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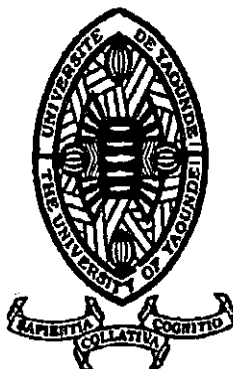
Socio-cultural perceptions of infertility
in women and treatment, the case of
Kom in Boyo division, North West
Province

2003

THE UNIVERSITY OF YAOUNDE I
UNIVERSITÉ DE YAOUNDÉ I

**FACULTY OF ARTS, LETTERS,
AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**

**DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY
AND ANTHROPOLOGY**



**FACULTÉ DES ARTS, LETTRES, ET
SCIENCES HUMAINES**

**DÉPARTEMENT DE SOCIOLOGIE
ET ANTHROPOLOGIE**



**SOCIO-CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS OF INFERTILITY IN
WOMEN AND TREATMENT, THE CASE OF KOM IN BOYO
DIVISION, NORTH WEST PROVINCE**

**A dissertation submitted to the department of Sociology and Anthropology in
partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of a MASTER'S
DEGREE IN MEDICAL ANTHROPOLOGY
(MA)**

By
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BA (Anthropology)
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Dedicated
to
Mr/Mrs Seba Ndongo and family
for their relentless financial and moral support
as well as to my mother
Rebecca Ntein
who encouraged me in times of difficulties.

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TOHMOUNTAIN Peter MUNTEH

Yaounde, October, 2003

ABSTRACT

This study is titled- **SOCIO-CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS OF INFERTILITY IN WOMEN AND TREATMENT, THE CASE OF KOM IN BOYO DIVISION, NORTH WEST PROVINCE**. It is a socio-cultural analysis of the cultural underpinnings of 'female infertility' in a matrilineal Kom society. It explores the people's concepts of reproduction: - human and vegetational. There is an intricate link between the two spheres. They are better expressed using the terms: "akain" and "dumwaiyn", which express the degree to which infertile people have been relegated. The major cultural themes we analyse are-

- The use of symbolism and imagery in explaining human fertility and how procreation influences social statuses among women.

- The link between procreation, and moral conduct in a traditional society, that is, the relationship between infertile women, co-wives, children of co-wives, others „and polygynous husbands.

- Practices which are detrimental to human, and agricultural fertility.

- The link between infertility and witchcraft.

- The place of fertility/infertility in matrimonial stability.

In order to achieve the above objectives, we used a number of anthropological methods such as, participant observation. The following data collection tools were used- an interview guide, a structured questionnaire, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. At the end of the study we regrouped the information into categories of gender, the presumed causes of infertility, the treatment of the infertile and their reaction to the situation among others. Key statements from certain informants have been retained verbatim and this has gone a long way to enliven this study. At the end , we came out with the following conclusions-

- Without procreation, marriage is considered incomplete. It is a religious obligation through which the individual contributes the seeds of life towards man's struggle against the loss of original immortality.

- To die without children in Kom is an abomination, disconnected, an outcast and lose of all links with mankind.

- In Kom, marriage is not fully recognised or consummated until the wife has given birth. Through childbirth, the woman is fully accepted into the husband's lineage or clan.

- Children are a unifying factor between two kin groups in a marriage. That is, the lineages or the clans of bride and bridegroom.

We may recommend that culture remains the lenses with which to understand people's behaviour. This provides the backdrop within which infertility should be understood in a typical matrilineal society.

RESUME

Cette étude est intitulée- **SOCIO-CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS OF INFERTILITY IN WOMEN AND TREATMENT, THE CASE OF KOM IN BOYO DIVISION, NORTH WEST PROVINCE**. C'est une analyse socio-culturelle permettant de comprendre l'infertilité féminine dans la société matrilineaire de Kom. Elle explore le concept humain et agricole du peuple. Il y a un lien intrigant entre les deux sphères. Elle est mieux exprimée en utilisant les termes - «akain» et «dumwaiyn», lesquelles expriment le degré d'infertilité auquel le peuple a été relégué. Les thèmes culturels majeurs que nous analysons sont -

-L'usage du symbolisme et de l'imagerie pour expliquer la fertilité humaine et comment la procréation influence le statut social des femmes.

-Le lien entre la procréation et la conduite morale dans la société traditionnelle, c'est à dire, la relation entre les femmes stériles, les co-épouses, les enfants des co-épouses, les autres habitants du village et les maris polygynes.

-Les pratiques qui affectent la fertilité humaine et agricole.

-Le lien entre l'infertilité et la sorcellerie.

-La place de la fertilité dans la stabilité entre mari et femme, famille du mari et de la mariée.

Afin d'atteindre les objectifs suivants, nous avons utilisé un nombre des méthodes anthropologiques comme l'observation participant. Les instruments de collecte des données suivants ont été utilisés : un guide d'entretien, un questionnaire structuré, les interviews approfondies et les groupes de discussion focalisé. A la fin de l'étude, nous avons regroupé l'information, de divers genres, les causes présumées d'infertilité, le traitement de l'infertilité et leurs réactions par rapport à la situation. Les déclarations majeures de certains informateurs ont été citées mot à mot, ce qui a donné la vie à cette étude. A la fin, nous sommes arrivés aux conclusions suivantes-

-Sans procréation, le mariage est considéré comme étant incomplet. C'est une obligation religieuse à travers laquelle l'homme contribue à pérenniser la vie.

-Mourir sans avoir eu d'enfant dans la société Kom est une abomination, une déconnection, un rejet et une perte de l'humanité.

-A Kom, le mariage n'est hautement reconnu ou consommé que lorsque la femme a fait un enfant. A travers la naissance d'un enfant, la femme est pleinement intégrée dans la lignée de son mari ou clan.

-Les enfants sont un facteur d'unité entre les deux groupes rapprochés par le lien du mariage. C'est à dire, la lignée ou clan du mari et de la mariée.

Nous pouvons recommander que la culture devienne la vitrine à travers laquelle on peut comprendre le comportement du peuple. Elle constitue le socle pouvant permettre de comprendre l'infertilité dans la société matrilineaire typique.

CHAPTER ONE

PROBLEMATIC AND METHODOLOGY

Infertility is a serious and complex problem, seen differently by demographers, sociologists, anthropologists, public health specialists, gynaecologists and economists. A painful problem that is felt differently by women, men, couples, traditional chiefs, and ethnic communities.

Infertility apparently has troubled humans throughout history. Various explanations have been given including social, biological, cultural and spiritual. *And Sarah said unto Abraham: Behold, the Lord hath restrained me from bearing, (Genesis 16: 2, the Holy Bible)*. Ralph Thomlinson quotes Pope Clement VII who purportedly advised Catherine de Medici, the childless wife to the heir to the throne of Francis I- *A girl of spirit will never lack children, (Ralph Thomlinson, 1965: 148)*.

Infertility has often been associated with a curse. It is on the basis of this assumption that this research focuses on two main concepts of infertility among the Kom, *akain* and *dumwaiyn*. These concepts are closely akin to witchcraft, breach of taboo and other forms of misdemeanour of men. These concepts will be defined latter on in this study. Ralph Thomlinson (1965), quotes a prominent obstetrician and gynaecologist to highlight the mystery of infertility in the following words-

Often it seems nature jokes with us by concealing infertility in a physically perfect body, whereas an emaciated used-up looking woman who appears barely able to sustain herself in everyday activities of life produces a child a year. One of the confusing things about the problem of human infertility is that ordinarily it bestows no physical stigma upon its victims (Ralph Thomlinson, 1965: 148).

Ralph Thomlinson ends by emphasising on the stigmatising nature of infertility by saying that the socio-cultural and psychological stigma inflicted upon its victims is alarming and pitiful.

Recent infertility study in Cameroon shows that primary infertility is still a major

problem among Cameroonian women. The Demographic and Health Survey (DHS, 1991), shows that 7% of Cameroonian women were suffering from primary infertility at the time of the survey and 26% of women had had one or more pregnancies ending in stillbirth, miscarriage, or abortion (Balépa et al, 1992). The over 250 diverse ethnic groups that constitute Cameroon's population all value children and women's fertility highly.

1.1. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Cameroon is said to be situated at the "Infertility belt" in Central Africa (Lassen, 1995). This means that Cameroon is situated in the zone of high prevalence of infertility. This infertility zone is not confined to Cameroon territory but continues into neighbouring Gabon, the People's Republic of Congo, Northern Zaire (Democratic Republic of Congo), the Central African Empire, and even beyond into Southern Sudan and Uganda. Modawi has reported a precarious situation in the Southern Sudan where certain communities are so stricken with infertility that their women have indulged in child stealing from the more fertile neighbouring communities (Feldman-Savelsberg, 1999). In some regions of Cameroon, Gabon, Zaire (Democratic Republic of Congo) and Sudan, up to 40% of married women reach the end of their reproductive period without ever giving birth (Belsey, 1978).

Despite the documented prevalence of infertility, local and international governmental and non-governmental organisations have identified hyper-fertility and birth spacing, rather than infertility and threatened reproduction, as "population problems" in Cameroon. In this context, infertility takes low priority. Its status as a public health problem is not taken into consideration. It should be understood that infertility is as much a health problem as a demographic one. Indeed, couples and individuals complain of infertility more often for personal, medical or social reasons than for that they were not able to contribute to the national size of the population. But when the government looks at infertility from the demographic angle, the phenomenon of this nightmare becomes a non-event. Nonetheless, an attempt towards solving the infertility problem by the so-called New Reproductive Technologies, such as "artificial insemination" by donor, has not achieved much success in Cameroon. They are financially out of reach and culturally

incompatible to most Cameroonian couples (Njikam Savage, 1992). Since fertility performance is the result of several factors and is looked at differently in terms of cultural norms and prevailing ecological influences, there is need to always define the setting or the context from which the fertility of a people is being studied or evaluated. Infertility is defined in terms of cultural norms and expectations, which are not the same in all countries or in one country at all times. In this context, infertility study can be well understood in terms of personal, medical and social reasons of individuals than in terms of the national size of the people under study. Therefore, how do the Kom people perceive and manage infertility?

1.2. PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

The study of a people's belief system is important to the student of culture because it illuminates concepts that are fundamental to their mechanisms of thought. This study therefore is our contribution to the understanding of the phenomenon of infertility from the matrilineal societal angle.

1.3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

We used one main and four specific research questions to collect the information needed.

1.3.1. Main question

What role does procreation play in marriage and kinship organisation in a matrilineal society.?

1.3.2. Specific questions

How does procreation influences social positions?

What is the role of a child in matrimonial relations?

Which practices affect fertility and infertility?

What is the link between infertility and witchcraft and how are childless people buried in this cultural universe?

1.4. HYPOTHESES

This study hinges on one main hypothesis and four specific hypotheses.

1.4.1. Main hypothesis

Procreation can be highly significant in shaping decisions and actions regarding marriage, kinship and the reproductive health care within particular communities.

1.4.2. Specific hypotheses

Matrimonial stability or instability in a traditional society is highly influenced by fertility or infertility.

Social positions in a matrilineal society are highly influenced by the capability to reproduce children.

Fertility is the index by which women are fully integrated into their matrimonial homes as well as the means by which cordial relations with their natal kin are assured.

Supernatural forces regulate the mechanisms of human and agricultural reproduction.

1.5. OBJECTIVES

1.5.1. Main objective

The main objective of this research is to understand the Kom perceptions of marriage, kinship, fertility and infertility and the impact of these perceptions on reproductive health care.

1.5.2. Specific objectives

To understand the concepts of the body especially the female body and how procreation influences social positions within the women's universe.

The role of children in the maintenance of matrimonial stability between husband

and wife, as well as, the families of bride and bridegroom.

Practices which affect fertility and infertility in a matrilineal community.

The link between infertility and witchcraft as well as infertility and death in a traditional society.

1.6. MOTIVATION

Built on my childhood experiences and the powerful symbols and imageries motivated me to investigate the concept of infertility. This motivation has been highly influenced by the fact that I don't only master the Kom language (*itanghi kom*) but I'm also a native of Kom and therefore stand a greater chance to do direct investigation.

1.7. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section focuses on the existing literature on infertility. We will examine the phenomenon of infertility with a critical view on what various writers have said concerning this subject and then we will end by addressing their shortcomings as a stepping stone into what we intend to investigate in this study.

A number of writers have opened up a debate on human reproduction with greater emphasis on infertility and the dilemma faced by the afflicted as well as those affected. The debate by these writers focuses on the meaning and causes of infertility, the link between infertility and witchcraft and the general infertility situation in Africa among others. These issues will be addressed with respect to different authors under the sub-titles- the phenomenon of infertility, causes of infertility, infertility situation in Africa, and criticisms on the study of infertility in Africa among others.

1.7.1. The phenomenon of infertility

The phenomenon of Infertility has been a point of debate among various authors with various definitions proposed. Most authors believe that the definition of infertility varies from society to society. These variations are marked by the absolute inability to conceive a child, the inability to give birth to a live child, and the woman's expectations to

child bearing. In this case infertility is taken by certain writers to mean childlessness while others define it in relative terms with respect to individual perception. Lantum in 1985 quotes Romanick as saying that infertility refers to the “*proportion of women over 45 years who never conceived a child*”. This is absolute or primary infertility. Still in Lantum (1985), infertility is defined with respect to the number of years stayed in marriage taking two years of marriage as the measuring rode and 16 years of age as the minimum age for a woman to be able to conceive a child. This is seen in the following words of Podlowski quoted by Lantum in 1985, «*Si nous considérons les femmes de 16 ans et plus et que nous observons celles n'ayant pas mis d'enfants au monde après deux ans de mariage, nous obtenons un indice de stérilité relative*». In the study of West Cameroon in 1965, Ardener gives a blunt view with regards to infertility when he terms sterile any woman who has not yet given birth to a live child. In this case he sees any woman without a live child as infertile regardless of age and the marital status of the woman. Reporting the case of Cameroon, Romanick refers to childlessness of about 35% among women 25 to 45 years of age.

Infertility is defined in certain communities with respect to the woman's expectations. Lantum (1985) highlights this point of view by quoting Ondoa (1976) who recently defined infertility in terms of a woman's expectations. By this concept, a woman has 100% fertility if she achieves the number of children she desires or wants, and another couple is sub-fertile if they do not achieve their desired number irrespective of the large number of issues they may have brought into the world.

1.7.2. Causes of infertility

Different authors have proposed various causes of infertility with clinical and socio-cultural underpinnings. Clinically, Lantum (1985) quotes Wanka (1975) who reports that Mafiamber (1974) had found that Oligospermia was the commonest factor attributable for the male partner in an infertile union. Furthermore Lantum quotes Wanka's review (1975), that tubal pathology, including obstruction and peritubal adhesions from pelvic inflammatory disease, were frequently diagnosed on patients complaining of childlessness. The same author cites Essomba (1963) as associating the high frequency of

ectopic pregnancy in Yaounde to the prevalence of tubal pathology.

While Lantum handles the causes of infertility clinically, other writers highlight its cause from a socio-cultural angle. This position is seen in B. Kwaku in his book titled Sub-Fertility and Infertility in Africa, (1974), who talks of the socio-cultural factors that affect fertility and reproductive characteristics of groups of persons. He further points to the fact that any attempt at dealing with the problem of low levels of fertility should be based on a clear-cut socio-economic and demographic enquiry. Feldman-Savelsberg (1999) supports this view by using Bangante chiefdom to explain the existence of evil in our society. She isolates witchcraft as the major cause of infertility in Bangante. Feldman-Savelsberg (1999) writing about illness in Bangante says that illnesses invariably thought to be caused by custom include infertility and oedema or swollen belly (ascitis). She says that the longer an illness lasts, recurs or increases in gravity, the more likely it is that Bangante people will seek explanations from the realm of custom. She also highlights Bangante images of gender to help them explain the presence of evil. Women are believed especially by men to be incapable of holding their hearts. Their emotional volatility leads them to directly cause misfortune by eating their fellows at night if they are “vampires” or by sending misfortune if they are sensitive ancestries. She identifies two types of witchcraft in Bangante, namely- *ntok* and *nzo*. *Ntok* is practised at night, when *ndum* (also called *gha ntok*), people with *ntok* or “vampires” leave their bodies and travel, transformed as animals, to harm their sleeping victims by slowly eating their organs. Most *ndum* are women (synonymous to *avung a nutu* (night-vampire), in Kom. On the other hand, *nzo*, which involves both mystical powers and the manipulation of portions, powders and fetishes in Bangante, can be performed at any time of the day or night. This practice is familiar with men and it is a sacrificial display of family members referred to in Bangante as “famla”. The parallel in Kom is *na jua* or *deble* (mami-water).

1.7.3. Infertility in Africa

Infertility is spread throughout the African continent. There are some areas where fertility is relatively very high and some where it is relatively very low as supported by B. Kwaku in his book titled Sub-Fertility and Infertility in Africa (1974). He goes on to say that each prevailing level and pattern calls for a different type of approach to the developmental problems created. Professor V.A. Oyemger the deputy Vice Chancellor of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria in his opening speech during a seminar at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, while addressing participants in 1974, on the topic “Sub-fertility and Fertility in Africa”, has this to say - “any factors, therefore, that impede any individual or groups of individuals from performing this most important function of life, is a curse which must be removed in order to retain one of the factors which robe people of one of their principal sources of happiness”. This sounds like a strong warning on the evaluation of any factors that may be detrimental to human fertility in Africa.

1.7.4. Criticisms on the study of infertility in Africa

Some authors hold that the problem of infertility in Africa has not been adequately evaluated. They hold that this is because the problem on a regional scale has been widely ignored while emphasising on the national and the international levels. In this case, hyper-fertility has been surfacing, leading to an increase in family planning and child spacing technologies. Lantum (1985) quotes Frank O as saying that, *“Although the phenomenon of extra-ordinary infertility in Africa has been documented and carefully studied in a few cases, the dimensions of the problem on a regional scale have been widely ignored”*. Evina Akam further proposes the study of infertility at the individual level when he considers infertility and sub-fertility in central and south Saharan Africa with respect to individuals than at the level of large groups such as tribes or ethnic groups. He further says that, a none negligible portion of the population of these countries is frustrated in its desire to at least have a child.

The above debate on infertility by different writers highlights the problem of infertility as synonymous to the failure to take into consideration the place of individuals in the face of this nightmare. From the reviewed literature, it is clear that most countries

evaluate the phenomenon of infertility with respect to the national population thus leaving out individuals who struggle in private for lack of children. The individual experience on the degree of affliction caused by this nightmare is supported by Retel-Lawrentin A. when she laments the cry of a woman in Upper Volter in the following words- «*Donne moi un enfant, même s'il doit mourir. Il vaut mieux un enfant mort que d'être*». This is translated as "Give me a child even if it must die. A dead child is better than none", (Retel-Lawrentin, A.1979:9). The above position of this sterile woman shows the seriousness of this phenomenon and how women are eager to at least test their uterine effectiveness by at least handling a pregnancy to term. In this case, pregnancy becomes the test of womanhood. Furthermore, all these studies have been based on patrilineal societies with greater attention on children as prospective successors to their fathers when they die. These calls for competition and jealousy in polygynous households within the context of patrilineal inheritance. That is why we thought it necessary to examine the perception of infertility within the context of matrilineal kinship organisation. We understand from the debate that infertility has been associated with the female gender by the various authors. The definition of infertility has also been highlighted with respect to the woman's expectations as well as the inability to give birth to a live child. Major issues continue to border us here concerning the causes and the knowledge of infertility by different societies. If children serve the purpose of successors in patrilineal societies and the lack of them as a threat to the well-fare of their fathers' property, why then should the matrilineal societies border about children when they do not have any role as far as inheriting their fathers' property is concerned? Therefore, we found it very important to address the subject of infertility with focus on the matrilineal society using Kom as our case study so as to add the missing link in the study of infertility in Africa with regards to smaller groups of people.

1.8. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this section we will attempt to explain the presence of disease, illness and sickness in the Kom community using theories of illness causation and secondly we will highlight the theoretical framework on which this study is built. In this study two theories

have been selected to better explain the major issues exposed. These two theories are- the structural functionalism and the cultural interpretative theories. We will highlight these theories immediately after the theories of illness causation.

1.8.1. Theories of disease causation

Theories of illness causation deal with causality, the explanations given by people to account for loss of health. Explanations such as break of taboo, theft of soul, an upset in the hot-cold balance within the body, or failure of the human organism's immunological defences against pathogenic agents such as germs and viruses.

The Kom kingdom associates loss of health to agents. These agents may be a supernatural being such as a deity or a god, a non human being such as a ghost, ancestor or an evil spirit or a human being such as a witch or a sorcerer. The main concern of the Kom community is on why illness is directed towards particular individuals and not others. To better understand the theories of disease causation in our study area it will be necessary to examine the views of certain authors such as Foster and Anderson and Young.

Foster and Anderson (1978) have placed disease causation theory into two camps namely - personalistic and naturalistic systems. The way people respond to disease, by seeking any therapeutic remedy is determined by the way these people perceive the disease causation theory. Disease causation involves the entire society and not just the individual concerned. For example, an accident, loss of a beloved one or documents, may be linked to unfulfilled cultural obligations like the failure to celebrate an uncle's death or any other relative. Foster and Anderson define personalistic belief systems in the following manner –

One in which illness is believed to be caused by the active purposeful intervention of a sensate agent who may be a supernatural being (a deity or a god), a non human being (such as a ghost, ancestor, or evil spirit), or a human being (such as a witch or a sorcerer). The sick person literally is a victim, the object of aggression or punishment, directed specifically against him for reasons that concern him alone. (Foster and Anderson, 1978:53)

Young (1983) labels this system as “externalising belief systems”. In this context, illness episode is attributed to the natural world (natural environment, climate, infections), the social world (witchcraft, sorcery or the evil eye), and the supernatural world (gods, spirits or ancestors). Therefore any disease is due to agents or external forces. Kom people attribute illness to agents particularly to envy. There is no concept of accident. For example, falling from a kola-nut tree or any other tree is due to witchcraft. Similarly other accidents are attributed to the same cause. The physician Harley, who practised medicine for nearly 15 years among the Mano of Liberia, found out that among these people, “disease” is unnatural (Ibid). Harley (CF Foster & Anderson, 1978) lists 16 known causes of illness and death including witchcraft, poisoning, the breaking of taboos, fetish power and many other external forces. The fundamental aspect of the disease causation theory lies in its holistic approach to the explanation of the presence of evil in our society.

