking contrast with the past, however, a woman's esteem does not rise with the number of her children.

In conclusion, a woman's access to social prestige formerly depended to a large extent on the number of her children. Except in special circumstances, such as an adulterous pregnancy or a pregnancy incurred before celebration of puberty rites, abortion from both a social and a cultural point of view seemed absurd and self-destructive. Nowadays, by contrast, it is necessary for a woman to have *some* children for her to be respected, but high esteem is primarily awarded to those who are highly educated and have married a prestigious partner. To achieve these two ends it is necessary to postpone a first delivery for some time, initially through contraception and if necessary by abortion.

## FIELDWORK IMPRESSIONS THAT IMPLY THE RARITY OF ABORTIONS IN THE PAST

Explicit denials that abortion took place in the past also influenced my change of opinion about their former frequency. I am well aware that old people tend to glorify the past and to condemn the present. None the less, some older Akan did become relatively free and open about describing to me less commendable practices of the past once I got to know them. I remember one very candid conversation with three old men in which we discussed birth control practices and infanticide in the past. One said he remembered a few abortion cases from as long as forty to fifty years previously, in around 1925. All of these cases turned out to involve schoolgirls, so that they rather seem to have been early colonial instances of abortion, the first signs of cultural transition caused by new possibilities of female education and the accompanying drift towards marriage postponement. Another of the old men stated categorically, 'I never heard or saw anything like abortion. No one ever told me that someone had obtained an abortion.'

It may be true that abortion is a woman's affair, but it is not plausible that if an abortion were to take place male relatives and marriage partners would hear nothing about it (I will return presently to the exclusively female character of abortion and its implications for attempts to discover the prevalence of abortion in the past).

The fact that the three old men were extremely co-operative during this conversation and seemed well-informed about other aspects of birth control made their statements about abortion very credible. Their remarks about birth spacing particularly reinforced my confidence in their information. Spacing is nowadays an important issue in public opinion about having children. There seems to be widespread agreement that it is good for both mother and children to have an interval of a few years between successive births. The old men supported this wholeheartedly. Ghanaian family planning organisations use spacing as the keystone of their campaigns, and demographers seem to agree that spacing is a solid tradition in most African societies. Akan informants often sneered at women who gave birth in rapid succession, comparing them insultingly to animals. Yet to my surprise the old men denied that formerly there was a strong feeling against rapid childbirths in succession. Even postpartum abstinence lasted a relatively short time, about four months. Some women 'who were tired of bringing forth', the men said, attempted to prolong the period of rest by travelling away from their husbands to their home town and staying there for a long period. Admission of such clear deviance in the past from what is considered proper behaviour today (birth spacing) strengthened the credibility of these informants. The same applies to the old people's statements about the occurrence of infanticide in former times (see note 7).

Still another research finding casts doubt on the existence of precolonial abortion: the bewildering diversity of abortion techniques. At first I regarded the large number of techniques as an indication that abortion had been practised among the Akan widely and for a very long period. Now I believe that it says nothing of the sort. Instead, the sheer number of alternatives rather seems to me to reflect present confusion about how to induce abortion; it underlines the absence of consensus concerning any *one* safe and satisfac-

tory method. If abortion were a long-established practice, does it not seem likely that by now young women who wanted to terminate their first pregnancy would agree on a reliable method?

#### COUNTER-ARGUMENTS: WOMEN'S 'MUTEDNESS'

The main question that remains to trouble me is whether a male researcher interviewing male informants about the past can hope to obtain reliable information about such an exclusively woman's affair as abortion. I began this article with a quotation from Devereux (1955: 161) in which he suggests that a society 'in which no woman would ever feel at least impelled to abort' is unimaginable. My old Kwahu informants made an important observation when they referred to psychological reasons why women may want to put an end to a pregnancy; some of these may indeed occur more or less universally, the preservation of beauty and freedom for example, or revenge against a despised partner.

Since Hardman (1973) first coined the concept of 'mutedness' for the 'inarticulate' way in which children communicate about the world they perceive, many anthropologists have drawn attention to the 'mutedness' of women in different cultures. This concept recurs with particular frequency in the writings of Edwin and Shirley Ardener, both of whom argue that women tend to have their own model of the world, one which men may hardly perceive at all because it is not consistent with the dominant (male) model. Anthropologists too often prove unable to discern the 'underground' culture of women. Female inarticulateness may be a function of women's failure to speak the dominant language, but 'mutedness' may also involve a choice. By communicating in a private code women can better preserve their own model without interference from the dominant ideology.

