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Secret strategies: Women and abortion in Yoruba society, Nigeria

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PREFACE

Induced abortion is a controversial topic. Its grave moral and ethical connotations have caused the practice of abortion and the resulting problems to be ignored and silenced for a long time. Gradually, however, researchers, health-service providers and policy makers have realised that induced abortion deserves attention because it is an increasingly pressing problem that results in high morbidity and mortality in many developing countries, particularly in Africa. While working in several African countries, I was moved by the many accounts of girls and women who died from abortion complications. These sad histories were my motivation to begin an applied anthropological study of the extent and the context of the problems. This book is the result of that study and aspires to fill a gap in current publications on abortion, which are mostly of a demographic and epidemiological nature. In addition to giving statistics on prevalence of and methods used for abortion, I pay close attention to individual women's experiences. Women's motivations, decisions, doubts and practices in different phases of the experience, from deciding to abort to coping with possible complications, are situated in their sociocultural, economic, service-provision and political context.

Although this case study of abortion concerns Yoruba women of Nigeria, the study has a much wider relevance. First, a study of abortion inevitably touches on other fertility regulation practices, including contraception and infertility treatment, and is relevant to the topic of sexually transmitted infections including HIV and AIDS. Second, some if not most of the multiple societal influences on Yoruba women's abortion practices will be similar to other societies. Last, the particular data collection methodologies that were developed to persuade informants to speak about their experiences on such a private subject as abortion, almost impossible to study according to many a scholar, may very well be applied in other studies.

It is my hope that this book contributes to reducing the suffering related to abortion. By exposing the magnitude *and* the nature of the problems, and by giving the women who have aborted a human face and voice instead of merely presenting them in figures, I hope health-service providers and policy makers

will become more motivated to act on abortion as a priority public health problem and be guided to apply appropriate interventions.

There are numerous persons I owe thanks for enabling me to complete this book; those who made the fieldwork in Nigeria possible, and those in the Netherlands who assisted me with the presentation of the study in this book.

The start of the fieldwork was greatly facilitated by my husband at the time, Bade Oyekan, and my in-laws who brought me into contact with different networks through which I met assistants and informants. Health-service providers proved highly co-operative: The associations of traditional birth attendants of Lagos Island and Epe Local Government shared their knowledge and participated enthusiastically in seminars. Lagos State Hospital Management Board, Lagos Island Local Government and Epe Local Government gave their permission to conduct the study in their health facilities and allowed their staff to participate as interviewers and in seminars. Without the generous funding of the Ford Foundation Nigeria, the study would not have been possible on this scale – I particularly thank Akwasi Aidoo and Babatunde Ahonsi. Women's Health and Action Research Centre, Benin City, through their director Friday Okonofua, allowed the study to be their satellite project (a condition for the funding) and gave advisory and administrative support. Thanks to the funding I was able to employ the co-researcher Grace Essien who so ably co-ordinated the fieldwork activities in Epe Local Government Area, research assistants, interviewers, facilitators, data entry personnel and a driver. They all showed great commitment and I so much enjoyed working with them: Omowunmi, Mr. Latifu, Dolapo, Toyin, Yemisi, Ogo, Kemi, Olga, Mr. Oluwo, Mr. Andoyi, Mrs. Tawakalitu, Mrs. Lawal, Adwoa, Mrs. Ekundayo, Ifeoma, Fatima, and Olu. I especially want to mention the women I worked with almost on a daily basis: Comfort Essien, the 'star interviewer', who tirelessly conducted many of the in-depth interviews; Bola Bakare (formerly Taiwo), consultant on Yoruba language and culture, who gave me valuable insight into the customs and traditions of Yoruba; Biodun Adamson, research assistant, who guided me through the streets of Lagos Island on the way to the clinics of traditional midwives and who painstakingly wrote out answers to qualitative questions on spreadsheets.

I want to thank all the informants who shared their experiences: The women, men and youth of the communities of Epe and Lagos who made the research-team feel welcome; the students of Ilupeju Secondary School who participated enthusiastically in the 'sexuality education club' as they called it; the women and health-service providers who answered all those questions of interviewers. I especially want to thank the girls and women who had come with complications of abortion to the hospital for allowing us to interview them. It

could not have been easy for them to share with us what had brought them to this deplorable physical and mental state.

Writing this book was a challenging experience and took longer than I had envisaged. I had greatly underestimated the task, partly due to the 'puzzle' of how to do justice to both the qualitative and the quantitative data I had collected. I am grateful to all the persons who enabled me to finish this sometimes seemingly impossible task. They took time to give me technical and theoretical advice, and emotional and practical support. I would not have been able to finish without the two years and some months' study grant provided by AGIDS (Amsterdam Research Institute for Global Issues and Development); I especially want to thank Ton Dietz and Carina Muliée for upgrading it to a full grant for the last ten months. During some of the part-time scholarship, I was extremely fortunate to receive additional funding from a private Dutch fund *Stichting Graag Gedaan*. NWO (*Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek*) financed the professional editing and the publication of this book.

I am highly appreciative of the technical and emotional support provided by Corlien Varkevisser, my first promotor. She was very critical, always urging me to further analyse and interpret. At the same time, she always encouraged me; when I felt that I was far from ready, she said I had already gone a long way. She liked to make something special out of our work-meetings that were usually over a lunch or dinner, which made our relationship become more personal than a professor-PhD student relationship normally is. The advice from Sjaak van der Geest, my second promotor, was invaluable. I greatly benefited from his clear and 'emic' insights into the topic of my study, which were similar to those of his own PhD study in Ghana, some 25 years ago (published under the pseudonym of Wolf Bleek). He was very motivating and supportive in an often 'minimal' way – meaning that with his short and sometimes seemingly casual comments he gave important suggestions for changes and improvements. The 'promotion club' of the medical anthropology unit, of which I am a member, made useful comments on some draft chapters, and these co-PhD students gave me badly needed mental support. Writing a book is a lonely endeavour, especially after a fieldwork full of social contacts and activities.

I am grateful to Lorraine Nencil, for suggesting literature on some of the theoretical concepts and guiding me in my thinking about the theoretical implications of my findings. Janneke Roos, a public health specialist, commented on some of the draft chapters. Ankie van der Broek, a public health doctor, read through the manuscript and corrected the medical flaws. Zoe Matthews, lecturer statistician at Southampton University, checked the tables and gave advice on presentation of statistical data. Olwen Pijpers offered me a friend's service by her editing of the draft manuscript. Sera Young did the professional

editing of the final manuscript and made many useful small critical comments, which guided me in putting on some of the finishing touches.

For the more practical aspects, to be able to write a book and at the same time keep a family with two children running, I owe thanks to my mother, Aly, for supporting me in any way she could. She gave me more time and peace to write, as did my friends Olwen, Monique and Jet and their families, with whom my children were always welcome to stay. The lively spirit of my father, Jan, often assisted me – to keep going. Lastly, I want to thank my wonderful enduring daughters Tinu and Iré, who, throughout their primary school, started in Nigeria and nearly completed in The Netherlands, do not know their professional mother as anything else than occupied with her research and her book. I fondly remember them in Nigeria, helping me with preparing stationary for seminars, stapling questionnaires and sorting filled questionnaires. Like many children, they always had many questions about what I did and what the words on questionnaires or reports meant. Their so acquired 'knowledge' was sometimes a source of embarrassment for their teachers in school and the cause of a lot of giggling with their friends. I am afraid they often lacked my full attention, especially during the period of writing. Their unspoken feelings were clear from Tinu's reply to my question whether she thought she would ever write a book: 'I might, but not if I had children'.