The same authors see naturalistic medical systems in the following manner-

Naturalistic medical systems explain illness in impersonal systemic terms. A naturalistic system conforms above all, to an equilibrium model- health prevails when an insensate element of the body, the hot, the cold, the humus or dosha, the yin and the yang are imbalance,..... When this equilibrium is disturbed, illness results, (Foster and Anderson, 1978:53).

According to Young, with regards to the above system, illness episode is mainly located within the individual either due to incorrect behaviour or lack of social and economic resources, or could be the result of personal vulnerability.

A disease causation theory embraces beliefs about the nature of health, the causes of illness, and the remedies and other curing techniques used by doctors. The disease causation theory highlights the link between infertility and the supernatural forces. In brief, the holistic approach of the popular sector in handling disease is highlighted.

Kleinman (1980) in talking about medical pluralism puts it this way-

.... put somewhat differently, then health care system like any other cultural system

integrates the health related components of the society. These include-patterns of beliefs about causes of illness, norms governing choice and evolution of treatment, socially legitimated statuses, roles of power relationship, interaction, setting and institutions” (Kleinman 1980:24).

Theories of illness causation have given us a vivid vision on how the Kom people explain the presence of ill-health in their community. Through these theories we have also seen how this cultural universe struggles to wade off loss of health among its members. The main aim of this study is not to justify the presence of ill-health in Kom but to examine how ill-health influences decisions and provokes social differentiation within groups of people in a matrilineal society using Kom as a case study.

1.8.2. Working theories

In the field of Medical Anthropology, writers have formulated a number of theories in order to explain major research findings. These theories include- the Structural Functionalism, the Ecological Perspective, the Marxist Political Economy Model, the Transactionalist Model, the Symbolic and Cognitive Approach, the Cultural Interpretative theory, the Biological approach and the Applied perspective.

In this study we have used the structural functionalism and the cultural interpretative theories to better explain the major issues. We will briefly talk about these theories and then justify why we think these theories best explain the main issues in this work.

1.8.2.1. Structural functionalism

This theory was dominant in Anthropology between 1920 and 1960 but today it seemed to have been largely ignored by anthropologists. This is true only in a formal sense because its basic tenets are still necessary to the structural maintenance of the society. According to this theory, society is seen as a system of equilibrium. In this perspective, the society is made up of various elements with differing functions, which contribute, to the overall functioning of the system. Like the body, which is composed of the organs and

limbs with differing functions, which contribute to the overall functioning of the body, the society is composed of different elements which interact to make the society what it is. The failure of this theory is the inability to explain conflict and change within the society. This theory helps us understand how infertility brings about a dysfunction in the Kom community and how this affliction acts as a catalyst in the promotion of fertility rites so as to maintain the smooth functioning of the entire system. It also shows how fertility functions as an adaptive strategy in the maintenance of family stability and the society at large. The fear of infertility leads to the performance of fertility rites as well the respect to socio-cultural norms and customs. So we see that through these efforts, the society strives towards equilibrium. It also helps us to understand how competition for children in polygynous homes leads to infertility inducing witchcraft.

1.8.2.2. Cultural interpretative theory

The origin of the interpretative theory is credited to Byron Good. This theory was lunched as a reaction against the domination of the ecological theory. The ecological theory emphasised on the fact that disease is part of nature and the external element to the human body. The authors of the interpretative theory under the banner of Author Kleinman argue that illness is not an entity but an explanatory model. According to Byron Good, disease is part of culture and culture is a way of representing disease. According to this approach, disease is part of the human reality. So disease is perceived both by the patient and the healer as a set of interactive activities. The fundamental role of this theory is the cultural construction of disease. Since disease is culturally constructed, each society therefore defines what is normal and what is abnormal. This theory helps us to better understand how the Kom people perceive infertility and the various steps being taken by this cultural universe to prevent this infirmity. A recall of the major themes involved in this work will give us more light on the importance of the above theories to this study.

Four major themes are treated in this study namely- kinship, marriage, fertility and infertility. All of them are closely related to one another. Marriage in Kom involves two individuals who belong to two distinct kin groups. These kin groups represent four lineages namely- the matrilineage of the bridegroom on both sides and the matrilineage of

the bride on both sides. This therefore gives the marriage a wider dimension as individuals belonging to the entire community. During this moment high expectations are on child bearing as a preamble to a happy home between the two individuals and the society at large. This accounts for a complex series of fertility rites performed during this moment. These fertility rites bring two distinct kin groups into a unique orb who under normal circumstances wouldn't have known each other, but because of two individuals it has become possible. Therefore through marriage, kinship organisation is reshaped.

The number of children the couple is able to bear strengthens the unity of these kin groups. In brief, marriage and kinship ties are conditioned by the reproductive capacities of the couples concern. Therefore structural functionalism explains the role of human reproduction in the maintenance of stability between two kin groups and how individual communities make sense out of unexpected and unfortunate situations.

The cultural interpretative theory helps to explain marriage as a complex whole. In this context marriage is seen as a means through which kingship organisation is reshaped and reorganised. Since marriage in Kom hinges on childbearing, infertility therefore becomes a disruptive element not only between the individuals concerned but also to the entire community involving the matrilineages of the bride and the bridegroom on both sides. Cultural interpretative theory helps to examine infertility as a disease as well as a socio-cultural stigma in Kom community.

1.9. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is supported by a number of concepts. These concepts have been divided into two categories namely- general concepts, and local concepts. All these concepts are linked to human health.

1.9.1. General Concepts

1.9.1.1. Infertility

According to medical opinion, infertility (sterility) is an absolute state of inability to conceive. Sub-fertility (secondary infertility) is a relative state of lowered capacity to conceive. Medical opinion classifies infertility into two categories namely: - primary and

secondary infertility. Primary infertility is an absolute inability to conceive. Such a person is likely to reach the end of his or her reproductive life without having had to conceive. Secondary infertility comes after an initial state of fertility. In this case the person might have had at least one delivery, whether the child is living or not. In demographic parlance, the term “infertility” means the incapacity to give birth to a living child. It could manifest itself after one or several deliveries. In this case, we can say that in demography, infertility means childlessness. This is how Lantum sees infertility –

The proxy definition of "infertility" using "childlessness" as a classification lumps together women who have never conceived, women who have conceived once or more times but never delivered a live birth and women who had forgotten to report live births which died shortly after delivery (Lantum 1985: 98).

Ondoa, (1976) has recently defined infertility or sterility in terms of the woman's expectations. By this concept, a couple has 100% fertility if it achieves the number of children it wants or desires, and another couple is sub-fertile or sterile if it does not achieve its desired number irrespective of the large number of issues it may have brought to the world. Our focus is on the proxy definition of infertility using childlessness as our unit of analysis

1.9.1.2. Gender

Gender refers to differences between men and women. This refers to the cultural ideas and stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. Gender concept does not only refer to individual identity but is also symbolic in nature referring to a pattern of behaviour between the members of a given society, either male or female. According to Feldman-Savelsberg (1999), the concept of cooking-in babies shows female dominance and power in matters of procreation. This is opposed to whether men are fertile or not, whether they contribute to procreation related activities or not. In this perspective, women are considered as objects of reproduction and the men only help in mixing the ingredients needed for the growth of the child in the womb. That is why she says the correct mixture is

needed, if not, the ingredients will fight within themselves and therefore will lead to abortions, miscarriages and foetal wastage. This is a means to ensure fidelity on the part of women during pregnancy. Kom people believe that infertility is gender related. Men believe that since only women get pregnant, they should as well bear the blame for infertility. Men seem to be surprised when asked on how they (men) who do not have children are looked upon by the society. Most men ask in turn if men do give birth.

Frank and Mc Nicoll describe high fertility to ensure access to land and labour within the context of marriage, bride wealth, inheritance, and land tenure institutions, (Feldman-Savelsberg, 1999). Infertility in medical anthropology is a tool, which is used to reveal the dynamics of gender inequality and family life, notions of success and failure, and cultural conceptions of kinship model. Infertility allows authors to examine how people make sense out of unexpected, unfortunate events.

In Kom, men and women have different views concerning procreation and child bearing. Women's bodies are considered as farmland where crops are planted. The farm may be fertile or not. So the performance of the crops depend on the nature of the soil which is the woman's womb. Men are believed to merely play the role of planters by depositing spermatozoa into the vagina.

As Kom women become increasingly dispossessed, gender becomes the most salient differentiation; the imagery of reproductive threat is widely shared. As children become a rare and precious good, competition for them creates more disharmonies and the use of more infertility inducing witchcraft, creating a vicious circle. Gender oriented concept helps us to examine those symbols and imageries that are used to explain infertility in women.

1.9.1.3. Cultural dynamics

African colonisation by the Europeans signalled a point of no return in the process of social change (Nkwi 1976). The Kom culture seems to have gone through an epoch of cultural delusion due to divergent cultural contacts, following the arrival of the Germans, the French and the British in Cameroon. Lesley White in his book titled; The Signs of Culture: A study of man and civilisation (1949), says that technological development

expressed in terms of culture is the engine of socio-cultural change. Even if that culture lies in isolation, even if you find in that society law and a strong authority and severe sanctions, even if the individuals obey those laws, however there is always bound to be a change in the life of that society.

Radcliff Brown and Emile Durkheim take the study of culture and society as a conceptual image related or linked to living organisms. This image shows that socio-cultural systems are at the point of constantly moving towards equilibrium. Many authors think that society changes everyday and all the time. All the systems and elements of culture are in perpetual change and are dynamic. This is true of medical systems. The concept of cultural dynamics helps us to see how cultural change as a result of cultural contacts can affect the local populations conversely.

1.9.2. Local concepts

1.9.2.1. *Akain and dumwaiyn*

These two concepts are the most prominent terms that are used in Kom to describe the degree of infertility. *Akain*, is the absolute inability to conceive. In this case, there is the tendency that such a person will come to the end of her reproductive life without having given birth to a child. It is believed to be “god given” and therefore a natural or divine curse (*indi fuyini*). Infertile women in this cultural universe are afraid of this term because it reminds them of what they do not want to remember in their lives. This is equivalent to primary infertility according to medical opinion.

Dumwaiyn means someone who dislike children. It is often used as some sort of mockery to people who dislike children as well as irresponsible people who do not know how to handle children. Most often, the manner in which somebody beats a child indicates the love such a person has for children. The question always goes thus - how is this person beating the child like a *dumwaiyn*? Why is this person eating like a *dumwaiyn*? So the manner in which somebody beats a child or eats is indicative of his or her reproductive health status.

It should be noted that most often, both concepts of *akain* and *dumwaiyn* are used interchangeably to mean childlessness in Kom.

1.9.2.2. *Calange* (a stinking smelling insect)

This is an insect, which is renowned for its nauseating odour and lives in isolation. It is believed that because of its unbearable odour, the rest of the insect kingdom has isolated it. This is a metaphor used to describe infertile women usually in form of epigrams by women. So, *calange* means a socio-culturally nauseating and a solitary person who has been condemned by infertility.

1.9.2.3. *Witchcraft (muso)*

Hammond, P. B. (1971) has said that the fear of witchcraft is generally most intense in times of crises and increased social tensions. He further says that accusations of witchcraft tend to occur often particularly among people in competition. A competitive relationship in which the potential for jealousy is particularly great is that between co-wives in a polygynous household.

There are two types of witchcraft (*muso*¹) in Kom namely- *muso jung* (good *muso*) and *muso bugh* (evil *muso*). When the Foyin is enstooled, he is accompanied by the world of diviners to *Ijum*, a place where he is shown all forms of *muso* (*su dien muso su Foyin*). The *Foyin* as the secular and the spiritual leader is supposed to know all forms of *muso* in order to better take care of the people he administers. Evil *muso* is practised by people who want riches by offering to the spirits the fertility of Kom crops, and women, thus provoking failure in the harvest and decreased in births. *Avung* (vampire) is an example of evil *muso* and it involves the eating of people's reproductive organs mysteriously. Sometimes, complete human beings are believed to be eaten to death by those who practice *avung*. All these issues will be highlighted in due course.

1.10. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is basically qualitative ethnographic field research conducted in the three main regions of Kom by means of participant observation principally through- interviews, focus group discussion sessions and individual in-depth interviews. The three regions of

¹ Muso generally means witchcraft in Kom. The term doesn't specify the type of witchcraft, that is, whether it good or bad.

Kom are - Fundong, Njinikom, and Belo valleys. These regions represent the northern and the southern parts of Kom, made up of *Abasakom* and *Nggvin Kijem* respectively. Our research calendar is in two phases. The first phase stretched from September 2000 to March 2001 while the second phase stretched from September 2002 to March 2003.

1.10.1. Target population

Our research sample comprised of ethno-medical practitioners, bio-medical institutions and lay people. Ethno-medical practitioners form the popular sector in Kom who interact frequently with the sick especially those diseases believed to have been caused by socio-cultural imbalance. They possess a lot of knowledge concerning illnesses due to witchcraft, breach of taboo, and many other diseases with socio-cultural implications. They therefore supplied us with information on the perceptions and causes of infertility, how these cases are managed and how these people are treated when they die. Thirty ethno-medical practitioners were interviewed.

The bio-medical institutions provided us with profound information concerning the infertile cases that visit their institutions and the difficulties infertile women go through with their husbands as well as with their husbands' kin group. Different views about the causes of infertility were recorded from the medical institutions. The failures and the successes of those managing infertile cases in the medical institutions were questioned. Ten bio-medical institutions were visited with a total of fifteen bio-medical personnel interviewed.

Lay people also served the role of onlookers or sufferers of infertility. Fifteen lay people were interviewed on how infertility is perceived, how infertile women are treated in their localities and where people suffering from infertility usually first seek help.

We organised three Focus Group Discussion (F.G.D) sessions to get the conflicting views on the perception of infertility. The average number of participants stood at ten persons per F.G.D session. The sessions were organised in the following manner- one for both men and women, bringing together twelve participants; seven men and five women, one for men only, making a total of seven men. The last session was for women only, thirteen in number. Our points of concern were on gender infertility.

We also visited 'born houses' and death celebration ceremonies to sample views on the category of the people who died. Our concern was to see if there are divergent ways in which childless people were treated and buried respectively.

1.10.2. Data collection and analysis

Data was collected using an interview guide, a structured questionnaire and a tape recorder. The data collected was transcribed every night. At the end of the study, we regrouped information into categories depending on perceptions of infertility, gender, the presumed causes of infertility, the treatment of the infertile, their reaction to the situation among others. Key statements from certain informants have been returned verbatim and this has gone a long way to enliven our report.

It is worthwhile important to note here that from the onset of this work, we intended to quantify the information, so we prepared structured questionnaires for both the traditional and the bio-medical settings. While on the field we saw the questionnaire for the traditional setting not necessary. As a result we used only the prepared questionnaire for the bio-medical setting to highlight the qualitative information gathered. So our study is based on the qualitative information we gathered in the process.

1.11. PRESENTATION OF STUDY AREA

The kingdom of Kom is found in Boyo Division in the North West Province of the Republic of Cameroon. It is part of the so-called "Grass-fields", a highland region that owes its name from the Savannah type vegetation resulting probably from centuries of man caused deforestation. Grass-fields is organised into a great number of polities, among which the largest units, such as Bamum, Nso and Kom have been commonly called "Kingdoms" due to their centralised nature and elements of divine kingship. A linguistic survey of the Grass-fields showed that a multitude of languages contribute little to the clarification of the early history of migration which led to the formation of many political units. The Kom speak a language of the ngkom family, just as their neighbours- the Nso and groups in the Fungom area (Richardson 1956:42-48).

1.11.1. History

The movement of the Kom from Upper Mbam and its tributaries to the western Grassfields dates as far back as three hundred years. Their traditions bring them from Ndobbo to Bamessi probably when the Bamessi were still in their older location in Bamum. Due to the trickery of the Bamessi chief, the active male population of Kom was destroyed. Nandong, the sister to the deceased ruler, led the remnant of the Kom to Nso via Nkar, led by the spirit of the deceased king (the python trail), after the revenge through a ritual suicide that killed a great number of the Bamessi people.

In Nso, the Kom met the ancestors of the present *Ndotitichia* clan who moved with them via Oku to Laikom by way of Ajung. This was around eighteenth century. The original ancestors of *Laikom*² were the clan of *Andonalu* who later moved its capital at Achain to the north of Laikom. Peace pacts proceeded with Ake, Achain and Ajung and these village chiefdoms were later peacefully incorporated into the Kom kingdom. Three royal clans found in *Laikom* are *Ekwu*, *Itinala* and *Achaf*, (Nkwi 1976).

Nkwi and Warnier, (1982), believe that the son of Nandong who later became king was the beginning of matriliney in Kom.

1.11.2. Location

Kom territory is a rugged mountainous terrain. Their immediate neighbours to the South are the chiefdoms of Babungo and Kijem keku (also known as Big Babanki), the Kingdom of Bafut to the South West, the Aghem Federation to the North West. The chiefdoms of Mmen (Bafmen), and the Kingdom of Bum to the North, the kingdom of Nso and the chiefdom of Oku to the East. It has a surface area of 280 square miles and occupies a high mountain terrain having a height of 5000'. The capital perches on a spur at height of 6324' (Nkwi 1976).

The territory of Kom is divided into two sections: - the northern part, *Abasakom* (lit³. site or area of Kom) and the Southern part *Nggvin Kijem* (lit. hunting land of the Kijem). Today the Kom consist of ten sub chiefdoms incorporated during the 19th Century and forty-two villages.

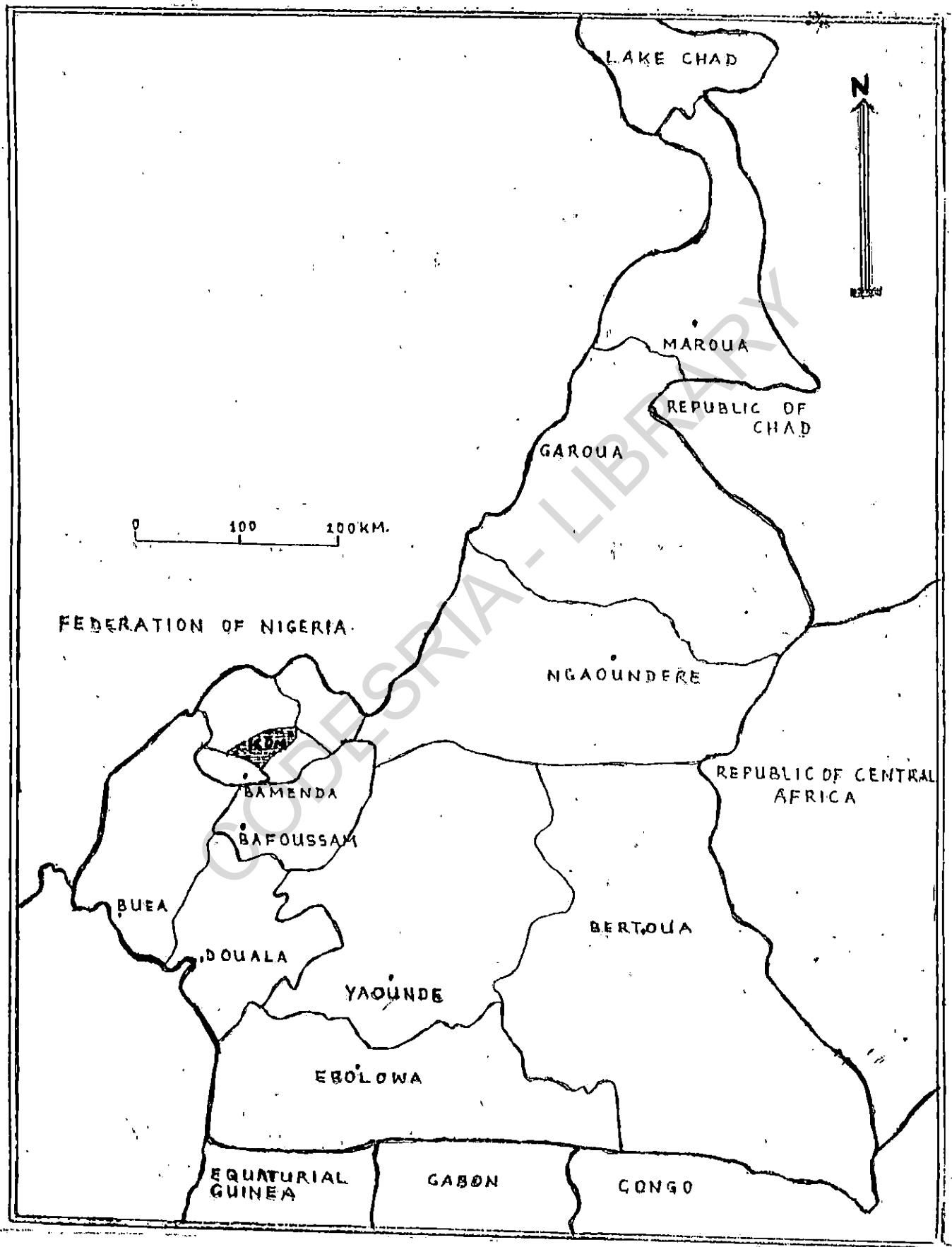
² Laikom (lit. the place of Kom), is the present capital of Kom. This is where the paramount ruler of Kom resides.

³ Lit. means literal translation.