With this analytic perspective in mind, it becomes plausible to argue that Akan women in the precolonial era may have carried out abortions which their men did not notice. Newman's (1985) collection of studies on indigenous fertility regulation contains interesting examples of how women elsewhere have managed to practise abortion unnoticed by the—male—outside world. Ngin (1985), Sukkary-Stolba (1985) and Browner (1985) portray such behaviour in, respectively, Malaysia, Egypt and Colombia. In addition Ngin and Browner show how women manage not only to conceal their abortions from external control but also to safeguard their actions against internal control, i.e., from the dominant male ideology which they have internalised and which condemns abortion as atrocious, abominable and sinful. They achieve this internal immunity by redefining early pregnancy as belated menstruation, so that abortion becomes a matter of 'menstruation regulation'.

My main objection to the suggestion that just such a situation in precolonial Akan society may account for men's ignorance of abortion is that if the situation ever existed, it could never have left the male members of the community *totally* ignorant that abortion was being practised. Indeed, it seems to me unlikely that on this same score Malaysian, Egyptian and Colombian men are totally blind to what is going on. I do agree that there may have been a clear division between men's and women's affairs among the



old Akan—as there still is today<sup>9</sup>—but to picture these two worlds as massive, mutually impenetrable entities is unsatisfactorily crude. It is much more likely that there was considerable overlapping, including far-reaching internalisation of the dominant ideology by the female population. Ardener (1978: 28) stresses the same point when she remarks:

Members of the muted groups, instead of ignoring the dominant group, or of merely tolerating its demands, may even go further and accept the burden of maintaining or 'policing' a system which to onlookers appears to disadvantage them. Thus . . . it is Zulu virgins who take steps against breaches of virginity. . . .

Ardener (*ibid.*: 37) even provides an example from a study of the Akan which illustrates how in the past women helped to uphold public morality by ostracising any young woman pregnant before her puberty rite. Such a deviant was sent into the bush to bear her child alone:

Women denounce her for her intrusion into their territory; girls reject her for her treachery. She is without status: no-one calls her *eno* ('mother') and so she is not a woman, and she is not a girl because girls do not become pregnant. It is after giving birth to a child who formally can call her mother that she demonstrates her womanhood and is accepted by the womenfolk. [Sarpong, 1977: 76]

Obviously the 'two-models model' should not be taken to mean that there are two separate and hermetically sealed blocs. As we have seen, women actively take part in and reproduce the dominant—mainly male—world. Moreover, women do not always share the interests of other women just because they are all the same sex. That would indeed be a very simplistic view of human society. Women will also side with men against other women, if the situation calls for it. It is therefore unthinkable to me that the practice of abortion would remain unknown to men.

There is still another reason why such utter secrecy in the past would have been highly unlikely. Abortion, together with witchcraft, is a common weapon used in gossip by women (and men) to tarnish reputations. Taking the gossip value of abortion into account, for the Akan I propose a reversal of Devereux's (1955: 162) pronouncement about the omnipresence of abortion: the non-availability of any information about abortion cases among the precolonial Akan provides convincing proof that abortion was *not* 'a—clandestine—cultural practice'.

I do agree, however, that my evidence for the non-availability of data about abortion in precolonial Akan society is conjectural and skimpy, deriving in large part from discussions with a few old men in a particular Akan community. I would therefore encourage fresh in-depth research among old Akan women on this issue by female anthropologists. Such research is long overdue.

#### CONCLUSION

Induced abortion, practised widely in contemporary Ghana, is likely to have been rare among the Akan in the precolonial period.<sup>10</sup> It was probably only attempted in circumstances where pregnancy entailed extreme shame and hardship for the woman involved: pregnancies that involved adultery or developed before puberty rites had been celebrated.

This hypothesis is based on three considerations: (a) certain important factors that now impel women to abort did not exist in the precolonial era; (b) the cultural and economic situation before colonisation made abortion senseless and self-defeating for women; (c) anthropological fieldwork in Kwahu, particularly discussions with old male informants, has produced evidence sufficient to question seriously whether abortion was ever common in the past.

