

Pregnancy Pragmatics Unveiled: On Bodies, Bellies, and Power in Cameroon

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Abstract

Over the last few decades, anthropologists interested in reproduction have increasingly focused on the relationship between women's (limited) reproductive agency and (bio)political forces such as patriarchy, medicine, the state, and the global political economy. In their quest for understanding local and global 'politics of reproduction', some have turned their gaze towards the female body, considered to be a symbolic arena in which multi-level power relations are played out. These scholars have studied minute 'body politics' as reflections of wider 'reproductive politics'. This paper contributes to this growing field of study by adding a nuanced perspective of the role of the material body – rather than its symbolic representation

– in such reproductive politics.

Drawing on long-term fieldwork in eastern Cameroon, I describe how women's pregnancy pragmatics are informed by existing (bio)political forces on the one hand, and by their material bodies on the other. My detailed ethnographic material shows that, although forces like patriarchy, biomedicine, and the state shape the field within which Cameroonian women give meaning and direction to their reproduction, women themselves have considerable leeway to circumvent existing powers or to use them to their own advantage. I argue that this freedom is inherently connected to some bodily attributes of the reproductive process: the invisibility of early pregnancies grants women time and space for secret bodily interventions. At the same time, I show that the (unpredictable) body can also become a constraining force complicating women's reproductive navigation. Thus, by attending to both social and material dynamics, new light is shed on the arena of forces that impact upon reproductive practice, as well as on women's own agency within that arena.

Keywords: reproduction; body; power; Cameroon.