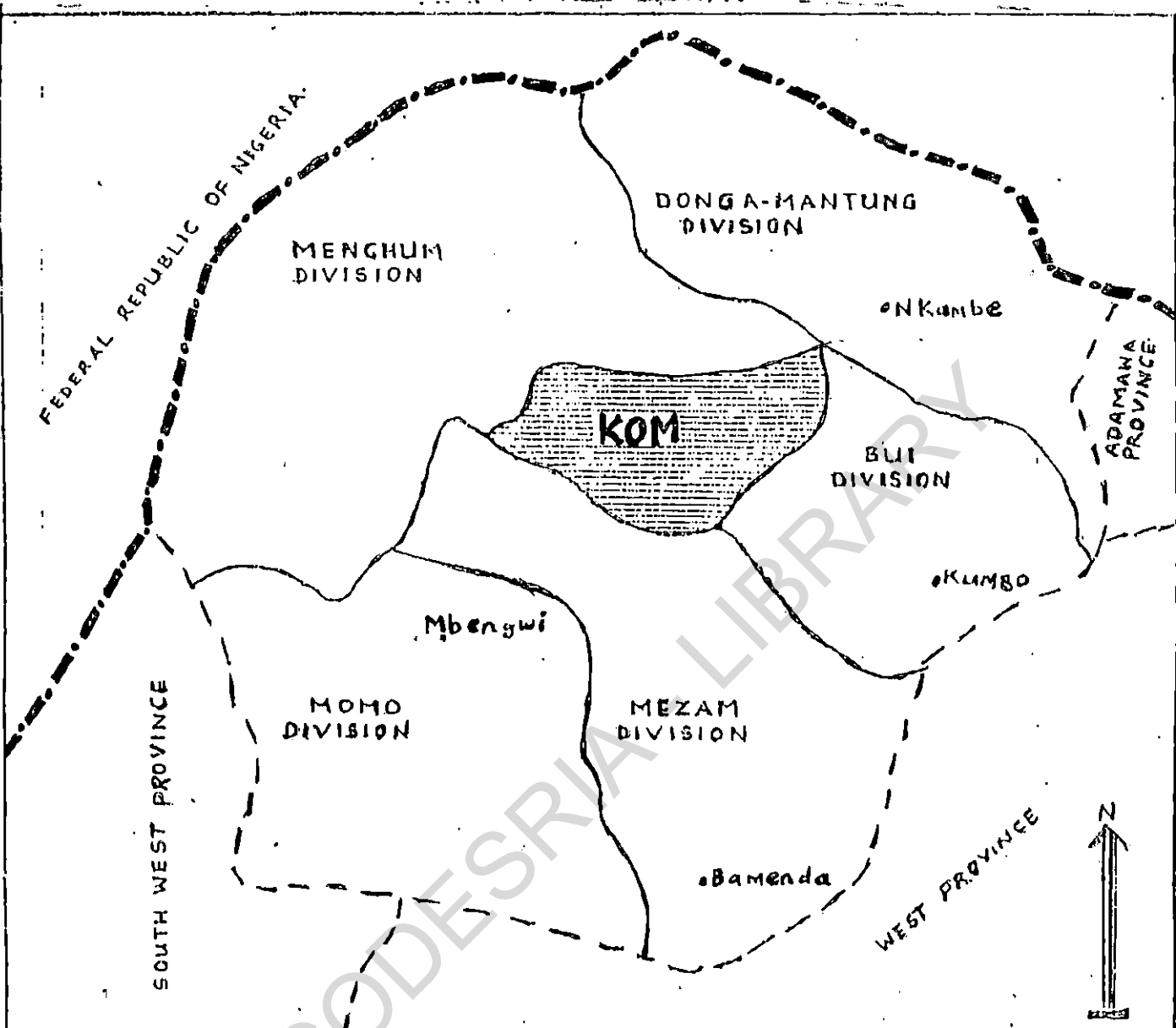
For a better understanding of the location of the Kingdom of Kom, we have presented the location of Kom in the Republic of Cameroon, the location of Kom in the North West province of Cameroon and the Kingdom of Kom in its entire. These are found on the three pages that follow.






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MAP 1
THE REPUBLIC OF CAMEROON SHOWING THE LOCATION OF KOM



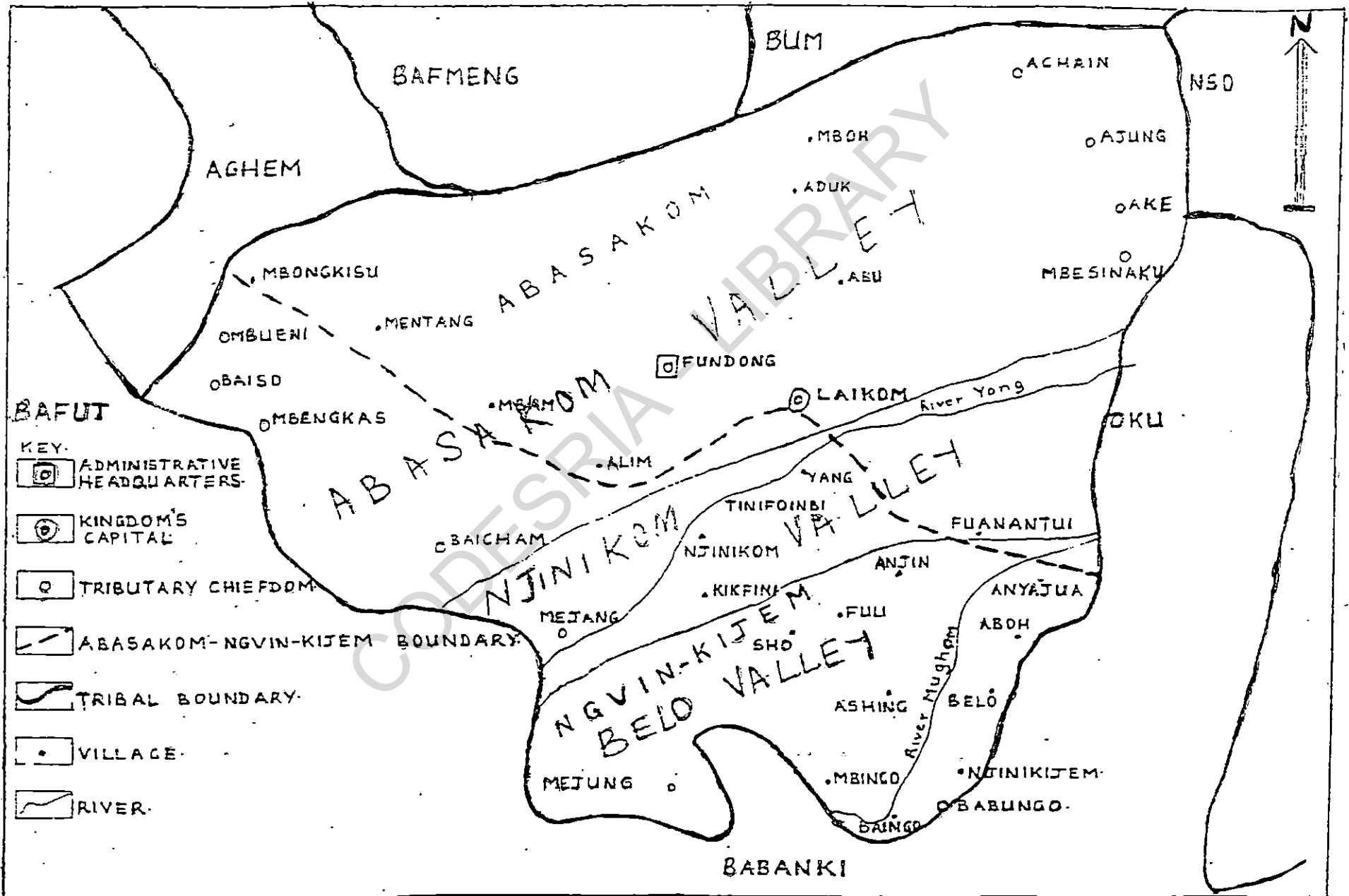
MAP 2
THE LOCATION OF KOM IN THE NORTH WEST PROVINCE



- KEY**
-  AREA STUDY.
 -  INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARY.
 -  PROVINCIAL BOUNDARY.
 -  DIVISIONAL BOUNDARY.
 -  DIVISIONAL CAPITAL.

SOURCE: NORTH WEST PROVINCIAL DEPARTMENT OF STATISTICS.

MAP 3
THE KINGDOM OF KOM



1.12. SOCIAL ORGANISATION

The village *nte* of Kom enjoys considerable independence in managing its own affairs. Village leadership consists of the village head *bonte* whose office depends on descent. *Ekwu* clan members eventually take up headships of most villages. Villages are subdivided into wards *funtetu* controlled by ward head *bonte pl⁴. ubonte* who are subordinates of the village heads. Wards are made up of several compounds *abai* whose owners the compound heads *ubobe, sing⁵. bobe*, have important say in village affairs. All men regulatory society is called *Kwifoyn* and villages have similar institutions called *mukum* sing. *akum*. *Kwifoyn* is restricted to the central political authority. The village head provides a link to the central authority by being an adviser to the *Foyn* (king).

The *Foyn* is the head of the kingdom, which signifies the central authority with *Kwifoyn* as the executive arm of the government. *Laikom* is referred to as *ilah* (home), while villages away from it are referred to as *nggvin* (farmland)

People approved at least by *Laikom* after installation govern villages. The village head *bonte* was chosen by his lineage group or clan *isa-ndo* and installed in the presence of the village population. After his installation he went to *Laikom* for approval. The village version of *Kwifoyn* is called *mukum*, sing. *akum* (village regulatory society). They are often referred to as the “eyes of *Kwifoyn*”. Their functions include minor judicial functions and the organisation of communal work. The *bonte* is at the head of *mukum*, which is entrusted with the dissemination of royal regulations, judgement of civil cases and village hunts among others. The *mukum* are closely assisted by *chong* (friction drum society) sanctioned only by *Laikom*. Each village has a tribunal (court of first instance), presided over by the village head, *bonte*. Its decisions are executed by the *akum*. The tribunal handles all minor land and matrimonial cases.

The highest court in the land is the court of appeal, *etwi* found at *Laikom* with the *Foyn* the presiding judge and the executive arm, the *Kwifoyn*. Those who are not satisfied with judgements from the lower courts (courts of first instance) are free to take their cases to the highest court (the highest court of appeal). He always says, *mu du etwi* (lit. I am going to *etwi*).

⁴ Pl. means the plural form.

⁵ Sing. means the singular form.

1.13. DIFFICULTIES AND LIMITATIONS

During the course of this research, a number of difficulties and limitations were encountered. When we first re-entered the field, we were received with a lot of scepticism. This was because our trip coincided with polio immunisation campaign, which was being rejected by many people. Informants termed this global free immunisation campaign, “a poisonous gift” claiming that good things are never free. So they thought we were part of this programme, which according to them was out to “sterilise” their children.

Sometimes we were regarded as clowns who had nothing serious to do. Most of the people considered our questions not important since they thought that as part of that community, we ought to know all what we were asking. Some informants wanted compensation before information could be given. This occurred especially during focus group discussions.

Most of the places were far apart and inaccessible by road. So we spent a lot time trekking. This made us to spend a lot of time on the field, which was also very expensive. To make matters worse, informants did not respect most of the appointments. Thus re-visits were compulsory. Most informants accused us of using them as tools to acquire wealth for ourselves. So enough time was needed to clarify issues before the research proper

Recording of information in a tape recorder was taken with lots of scepticism, as most of the informants did not want their voices to be taped. This was due to the superstitious belief that we may sell their voices elsewhere. We therefore took a lot of time convincing them that this was just a strategy to avoid time wastage as well as the fragmentation of information that can be caused as a result of interruptions by questions.

Focus group discussion participants sometimes broke into rioting with each person claiming superiority over his or her own point of view. This was the case in Fundong (*abasakom*).

The Kom speak a language called *itanghi kom* (lit. the Kom language). Most of the information collected was translated with a lot of difficulties. This hindered us from transmitting exactly what the informants said on paper, that is, first hand information was missed in this event.

Getting access to medical institutions needed authorisation from the hierarchy, which was not always easy. This made us to waste a lot of money and time chasing for them.

CONCLUSION

The chapter ending has highlighted the problematic and the methodology. We have seen that the phenomenon of infertility in Africa has not been adequately evaluated. More attention has been focused on the demographic indicators of infertility thereby neglecting individuals who complain of infertility for personal, medical and social reasons not that they were unable to contribute to the national size. The proxy definition of infertility using childlessness as a classification, is our working definition. To support our research findings we have used the structural functionalism and the cultural interpretative theories. Other major issues treated under this chapter include- the presentation of the study area and the social organisation of the Kom kingdom. Finally, the Kom and Aghem, as well as Mmen (Mme), Fungom, Kuk, Nyos and two quarters of Kung have rules of matrilineal decent and succession, whereas elsewhere, patrilineal rules are observed.

This work contains four chapters. The first chapter has highlighted a number of issues including- the problematic and the methodology among others. Chapter two handles data presentation on kinship and marriage in Kom. Chapter three deals with data presentation on fertility and infertility in Kom. Chapter four treats data analysis and the general conclusion. Each of these chapters will be handled in its entity.

CHAPTER TWO

KINSHIP AND MARRIAGE

This chapter deals with data presentation on kinship and marriage in Kom. The two are closely knit together. Marriage expands kinship and widens the responsibilities of individuals in this community. This section attempts to bring out this link as well as to understand the concept of infertility in a wider sense. Major issues in this chapter include- kinship and marriage. Under kinship we will be treating the following issues- rights and obligations within family members, roles of complementary relations, and inheritance. Under marriage, we will focus on the following issues- women within the marriage equation, marriage rituals and finally, divorce and widowhood in Kom.

The western Grass-fields presents a puzzling diversity of kinship systems, that is, ways of reckoning decent, regulating marriage, inheritance of property, residence of newly married couples, succession to offices of *Foyn*, lineage heads and family heads. The grass-fields people have a common stock or repertoire of social institutions, elements of political organisation and beliefs. Patri and matri-lineages are the building blocks of all Grass-field chiefdoms (Nkwi 1976). Nowadays, the majority of Kom and Aghem, as well as Mmen (Mme), Fungom, Kuk, Nyos and two quarters of Kung have rules of matrilineal decent and succession, whereas elsewhere, patrilineal rules are observed.

2.1. KINSHIP

Kom has a matrilineal kinship organisation, although there is one patriclan, which had been incorporated when a patrilineal chiefdom was expelled during Kom expansion. The largest recognised kinship unit, a 'clan', *isa-ndo* (lit. buttocks of the house), is an acephalous⁶ political unit. The lineage *ushu-ndo*, which extends about four to six generations in-depth, constitutes an exogamous unit with a head who provides leadership. Residence with matriclans and lineages is patrilocal. Every child is a *waiyndo* (lit. child of the clan) and he is a *wul-ndo* of the mother's clan or lineage. Sons turn to settle near their

⁶ Acephalous is kinship organisation in which the head is not well defined.

fathers' household. Clans have specific names. Kom has over twenty clans today with exception of *Kijem* clan and some lineages of *Njinasung*, all matrilineal.

The kingdom of Kom is founded on the basis of an alliance between the other clans and the three 'navel' clans, which sit at the centre. Clan membership and membership in particular lineage determine access to certain functions, mainly of a ritualistic nature. The lineage, *ndo-funkuin*, which belongs to the *ekwu* clan, provides the rulers. It was named after Funkuin ("ndo" means, house), the mother of *Foyn* (king) Yu who ruled approximately from 1865 to 1912. *Ekwu* and *achaf* clan membership is instrumental in holding important priestly functions in the realm of the *fechuo* and *ntul* cults (Nkwi 1976).

2.1.1. Rights and obligations within family members

The term *waiyn-ndo* expresses the individual's patrilineal relationship or complementary filiation, which gives him the right of land from his father on which to settle after marriage. The father is supposed to provide a wife for the son and land on which to build or settle and farm. This land is usually lineage land. This land therefore theoretically becomes the property of the son's lineage. Sometimes a mother's brother may provide land for residence of the sister's son but this avunculocal residence is relatively unknown.

Women have a lot of influence within the family equation. Sons do not succeed their fathers as compound heads. Mothers have as duty to make sure that fathers secure plots of land for their sons though these children do not belong to their fathers' lineage. The mother could block their husbands from giving out land even to his matrikin if she feels threatened that her sons may not have plots of land to build and to farm in the future. So we see the role of mothers towards the transfer of lineage land to her own lineage.

Children too have specific roles and obligations within the family. Duties are distributed with regards to sex. Female children assist their mothers in farm work and cook food for the family. The general cleaning of the home is done by the female children. They also make sure there is enough water at home for bathing and cooking. Hot water is provided to fathers in the morning as well as in the evening by the female children. Baby seating is one of those duties allocated to the girl child in Kom. While the girl child

occupies herself with what is termed “light jobs”, the boy child handles harder duties. These include- taking care of the father’s flock, providing wood for the family, hunting, and clearing of the mother’s farms during farming seasons. The boy child takes the place of his father when absent. Particular privileges that are reserved for fathers are automatically rendered to the boy child when the father is not there. This include special parts of a chicken like the ‘gizzard’.

The harmony of families hinges on how individuals are able to exercise their duties. In every family people have unique places that they occupy and families can only function smoothly if each and everyone performs his or her own duty. For example, if the husband does not provide his wife with plots of land on which to farm, he will not have food to eat. In this case, the family runs the risk of starvation. The girl children must accompany their mothers to the farm so as to produce enough food for the family. Boys are expected to hunt and bring home game thereby providing meat for the family. If farms are not cleared, the mother could not cultivate. So each individual has rights and obligations within the family.

2.1.2. Roles of complementary relation

Complementary relation plays an important function in the social structure in that it reveals a strong emotional attachment of the father to his children who by custom are not members of his lineage. The bride wealth cements the lineage’s right over the woman’s fertility, her children and their destiny. Children become more responsible and oblige to their father than to their mother’s brother. The child looks after his father in sickness and at old age, clears his farms, thatches the roofs of his houses, consults him in all important matters and surrenders all game to him. The lineage as well receives a greater portion of the bride wealth of a man’s daughters. The father initiates his sons into his trade and medicine. He also transmits any charismatic or secret powers he may be endowed with to his sons. The father can transfer lineage property to his sons, not sacrosanct property including, kola trees, women, compound sanctified by libations, raffia strands and palm groves. Such property is bequeathed to rightful successors.

Sons do not succeed their fathers as compound heads but they and their sisters play an important role in matters of inheritance and succession by a sister’s son. The eldest son

takes possession of the sacrificial cup as soon as the father dies. The children play an active role in burying their father as well as in mortuary rites. The matrilineage is responsible for the choice and the installation of a successor. Children and widows could refuse to accept the lineage choice and chose any close member of the matrilineage of the deceased as father and husband. If the choice is approved, the son hands over the sacrificial cup and they all drink wine from it given by the new heir. The new heir acts as father taking care of the children and widows inherited, if not they are free to pay allegiance to any member of the deceased matrilineage.

2.1.3. Inheritance

In fraternal relations, a man merely assumes control of his brother's compound, property and widows as soon as the mortuary rites are over. No ceremony endorsing his claim is conducted and he couldn't bear the title *nzhindo* (lit. the eater of a house). A special ceremony is performed immediately a sister's son is chosen in the presence of the sub-clan, villagers, children and widows of the deceased. Formal approval of the father is also sought before installation. We may be tempted to ask how the formal approval of the father can be sort taking into consideration that he is dead. The fact is that nowadays most people leave their will in writing but formally oral tradition was observed very strictly. Therefore, the successor must be in conformity to the will of the deceased.

As soon as a special ceremony is performed, the new heir assumes full control over sacrosanct property including, kola trees, women, compound sanctified by libations, raffia strands and palm groves. This property remains lineage property and is passed on from generation to generation within that lineage. We have seen cases were lineage property like land, has been transferred to another lineage. This is not the case with the above-mentioned property. Therefore real succession lies in the control of sacrosanct property.

Field research proved that brothers to the deceased possess a lot of influence on the compounds to be inherited. It is believed that until all the brothers are dead, the rightful successor cannot be enstooled. Since the man's brother cannot bear the title of *nzhindo*, the compound can therefore remain for long without a successor depending on the number of living brothers to the decease.

2.2. MARRIAGE

In Kom, marriage is the focus of existence. It is the point where all members of the community meet- the departed, the living and those yet to be born. All dimensions of time meet here, and the whole drama of history is repeated, renewed and revitalised. The living, the dead, and those yet to be born are invoked into a unique orb through the complex series of rituals performed during this period. The performance of rituals, conducted by a priest transforms the natural world of marriage into the world of spirits since marriage is looked upon as a spiritual obligation. The man therefore can only take his wife after a series of very important consultations with the world of spirits must have taken place to see if the proposed marriage is compatible or not. Failure to get married under normal circumstances means that the person concerned has rejected society and society rejects him in turn (Nkwain 1978). This explains the complexity of rituals that are performed before, and during marriage. This will be highlighted later on in this work.

In the kingdom of Kom, girls spend most of their time with their mothers while learning the techniques of motherhood and how to be prospective wives in future. These teachings gradually transform them from irresponsible and innocent individuals to eminent responsible women as they approach their first menstrual experience, (believed to be a sign of the capability to conceive). On the other hand, boys spend most of the time with their fathers who initiate them into their trade, and medicine. The mother therefore transfers feminine attributes onto her daughters while the father transfers the male attributes to his sons. These are some sort of initiation activities, which are found in the kingdom of Kom.

In fact, there are several situations in Kom in which, the attraction between a girl and a boy have led to marriage, but this has always been if the relations of the boy and those of the girl smile on their affection. But the attraction between the boy and the girl is not the important thing. This conception can better be appreciated in its wider and more compelling setting in which marriage is recognised as a union, not so much of two persons concerned, but of two kin groups involved. The kin groups here represent the four lineages. That is, the matrilineages of the bride and groom families on both sides. In some African countries, vows are very instrumental in marriage. An example is seen in an Egyptian marriage with the following words from the man-

I bow before your rights from this day on. I shall never oppose your claims with a single word. I recognise you before all others as my wife, though I do not have the right to say you must be mine, and only I am your husband and mate. You alone have the right of departure. I cannot oppose your wish wherever you desire to go... (U.N. 1991)

Therefore each society undertake certain principles in order to give marriage worth its meaning. Through these principles, individuals are compelled to respect certain rules and regulations as members of the community in which they live. This is the case with the Kom community through the marriage rituals we will be treating.