It might be counter-argued that the former practices of women cannot be traced by a male researcher interviewing male informants. The 'mutedness' of Akan women, especially in the past, may have prevented men from hearing about abortions. My reply would be that male and female worlds among the Akan, past and present, overlap to such an extent that it is unlikely that women did not accept and internalise the hard core of dominant public pro-natalist ideology and it is equally unlikely that men would have remained totally unaware of abortion if abortion were taking place.

Nevertheless, I strongly recommend additional research into this question by and among women.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The term 'abortion' in this article refers only to *induced* abortion.

<sup>2</sup> The adjective 'precolonial' in this article does not indicate a specific time period. It is applied to Akan communities which have not yet been affected by the economy and cultural values of the European colonisers.

<sup>3</sup> See Bleek, 1976: 52-6; Akuffo, 1987; Van den Borne, 1985; Roberts, 1975.

<sup>4</sup> In the royal lineages in precolonial Asante there was also much concern about procreation, mainly with the aim of safeguarding the continuation of the dynasty (cf. Wilks, 1975).

<sup>5</sup> See Aidoo, 1981; Arhin, 1983; Oduyoye, 1979.

<sup>6</sup> Caldwell and Caldwell (1987) remark that procreation in Africa was strongly supported by religion. Continued fertility was equated with virtue while reproductive failure was associated with evil and punishment.

<sup>7</sup> The fact that infanticide seems to have been quite common among the Akan in precolonial times does not contradict their simultaneous abhorrence of abortion. Infanticide was practised for the same reason that abortion was not: to safeguard the lineage's welfare. A deformed infant was believed to bring misfortune to the community. In Kwahu such a child was killed immediately after birth, usually by drowning. A case of infanticide would not become known to outsiders and people would refer to it with euphemisms such as *wasan awoye* (he has been born and returned), *ne ba no anye yie* (her child has not become well) or *warwu nsuo no mu* (he has died in the water). The informants did not all agree on the type of deformity which prompted infanticide. All mentioned the case of six fingers on one hand (*nsa wansia*). A child with that deformity was considered particularly dangerous to the lineage. Opinions differed concerning other deformities such as harelip (*n'ano apae*), and two hands on one arm (*ɔɔka*). According to Rattray (1927: 66) hermaphrodites (*busufɔɔ*) were buried alive. Rattray (1927: 56) makes yet another remark about infanticide: 'There are traditions of women having given birth to children half-human half-monkey, half-man half-fish, children with three or more breasts, six or more toes. All such would, of course, be destroyed as also hermaphrodites.'

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, several contributions in Page and Lesthaeghe, 1981.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Oppong, 1982: Abu, 1983.

<sup>10</sup> Adam Jones (personal communication) reports that he came across twelve references to induced abortion between 1841 and 1912 in archives in Basel and Accra and in missionary journals. All cases had occurred in the Accra or Cape Coast/Elmina area where colonial influence was already quite strong at that time. Several of the cases involved Europeans and West Indians. The number of twelve is certainly high—given the fragmentary nature of all documentation on women's affairs—but it seems clear that these cases represent the 'colonial' rather than the 'precolonial' situation. At the same time Jones's observations emphasise the need for historical-anthropological research into this matter. Another historian who mentions abortion in an early Akan context is Baesjou (1979: 43). He refers to a case brought before Dutch officials in the Elmina fort in 1847. During the hearing a woman stated that her daughter had induced an abortion. The abortion was used as an argument to claim money from a man involved in the court case and to deny that person's fatherhood over a child. The case shows that abortion was certainly known, but again this example can hardly be called 'precolonial Akan'. Both plaintiffs in the case were mulattos.

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### Résumé

## Les Achantis avaient-ils recours à l'avortement à l'époque précoloniale?

Bien que l'avortement soit une pratique répandue dans le Ghana d'aujourd'hui, il est probable qu'il s'agissait d'un acte rare chez le peuple Achanti de l'époque précoloniale. Certains facteurs qui poussent maintenant les femmes à avorter (éducation, mariage plus tardif et le fardeau économique que représentent les enfants supplémentaires) n'existaient pas à cette époque. De plus, la situation précoloniale des femmes rendait l'avortement inutile, si ce n'est désavantageux pour elle. Les travaux de l'auteur au sein d'une communauté Achantie ont confirmé ces points de vue. L'argument selon lequel l'avortement aurait eu lieu en cachette du genre masculin en raison du 'silence' des femmes reste peu convaincant.

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