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PERCEPTIONS OF PREGNANCY AND CHILDBIRTH IN THE BAFUT FONDOM OF THE BAMENDA GRASSFIELDS OF CAMEROON

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ABSTRACT

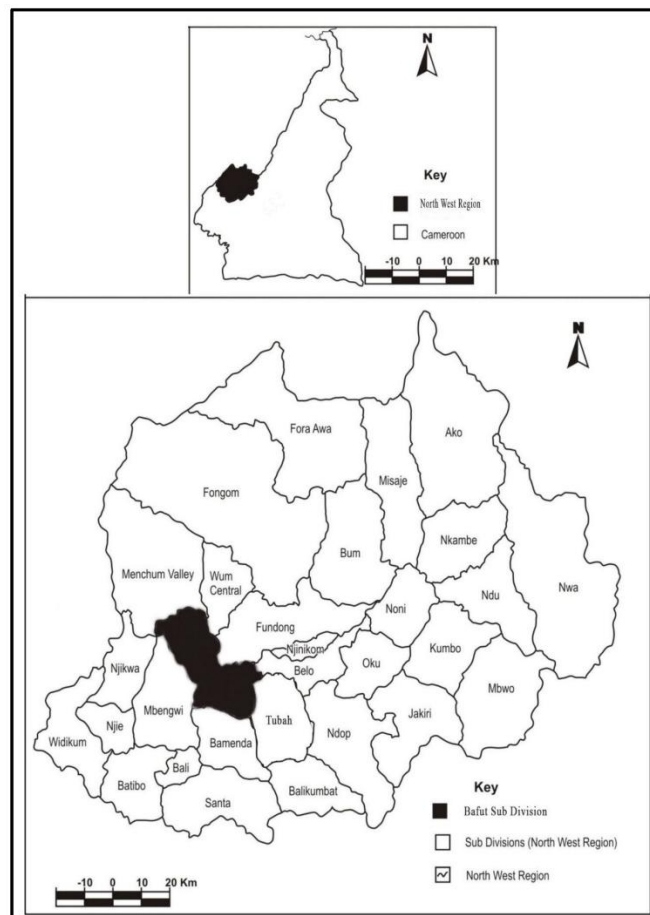
Pregnancy and childbirth are universal phenomenon but different cultures perceive it different and such perceptions are handed down from one generation to the next. Bafut people like all Africans have perceptions about childlessness, pregnancy and childbirth. The questions this article raises is how do the people of Bafut perceive childlessness, pregnancy and childbirth? The objective therefore is to find out the perceptions of the Bafut people about childlessness, pregnancy and childbirth. Data of the article is purely qualitative, collected using in-depth interviews and life history. The data was analysed during data collection and soon after fieldwork using content analysis. It was interpreted using the theory of social representation of Moscovici (1961). Findings reveal that childlessness is considered a curse and a childless man or woman does not earn the respect of friends, family members and the society. Pregnancy and childbirth are blessings and gifts from the ancestors and gods, and reincarnation of deceased relatives. Pregnancy and childbirth are marital phenomenon, a sign of fertility, and a fulfilment and pride to the family and society.

Keywords: perceptions, pregnancy, childbirth, Bafut Fondom, Bamenda Grassfields, Cameroon

1. INTRODUCTION

Pregnancy and childbirth are two very important phenomenon in every human society. While pregnancy is the progression of stages from conception to birth, childbirth is the action of giving birth to a child, as the culmination of pregnancy. These concepts are very important because they are the means through which new members of the family are born hence ensuring the continuity of family and society. In Africa including Bafut, childless women are not perceived in a similar manner like pregnant women. Childless women are treated with disrespect and regarded as liabilities to their families and society because they are unable to bring forth a child or children who shall take over from them when they have “gone beyond” - died. The objective of this article is to uncover the perceptions of the Bafut people about childlessness, pregnancy and childbirth. The Bafut fondom is found in Bafut Sub division in Mezam Division of the North West Region of the Republic of Cameroon (map 1).