2.2.1. Marriage rituals

Most traditional marriages in Kom were and are still arranged. Once marriage arrangements are acceptable to the two kin groups, then it is more or less worthwhile. Many Kom men working in the Cameroon Development Corporation (C.D.C) plantations or in private farms have had wives as it were “posted down” to them. It is important to keep this in mind if we hope to understand the complex series of rites involved in traditional Kom marriage. The measure of love and affection in Kom marriage is how well the entire community smiles over the union and secondly, on how the partners perform their expected duties to each other. Children are riches in that money borrowed can be repaid by giving a child for marriage. Children also serve for social integration between the two kin groups. Marriage is therefore sealed by a complex series of rituals as we will be seeing below.

2.2.1.1. *Ibegiwuwi* (discussing a woman)

This is the first stage that effects the debut in marriage relationship. This stage is the talking stage where the two families exchange words. The symbolic element here is a “kola nut”. kola nut here is very important in that, once exchanged, it becomes indicative of the willingness of the two parties concerned to assess the proposed acceptable marriage. It is like putting a mark on the body of the to-be wife. Elsewhere, kola nuts have been

exchanged for the sake of a girl and she finally absconds. Unfortunately, she is cursed for life with celibacy or infertility. This same situation is seen in other North West cultures in Cameroon and among the Ibos of Nigeria as reported by Achebe in his novel titled- THINGS FALL APART. Achebe says, he who brings kola nuts, brings life.

2.2.1.2. *Afoh nutu-u* (a nocturnal gift)

This is sometimes referred to as the secret *iyeni tkfundoh* (lit. recognising the door). This stage is generally known as *indo iwui* (lit. house of woman) implying the payment of the bride price and this stage paradoxically never ends. It comprises a drum of oil with the capacity of three or four tins of oil to the father-in-law and a huge bundle of cooked meat. The pride and the financial prowess of the son-in-law usually spice this stage. The bride price is symbolic in that it never surpasses what was paid on the mother of the girl. This is because a girl in Kom is never sold but given to her husband. The bride price in this cultural universe is considered as compensation to the bride's family, for having taken care of the girl till marriage. Anyway, it differs from lineage to lineage. After this stage, the man is permitted to pay nocturnal visits to his mother-in-law's house. These nocturnal visits are indications that the public pronouncement of the marriage is still awaited.

2.2.1.3. *Tsha* (the ring)

This is also called the public *Iyeni tfundoh* as opposed to the secret *Iyeni tkfundoh*. This stage is very important because it is the public sanctioning of the marriage. At this stage, a drum of oil, which takes at least six tins of oil, is presented. This takes place at midday in the "eyes" of the people, when strong sweating carriers relay the drum. This drum is divided into two namely- *utku bowaiyn* (lit. father's mouth, that is, father's share) and *utku nawaiyn* (lit. mother's mouth). Meat and a number of "bamboos" of salt usually accompany this. The real *tsha* (an armlet) and or neck beads are also presented. During this stage, the girl and her peers bathe and are decorated with cam-wood, (*pterocarpus tinctorius*). This is called *chi abu* (protecting her cam-wood). Cam-wood (*pterocarpus tinctorius*) in this culture is a sign of beauty linked to human fertility. In Kom, cam-wood is a symbol of fertility and is used to initiate girls into the category and status of

reproductive women. Cam-wood also pre-disposes girls for childbearing through the psychological changes it initiates into them.

Like the Roman Catholics and the Protestant churches where finger rings are exchanged by the bride and the bridegroom, the Kom traditional marriages also hand an armlet and a bunch of beads to the bride. The armlet is put on her arm and the bunch of beads round her neck by the stepsister to the *lumwi* (lit. bridegroom) or a wife to one of his brothers or if he is already married to other wives, one of them will do it. This is done with grunts of appreciation of the *wilum*, as observed in the following quotation bellow-

A rare thing we discovered. Sweet messenger of a palace. Behold her legs, behold her arms. See the children creep her breasts. A rare messenger of a palace. (Nkwain 1978:11).

The *wilum* then dips her finger twice into the oil, (*elaeis guineensis*) and licks it. She then scoops the oil twice with her cupped hands and puts the oil into the bowl of her favourite female members of her father's matrilineage. The rest of the oil is shared to all those who had attended to witness the *tsha*. This phase ends with the *lumwi*, his peers and his friends bringing firewood to the compound of the girl in the evening. This ceremony gives room for the son-in-law to visit the mother-in-law's house during which the mother-in-law initiates him into the sex taboos of her matrilineage. The concern here is to ensure the safe delivery of unborn children and their subsequent survival.

The above epigram serves to initiate the *wilum* from the world of celibacy to the world of reproductive women and a subsequent ideal mother. A woman, capable of, reproducing a whole nation. The beauty of a woman is seen on her legs, arms and breasts.

The nature of a woman's hands is an indication of how hard working she can be especially in farm work. Her legs indicate how much she is able to carry and how long she can trek since farms are usually situated very far from homes. Basic necessities in Kom, like food, water, firewood are got from very long distances. A full-grown breast is a sign of abundant children.

Public presentation of couples in Kom is one of the most exiting elements in marriage. It is the final seal that permits the couples to exercise their sexual obligations without any fear of external infringement. It is believed in Kom that sexual intercourse is reserved only for married couples since it is meant solely for procreation.

2.2.1.4. *Ichi-i-waiyn (lit. protecting the child)*

This is the last ritual that is performed just before the girl bids farewell to her parents. Her father, mother, sisters and brothers unite as one to bless the girl by sharing a cup of water or wine (raffia, palm) etc. This cup is passed round in a special order beginning with the father and ending with the girl. It is the moment of reconciling any past grudges which may mar the girl's reproductive prowess. Most girls drop their heads in tears during these moments when they imagine leaving their mothers' households to the husbands' matrilineage. The sharing of water or wine by the entire family shows their love and unity in spirit as the girl moves to her new home. This is the mystery of marriage and socio-cultural life. She is led to the husband's compound by a convoy carrying food where they would be feasted and presented with shares of salt, oil and meat. After this the mother continues to call on the ancestors to bless her daughter with children.

Field reports confirmed that after performing the above ritual, some water is thrown on the floor to invoke the "gods" of procreation to bless her womb with countless children. This is called, *mah mooh me waiyn* and cam-wood is also drawn on her head to induce fertility in her womb. The mother tells her daughter that her cam-wood "should always remain red", which means she should bear as many children as possible.

2.2.1.5. *Su lapsi wulwi (lit. to decorate the women)*

Pregnancy is the climax of marriage in Kom. This is the stage in which the woman is completely integrated into the husband's lineage and kinship circles. This stage is marked by extreme ecstasy manifested by the matrilineages of the bride and bridegroom.. The pregnant woman is decorated with cam-wood, beads are worn on her neck and a leopard skin is tied around her waist. A staff is given to her as a sign of kingship status. She is led to dance in the presence of the two kin groups and the entire community. This is an

indication to women who tarry too long before getting pregnant that beauty lies in pregnancy. During this moment the entire community respond with thunderous applause while rendering epigrams of praises to the woman. This stage ends with sumptuous feasting and the invitation of those women who have difficulties in getting pregnant to drink from the child's calabash given by the decorated woman.

2.2.2. Women within the marriage equation.

In a society where being a woman meant being a mother, the actual make up of such relationships depended on the fertility of the woman and the success their sons could achieve with their help. Many women contribute heavily to their sons' bride price and various payments affected to gain status. Women contribute a lot towards the acquisition of plots of land for their sons to build and farm. The woman on her marriage is entitled to be provided with portions of land by her husband on which she could cultivate her crops. She is required to support her husband and children with food produced from her farms. In reality, a man who does not provide a farm to his wife is not supposed to receive any food from the wife. The husband could dispose of the land but without his wife's objection that would protest in the interest of her children. There is a saying in Kom that a, "man builds only on his mother's farm". So a woman could prevent her husband from giving out land even to his matrikin so as to safeguard the land to her sons.

2.2.3. Divorce and widowhood

In Kom, bride price is just a symbolic gesture. The Kom people believe that women are not sold but are exchanged between two kin groups who are willing to extend their friendship ties. Daughters are therefore exchanged for sons who will take care of the in-laws farms, *item i ndo wih* (lit. the clearing of the bride's house) during farming seasons as well as roofing the houses of the parents-in-law, in times of need. The bridegroom also participates actively in mortuary activities as well as funeral rites. He is the person who makes sure that the sacrificial cup is preserved in case the first son is not present as soon as the man dies, until the right successor has been named. He provides smoked meat and oil

during funeral ceremonies to the mother-in-law for the entertainment of people who come to pay condolences to her. In fact, the role of the bridegroom's kin group is so important and very extensive in the life of the bride's family that we start asking what happens in case a divorce has to be effected.

The foregone discussion re-enforces the concept of marriage in this cultural universe as a union and not the mere coming together of two individuals. With this in mind, the concept of divorce becomes debatable as it involves a wide range of people and not just the two people concern. Most of the exchanges mentioned above are never documented and the concept of bride price in Kom is believed to be an endless stream of issues in the life of a typical Kom marriage. As soon as final marriage vows are taken, the bridegroom's lineage remains indebted to the bride's lineage indefinitely. This can be logically seen as guarding against divorce. The question of divorce in this cultural universe therefore remains a topic to be examined.

In reality, divorce per se does not exist in Kom as we have already seen concerning the multiple role play by the entire complex group during farming seasons and death ceremonies among others. This act should not conflict with the abandonment of the patrilocal residence by the wife. This is always done with the complicity of the girl's mother so as to raise the awareness of the bridegroom's lineage on the non-completion of payments due them. Sometimes, it is a ploy by mothers and their daughters to seek for extra favours from their sons-in-law, who seem to have abandoned them for too long. The husband in this case can only retrieve his wife from the mother-in-law upon payment of a substantial fine to the bride's lineage. Cases may abound in which a complete desertion of the matrimonial home have occurred. This is often due to witchcraft-related issues or the decision by the husband to withhold his sexual obligations thereby forcing the woman to flee in protest. Other obligations as a husband include the supplying of basic necessities like, oil, salt, meat and fertile plots of land in which the woman could farm. In case these obligations are withheld, the wife may decide to desert the matrimonial home in protest. In principle, an onlooker may regard this as a divorce, but in reality the woman still remains the property of the matrilineage of the bridegroom because when she dies, she is brought back to be buried at the husband's home. Therefore, since the woman is the property of the

entire lineage and not just the belonging of the man alone, the concept of divorce per se remains foreign in this cultural milieu.

Another concept of interest in this cultural universe is that of widowhood. We have already seen that once marriage vows are completed in this society, the woman becomes the wife of the entire lineage, that is, the matrilineage of the bridegroom on both sides. Most often, the woman spends a greater part of her honeymoon with the mother-in-law. This is also where the woman gives birth to her first child while undertaking lessons on the sex taboos of the lineage as well as other secrets with respect to the entire social structure of the lineage. This is some sort of initiating her into the husband's kinship system. While there, she is called by the name of her father. For example, *waiyn Chia* (lit. the child of Chia). She is also referred to as *wi ndo ni ghesina* (lit. wife of our clan or lineage). This re-enforces the alliance the two kin groups have undertaken as larger groups and not as individuals. As soon as the man dies the woman is referred to as *wi nkfu* (lit. the wife of death). This appellation vanishes as soon as the rightful heir is enstooled. Once, wine is shared from the sacrificial cup between the heir, the "widow" and the "orphans", his position, as a father to the "orphans" and a husband to the "widow" or "widows", becomes a reality. We have earlier seen that rightful successors have authority over compounds that have been sanctified by libations as well as sacrosanct property. This property includes kola trees, palm gloves, and women among others. Compounds not sanctified by libations are considered as houses (*ndo*, pl, *ndosu*) and not compounds (*abai*, pl, *mubai*). This is because the owner has not performed the rite which legitimises his claim to such a house or houses. This rite is known as *su tang uyo*. The heir to compounds sanctified by libations becomes the legitimate owner of the compound inherited including the "orphans" and the "widow" or "widows". He is also expected to exercise sexual obligations towards the widow or widows as his legitimate wife or wives.

On the field, we saw a case in which the man died and the younger brother took over the wife including the children and continued with the process of procreation. The deceased brother left behind two children but the younger brother have added three more children with the women, (field report, March 2001). This levirate kinship relation is alive and waxing strong in this cultural universe. Thus widowhood has no grounds in Kom.

CONCLUSION

We have had an overview of kinship and marriage in Kom including particularly rights and obligations of the individuals within the marriage equation, and divorce and widowhood among others. The Kom community is built on matrilineal descent and clans have specific names. The Kom kingdom has over twenty clans all matrilineal with the exception of some lineages. A child within the family is known as the waiyn-ndo (child of the father's lineage) and wul-ndo (member of the mother's lineage). The mother's lineage is actually where children belong. These appellations explain specific rights and obligations by each member within the family. Divorce and widowhood do not exist since marriage is the point where all members of the community meet. In a nutshell, wives belong to the entire lineage and not just to the legal husband. Therefore when he dies, the wife simply changes the husband to his brother or the deceased sister's son. Since marriage is seen in a wider perspective than just the individuals concerned, the concept of divorce becomes difficult or impossible.

Marriage and kinship in Kom are closely related to child bearing because children are the uniting factor between the two kin groups. This explains the complex series of rites performed during marriage. The following quotation by Nkwain in 1978, gives us the impact of child bearing in a Kom marriage:- *A rare thing we discovered. Sweet messenger of the palace. Behold her legs, behold her arms. See how children creep her breasts. A rare messenger of a palace (Nkwain 1978: 11).* This leads us to examine the concept of human fertility in a Kom marriage. This is the aim of the chapter that follows.

CHAPTER THREE

FERTILITY AND INFERTILITY

This chapter treats data presentation on fertility and infertility in Kom. Major issues include- factors which influence fertility and infertility. To better understand these major issues we will be addressing the following themes- fertility rituals, practices which hinder human fertility in Kom, socio-cultural causes of infertility in Kom and finally, we will examine how cultural contact and change affect human health in this cultural universe.

3.1. FERTILITY RITUALS

In Kom ritual performance is done by two sets of people namely- the male and the female secret societies. Each of these societies are guided by sets of rules and regulations which regulate its membership. Membership into each of these secret societies is strictly on gender basis. Females get themselves admitted into female societies, whereas men get themselves admitted into the male secret societies. In each of these secret societies, there is a presiding priest. The male priest presides over rituals whose membership is reserved for men only while the female priest preoccupies herself with rituals whose society is made up of female membership. Sometimes these rituals may be performed simultaneously but at different sites and sometimes they may be performed at different times of the year depending on particular circumstances. The most important point here is that these rituals emphasise on human and vegetational fertility. We will be treating these rituals in their entities beginning with the female secret societies and secondly, the male secret societies.

3.1.1. Female fertility rituals

In this section, we will be dealing mostly with imagery, proverbs, epigrams and comments about women, on women, and by women, as we endeavour to describe the various rituals women perform in order to enhance human fertility. These rituals include- bathing ritual, communal farming ritual, born house ritual (*ndo-waiyn*) and *ikeng-i-waiyn*.

3.1.1.1 Bathing ritual

Before describing this ritual one informant by name Nawaiyn⁷ Rebecca 57 years old and a mother of six children, relates the increasing number of infertile women in Kom to the fast extinction of cultural values. She began by emphasising that formally women gave birth in their houses and not in the hospital as it is the case today. This was very important and functional, boasted Nawaiyn Rebecca in the following words –

When a pregnant woman was about to give birth, a hole was bowed under her bed and a calabash provided. When she finally gave birth with the aid of a local birth attendant, water was put on the calabash for her to clean herself. She therefore continues to cleanse herself with this water from the calabash thereby letting the contents to flow into the bowed hole under the bed. If there was any infertile woman in the compound or in the village, she was brought and put under the bed where the woman who had just given birth was found. Each time that this woman cleaned herself, this water fell on the infertile woman. When this was done over and over, she was taken, accompanied by songs to the husband's house where she was locked up with her husband. That very night she got pregnant. (In-depth Interview, Nawaiyn Rebecca, Kitchu-Kom, 02/02/01)

The woman who has newly given birth acted as a cleansing agent to wash away the germ of infertility from the infertile women thereby removing her from the world of dryness to that of procreation. Here, the after birth was believed to have been transferred to the infertile woman and a new life came upon her. The informant confessed to have known so many women who conceived through this method. She also said she knew a certain woman who after eight years of infertility in her husband's house got pregnant through such a method. Sometimes during this occasion, an elderly woman will take a loaf of corn fufu and mix it with raw palm oil. This food is pushed into the woman's mouth to eat. This act was interpreted as, the sign of softening the woman's womb since one of the obstacles

⁷ Nawaiyn is a title given to any woman who has at least given birth to one living child. Nawaiyn Rebecca is an illiterate and a mother of six who boasts that all the six children were born in the house and not in the hospital as is the case nowadays. She also claims to have been used as a cleansing agent for a number of infertile women who have children nowadays. She is a priest and owns an *ikeng-i-waiyn* at Kitchu-Kom.

against conception is the dryness of the body fluids. Raw palm oil therefore plays the role of lubricating the womb and making conception possible.

3.1.1.2. *Communal farming ritual*

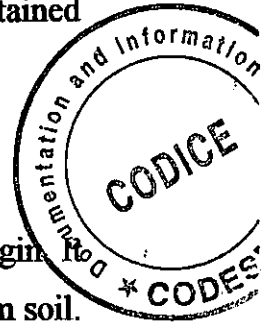
Communal farming has been practised in Kom for several decades. Some communal farming groups have even gone to the extent of forming associations. Almost every village had at least a communal farming group. Some of these farming groups originated from churches. Their objective was to maximise their produce. During communal farming, women brought assorted foodstuffs, including- roasted cocoyams, potatoes, plantains, boiled maize, groundnuts and many other foods with hard skins. During recession, this food was peeled and if there was any infertile woman among them, all the peelings were gathered and given to her. Then she was escorted to the boundary of the farm and asked to deposit the peelings there. After this, she was escorted back accompanied with the following epigram as reported by Nawaiyn Rebecca of Kitchu-Kom.

Cha-ah kom-a-tang-wi-a wo yin ndona ghesina ndu caf a cha-ah tumdzi (lit. Kom soil is not elastic, so let us go and bring soil from foreign lands), (In-depth Interview, Nawaiyn Rebecca, Kitchu-Kom, 02/02/01)

This very day upon return from the farm, the woman was escorted to the husband's house and locked up there with her husband. That very night she became pregnant. The farm represented a different world of dryness and barrenness, while the boundary of the farm represented the foreign land in which good soil for human formation was obtained. The peelings of the food deposited at the boundary of the farm represented the former body of the infertile woman deposited in the foreign land in exchange for a more productive body. This is some sort of a rebirth of this woman into the New World of reproduction. The old life is gone and the new has come. Soil imagery here is also significant in tracing the origin of the Kom people from Bamessi⁸, which is reputed for its unbeatable art of clay pot moulding. The soil in Bamessi is believed to be renown for its

⁸ Bamessi is a village in Ngoketunja sub-division in the North West province of Cameroon. The Kom people hold these people at a very high esteem in clay pot production. It is believed that they are unbeatable in this art. Their soil is also believed by the Kom people to be extremely elastic and productive.

flexibility such that it could be transformed into any shape. Therefore as the clay pot needs good and elastic soil for its production, so too do the human beings need similar soil for their production, and if this soil cannot be obtained from Kom, then it can be obtained elsewhere.



3.1.1.3. Born house ritual, (*ndo waiyn*)

A born house ritual is the act of initiating a new-born baby into its culture of origin. It is believed that a real Kom person is the one whose umbilicus has been buried in Kom soil. The people believe that the umbilicus establishes the link between the natural world and that of the ancestors who are believed to be the intermediaries between God and the living. It is also believed that the living cannot take their problems directly to the all mighty God without passing through these intermediaries (the ancestors). Born house ritual is known as *imiangli i waiyn* (lit. boasting the child) and the burying of the umbilicus is known as *su tim itonghi waiyn* (lit. to shoot the child's umbilicus).

The collapsed stump of the umbilicus is taken and wrapped in a special piece of cloth and buried inside the house, which serves both as a kitchen and a sleeping room. The hole in which this stump is buried is dogged behind the fireside under a bed known as *ikun i bveeh* (lit. the bed of delivery). The sex of the child to be initiated is very important. If the baby is female, the umbilicus is buried on the left side of the house and if a male baby, it is buried on the right hand side of the house. A smart boy or a girl is called in to perform the initiation ritual known as the running phase, *su nying itonghi waiyn*, (lit. to run the child's umbilicus).

A piece of boiled bush meat, mixed with raw palm oil is put inside the cupped hands of the boy or girl and a smaller piece put between the thumbs. The boy or the girl is asked to run round the house in which the umbilicus has been buried. The direction of the running is also important. If the child is a male, the boy doing the running goes clockwise and if a female, the girl does it anti-clockwise. When the girl or the boy comes back after the race, he or she announces to the entire house to take their child, *zi ku waiyn ghesina weiyen* (lit. take this our child). The piece of the meat between the thumbs is removed and he or she goes with the other piece inside the cupped palms. This is the real initiation of

the child into the Kom society. The child's umbilicus in Kom serves the role of the fervent attachment of the child to his birthplace. That is why a Kom person always treats the umbilicus with a lot of caution no matter where the child has been born. Until this umbilicus is brought home and a proper initiation ceremony performed, the person will always be regarded as a foreigner or as a stranger to Kom land.

