

BOOK REVIEW

Erica Van der Sijpt. *Wasted Wombs: Navigating Reproductive Interruptions in Cameroon*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2018. 280 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$39.95. Paper. ISBN 9780826521705.

A young woman's pregnancy ends under ambiguous circumstances, and individuals in Asung, a rural village in eastern Cameroon, accuse her of aborting it. The young woman reluctantly admits she had tried to abort the pregnancy before deciding to keep it. Her sister claims the loss was caused by a witch's supernatural attack, while others claim the formerly pregnant woman was the real witch. *Wasted Wombs* begins by telling this story in clear and poised terms; it then proceeds to take readers through varied understandings of reproductive interruptions among the Gbigbil people in Asung. Erica Van der Sijpt seeks to go beyond analyzing abortion and miscarriages to examine "the conditions and configurations that shape [them] and that affect how women give meaning and direction to their experiences" (4). Using the concept of navigation to examine what women do after losing or aborting a pregnancy, the author contends that "[r]eproductive conjectures" represent "a potential turning point in people's reproductive lives" (10). Ultimately, as the author asserts, moments of reproductive disturbances are *fertile* grounds from which to analyze how women enact agency when striving to cultivate varied reproductive outcomes.

The impressive analysis makes Van der Sijpt's work comparable to other classic works on gender and reproduction in Cameroon (e.g., Ardener 1962; Feldman-Savelsberg 1999; Johnson-Hanks 2006). The use of the local idiom "abum ia digela [wasted wombs]," meaning pregnancies that do not end in a live birth, threads her examination of reproductive interruptions. She considers miscarriages, stillbirths, and perinatal and neonatal deaths, along with menstrual regulation procedures and induced abortions. Considering all these various forms of loss deepens our understanding of their meanings and how women cope with them, rationalizing their reproductive choices "within the social worlds of which they are part" (139). Through this rationalization, women have adapted gender ideals according to changing geographic and economic circumstances in eastern Cameroon.

Wasted Wombs contributes to larger understandings about gender and reproductivity in Cameroon and Africa. Much like other women

throughout the continent, Gbigbil women experience changing reconfigurations of ideal African womanhood in rural and urban spaces. For instance, they alter “meanings and management of fertility” according to different geographic contexts and economic constraints or possibilities (105). In rural settings, “proper” women focus on production—primarily by farming and having children. While women in both rural and urban locations seek respectability, for instance, through marriage and reproduction, the urban setting offers alternative paths to respectability that change women’s reproductive goals. For example, some unmarried women engage in sexual relationships with “gros poissons [big fish],” that is, wealthy men, to achieve an ideal urban life (117). But when such relationships lead to pregnancy, some women see it as an obstacle to larger urban aspirations, while others see it as a way to secure financial security through a lasting link to a wealthy man (122). Through her nuanced analysis of extensive oral sources, Van der Sijpt craftily challenges accounts that cast rural women as helpless victims and their urban counterparts as holding greater agency. The stories she shares reveal that pregnancy and its interruptions can cause both rural and urban women suffering as well as increased opportunities.

Van der Sijpt’s work informs global discourses about women’s reproductive activities and abortion rights. *Wasted Wombs* challenges assumptions in the West that interrupted fertility leads to only suffering (for those who confront infertility) or empowerment (for those who choose abortion), but never both. The situation is in reality much more complicated; Gbigbil women experience the loose boundaries between “victimization and agency” differently based on their social worlds and life circumstances (160). Women who experience failed attempts to interrupt pregnancies due to unforeseen circumstances may change their perspectives and attribute the resulting birth to predestination (166), thereby justifying and adjusting to changing reproductive trajectories. Women who lose a pregnancy, wanted or unwanted, might describe it as never having been “real,” due to different notions of what pregnancy is and when it actually starts.

The author draws from a wide range of sources to illustrate how Gbigbil women understand reproductive activities and interruptions, including 209 oral interviews, ethnographic observations, and relevant secondary sources. The text is accessible, through the delightful writing and captivating vignettes.

One minor drawback to the book is that the introduction does not provide needed background on the Gbigbil people. While Van der Sijpt addresses this issue in the first chapter, moving some of this information to the introduction might have allowed readers to grasp her main arguments and main points more fully, right away. Nonetheless, *Wasted Wombs* is an excellent and well-researched text that is accessible to graduate and upper-level undergraduate students. The book’s timely subject matter will appeal to scholars in medical history/anthropology, gender studies, and undoubtedly to individuals in women’s health organizations both in Africa and in the diaspora.

Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Madison, Wisconsin
jmougoue@wisc.edu

doi:10.1017/asr.2019.78

For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Barnes, Teresa. 2013. "Pregnancy and Bodies of Knowledge in a South African University." *African Studies Review* 56 (1): 1–20. doi:10.1017/asr.2013.3.
- Cooper, Barbara M. 2019. "Traveling Companions: The Burial of the Placenta in Niger." *African Studies Review* 62 (2): 127–48. doi:10.1017/asr.2018.17.
- Dodoo, F. Nii-Amoo, and Poem van Landewijk. 1996. "Men, Women, and the Fertility Question in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Example from Ghana." *African Studies Review* 39 (3): 29–41. doi:10.2307/524942.