Map 1: Bafut Sub Division in the North West Region of Cameroon

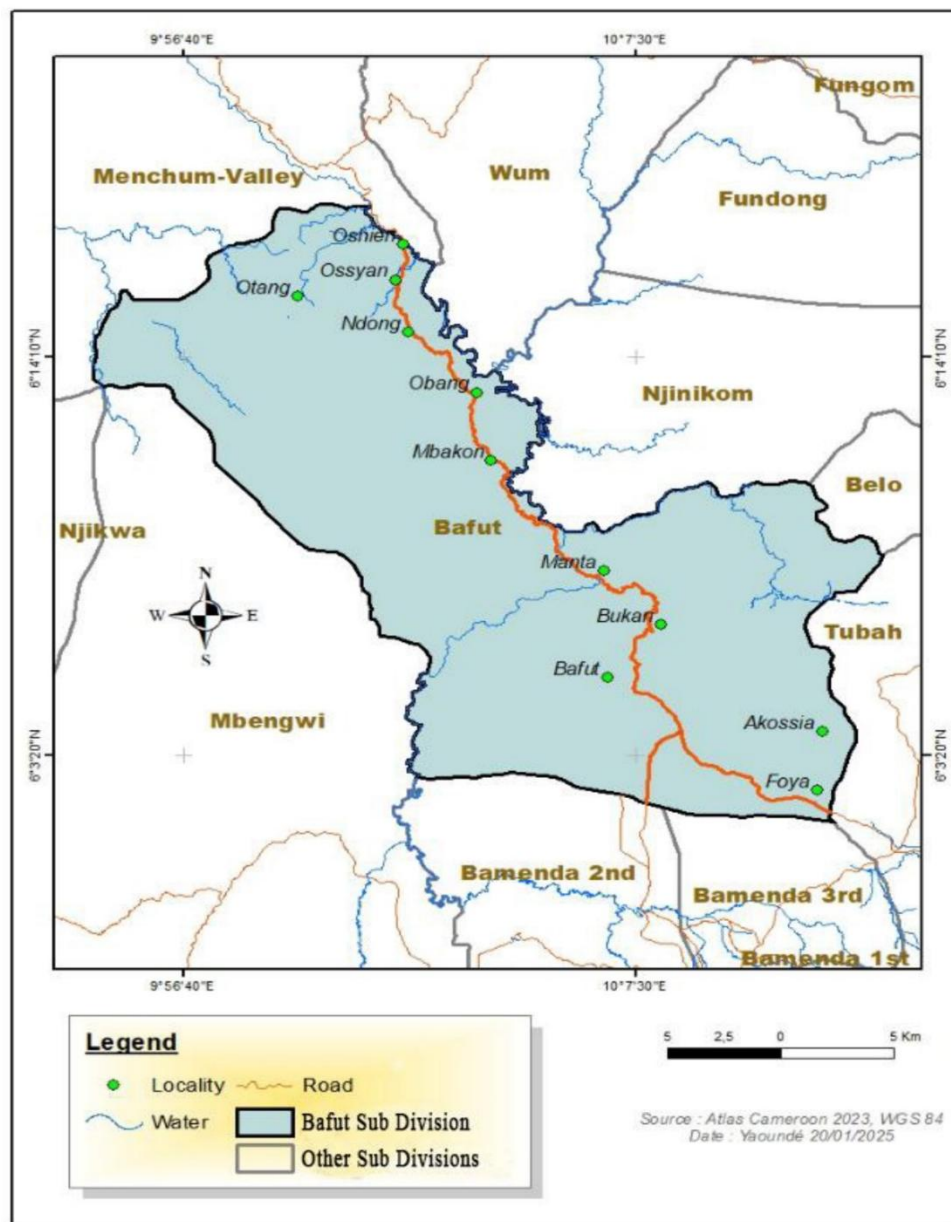


Source: Atlas Cameroon (2025)

The North West is one of the ten regions that make up the Republic of Cameroon. It is divided into seven Divisions and Mezam Division is one of them. Mezam Division on its part is sub divided into sub divisions including Bafut Sub Division. The others being Santa, Tubah, Bali, Bamenda 1, Bamenda 2 and Bamenda 3 Sub Divisions.

Bafut (map 2) a fondom in Bafut Sub Division shares boundary with Tubah, Wum, Menchum-Valley, Boyo (Njinikom and Belo), Mbengwi, Wum, and Bamenda 2 and 3.

Map 2: Bafut fondom and Sub Division



Source: Atlas Cameroon (2025)

Sama (2021), notes that geographically, Bafut is situated about twenty kilometres northwest of Bamenda, in the Mezam Division, and covers an area of roughly 340 km². Bamenda is the chief town and Regional head-quarters of the North West Region. It is located in the Bamenda or Western Grassfields geographic region - which includes Cameroon's North West Region and surrounding grasslands areas. Bafut is divided into 26 quarters.

Bafut is primarily an agrarian region with a rich cultural background. It is actually a composite of different ethnic groups. At the centre are the people of Mumala'a (heart of the country) clustered around the *Nto'oh* (Fon's palace) who refer to themselves as the real Bafut. This name is applied to the whole kingdom. To the south is the *Ntare* (ridge) area covering villages like: Mankwi, Mankanikong, Mambu, Bawum, Mundum and Akofunguba. The north is the Mbunti (lower) area, which descends abruptly to the Menchum River valley. Here, we have Tingoh, Obang, Mbakong, Butang, Kwaala, Buwe, and Bukari.