When the umbilicus has been "shot", (direct translation from the Kom language), the child or person is taken outside for the bathing ritual. Actual bathing of the child is done in a special calabash, commencing with the biological mother of the child. After this, the child is taken to be thrown (dramatisation of jealousy) in a nearby bush by the eldest woman who has shown her worth through childbirth. Any infertile woman in the group rushes and seizes the child from being thrown away, bathes it very well and then dresses the child up. After this, the infertile woman is bathed with the remaining water and she is accompanied with a song to her husband. The song carries the following wordings- *ban-a waiyn a lam nda, ka yi visi-a dumwaiyn zi behti bong yi*, "lit. who has cooked the child's food? You should not allow the person who dislike children to eat it too", (field notes 2001). It is believed that this song is a means by which infertility is chased out of the afflicted woman. It is also a warning to women not to be responsible for their infertility.

To ensure food safety in Kom, child bearing is an obligation. It is believed that the person who has no child is not supposed to eat from the child's dish. This is because the child's dish is the source of ever-ready meal for any eventuality. People with children are always ready to entertain strangers, whatever the time of the day, which is an example of a responsible behaviour. This is not expected from childless individuals who are feared to possess "evil eyes" towards children and therefore may eat up all the children's food thereby starving them to death. The abundance of crops that can be found on the farm depends on how much food the child's dish contains. This dish is believed to be the furnishing centre of the entire household, because the more people are entertained, the more gods will be entertained unconsciously, thus, blessings will be poured down on the household. Field reports indicate that many women have succeeded in becoming pregnant after undergoing this ritual ceremony.

3.1.1.4. *Ikeng-i-waiyn*, (the child's baptism)

This ritual is meant for special sets of children. The particularity of a child in Kom is indicated from the manner in which the child was born. In this case the nature of the child's presentation at birth, that is, the first part of the baby that appears on the cervix, announces the manner in which the child will be treated in futur. Such children are often believed to possess certain strange powers which enable them to transform into certain animals. The most common types of animals that children transform into are the chameleon⁹ and the "green snake". Examples of these special children include- children born with the unbiblical cord around the neck, children who present with the hand, foot or feet and the shoulder (breach¹⁰), as well as twins. These children are not considered normal human beings and therefore, this ritual is perform as a means to transform these children from extra-ordinary beings to ordinary beings. That is why this ritual carries a religious connotation as the "child's baptism". Most often, this ritual is performed simultaneously the very day *ndo-nggvin*, (to be explained later) is performed, though extraordinary sessions do abound.

Ikeng-i-waiyn, as the name implies is meant to protect children of all ages from evil spirits. The priest is always a woman, generally the oldest in the household. The ritual comprises a specially designed clay pot filled with guinea corn beer, *mukal*. A calabash, *agheghn-a-waiyn*, filled with water freshly collected from the stream and a special kind of grass or herbs used for washing kids, *iloul*. Two empty snail shells, *ngol si twah*¹¹, which are spin in the *mukal* and the direction of the tips interpreted by the priest. On the rims of the ritual pot, is found a kind of candle, lighted, *ileng*. Fufu corn and egusi, *ngesi*, tied in a leaf and boiled, and finally a stone that is used to grind different spices of grass mixed with castor oil, *mijang*.

The ritual proper starts with the priest standing at the door. She begins with the invocation prayer calling on the Almighty God in heaven, *fuyini fighanefi fi a'wa gjhegh*

⁹ The chameleon and the green snake are a symbol of disgruntled twins in Kom. Such animals are not killed or harmed. Families with sets of twins take special care of such animals especially when they are found on the highway. They are helped to cross the highway as fast as possible so that passing vehicles should not crush them. It is believed that if this happens, the twins run the risk of dying mysteriously.

¹⁰ Breach" is a medical palance used in obstetrics to mean the descending of the baby with the first show of any of the limbs

¹¹ *Ngol si twa*, is the plural form of snail shells. The singular form is, *ngol a tah* which means a snail shell. In Kom it is believed that the strongest medicine comes from this shell. So, dangerous diseases such as, *ngwose* (cancer) is treated with medicine from this container. This medicine is usually known as *afu a ngol*, (medicine from the shell).

ijev, to unite all the smaller gods and give them power so that they can look after all the children. She proceeds by saying that even the lion should be helpless when it comes across a child and that any stone should scatter when a child knocks his foot against it. While this prayer is going on, water is poured across the door to block evil spirits from entering the house. The life plant, *kengsi* is put in the blessed water and is mused on everyone present, the calabash is then passed around and everyone takes a sip of the water. This has been likened to the holy water used by the Roman Catholic Church to chase away evil spirits. The priest proceeds by mumbling some words while aligning the snail shells in the *mukal* inside the ritual pot. Everyone goes round and with one knee in front of the ritual pot, the priest deeps the *kengsi* in the calabash and pass them round his neck three times and with her left hand gets some of the water from the calabash and gives him to drink in his mouth. Little children take full baths with *iloul*. The *mukal* is drunk in both snail shells. After this, she spins the snail shells again and mumbles some words. The special oil on the stone comprising of different species of grass is applied on everyone especially the head and feet. This ritual ends with the eating of corn fufu and egusi.

Ikeng-i-waiyn is believed to protect children from destruction by the evil eye. Every household that offers this sacrifice has on the door-post, three¹² white lines marked on both sides. These three marks represent the child, food, and the animal. We were informed that these lines indicate that the children in this household have been protected and it is a warning to the spirits of destruction not to temper getting into such houses as they risk being destroyed.. They believe that once a destructive spirit sees these lines, it will just pass without inflicting the family. The number “three”, is very important in this cultural universe. When a Kom person says *iwu i Kom twal* (lit. three hands of Kom), he relates to “child”, “food”, and “animal”. This means that a child has to be well fed. Food and children in Kom are inseparable. This also signifies why pregnant women have to be given good food especially the liver of a cow, which is believed to contain the blood that is needed by children in the womb.

¹² “Three” is a very important number in Kom. This number is believed to represent the foundation of the Kom Kingdom which is “child, food and animal”. It is believed that when the Kom people migrated from Bamessi, they carried along children, food and animal. Some informants say an animal is just symbolic as it does not signify the physical animal but anything that can be used as a complement for feeding children. Some informants say an “animal” in Kom is the “garden egg”. And this was actually what the Kom people ate with “com fufu” as they migrated.

The rituals we have just described centre around women fertility and most of these rituals are performed directly on women and children and by women priests. There is a direct contact between women and these rituals. Children are also directly implicated in that the rituals are performed directly on them and by the female priests. This is a clear indication that women are more concern about their wellbeing and that of the children. The next series of rituals are performed by men without a direct implication of those the rituals intend to protect.

3.1.2. Male fertility rituals

As women become preoccupied with fertility rituals concerning themselves and the children wellbeing, men concentrate their energies toward the protection of the entire community. This reinforces the gender concept, that is, while women are so concerned about their individual wellbeing as well as the wellbeing of their children, men safeguard the society at large. Presiding priests here include- the *Foyn*, assisted by the all men encompassing society- the *Kwifoyn* and the village heads at the village level assisted by the *mukum*. The *Foyn* and the *Kwifoyn* represent the central authority, while the village heads, *ubonte* represent the *Foyn* at the village level. Village heads are often referred to as the “eyes” of the *Foyn*. The duty of the *Foyn* and the *ubonte* is to ensure high crop productivity and human fertility by performing a number of rituals annually or as the circumstances demand. Rituals performed by the central authority, that is the *Foyn* and the administrative arm of the palace, the *Kwifoyn* usually run for a week while rituals performed at the village level usually take a day. These rituals are believed to act as buffers against bad witchcraft, *muso bugh*, which is characterised by famine, female infertility, infant mortality, diseases and many other plaques meant to destabilise the entire community.

The concept of witchcraft and human reproduction in Kom, are closely knit together. We have seen elsewhere in this study that two types of witchcraft are practised in Kom namely- *muso jung* (the good *muso*) and *muso bugh* (bad *muso*). The central authority uses good witchcraft to neutralise the powers of those who practice bad witchcraft. This section hammers on the good type of witchcraft which is characterised by abundant crop harvest,

abundant rainfall, good health, peace and harmony, increase in childbirth and many other aspects for the general wellbeing of humanity while bad witchcraft will be treated under practices which hinder human fertility in Kom.

3.1.2.1. *Koh-ngang (ascension to the sky)*

When the *Foyn* is newly enstooled, he and his assistant, the executive arm of the administration, *Kwifoyn*, go to the sky. This is known as *koh-ngang*. Others refer to it as, *su ko' iyu* (lit. to go to the sky). The aim of this ritual is to foresee the future and determine the fruitfulness of the forthcoming planting season, as well as the general wellbeing of the society especially the fertility of women and children's wellbeing.

The presiding priest is the *Foyn*, assisted by the administrative arm of the Kingdom, the *Kwifoyn*. The ritual starts on one of the weekdays in Kom, called *Itu' i two* (lit. the healthy day). The duration of this ritual is eight days. We should bear in mind that according to the Kom calendar, a week is made up of eight days. Members of this secret society are men. *Kwifoyn*, is restricted to the central political authority and it represents the ten sub-chiefdoms that make up the Kom Kingdom. These sub-chiefdoms are known in Kom as *titang ti Kom bulamoh*, (lit. the nine hills of Kom). With representation from each of these sub-chiefdoms, the *Kwifoyn* sets out for a place called *Ijum*¹³, the site of sacrifice. From field reports, it is believed that fortunes and misfortunes are usually represented in form of bundles at the site of the sacrifice, at *Ijum*. The choice of these bundles needs to take into consideration the pride of the entire kingdom (human and soil fertility as well as general good health). With these bundles, only one is selected at a time. It is believed that once a wrong bundle has been selected, it cannot be returned whatsoever the outcome till the end of the annual year. The result of this wrong choice will be marked by untold suffering in the entire Kingdom characterised by famine, infant mortality, female infertility and the general instability of the community. It is also believed that the selection has to be done in time, so as to prevent the evil people of the land, specialised in selecting the bad bundles from taking the advantage of such lapses. Most of the people who do such things were believed to come from the neighbouring chiefdoms but nowadays, this has become

¹³ *Ijum* is found on the Eastern slopes of Kom, marking the boundary between the Kingdom of Kom and the chiefdom of Oku. It forms part of mount Oku as well as part of the Oku forest reserve. Among many other rare pharmaceutical tree species found here is the *pygeum africana*.

the handiwork of the people living right inside the kingdom, (ethnographic reports). So it takes the *Kwifoyn* seven days to study the bundles and on the eighth day the results are proclaimed to the entire community.

The members of this society are called, *nchinsendo*¹⁴ (lit. guards of a house). In Kom, the secrets of the land are in the hands of this group of people. Food and children are the watchwords on the lips of every Kom person who has the wellbeing of the Kingdom at heart. Any preaching or teaching which impedes food production and childbearing in Kom is uncalled for and violently rejected by the people. It is believed that a well-nourished child hardly gets sick and a person who has many children is rich in character. It is also believed that people produce food because of children and therefore he who has no child should not produce food since there is nobody to consume. This perception has brought about accusation of stolen crops from the farms of fertile women by less infertile women who are envious of their more productive counterparts. In this case, infertile women steal crops from the farms of their more productive counterparts so as to starve their children to death. The mechanism involved here is very complex and mystical.

The offering of sacrifices at the three royal springs – *jua Ekwu* (Ekwu spring), *jua Achaf* (Achaf spring), *jua Itinala* (Itinala spring), takes place a day or two after the *Foyn's* return from *jua Ijum*. These springs are believed to be inhabited by clan gods to whom the *Foyn* prays to ask for wisdom to rule. While praying, the *Foyn* offers a sacrifice of food, egusi (*cucumeropsis edutis*) and cam-wood and then he pour libation of wine (*su mag' isa*). On his way back from *Ijum*, he distributes the leftover of the food to people he meets on the way especially women and children. This is usually more pronounce during the *Foyn's* first trip to the place of the sacrifice at *Ijum* immediately after his enstoolment as it signifies his first act as protector of fertility and promoter of lineage and clan continuity. Women who had no children or who had difficulty in getting pregnant come out and take their own share of the sacrificial food believed to render them more fertile.

It should be noted that though we did not come across the name *ntul* as mentioned by Professor Nkwi, we believe that this is the same ritual, which he had earlier mentioned

¹⁴ *Nchisendo* means, the house pages. The singular form is *nchindo*

in 1976. According to Nkwi (1976), *ntul* rituals were meant to offer a “barrier” to the malevolent persons and to warn them of the consequences in case they encroached into such zones to perform their malevolent acts. This was exactly the role of the ritual we have just treated, *koh-ngang*. By the time we first entered the field, we were told that it was not up to a month since the *Kwifoyn* came back from *ngang*.

3.1.2.2. *Ndo-nggvin* (village version of *Koh-ngang*)

While the *Foyn*, assisted by the administrative arm of the kingdom, *Kwifoyn*, ensures the overall protection of the Kom kingdom, villages, *ntesu*, under their leaders, *ubonte*, sustain the action of the *Kwifoyn* through a village society known as *ndo-nggvin*¹⁵, whose duty is to safeguard all the junctions leading into the village from disease intrusion, such as infertility, epilepsy and other diseases believed to be caused by agents. It also guards against tornado which may destroy crops. Members include- energetic men and boys of the village. This ritual is performed once every year when guinea corn, *asang a bola* is being cultivated. This type of maize is believed to be the original food crop of the Kom people during their migration from Bamessi, *suh* (*ethnographic report*). The villages, *ntesu*, enjoy considerable autonomy in managing their own affairs under the head-ship of *bonte* or village head.

This ceremony or ritual begins with a prayer offered by the village head calling on the gods of the land to protect the village from all the forces of evil and pleading for abundant harvest as well as an increased in childbirth during the year. After the prayers, men and boys set out to harvest herbs of assorted kinds from nearby bushes. These herbs are brought and are transformed into powder (apotropaic medicine), at a special site when passers-by are not allowed to look, most often, under a big kola nut tree. When the herbs have been properly transformed into powder, the members each, collects a quantity in a special basket, *akaleh*. They are divided into various groups, each with a leader. The groups go into different directions sprinkling the powder at the village junctions making sure that no one looks as they sprinkle the powder. Even those sprinkling the powder are not supposed to look back. To look back means inviting the very havoc they want to evict.

¹⁵ *Ndo-nggvin* is actually translated as the bush-house. That is why before the ritual proper starts, all the members must visit the bush to harvest herbs of various sorts.

That is why they have to turn their backs in opposite directions before sprinkling the powder. Wild garden-eggs, *fenyah*, and life plants *kengsi*, are used to disperse onlookers especially the male population of the village.

This ritual is believed to block wicked spirits from entering the village. Sealing the junctions, *tufam*, sing., *Ifam*¹⁶, arrests the strong winds, which are believed to be the handiwork of witches, and wizards. It is believed that children and women can only blossom in an environment void of destructive witches and wizards. Whichever village that fails to respect this ritual performance, invites havoc into itself.

Despite this endeavour by the *Foyn* and his assistants as well as the support he receives from the villages through their leaders, *ubonte*, to enhance fertility and the general wellbeing of the kingdom, certain factors still remain a setback to human and agricultural fertility in this community. Before we examine these factors, let us see what Hammond, P. B. has said concerning belief and ritual.

In a way, a people's belief system is always importantly related to their values, to the particular ethical and moral concepts that give them a basis for making judgements and taking action. For an anthropologist this is perhaps the most significant function of ideology: its role as a guide to behaviour, to defining right and wrong, to choosing between good and evil, and sanctioning both individual behaviour and cultural institutions- the right form of marriage, the proper organisation of society, economic morality, the best type of political system, and of course, the right" ideology itself, (Hammond, P. B, 1971: 258)

Therefore, the study of a people's ideology is important because it illuminates the concepts fundamental to their mechanics of thought.

The function of a ritual is that it reinforce belief itself and provides participants with what they perceive as a means of controlling, or at least affecting their relationship with other men, with the world and with the powers, supernatural or natural, that determine the destiny of all things. The ritual of sacrifice, for example, is based on the belief that a

¹⁶ *Ifam* (road junction) or *tufam* (road junctions), are usually marked by life plants, *kengsi*. These junctions are believed to be the safest places for people to deposit whatever they intend to collect afterwards. People only collect what belong to them here. It is believed that if anyone collects what does not belong to him or her, the gods will haunt the person until such an article is returned to the *ifam*.

particular source of power, usually a specific supernatural being shares men's evaluation of a particular object, action or thought.

The above rituals therefore serve a very important function in the life of Kom people since they highlight the way normality is restored in this cultural universe.

3.2. PRACTICES WHICH HINDER HUMAN FERTILITY

Two dominant practices were cited as the main causes of human and agricultural infertility. These two are - *muso*¹⁷ and *avung*. We will treat these two in detail.

3.2.1. Muso

We saw elsewhere in this work that the *Foyn* was shown all types of *muso* upon enstoolment to the office so as to fortify him to be able to better role his people. He was therefore well equipped with the techniques in good and bad *muso* so as to be able to act as a buffer towards the evil elements within the society. While the *Foyn* tries to safeguard the kingdom from evil intrusion, malevolent elements struggle to destabilise the community through the practice of evil *muso*. We will therefore focus on the practice of this bad or evil *muso*, *muso bugh*.

It is believed that only women are engage in this type of witchcraft due to their selfish aims. Most often, young women who want to remain beautiful and young, transcend into the world of the spirits when pregnant to deliver the children prematurely as a sacrifice for youthfulness. We gathered that women believe that carrying pregnancy to term in this physical world is so tiring and makes them old. So these women transcend into the spirit world each time they are pregnant and these children are born prematurely in the spirit world in exchange for youthfulness and beauty. These women therefore sacrifice their reproductive capacity in the spirit world thereby remaining infertile throughout their lives in the physical world. We were told that some women are initiated into this bad *muso* by their friends without their knowledge. The ethno-medical practitioners told us that these women are usually redeemed from this world late enough for them to be able to give

¹⁷ *Muso* as we have seen elsewhere in this study, means witchcraft, both good and bad categories. It is practiced by people who possess extraordinary powers. It involves mystical practices, either for the good or for the bad of the Kingdom. That is why the *Foyn* is shown all sorts of *muso* so that he can be able to pre-empt any evil *muso*. In this context, *avung* is bad *muso*.

birth since all the children have already been sacrificed in the other world, (the world beyond). Women therefore stand the chance of infertility accusation, we were told.

Evil witchcraft has as function to bring about an increase in death rate, infant mortality, disease, infertility, and all sorts of plagues for human and agricultural disaster. Apart from the effect on human fertility, we also gathered that this practice is also meant to cause disaster in food cultivation. It is believed that women transform into spirits and use rain as a medium to push down maize, remove the roofs of houses and also cause untold floods that sweep away crops from farms.

3.2.2. Avung (vampire)

Although we decided to treat this separately from *muso*, its underline essence and practice is not distinctly different from the practice of *muso*. What we notice here is that while children are born and sacrificed in the “spirit” world, by the women who practice *muso bugh*, the practice of *avung* involves the mystical “eating up” of the reproductive organs of people. Sometimes it is believed that complete human beings are “eaten” to death. Women are generally weak, envious, jealous, and competitive especially with their counterparts. In polygynous homes, there is always competition at various levels- for productive pieces of land, good food and the husband’s attention in general. Infertile women for fear of being evicted from their marital homes by their husbands, mystically “eat up” the reproductive organs of their more productive counterparts at night in order to render them infertile. In Kom, children serve for social cohesion and family stability. A woman who gives her husband many children captures his admiration.

This practice takes place mostly at night. It is believed that the women, who practice this witchcraft, leave their physical bodies at night and transform into “spirits” (vampires), capable of mysteriously eating up the reproductive organs of their colleagues. When this is done, they will then return and take up their normal bodies and come back to the natural world. To be able to better understand this practice, it will be good to review one case in point that openly practised it.

Field research talks of a woman who got marriage but was unable to give birth to a single child at the husband's house. *Nawaiyn Ngwe*¹⁸ of Njinikejem-Kom, reported in the following words-

When the husband saw that his first wife could not conceive, he decided to bring in another wife. The first wife opposed in vain. The husband finally brought in the second wife who became pregnant shortly afterwards. The husband became extremely happy and decided to buy her the child's basin "akang a waiyn"¹⁹, in preparation for the forth-coming baby. When the first wife saw this basin, she demanded that her own be bought. The husband told her that when she will become pregnant her own basin will be bought since it is for the child. This woman refused insisting that she wanted her own basin but the husband refused. When the husband went out, this woman beat up the second wife and almost burnt her with hot water. The husband learnt of this upon his return and she was immediately evicted. She went away vowing to destroy the child in the womb of the second wife. With the aid of a seer, these intentions were made known to the husband who decided to protect the baby by taking the second wife to a witch doctor. The first wife, while at her uncle's home tried in vain to destroy the baby in the womb of the second wife since it had been protected. She finally decided to "eat" the uncle's child and was later expelled from the compound. This woman now is a wanderer while her desire is to "eat" as many children as possible, (In-depth interview, Nawaiyn Ngwe, 07/02 /01)

This is a clear indication that an infertile woman is the temple of the evil spirits. In Kom, the first thing that a man offers his pregnant wife as a sign of his satisfaction, is the child's basin, which doubles as the baby's cot and for bathing the baby. The Kom people hold this basin at a very high esteem and this tradition has been there time immemorial.

Another example in which witchcraft was practised concerns a woman who failed to bear children with her husband. The husband decided to bring in a new wife who got

¹⁸ Nawaiyn Ngwe is a nurse aide working at the village health post in Njinikejem-Kom. She is married and a mother of three.

¹⁹ *Akang a waiyn* (the child's basin), is still highly valued by many families today in Kom. It serves both as a baby's cot and for bathing children.

pregnant shortly afterwards. The story continues thus, as narrated by Ngam Henry²⁰ of Mbam-Kom-

The first wife started developing envious thoughts while planning to eliminate the baby in the woman's womb. This was suspected following a song she was always singing in her isolation. The wordings of the song go thus; "I am lost for nothing. What is left of me is only my chest for you Ngong to be caressing each night" (my translation from Kom language). When her husband heard this song over and over, he decided to consult a seer. He was told that his first wife was planning to kill the baby in the womb of the second wife. He was advised to protect the baby. The help of a witch doctor did this. When the first wife discovered that it was impossible to kill the baby she decided to quit the husband's compound vowing to revenge elsewhere. While away at the sister's house, the sister's child died mysteriously and a seer said she was the cause, (In-depth Interview, Ngam Henry, 30/01/01)

Some informants mentioned family planning and child spacing techniques perpetuated by the biomedical practitioners as one of the practices which hinder human reproduction in Kom. The indigenous population and the ethno-medical practitioners frowned at these approaches calling them acts of wickedness and an abuse to the very foundation of human existence. They complained that these practices have been left loose in the hands of the younger generation making them to take non-prescribed pills thereby rendering them infertile in the long run.

3.3. SOCIO-CULTURAL CAUSES OF INFERTILITY

In this section we will focus on the causes of infertility as perceived by the traditional Kom society. But before we delve into this endeavour, it will be necessary to simply cite the clinical causes of infertility obtained from the field, through the help of biomedical institutions. According to biomedical opinion, the following causes were cited

²⁰ Ngam Henry is a seer. His first wife left because she was unable to give birth to a child. He insisted that he didn't send her away but she just decided to leave because he got a second wife.

as the major causes of infertility. These include- chronic pelvic infections in both men and women, inadequate knowledge of reproductive health, oligospermia (azoospermia), multiple sexual partners, Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (PID), abortions, anovulation, blocked tubes, hydrosalpinx, Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), uterine deformation, non-prescribed pills, poor habits, fibroid uterus (fibromyoma), alcoholism and smoking, abstinence, ovarian cysts, and orchitis in men.

From ethnographic reports, the following socio-cultural causes of infertility were registered- *Suh* (hernia), breach of custom, non-respect of cultural norms and the violation of sacred societal norms (masks society), among others. These issues will be examined in greater details.

3.3.1. *Suh* (hernia)

Most informants mentioned *suh* (hernia) as the major cause of infertility in the Kom society. *Suh* (hernia) is commonly called “underbelly pains”. From informants, we were told that everyone has this type of disease, which paradoxically is necessary for human reproduction. Two types of *suh* were mentioned namely- the good and the bad types. According to informants, the bad *suh* is very painful and can only be treated by the ethno-medical practitioners. This type hinders human reproduction and therefore must be treated in order to enable conception to take place. We were told that most people hurriedly go to the hospital for an operation, which is very unfortunate. When they attend the hospital, most of the times, the doctors remove but the good *suh* (hernia) that is responsible for reproduction. Once this is done, the woman can never become pregnant thereby remaining infertile for life. This type of hernia is believed to attack only women. When we contacted the biomedical practitioners the link between *suh* (hernia), and human fertility could not be established. The mechanism in which this works is unknown. Anyway, the recurrence of this phenomenon indicates that there is an illness associated with lower abdominal pains commonly known as the “underbelly pains”, which causes infertility. Since the signs and symptoms of Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (PID) is “under belly pains”, we are tempted to conclude that this may be Pelvic Inflammatory Disease infection which Feldman-Savelsberg (1999) had earlier associated with infertility in the Bangante chiefdom. This

informant, *Nzhindo Fulani*²¹, supports this point as follows-

Suh (hernia), is reduced not eliminated. When you have 'suh' and take it to the hospital, the doctor will remove the 'suh' that is necessary for reproduction. Medical doctors do not know the difference between bad and good suh. This is not their domain. It is our domain. Once the medical doctor has removed the suh that is responsible for conception, the woman can never conceive any longer. So you see that the woman will automatically become an akain when she is not the one responsible, (In-depth interview, Nzhindo Fulani, Kitchu-Kom, 15/02/01)

3.3.2. Breach of custom

Breach of custom was also isolated as one of the major causes of infertility and diseases in general. One informant used an example of a certain woman to push this point through. She started by expressing her fears as a health worker in Kom. The informant, by name Yoma Evelyn, expresses her worries by what she has witness with her “naked” eyes. She narrates the story of one of her friends who refused the choice of the husband given to her by her parents and therefore was inflicted with infertility as a result. This informant claims that this girl up till this moment has not been able to conceive. She claims that until the curse is removed from her, which can only be done by the man who was chosen for her by the parents, the girl can never conceive.

Another case of infertility, which has to do with breach of custom, is seen during the complex series of rituals performed during marriage in Kom. A loincloth is usually tied around the waist of the *wilum* (bride) by the *lumwi* (bridegroom). The sister to *wilum's* (bride) mother who has not yet done this elsewhere removes this loincloth. If she has already performed such a duty elsewhere, the *wilum* (bride) will be inflicted with infertility. The bride price is calculated in units called *uchui* and together *tuchui*. An *uchui* is an oil measure ranging from two tins of oil (eight gallons) to about four tins (sixteen gallons) depending on the lineage and the precedence already created. This has already been laid down and if more is taken than what was given for the mother of the girl, the

²¹ *Nzhindo Fulani* is 70 years old. He is an ethno-medical practitioner who specialises in the treatment of *finsam*, (convulsion) in children, *afu woinda*, (lit. the children's thing) which has as symptoms, “side pains” (pneumonia), *suh* (hernia) and the capturing of bad witches and wizards.

result will be infertility. Informants lamented that these rules are highly neglected nowadays as girls are being sold like articles for fabulous amounts of money leading to untold curses and suffering. We see how infertility helps in maintaining the functioning of the different cultural systems in the traditional community. This measure guards against extortion of money from bridegrooms by the parents of brides for their selfish aims.

3.3.3. Violation of sacred societal norms

Another point of focus is the sacred societies, especially the masquerades. One of the sacred societies mentioned on the field is the *fumbain*²² mask. This is a dangerous mask whose costume is made up of raffia fibre and no piece falls and remains at the dancing ground. Members pick up all the fallen fibres. Women are supposed to stand on the left-hand side of the mask during display. None members are not supposed to come across its shadow. If a woman crosses over one of the fallen pieces of fibre, her menses will automatically starts flowing and will never stop until she is cleansed by that society. If a none initiated person comes across its shadow, serious diseases will attack him. Leprosy is one of those diseases. It is believed that the person who wears this juju is supposed to undergo a cleansing period for at least three days before having sexual intercourse with his wife. Informants lamented that this is not more the case as this dangerous mask has been left in the hands of overzealous youths and adolescents, who grossly violate the roles with very disastrous consequences. It is believed that once this rule is bypassed and the man gets sexual contact with any woman, she will never give birth. One informant, by name Nteff Emmanuel Nges, during a focus group discussion session, believes that so many women today are being rendered infertile by the youths who are members of this sacred society.

Furthermore, the members of this sacred society carry along concoctions, which are dangerous to female reproduction. The effects of these concoctions can be easily transmitted when crossing a river while women are bathing or washing clothes. It is believed that women must leave the stream or river before such people can cross. The effect of this concoction is continues menstruation and the likelihood of still-births,

²² Fumbain mask is believed to be very dangerous and mystical and whoever tries to film it has his eye-sight lost as a consequence. It can also destroy the lenses of cameras used.

abortions and other factors related to infertility. Again, the mechanism in which this works is difficult to understand and therefore we have left it for further investigation by specialists.

Infertility therefore is the means by which the societal institutions are put into motion. The fear of infertility makes people to be more conscious of the consequences if the fervent respect to societal norms is not fully respected. Various cultural structures are put alert as combating elements towards infertility related intrusive elements.

African societies are in the permanent state of cultural disintegration due to the continuous influx of different cultures forcing the local cultures to succumb. The pressures of these strange cultures lead to cultural contact and change.

3.4. CULTURAL CONTACT AND CHANGE

When two cultures meet, two things happen to the local culture. The local culture may revise its ways of solving its basic problems using the strange culture as a model, secondly, the local culture may refuse to modify its ways of tackling its daily problems and thereby forcing the strange culture to retreat. Therefore encroaching cultures may either impose themselves on the local cultures thereby bringing about social change or the local culture may refuse to succumb to the strange culture and therefore maintains its original ways of solving its problems.

Lesley White in 1949 says that, technological development expressed in terms of culture is the engine of socio-cultural change. In this context, each society is in the process of development as time changes so as to meet up with the ever increasing challenges. Socio-cultural systems are in the point of constantly moving towards equilibrium. Many authors think that society changes everyday and all the time.

Kom is believed by informants, to be the most affected region in the process of socio-cultural change. Informants lamented the destruction caused by the white man, beginning with the establishment of the first Christian church in Njinikom and the influx of strange diseases ever since the construction of the Bambui-Fundong highway. Contacts have become so common and the local populations are paying the highest price, lamented *Nzhindo* Tangwa of Fundong-Kom.

Each time when populations meet together, certain strange diseases abound. The most common types are- malaria and sexually transmitted diseases. Feldman-Savelsberg in 1999 likened the spread of infertility in Bangante to the arrival of missionaries. This is the case with Kom over the past decade. It is believed that frequent contacts with the urban town of Bamenda has caused the local population to borrow strange ideas which are not favourable to the health of the local population. Sexually Transmitted Diseases, Family planning methods and criminal abortions were mentioned so often as reasons for an increase in infertility rate in Kom. According to informants, these issues are foreign. The dynamic concerns of ecosystem help in understanding how environmental changes and fluctuations affect rates and patterns of disease.

Over the course of history, one of the most devastating of the stresses affecting the health of human populations is rapid and irrevocable change in a people's way of life. Such change has often come from floods, earthquakes, droughts and other natural disasters. Whatever the business of contact agents, whether to find a home, to preach the gospel, or to make a profit, they often disrupt the lives of the native people whose lands they enter. Sometimes this disruption is deliberate, but often the ecological and economic repercussions are unintended. Outsiders may introduce disease organisms to which native people have little immunity.

Our primary concern is the way health and diseases are related to the adaptation of human groups over a wide geographic range and across a broad span of time, from prehistory to the future. In this way, a comparative perspective helps us to understand the problems of our society. Each society pays certain "costs" in order to survive new cultural traits, and these costs are often enacted in terms of human suffering and deprivation.

CONCLUSION

The concept of fertility and infertility play a very important role in kinship and marriage in Kom. The concern of the parties involved in a Kom marriage is the fertility of their children. That is why marriage becomes the moment of reshaping kinship ties. To ensure the continuation of the lineage, fertility rituals become an obligation for any marriage arrangements in this cultural universe. It is this ritualistic display which gives the

Kom marriage meaning.

Ritual performance in Kom is done by two groups of people with respect to gender. We have the male and female priests, representing the male and the female secret societies respectively. While fertility rituals presided by the female priests have direct contact with the human world especially women and children, rituals performed by the male secret societies do not have any direct contact with the human world. To better understand the role of the above mentioned rituals, we have examined certain practices which affect human health in Kom, such as the practice of bad witchcraft which is dominated by the women folk. Anthropologists and sociologists believed that witches who are mainly women, are people with an inherent power by means of which they can abandon their bodies at night and go to meet with similar people (other witches) or to “suck” or “eat” away the life of their victims (Mbiti John S., 1970).

Finally, cultural contact and change have affected the human population in Kom through the introduction of new ways of life which have diverted the indigenous population from performing their respective duties towards enhancing human and land fertility. Most people have embraced strange ways thereby not taking fertility rituals seriously. One informant lamented the increasing number of infertility rate in Kom to the influx of biomedical institutions which have made the women to abandon their local delivery bed, (*ukun-i-bve*) that acted as a remedy to infertile women (cf, the words of *Nawaiyn* Rebecca of Kitchu-Kom, 02/01/2001 in page 42).

Having seen that human fertility is the focus of a Kom marriage and the enhancement of fertility is spiced by a complex series of rituals, it will be therefore necessary to examine the perception of infertility in Kom and its impact on kinship and marriage. This is the focus of the last chapter which is attributed to data analysis. Issues to be discussed include- Kom perceptions of infertility. To better understand these perceptions, the following issues will be examined- infertility as a socio-cultural stigma, infertility and socio-cultural institutions, reproductive prowess and moral conduct, infertility and witchcraft and the relationship between infertility and death among others.

CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS AND GENERAL CONCLUSION

This last chapter is an analysis on the major themes treated in this study. Major issues to be analysed include- Kom perceptions of infertility and the impact of infertility on kinship and marriage in Kom. We will be directed by the following issues- the use of symbolism, imagery and human reproduction, infertility and witchcraft, infertility as a socio-cultural stigma, socio-cultural institutions and infertility, infertility and gender, the concepts of *akain* and *dumwaiyn* in defining infertility, human fertility and death, and finally we will examine the link between reproductive prowess and moral conduct in a traditional society among others. The second part of this chapter will x-ray the impact of infertility on kinship and marriage in Kom.

4.1. PERCEPTIONS OF INFERTILITY

4.1.1. Symbolism, imagery and human fertility

This section tries to examine the concept of human reproduction with the use of symbols and imageries in Kom. Symbols and imageries are enormous in Kom, when talking about human fertility. The entire language of human reproduction is overshadowed by imageries and symbols in this cultural universe. Two categories of symbols and imageries are used. We will first examine the symbols and imageries which signify fertility and secondly, the symbols and imageries which signify infertility.

4.1.1.1. Fertility symbols and imageries

In this sub-section we will handle the following symbols and imageries- cam-wood (*pterocarpus tinctorius*) and palm oil. Children in Kom is known as wealth or “oil” especially girl children who are considered by men as the means by which their bride price will be reimbursed. But our concern at this juncture is to examine the ways such elements are used to symbolise fertility and as imageries of human reproduction.

Many rituals performed in the Grass-fields use basic ingredients obtained from the forest. This shows the Grass-fields people's attachment to the forest crops and plants. For example, in Chomba, Mankon and other Ngemba speaking areas, the banana flower is taken as a substitute for a baby and given out as a symbol that will induce fertility in women. Cam-wood (*pterocarpus tinctorius*) and palm oil (*elais guineensis*) is used in all rituals to mark things and people and as a cosmetic. In Kom, palm oil and cam-wood are used so frequently to induce fertility and for royal households.

The Kom people stressed on "cam-wood" (*pterocarpus tinctorius*) as an effective element to induce fertility in women. In several instances, cam-wood, do not relate to the actual tree itself, but is used symbolically to mean menstruation in women. Cam-wood in Kom is known as *abu*. Before a woman leaves to meet her husband, the entire family unites and the mother and the father unanimously tell the girl to let her cam-wood "red forever", which means nothing should disturb her from bearing as many children as possible.. Cam-wood here represents her menstrual flow. In Kom, the onset of menstrual flow is an indication of fertility. In this case, the mother prepares her daughter psychologically as soon as she starts suspecting the eventual onset of her menstrual flow as a warning on the risk of pregnancy if a man "crosses" her. So when parents tell their daughters to let their cam-wood "red" forever, it means they should produce as many children as possible. We should note that at menopause, menstruation stops which marks the end of ovulatory period and therefore an end to reproductive life.

Most often, before the girl leaves the mother's house, cam-wood is drawn on her head. This symbolises the girl's psychological transition from the world of bareness to that of productivity. The *Foyn* also uses cam-wood when he wants to recruit new wives into his palace. His retainers, *nchisendo* take cam-wood and mark at the door-post of the house or houses the girl or girls are to be recruited. Once it is marked at any door-post, the effect is considered binding and the girl has no other choice but to move over to *Laikom*, in order to meet the *Foyn*.

Cam-wood is also use to decorate pregnant women, *su lapsi wulwi* (lit. to decorate a woman). Pregnancy in Kom is a mark of beauty. The woman is rubbed with cam-wood and a sceptre is given to her and she is led to dance in front of the villagers as a display of

beauty pageant. In this case, there is a liaison between pregnancy and kingly attributes. Only the king uses the sceptre when enthroned and he is also rubbed with cam-wood during enstoolation. A pregnant woman therefore is uplifted to the level of a king. Cam-wood is believed to be a blessing to women to bring forth as many children as possible.

Palm oil (*elais guineensis*) also plays a vital role in inducing human fertility in this cultural universe. We mentioned earlier in this study that, during communal farming, barks of dry foods represent the dryness of infertile women. In some cases, infertile women are asked to eat dry roasted barks of cocoyams, potatoes (Irish and sweet), and cassava among others. After this, palm oil is poured into their mouths as a means to lubricate the dryness of the body so as to be able to accept children. It is believed that children require a very soft body so as to thrive. Palm oil therefore symbolises the world of children and women's fertility.

Palm oil plays a very important role in a Kom marriage. Bride price, as we saw elsewhere is not measured using money value. The unit called, *uchui* is an oil measure comprising several tins or gallons. No marriage can take place if the laid down amount of oil unit is not brought. In fact., oil is the unifying element in any Kom marriage.

Fertility rites performed by women in Kom are mostly for human reproduction and children's welfare. Most of these rites are spiced by colourful melodies chanted by women. Most of these are epigrams, rich in animate and inanimate imagery aimed at discouraging infertility by chasing it out of their presence. These epigrams carry along imageries like, the volatile nature of the soil (*acha a kom a tang wi*), literally translated as "Kom soil is not elastic), a shapeless stone (*ngo a nkvin*), the craftiness of children's sharer (*ngwo woyn mi gheli ni woin*), emptiness (*yum*) and many other negative idioms aimed at reshaping the entire society. Ethnographic report testify that these negative imageries represent infertility. It is believed that when these epigrams are chanted, the gods of children are appeased and they eventually descend from their resting-place to supply children to the childless.

4.1.1.2. Symbols and imageries of infertility

Infertility is symbolised using animate and inanimate elements. These include shapeless stones, wood, and the insect kingdom. Infertile women are referred to as *calange*, an insect that lives in isolation because of its detestable odour. It is therefore bound to live in isolation and in solitude. In using this imagery to describe infertility, we come to realise the extent to which infertility is disapproved of in this cultural universe. In this cultural milieu, infertility has no place. Like the insect, *calange*, which is isolated, infertility is also isolated in this community.

The concept of hardness is used to describe the infertile. Most infertile women are referred as shapeless stones, *ngohsa-nkfuin* and logs of wood, *fukah*. It is believed that the shape of a woman is determined by her ability to bear children. The husband in claiming that she is a log of wood since she is not able to bear children, deprives her from sexual gratification. Most of these symbols and imageries were explained in the form of epigrams as we saw elsewhere in this study. One informant, Ngam Henry of Mbam at Fundong-Kom recounted the dilemma of an infertile woman in the following words-

Ngong, I am lost for nothing and what is left of me is only my chest for you to be caressing each night, (In-depth Interview, Ngam Henry, Mbam-Kom, 30/01/01).

Human reproduction in Kom is marked with symbolic language. People feel very comfortable transmitting information concerning human reproduction using symbols and imageries. This is further spiced by the epigrams that accompany such symbolic expressions.

4.1.2. Infertility and witchcraft

The body of an infertile woman in Kom is believed to be the temple of evil spirits. It is believed that an infertile woman is full of evil in her heart since she has nothing to protect. Children in this cultural community function as guards against pervasive character by their parents who are afraid that their children may become victims of witchcraft inducing illnesses if their behaviours (parents') are not properly checked. In this case

women who have no children are believed to be full of evil in their hearts believing that they are already cursed by God or ancestors and therefore have nothing to gain or lose in life. The following words are said to have come from an infertile woman during a family squabble, quoted by Waiyn Timbong²³ as follows-

If I even talk and spoil, what will happen? Is it a child that will cry in my arms one day that I will be forced to speak out? (In-depth interview, Waiyn Timbong, 15/01/01)

These were the words of an infertile woman who according to her had nothing to gain or loose during a family squabble. She feels that it is only a child who can force someone to have moral values within the community. Most of the language within the societal milieu is centred on the wellbeing of children. Any child in the community is considered the child of the entire community. As you treat another person's child, expect that same treatment to be given to your own child.

Infertility is synonymous to witchcraft in Kom. Kom people associate disease causation to agents- supernatural or human. "Nothing happens 'by chance', everything is 'caused' by someone directly or through the use of mystical power" (Mbiti John S. 19470). There is no issue of accident. Time and again people seek information from the popular sector for the explanation of the presence of disease in the society. Illnesses, like epilepsy, leprosy, swollen belly (ascitis), and infertility, are thought to be caused by witchcraft. Accusations of stolen babies from the womb as well as the destruction of the reproductive organs of women to render them infertile are rampant in this cultural universe. This informant by name Yoma Evelyn²⁴, has this to say-

I feel so frightened working here in Kom because of what I have seen with my "naked" eyes. One girl was given to her husband by the parents but the girl refused

²³ Waiyn Timbong is 45 years old and a second wife. She claims that the man got marriage to her because the first wife gave birth only to male children. She has four children, three females, one male. Timbong is her father's name. She is therefore known as the "child of Timbong".

²⁴ Yoma Evelyn is 24 years old, a nurse by profession, unmarried and a mother of three, working at the village health post at Jinkfuin-Kom. She is not a native of Kom. She believes that there are so many witches and wizards in Kom who are so destructive especially with regards to human fertility.

this choice. Her parents decided to go ahead and took the bride price despite the girl's rejection of this offer. The girl finally absconded and she finally got married to a man of her choice. Ever since she got married, she has not been able to bear a child. When a seer was consulted, she was told that there is a "mark" on her head by someone else and until that mark is removed, she can never give birth. She has been moving from one ethno-practitioner to the other to no avail. The man who wanted to get married to this girl has refused to take back what he gave the girl's parents as part of the bride price, (In-depth Interview, Yoma Evelyn, 11/02/01)

The above quotation shows how a woman's reproductive capacity can be destroyed through witchcraft. Ethnographic report asserts that witchcraft is real and active in this community. Feldman-Savelsberg (1999) supports this assertion when she links infertility and swollen belly (ascitis) to witchcraft in Bangante chiefdom.

Feldman-Savelsberg in 1999 highlights the issue of witchcraft in Bangante through the presence of *ntok* and *nzo*. She says people who practice these types of witchcraft leave their bodies and harm their sleeping victims by slowly eating up their organs. She emphasises the practice of *nzo* by women. Built on ethnography, we came to realise that the notion of stolen babies was so pronounced in Kom during our field trip. We were told that infertility inducing witchcraft was and still remains the pre-occupation of the central political authority, incarnated by the *Foyn* in his yearly priestly functions. In polygynous homes for want of attention from the husband, women indulge in witchcraft to render their more reproductive counterparts infertile. Several cases of witchcraft practices were quoted, concerning infertile women who wanted to get rid of the unborn babies of their most reproductive counterparts. For example, we saw elsewhere in this study a woman who demanded her own basin when she discovered that her co-wife was pregnant. When she was finally evicted by the husband for attempting to get rid of the baby from the womb of her counterpart, she finally ended up eating the uncle's child. The person who practices this type of witchcraft is called *avung* (eater of people), or "vampire" in Kom. This is the Kom version of *nzo* as mentioned by Feldman-Savelsberg in 1999.

When an illness lasts longer in Kom then there is reason to give explanation from the realm of custom. To guard against infertility inducing witchcraft, men exempt their wives from visiting their natal kin for fear of them being inflicted by their natal kinsmen, especially those women who have not been able to get married. Most of the time women go into isolation shortly after married until the birth of the first child. Marriage in itself is an act of competition within various lineages in which each family prefers its own daughters to get married than others. This leads to the practice of infertility induced witchcraft.

4.1.3. Infertility as a socio-cultural stigma

Infertile women are presented as the temple of evil spirits. This is seen in their relationship with their husbands, co-wives, their husband's families and their natal kin. Infertile women are at the jungle with no sense of direction considered by most people as dangerous, wicked and impersonal beings. That is why parents are always concerned about their daughters' reproductive prowess before giving them to marriage. This is seen through the complexity of the rites and rituals that precede marriage. Witches and wizards are believed to be responsible for ill-health in Kom. The cause of infertility is attributed to these elements. It is believed that these evil powers are found mostly in infertile women.

In Kom pregnancy is imbued with kingly attributes. This ranges from the modification of the woman's meals to a series of initiation rites conducted by the society in honour of the pregnant woman. This stage in life (pregnancy) reinforces the relationship between the husband's kin group and that of the wife. It is believed that pregnant women have extended rights, one of which is to harvest from any farm if the baby in the womb so desires, especially fruits which are badly needed by the baby. The husband is also entitled to supply the woman with special meals and needs like, meat (liver), eggs, a child's basin, *akang a waiyn* and very special comfort to enable the safe arrival of the baby.

Prolonged stay at the husband's house without conception slows down all the expectations by the husband's kin group and that of the woman's natal kin who start questioning the authenticity of the marriage. Should she be divorced, she will lose her farming pieces of land, which she can only get through her husband. If not a new wife will

be brought in and she will be pushed to the less productive pieces of land. Field research indicates that an infertile woman does not even need to eat meat and other basic food items like oil, meat and eggs. This is supported by Theresia Nange²⁵ in the following words-

An infertile woman does not even have to eat meat and oil. Look at me here. I left my husband's compound at Fungeih because he was not more looking at me ever since "chuo chvu ni bobe" (lit. the most tasteful to the man's mouth), came. I had no oil and meat to eat and so I left (In-depth interview, Theresia Nangeh, Njinikejem-Kom, 02/04/2001).

This woman was forced to abandoned her husband's home because she felt isolated. She saw nothing to attach her to the husband's home. She claimed that even the husband's relatives did not want her anymore and were constantly accusing her of "eating" the husband's wealth for nothing. According to her, children are the only means by which a woman can "enjoy" at the husband's homestead.

Another informant by name Tasa Grace²⁶, mentioned an infertile woman who wanted the husband to buy her a child's basin, *a kang a waiyn*, when she discovered that her husband has bought one for her co-wife who was pregnant. When the husband refused, she decided to beat up the second wife and water was thrown on her. Furthermore, she started developing evil schemes to eliminate the baby from the co-wife's womb. When the husband discovered her intentions through a seer, she was divorced. She finally went to the uncle's home. While there she decided to "eat" up the uncle's child and was driven out from there. This informant concludes with the following words-

She is now a wanderer while continuing with her witch hunting on fertile women, (In-depth interview, Tasa Grace, Njinikejem, 09/02/2001).

²⁵ Theresia Nangeh is 68 years old with no child. She is a tradi-practitioner who claims to specialised in the treatment of several diseases with infertility inclusive. She is a divorcee and lives in isolation.

²⁶ Tasa Grace is 38 years old and a mother of three children. She is a nurse working with Njinikjem health post.

Fertility is therefore an adaptive strategy especially for women while infertility is disastrous and qualifies women as socio-cultural aliens.

The larger society defines the legitimate criteria for sickness for its members. Cultural differences are perhaps more marked than socio-economic differences. Illness behaviour has been defined as “the way, in which symptoms are perceived, evaluated and acted upon by a person who recognises some pain or discomfort or other sign of malfunction (Foster & Anderson, 1978). This behaviour begins with an awareness of the first faint symptoms, the progression, the social and the physiological processes that occur, the termination, through recovery or death. At many points, during “the course of the illness”, medical and social decisions must be made, roles readjusted and attitudes changed to conformed to the reality of the situation.

While pregnancy attracts the attention of the entire community in Kom, infertility distances the sufferer from the community. A pregnant woman needs to abstain from heavy duties and special care from the husband is a prerogative. Special meals are obligatory and an attendant needs to be around at all times to help her if need arises. Infertility on the other hand scares the members of this community. Like leprosy, tuberculosis, and epilepsy, which are considered by the Kom people to be very dangerous if such people are allowed to live in the same community with others, infertile people are treated with a lot of caution for fear of being “eaten” by them through witchcraft. These diseases are believed to be unnatural and dangerous to the entire community. Sometimes, the sufferer is looked upon as a threat to the entire society and therefore needs isolation or risk being evicted. This is because it is believed that the family of the afflicted might be suffering from a curse or the individual himself may be responsible for his own doom. Any illness that is linked to witchcraft is looked upon with double minds.

Infertility is one of those diseases purported to be as a result of witchcraft most often on the part of the afflicted. Most women in our study area have been blamed for being responsible for their infertility because of their irresponsible behaviour in the past. This is explained by the none respect of cultural norms by the women themselves thereby invoking the attention of evil eyes.

Infertility is considered an end to the lineage especially in this society where women are looked upon as the link to future generations. In a matrilineal society like the one we have studied, the continuity of the lineage is at the mercy of the woman. This means that any woman who fails to perform the role of motherhood by bringing forth children is considered as a blockage to that lineage's survival. She is considered a witch whose dwelling place is in oblivion for fear of the harm she may inflict on her more reproductive counterparts. An infertile woman is not even allowed to send somebody's child since she has never known the pains of labour during delivery. She is not allowed to attend to a woman during delivery as she may harm the baby.

Field report, shows that most infertile women live in isolated areas. Nini Yulia²⁷ has this to say-

Infertile people do not need to live with people. First of all who's child will accept to help you? Rather than receiving that type of behaviour, it is better to live alone knowing that you have nobody, (In-depth interview, Nini Yulia, Fungeih, Kom, 05/03/2003).

Some informants believe that infertile people are hardly given any role to play within the daily affairs of the society and therefore they see no need living amongst people when they are not regarded as equal members of the society. Their isolation is also linked to the fact that most often, these very women are blamed for witchcraft affecting human and agricultural fertility. In this way, this set of people is looked upon as dangerous to the society since they have become the dead end of human life, not only to their genealogical line but also to themselves. That is why, a woman, no matter what qualities she has, her failure to give birth, is far worse than committing genocide. This further intensifies the cry of the woman quoted by Retel-Lawrentin A. (1979), in Upper Volta, who wants a child, even if it must die.

²⁷ Nini Yulia is 70 years old and has never conceived a child. She lives in an isolated place called, Fungeih and she claims that it is because no child accepted to come and live with her. Fungeih was formally considered farmland where people only go there to cultivate their crops but nowadays people are beginning to settle there.

Pregnancy is the dream of every woman in Kom. That is why women who find it difficult to get pregnant often ask, "Why was I born a women?" Infertility therefore is a mark of irresponsibility, the dead end of a lineage, and an abuse to humanity.

Foster and Anderson through more light on the stigmatising nature of infertility when they quote Sudnow making a distinction between biological and social death. It goes thus- Sudnow distinguishes. "clinical death or the appearance of death signs on physical examination; "biological death", the cessation of cellular activity, which is not easily established; and "social death", not a diagnostic implement, but the point at which the individual is accorded treatment appropriate to a corpse. Kalish's "anthropological death" (the point at which one is rejected or cut off from his social world) does not help the designation of the physical death, but all definitions attempt to cope with the critical medical designation of when an individual ceases to be defined as human.

An infertile person is therefore an object of Kalish's anthropological death. This inhuman treatment suffered by infertile people (social death) extends right to the corpse. We will see this under human fertility and death.

The tenacity of infertility and the stigma and poverty induced by childlessness means that therapeutic management groups and social support tend to collapse over time. The infertile woman is considered dead socially (isolated), and culturally (exempted from active participation in the affairs of the society). Unlike the concept of the living-dead who are believe to live-on even after the physical death, infertile people are death socially and culturally even after their physical death with respect to the manner in which the corpses are laid to rest and what they carry along to the world of the ancestors. They are therefore considered as the "dead-dead" after their physical death.

4.1.4. Human fertility and death

Field report shows that a childless person receives treatment equal to that of a sub-human, even when he dies. In this context, infertility is therefore perceived as death. In Kom, the dead are not dead. They are believed to have transcended to the world of the ancestors so as to better take care of the living. It is believed that the dead participate fully during their funerals and carefully check the activities of each member of the family.

Despite this belief, childless people are easily forgotten immediately after burial since there is no child to carry on the name of such a person. It is believed that the characteristics of dead people are carried on by their children. It is even believed that some people are reborn by their children. This is usually justified by the full character of the deceased which is carried by a child as he or she grows up.

Since childless people are considered socially and culturally dead as we have seen elsewhere in this study it will be necessary for us to give a better insight on how these people are buried when they die.

We will do this by examining three types of graves with respect to three different categories of people who die. This include- a young person (an unmarried person), married and childbearing individuals and the married and childless individuals.

A young person in Kom generally refers to an unmarried person. Marriage by itself is a mark of maturity and responsibility. An unmarried person could not be independent in the nineteenth century. Unmarried people in Kom are considered children who are still under their parents protection and guidance. Therefore, our concern here is on graves allocated to unmarried people. When such people die they are buried immediately on shallow graves about one and a quarter meters deep. Most often, the corpse is not put in a coffin but only wrapped up in a mat or pieces of clothes prior to burial. Reasons for immediate burial is because they have left nobody behind to prepare for their funeral. Again they have not expanded their sphere of influence through kinship ties. When married people die, no hasty burial is done since they belong to two distinct kin groups. Decision making is therefore an affair of these two kin groups. That is, the kin group of the man and that of the woman before burial rights are performed. The death of a young (unmarried) person is usually referred to as “hot” death, *ikfu mulum nchung* whose corpse is considered fragile and therefore can easily decompose in case burial is not immediately effected. In this case we see the link between marriage and maturity both to the living individual and to the corpse.

A married person is given a noble burial beginning from the presentation of sackcloth by kinsmen on both sides and the provision of a coffin that befits the taste of the person who died. The corpse of a married person can last up to three days, anointed

repeatedly with cam-wood (*pterocarpus tinctorius*). Marriage by itself is a symbol of responsibility and a measure of belonging to a wider world. The first son usually provides the coffin when his father or mother dies. In case he or she has no child, the son to the sister supplies one. Our concern here is on the nature of the grave in which such people are buried. Both childless and people with children have their graves dug with an additional one dug by the side called, *waiyn i se* (lit. the child of the grave). "The child of the grave" is a chamber dug by the side-wall of the grave to avoid the corpse or the coffin from having direct contact with the soil during tampering. The direction of this smaller grave is significant to the Kom community and indicates the type of the person who died. People with children have their *waiyn i se* dug towards the direction of the foundation of the house the corpse is laid. This means that though dead, he is still conscious of the fact that people have been left behind who need care. It is a sign of a job well accomplished here on earth. Though dead physically and buried, he lives on, through the children left behind. It is believed that an elder is not supposed to turn his back against a child who needs his protection and care. People who have children pass on to the land of the ancestors to mediate between gods for the wellbeing of the children. He or she is therefore compelled to keep a watching eye on those left behind. That is why the smaller grave is dug towards the foundation of the house the corpse is laid. The foundation here signifies that the person has been buried inside and not outside the house.

Childless people have all the mortuary rites observed when they die. Sackcloth and blankets are supplied to protect them from extreme cold as they move onto the land of the ancestors. The difference here lies on the direction of the "child of the grave", that is, the chamber in which the corpse is laid. This chamber is dug towards the opposite direction from the house the corpse is laid. Before putting the corpse into the coffin, a stone is put on the palm of the deceased. This signifies the degree of his dryness and hardness while here on earth. This reinforces the symbols and the imageries used in the explanation of infertility in this cultural universe. The direction of the chamber, in which the corpse is laid, is of great significant. The chamber, crazed away from the foundation of the house in which the corpse is laid, signifies that the dead person represents not only an end to humanity but also an end of his or her real existence. He or she has left nobody behind and

therefore needs to look unto the opposite direction. The opposite direction from the foundation means that the person has been thrown away since he or she was unable to perform his function as a human being while here on earth. Therefore a childless person does not only die physically but also socio-culturally, through the way his corpse are treated.

4.1.5. The concepts of *akain* and *dumwaiyn*

The concepts of *akain* and *dumwaiyn* are used to classify infertility in Kom. Total infertility in Kom is generally referred to as “*akain*” although situations do abound in which a person may be referred to have reverted to an *akain* after an initial stage of fertility. Generally, the term, *akain* refers to a person who has never conceived a child and may never conceive in his or her lifetime. That is, absolute bareness. The global belief in Kom is that an *akain* is a curse from God. Such people are believed to be very dangerous to the society and need to be treated with extra care and caution. Such a curse is feared by every Kom person and rituals performed prior to marriage are meant to wade off such eventualities. *Nawaiyn Sangli*²⁸ of Kitchu Kom, highlights the concept of *akain* to describe the fear of infertility, using in the following epigram-

Chemli gha iyvu ta mumi waiyn-a, wul ni tey ma ni ndi akain (lit. what is dropping from the sky like the “child’s water”? Someone has insulted me as an akain),
(*Nawaiyn Sangli, 02/02/01*)

The above epigram signifies the dream of every Kom woman whose primary concern is not to be insulted as an *akain*, (infertile). She therefore believes that one day, she will be able to bring forth a child. The direction to the sky is an open plea to the almighty to look down on those who do not have children and bless them with children. This epigram also denotes the Kom notion of childbirth, which precedes with the rupture of membranes during child labour, before the onset of cervical contractions.

²⁸ *Nawaiyn Sangli* is 70 years old and an escapee royal wife. She asserts that she has presided over several bom house rituals in which many woman have conceived as a result of such rituals. She claims to have walked on her feet at the age of seven months and therefore all young mothers bring their children to her to first put on the ground to enable them walk early.

Furthermore, a woman who has newly given birth always moves along with some water in a special calabash called, *fubom-fe-waiyn*, (lit. the child's calabash) decorated with cam-wood. It is believed that water never gets finished from this calabash which is considered the spring of life. So, women who have difficulties in conceiving are invited to drink from this calabash, the source of life. Infertile women therefore dream of water dribbling from the sky like this water from the "child's" calabash. This highlights infertility to be seen as a socio-cultural stigma

The concept of *dumwaiyn*, (dislike for children) is used most often to insult those who do not treat children fairly. By this concept, it is believed that people who do not have children do not know how to care for them. Such people are not allowed to eat from the "child's" dish for fear that they will consume everything from the children. It is believed that a "child's" dish is not supposed to be empty. This dish is considered the source of life. Therefore if a *dumwaiyn*, is allowed to eat from this "dish", he will destroy this source of life by devouring the entire contents. In this case, an unknown stranger may come at any moment and leave without having being entertained. Who knows if such a stranger may not be the "god" of children? If such a thing happens, then the family is cursed with infertility, (ethnographic report). The epigram below was reported by *Nawaiyn* Rebecca of Kitchu-Kom as a warning for those who give children's food to *dumwaiyn*.

Abana wana lamda ka yi visia dumwaiyn zi beti bonyuh (lit. who has cooked the child's food? Do not allow dumwaiyn to also eat). (In-depth interview, Nawaiyn Rebecca, Kitchu-Kom, 02/02/01)

In Kom, people who have children are considered responsible people who are suppose to treat other children without discrimination. On the contrary, childless people are believed to be irresponsible and therefore are given all sorts of negative attributes like *abvuk* (lit. a useless person), *abvu* (lit. a dry person), and *fukah* (lit. a piece of wood), among others.

4.1.6. Infertility and gender

Kom men believe that infertility is a woman's problem. Men have the final say as far as the health of the entire community is concerned. This position is seen through the way men handle their respective households. They decide when their wives and children should seek medical attention and when not to. If they suspect any practice under the auspices of health care, which is believed to be detrimental to the health community, they will violently reject it. One of those things men will violently reject is when the fertility of their female children and that of their wives is seemingly threatened by biomedical practitioners. Tasa Grace, a health worker supports this claim with the following words –

We had a lot of problems during the just ended polio immunisation campaign. One man who said none of his children was going to receive any medicine from us chased us out of his compound. The man accused us of trying to sterilise his children. As we tried to persuade him, he took up his machete and followed us. We had no other choice but to escape. Most men have also banned their women from attending antenatal clinics saying that we teach unlawful practices which are against the wellbeing of humanity. (In-depth Interview, Tasa Grace, Njinikejem-Kom, 07/02/01).

Most women also hold the fact that infertility is a woman's problem. One informant questions how one can prove that a man is infertile. She says even if there was a way to prove a man's infertility, women will still be the ones to bear the highest cost since it is the man who decides whether a woman should remain in his house or not. During a focus group discussion at Njinikejem in Belo-Kom, this informant by name Mary²⁹, said that only women have to bear the consequences in case of an infertile union and therefore should use their initiatives to guard against any feelings that they are infertile. This is what she proposes as a remedy to keep the marriage intact –

²⁹ Mary is married and a mother of four kids. She claims to know so many women who have been divorced by their husbands because they could not give birth. She sells in an ethno-medical pharmacy and also prescribes remedies to patients.

If I discover that my husband cannot give me a child, I will "steal" from "outside". I cannot even tell my husband that he is infertile because I will be the one to loose. Men can never accept that they are infertile. How can I even prove it when men do not get pregnant? So to keep him happy, the only thing I can do is to get pregnant at all cost. (Mary, Focus group discussion, Njinikijem-Kom 14/01/01)

Ralph Thomlinson had earlier supported this view when he says, that the limiting person in fecundity of most families is the woman. He stresses that a man's ability to reproduce is almost unlimited by comparison to a woman's. The following statement confirms this assertion-

A Pharoah of Egypt supposedly begot more than 1000 children, and the first Khan boasted that his household cavalry troop of 800 men were all his sons not to mention his some 2000 other children. (Ralph Thomlinson 1968:145)

The Kom men find themselves in this unlimited arena of fertility, as they believe their fertility is unlimited.

In Ralph Thomlinson (1968), Carolus Linnaeus insisting that, only women give birth, sums up the entire concept of fertility in the following words –

Everything living comes from the egg. (Ralph Thomlinson, 1968:146)

4.2. REPRODUCTIVE PROWESS AND MORAL CONDUCT

Marriage is a union of two kin groups not merely the coming together of two persons. If marriage is a union, then moral conduct between the two kin groups must be maintained so as to ensure the security and the safety of their children in holy matrimony. It is believed that a child is the "mother's child" only as long as it is still in the womb. Once the child is born, it immediately becomes the child of the entire society. Anybody who has a child has the right to send whoever's child without any fear of remorse. The words of childbearing parents are believed to be full of wisdom and free from insults and

curses. He who has children tries to create a friendly relationship with many people as possible so as to introduce his children for future marriages.

Children bring about food security and sharing. People with children are believed to be especially generous. That is why so much importance is given to the child's dish commonly known as the child's basket, *ikel i waiyn*. This particular dish is believed to be constantly flourishing with food, the source in which strangers are entertained. This marks the hospitable nature of fertile women in Kom. Further, the character of a person can be judged by the way he, or she, eats from the child's dish. Only childless people can eat up all the food from the child's dish. This in itself is an indication of irresponsibility on the part of those who do not have children. Therefore, children are a source of affluence and a guard against moral conduct.

Entertainment of strangers is very sound in Kom. Here, the notion of "god" is highlighted. Like the biblical allusion, which talks of fair treatment towards everybody, the Kom person feels that by entertaining everyone, gods are entertained. Anyone who fails to supply drinking water to a stranger who is thirsty as well as anyone who fails to entertain a hungry stranger is at the risk of being cursed. It is believed that if strangers are well entertained, the god of plenty will open up his bands and allow surplus to fall on those concerned. This abundance includes food and countless children.

Children do not only ensure moral conduct in Kom, but also ensure the survival of the marriage itself. When a man gets marriage, the first pregnancy is generally a highly welcome issue by the man's kin group, especially the husband's mother. Most women have their first babies at their mothers-in-law's residences. This is the only opportunity through which the mother-in-law fully integrates her daughter-in-law into her family and kinship circle. This therefore means marriage is not fully consummated until the wife has given birth. Pregnancy therefore becomes the final seal of marriage, the sign of complete integration into her husband's family and kinship circle. In this perspective, children are a means by which matrimonial stability is maintained in African communities.

Therefore, fertility is the commanding factor, which allows women to acquire full control over their husbands. The fertility of a woman is therefore a method by which men use to guard against divorce as well as to ensure the benefits that an ideal wife can get

from a satisfied husband. It ensures the acceptance of the woman by the bridegroom's family as well as the happiness of the bride's family who will not have to pay back the bride price in case of a divorce.

The quotation of Waiyn Timbong is a clear indication that infertile women are the temples of evil spirits as we see in the following words-

If I even talk and spoil, what will happen? Is it a child to cry in my arms one day that I will be forced to speak out?, (In-depth interview, Waiyn Timbong, 15/01/2001)

4.3. IMPACT OF INFERTILITY ON KINSHIP AND MARRIAGE

In Kom, children are the buds of the society and every birth is the arrival of "spring", when life shoots out and the community thrives. In this context, marriage and procreation become inseparable. The harmonious survival of the community is determined by the unity of the two individuals in particular and the society at large. This unity is determined by the capability of the individuals with regards to procreation. In a society where being a woman meant being a mother, the actual make up of such relationships depended very much on the fertility of the woman. This is what Professor Nkwi says concerning procreation-

It is the theory of procreation which expresses a peoples beliefs as to the physical contribution of the father and the mother to the formation of the child, and hence the traditional conception of physical continuity between one generation and the next, and the next their beliefs as to the influence of the dead members of each social group over the living and hence the social identification of a man to the line of his dead ancestors (Nkwi 1976: 28).

From our previous discussions, we have seen that infertility plays a disruptive role in kinship ties. While infertility plays a negative role in the Kom community, fertility brings about socio-cultural cohesion through the warm welcome accorded the unborn child

by bride and groom's families. In this context, children become the mechanism through which kinship ties are further strengthened. The illustration below shows how children play an important role in marriage and kinship relations.

Ghes si ne-a ne-na dengha, su nyansi dien gvui ne waiyn a ghes yein. "We're so overwhelm with joy, you people should show us the baby as fast as possible so that we can see", (field notes, 02/03/2003, Belo health centre).

The above epigram was being chanted by a group of women who were anxiously waiting to receive a new born baby at the maternity centre in Belo-Kom, popularly known as "Ngwa"³⁰. Here present was the mother of the girl (bride) and the mother of the man (bridegroom). The two families were all present, anxiously waiting for the forthcoming baby. Shortly after wards, the great news was announced to the waiting crowd. They all burst into extreme ecstasy singing joyously even before the baby is shown to them.

I can now be counted among the elders of the village. (mother to the girl, Ngwa, 02/03/2001)

From the above informant, we gathered that her daughter made one and a half years at the husband's house before ever becoming pregnant.

In this case, infertility widens the gap between two kin groups. One would imagine that these two families have lived asunder for one and a half years and have been finally reunited by the long awaited baby. In case this baby did not come, then such families may never have had the chance to come together. This means that without children family reunions will be difficult if not impossible thereby weakening marriage and kinship relations. In this context, infertility disrupts marriage ties as well as kinship relations within the Kom community.

Therefore, failure to give birth is worse than committing genocide. The individual has not only brought an end to humanity but has come to the end of her real existence

³⁰ Ngwa is synonymous to childbirth in the Nggvin Kijem sector of Kom. It is one of the oldest maternity centers in Kom. When somebody says "I am going to Ngwa", especially pregnant women, what comes to mind is child birth. Presently, it has been upgraded to a health center.

since her name will not continue. One's name can only thrive through a child who can carry on the name to the next generation. Children therefore are pathways to future generations. Her integration into the husband's lineage is threatened. Marriage will not be fully consummated since most families wait for the birth of the first child before a full validation of the marriage.

CONCLUSION

There is an intricate link between moral conduct and fertility, as well as practices, which hinder both human and agricultural reproduction. There is also a culturally established link between witchcraft and infertility. Social positions are determined and influenced by human reproductive capacity. Children are the springboards through which kinship ties are strengthened. Furthermore, marriage is fully consummated through the birth of the first child. This highlights the concept of infertility as a nightmare to most women in Kom since children are their reason for happiness as married women. Without children, women lose all the benefits that can be derived from their satisfied husbands.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

The importance of infertility as a Public health problem as well as a socio-cultural problem can be judged from the perspective of the couple, the health care providers and the society at large. The infertile couple is subject to a variety of family and socio-cultural pressures, the health care providers who are looked upon as the last hope meet with stiff resistance in trying to put infertile couples together. The society, on its side looks at these people as incomplete beings and therefore have nothing to contribute for the welfare of the society.

Field report shows that, without procreation, marriage is incomplete. It is a religious obligation through which the individual contributes the seeds of life towards man's struggle against the loss of original immortality. In Kom the living-dead are reincarnated in part, so that aspects of their personalities or physical characteristics are "reborn" through their descendants. It is in one's family that the living-dead is kept in personal memory- the longest, after physical death. Elderly people usually say to their grand children who seem to wait too long before getting married- *If you don't get married and have children, who will pour libation to you when you die?* (Field notes, January 2001).

To die without having children in Kom is to be completely cut off from the society, to become disconnected, to become an outcast and to lose all links with mankind. Thus childlessness consistently causes emotional, social, economic and sometimes physical suffering particularly for women as well as the source of most anxiety and disillusionment.

All our stated hypotheses have been validated. However, other related areas to infertility, such as, the role of traditional medicine in the treatment of this situation are still beginning to be addressed.

In those countries or segments of the society in which the traditional emphasis on a woman's role is defined in terms of her fertility, involuntary infertility represents a socio-cultural stigma, usually, often unfairly borne by the woman. Failure to bear children is an accepted basis for divorce in many cultures.

Couples suffering from infertility, often require detailed, sophisticated and costly clinical and laboratory examinations, stretched out over a period of months. Most of the rural women do not have access to these expensive technologies. Even their basic needs

are in the hands of ethno-medical practitioners whose compensation is most of the times in kind (fowls, raffia wine, goats, etc).

The role of the people's customary ways to guard against witchcraft affecting human and agricultural reproduction has been diluted by the influx of many religious sects. The failure of the elders to perform their role as the custodians of the wellbeing of all has been abandoned in the hands of overzealous youths who care very little about the dangers involved in their actions.

The traditional society find it difficult to live with uncertainty. They want to know "why?" Why do the rains come and the crops mature one-year and not the next? Why does one villager prosper in wealth, while his neighbour remains poor? Why does one girl suffer repeatedly from a sore throat, while her sister rarely does? There are so many "why" questions in the lips of many within the traditional setting.

In a pluralistic medical society, like the Kom, much emphasis is on the personalistic or externalising causes of a disease rather than the naturalistic or internalising disease causation, which dwells more on the individual than on the entire society. The preoccupation of the afflicted, is on who lies behind the cause. In this light, the naturalistic or internalising medical system is seen as the by-product of the personalistic or externalising medical systems. This is seen on the less interest that is paid on the immediate cause of disease. Naturalistic or internalising medical systems therefore can be placed under opportunistic infections, (diseases occurring because of the presence of a major infectious agent). If the cause of disease is "who" lies behind the cause, and not "what" is the cause, then, the agent must be identified and propitiated or otherwise rendered harmless if recovery is to be permanent.

Furthermore, almost all diseases and misfortunes in Kom are believed to originate from personalistic or externalising agents. Human fertility is one of those areas which is believed to be mainly affected by agents. This account for the complex series of rites performed prior to taking marriage vows in order to render all the pending personalistic or externalising agents harmless or propitiate them. This is because the first and the most important reason for getting married in Kom is the ability to bear children. It is on the basis of how many children one has brought into the world that socio-cultural positions are

awarded. This justifies our hypothesis on the award of socio-cultural positions.

The emphasis on agents, which cut across the natural and the supernatural world, is widely shared in Kom. The disappearance of children from the wombs of women is one of those things believed to be as a result of witchcraft. The concept of stolen children from the womb is common in female gatherings. Most of the times these messages are transmitted in form of epigrams. Foster and Anderson (1978) had this to say pertaining to witchcraft: -“ordinary people, equipped with the proper technical skills- sorcerers, various supernatural entities, such as ghosts, bush devils, and witches or the supreme god, Nyame, acting alone or through lesser gods, may all cause disease” (emphasis on agents). This is what they further say concerning disease...

the Mano of Liberia found that among these people “disease” is unnatural, resulting from the intrusion of an outside force, usually by magical means (Foster and Anderson, 1978: 55).

In Kom, people hardly talk of a natural cause for ill-health, without an underlying personalistic or externalising cause. There is no suffering without a supernatural force somewhere that has come to bear on the sufferer with or without his consent. Infertility and swollen stomach (ascitis) are the leading witchcraft diseases. Since women are considered as both sufferers and those responsible for infertility inducing witchcraft, they are the ones who suffer from sexual as well as economic discrimination from their husbands. The in-laws look at them as “eating” the husbands’ wealth for nothing. This logically leads to divorce or polygynous marriages.

Medical systems are rich and complex organisations that serve many roles and goals. They reflect the fundamental patterns and values of the cultures of which they are a part. Only when viewed in the broad context of total socio-cultural milieu can the health behaviour of the members of any group be fully understood.

All medical systems have both preventive and curative sides. When people believe that illness is sent by angry gods or resentful ancestors who are punishing sin, the obvious procedure to prevent it is confession or, better still, the meticulous observation of socio-

cultural taboos and careful execution of rites and ceremonies owed to the gods and ancestors. For those who attribute illness to witchcraft, it is wise to avoid offending neighbours who might resort to nefarious acts. If illness is thought to follow the entry of cold air into the body, the cautious person tries to avoid situations in which cold air may strike him. Where babies are feared will sicken because of the envious glance of a barren woman, careful mothers place appropriate amulets around the infant's neck or wrist to ward off the evil. With the continuous degradation of cultural values, these issues need to be re-examined.

Medical anthropology builds a bridge between the health sciences and anthropology. Anthropology's comparative framework helps medically trained people avoid a limited one-culture perspective, to see how socio-cultural environmental factors affect health, and to be aware of alternative ways of understanding and treating disease. The holistic approach of medical anthropology views humans as multidimensional; as biological organisms, as social persons, and as beings that communicate and maintain cultural systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Infertility remains a plague to the rural poor as well as a hindrance to the socio-cultural fabric of the affected population. Since individuals complain of infertility because of personal reasons, and not because of their inability to contribute to the size of the national population, greater resources should not be directed towards family planning and child spacing but towards the fight against socio-cultural elements which impede human and agricultural reproduction and encouraging those factors which enhance human and agricultural fertility. This can be done through involving ethno-medical practitioners in the decision making that has to do with health, disease prevention and treatment. Ethno-medical practitioners should be empowered to function overtly without any fear of reproach from their bio-medical counterparts. This approach will help reduce charlatanism, which has eaten deep into the internal fabric of human nature. Research centres can be created as a unifying arena to reconcile bio-medical and traditional medicine patterning to health and disease.

The government should rethink on the health repercussions of the populations to which development is intended. This is because these projects are embarked upon without the proper sensitisation of the populations on the dangers of new strands of diseases that are caused by population contact. Most enclave zones suffer the onset of diseases like malaria, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) such as gonorrhoea and syphilis, as well as other infectious diseases like tuberculosis following the influx of different populations under the canopy of developmental issues. Feldman-Savelsberg (1999) likens infertility in the Bangante chiefdom, to the spread of sexually transmitted diseases during the arrival of missionaries.

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3. INFORMANT PROFILE

Informant Number	Name	Age (years)	Category	Place Interviewed
1	Bobe Ngoh Chia	80	Tradi-psychiatrist	Njinikijem
2	Felix Mugwo	72	Witch doctor	Njinikijem
3	Bobe Ansah	33	Tradi-practitioner	Njinikijem
4	Nchuodzi Christopher	57	Tradi-practitioner	Jinkfuin
5	Bangha Se Peter	55	Tradi-practitioner	Jinkfuin
6	Getrude Ndokwo	60	Tradi-practitioner	Kitchu
7	Francis Wulnibaih	65	Tradi-practitioner	Isaibal-Fundong
8	Boh Tim (James)	67	Tradi-practitioner	Ameng-Fundong
9	Ngong Wilibroad	37	Tradi-practitioner	Fundong
10	Nzhindo Tangwa	60	Tradi-practitioner	Fundong
11	Boh Nchuoh	45	Seer	Mbam
12	Kendong	50	Tradi-practitioner	Mbam
13	Nzhindo Nchih	65	Tradi-practitioner	Alim
14	Ngam Henry	62	Tradi-practitioner	Mbam
15	Bobe Akem	63	Tradi-practitioner	Alim
16	Lawrence Ntoh	50	Tradi-practitioner	Fundong
17	Gham Julius	38	Tradi-practitioner	Fundong
18	Boh nte (Nzhindo Mama)	68	Tradi-practitioner	Fundong
19	Dr. Ngong Aaron	55	Tradi-practitioner	Kikfuni
20	Ignatius Tehdze	35	Tradi-practitioner	Kikfuni
21	Nawaiyn Rebecca	57	Lay person	Kitchu
22	Sangtum Andreas	70	Tradi-practitioner	Njinikijem
23	Bobe Foinmbe	91	Tradi-practitioner	Jinkfuin
24	Nfoiyn Simon Ngum	40	Tradi-practitioner	Jinkfuin
25	Bobe Timngum Lehteh	90	Tradi-practitioner	Njinikijem

26	Nzhindo Kumbong	48	Tradi-practitioner (cancer specialist)	Acha
27	Fidelis Wam	40	Tradi-practitioner	Kitchu
28	Bobbe Aboh	49	King enstooler	Aboh
29	Na Nsom Ngwe	80	Royal wife (lay person)	Aboh
30	Na Michael Ndichia	85	Royal wife (lay person)	Aboh
31	Bobbe itsin	68	King enstooler	Aboh
32	Sarah Shey	60	Midwife and proprietress of a clinic (childless)	Fundong
33	Rev. Sister Thea Fonyuy	50	Bio-medical practitioner (childless)	Njinikom
34	Rev. Sister Benadette	48	Bio-medical practitioner (childless)	Njinikom
35	Nawaiyn Sangli	70	Formal royal wife	Kitchu
36	Waiyn Timbong	45	Lay person	Kitchu
37	Evelyn Ngang	40	Lay person	Kitchu
38	Irine Bih	26	Lay person	Bobong
39	Nteff Nelson Bangha	55	Lay person	Kitchu
40	Romanus Tchiva	40	Lay person	Fundong
41	Waiyn Sam	52	Lay person	Kitchu
42	Nteff Emmanuel	30	Lay person	Belo
43	Theresia Nangeh	68	Tradi-practitioner	Njinikijem
44	Tasa Grace	38	Bio-medical practitioner	Njinikijem
45	Nawaiyn Nghwo	51	Tradi-practitioner	Ashing
46	Nzhindo Fulani	70	Tradi-practitioner	Kitchu
47	Kuh Joseph	32	Bio-medical practitioner	Aboh
48	Nawaiyn Menso	35	Bio-medical practitioner	Mbingo
49	Nawaiyn Abulah	36	Bio-medical practitioner	Mbingo
50	Ngoh Esther	55	Bio-medical practitioner	Mbingo
51	Nawaiyn Ayungha	45	Tradi-practitioner	Abuh
52	Nawaiyn Sih	45	Bio-medical practitioner	Mbingo
53	Nawaiyn Ngwe	37	Bio-medical practitioner	Mbingo

54	Fulai	29	Lay person	Anyajua
55	Dr. Nono	35	Medical doctor	Mbingo
56	Yoma Evelyn	24	Bio-medical practitioner	Jinkfuin
57	Timchia Magarette	46	Bio-medical practitioner	Mbingo
58	Nini Yulia	70	Lay person	Fungeih
59	Yonghabi Lydia	50	Bio-medical practitioner	Belo
60	Nchuo Mary	50	Bio-medical practitioner	Mbingo

Source: Field notes, September 2000-February 2001.

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GLOSSARIES

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1. KOM-ENGLISH

Abai- Compound

Abasakom-The other side of Kom

Afoh nutu- A Nocturnal gift.

Aghena a waiyn- a special calabash for bathing children

Akain- Absolute inability to conceive

Akiia Mufui-The forest of medicines

Akum- A smaller institution (village version of Kwifoyn)

Avung- a type of witchcraft, in which, the victim is eaten mysteriously

Ayunga-ndo- the extension of the house.

Bobe- compound head

Bonte-village head.

Cha-ah Kom- Kom soil.

Chong- powerful socio-cultural and large sacred association

Dumwaiyn- hater of children

Foyn- king

Funteti- ward.

Ibegiwuwi- begging for a wife.

Ikenghiwain- a child's sacred calabash.

Ikel i waiyn- a child's dish

Ileng- a kind of candle

Iloul- herbs used in washing kids

Isai-ndo-buttocks of the house

Kengsi- life plant

Koh ngang-going up the place of sacrifice or ascending the sky

Kwifoyn-All men's regulatory society

Laikom- the place of Kom.

Muso- witchcraft

Muso bugh- evil witchcraft

Muso jung- good witchcraft

Mooh- water

Mukal- guinea corn bear

Nawaiyn- mother of a child

Ndo- house

Tsah-ring.

Ushu-ndo- the arm of the house.

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2. MEDICAL TERMS

Ascites (hydroperitoneum)- the accumulation of fluid in the peritoneal cavity, causing abdominal swelling.

Anovulation- absence of the release of female germ cell (ovum) in the ovary.

Azoospermia- the complete absence of sperms from the seminal fluid.

Ectopic pregnancy (extrauterine pregnancy)-the development of a foetus at a site other than in the womb.

Fibroid uterus- a benign tumour of fibrous tissue in the muscular wall of the womb.

Hydrosalpinx- the accumulation of watery in the fallopian tubes, which becomes swollen.

Oligospermia-the presence of less than the normal number of spermatozoa in the semen.

Orchitis- the inflammation of the pelvis.

Ovarian cyst- a fluid filled sac; one or more of which may develop in the ovary.

Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (PID) – an acute or chronic condition in which the uterus, fallopian tubes, and the ovaries are infected.

APPENDIXES

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1. INTERVIEW GUIDE

I. MARRIAGE AND SIGNIFICANCE

1. At what age can a girl marry? Why?
2. Which types of rites or rituals precede marriage and what are the significance?
3. Do women give any conditions to bind their stay at their marital homes?

II. SOCIETAL KNOWLEDGE OF INFERTILITY

4. What according to you is the meaning of infertility?
5. When a couple is unable to bring forth a child, who receives the greatest blame, and why?
6. How do people in Kom consider and treat infertile couples?
7. How is the relationship between an infertile woman and her husband, her natal kin, her husband's relatives?
8. Are there any songs, proverbs, or terms used in describing infertile men and women?
9. Are there any institutions here in the village whose membership is denied infertile women/men? Which ones and why?
10. Are there any practices in the village, which make women vulnerable to infertility? Which are they if any?

III. SOCIETAL MANAGEMENT OF INFERTILITY

11. Can infertility according to you be treated?
12. If you happen to discover today that you are infertile, where will you first seek help and why?
13. How is the medicine prepared and how is it administered?

IV. INFERTILITY AND POLYGyny

14. Do you think infertility is the cause of polygyny in Kom?
15. What is the relationship between an infertile woman and the following people?
 - a) Co-wives.
 - b) Co-wives' children.

V. INFERTILITY AND DEATH

16. When a childless person dies, how do the people handle his corpse, what do people say about him/her, and what happens to his/her property?

2. QUESTIONNAIRE FOR THE BIO-MEDICAL INSTITUTIONS

NAME OF INSTITUTION _____

QUESTIONNAIRE N° _____

We thank you for accepting to participate in the study we are carrying out to know the problems faced by childless women and their needs in the domain of reproductive health. All the information you will give us will help develop appropriate activities, which will be helpful to many women suffering similar problems in various parts of the country. The data collected remains confidential and anonymous. You do not need to mention your name, but I should be very grateful if you answer frankly the questions I will ask you. Thank you in advance for your co-operation.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Date _____ Sex () 1. Male () 2. Female Age: _____ years

Marital Status: () 1. Bachelor () 2. Married
() 3. Concubine () 4. Divorced
() 5. Widow (er)

If married, type of marriage: () Monogamous () Polygamous

Number of children: _____

Religion: () 1. Catholic () 2. Presbyterian
() 3. Moslem () 4. Animist

Occupation: () 1. Family Planning Counsellor
() 2. Gynaecologist
() 3. Obstetrician () 4. Other, specify _____

Ethnic group (tribe) _____ Quarter _____

I. IDENTIFICATION OF INFERTILE WOMEN (DIAGNOSES)

1. For how long have you been working in your present category? _____

2. Approximately, how many patients do you receive a week? _____

3. From your statistics, how many patients have you received from Kom during the past 12 months? _____

4. How many types of infertility do you know?

a) _____

b) _____

c) _____

d) _____

5. According to you what are the causes?

a) _____

b) _____

c) _____

d) _____

II. INFERTILITY AND SOCIETAL REACTION

6. Do you know any woman or women who have been ousted by their husbands for failing to give birth?

Yes No

7. If yes, how many? _____

8. Do you know any one who has been able to conceive up to this particular moment?

Yes No

9. Do your patients present any signs of depression?

Yes No

10. If yes, name them _____

11. Do they accuse anyone for their misfortune?

Yes No

12. If yes, who do they accuse?

a) Their husbands

b) Their co-wives

c) Others, Specify _____

13. Do you think infertility is the cause of polygamy?

Yes No

III. MANAGEMENT OF INFERTILITY

14. From the patients you have received have you been able to make any of them pregnant? Yes No

15. If yes, through which method?

- a) An advice
- b) Surgical Intervention
- c) Others, specify _____

16. Have you been able to convince any couples to understand their cause of infertility? Yes No

17. If no, which of the couples failed to understand?

- a) The husband b) The wife
- c) Others, specify _____

18. Are your patients interested in your job? Yes No

19. Can you briefly outline the difficulties you go through?

- a) _____
- b) _____
- c) _____
- d) _____

20. What are the difficulties encountered by an infertile woman in her marital home?

- a) _____
- b) _____
- c) _____
- d) _____