1. 1 Origin

Bafut tradition traces its dynastic origins to the Ndobo or Tikari areas. From the reign of AfooAfum or Firlo (Aletum, 1990) the first Fon of Bafut. Chem-Langhee (1976), Fanzo (1988), Ngoh (1987) note that many kingdoms of the Western Grassfields, like Bafut, claim an origin from the east in the Upper Mbam River area where the present-day Tikar people live. To give credibility to their claim, they record that the political institutions, spatial organisation, and religious practices show very strong similarities. The Bafut people migrated into the Grassfields area under several leaders and at different times. Most of the people of Bafut fall under the Tikari tribe. The migration of the Bafut people from Ndop has been attributed to disputes of succession, which resulted in the disintegration of the group. One faction moved to other parts of the former North West Province of Cameroon. Yet another faction moved to settle on the small hill called Mbebeli in present day Bafut about 1516 (Ritzenthaler and Ritzenthaler 1962, Nebasina 1973, Asombang 1999). These newcomers found out that some people had earlier inhabited the small hill so they settled with them peacefully after offering them gifts. Another group, the Buwe Bukari, was already settled in the lower part of Bafut but the two early settlers seemed not to have established any contact with each other. The Buwe Bukaris are believed to have found their way into this area through the Menchum valley. Another group of migrants into the area include the Bawum who claimed to have come from the hills of Bamenda Station; that is, around Bamendakwe. The people of Mambu claim a Widikum origin and passed through Mundum to Bafut. The only recognisable early settlement where the various migrants conveyed was Mbebeli supposed to be the earlier settlers of present day Bafut under the leadership of Neba Chi (Kaberry 1952, Chilver and Kaberry 1962/1968).

In 1518, two years after settlement in Mbebeli as a result of the rocky and hilly nature of the area, a woman from the palace went out for farming and fishing and found a level and fertile land. Aletum (1990) writes that according to legend, the present site of the Bafut palace was founded by one of the *fon's* wives whose original name was *Maa Lum Mochiengie* from mbebeli. She reported to the *fon* and after serious investigation the people decided to move to the level land which is where the present palace is located.

During their departure only part of the population moved to the present site because of chieftaincy disputes. As a result of the disputes, many people supported him (Neba Chi) because he was generous. Consequently, many people moved to places like Ntohmuwi of Niko quarters, Ntohnta'a of Njibujang quarter that later moved to Nkwen (another fondom). The Bafut people assassinated *Maa Lum Mochiengie* in an organised coup staged at Nsanimunwi. Since then, her name became "*Nduh-alaa-mbue*", meaning, "she who founded a nation, but got missing" (Aletum, 1990). The reasons for the act were to put an end to the respect she gained from many people. It was feared that she could pull the entire crowd to her side and power might one day be handed to her, as it happened with Neba Chi and Agha-Njo (Chilver and Kaberry 1963/1968).

1. 2 The Political Structure of Bafut

Bafut like most Cameroon Grassfields fondoms is highly stratified with the kwifon, the *fon*, sub chiefs and *fon* makers occupying positions of decision making. The kwifon is the highest institution in this society. According to Nkwi and Warnier (1982), a distinctive feature of the political system of all Western Grassfields states is the police society known as *kwifon* which usually has its quarters in the palace precincts and has, among its duties, the recruitment of boyhood of the palace retainers from freeborn commoners. Its authority is of an impersonal kind and its agents cannot be held to account by the populace. It takes decision and gives instructions on very important matters about the fondom. For example, work on the palace, shrines, roads, and repairs of the *fon*'s palace. The removal of pollution is the prerogative power of the kwifon.

After the *kwifon* is the *fon*. He is called *mfor* in Bafut. He is the highest personality in the village to whom inhabitants pay allegiance. He is a custodian of culture. He is chief military commander and the highest judge in the judiciary system. He is the chief priest and serves as a link between the people and the ancestral gods. The *fon* also performs rites to appease the ancestors, seek their help in times of difficulties and purifies the village from curses and witchcraft practices. Unsettled problems in quarter councils are brought to the village traditional council where the *fon* presides. The importance of the *fon* and the power he wields is reflected in the humble and respectful way the people greet him. To greet the *fon*, a man first bows, claps thrice and utters the word *mbeh*. Women stoop as low as possible before clapping and saying *mbeh*. The *fon*'s power is demonstrated through the use of the leopard or tiger skin, the red feather, special dances, dresses and special behavioural action

Sub chiefs are usually referred to as hereditary rulers, council of elders or clan heads. They work hand in hand with the *fon* in the management of the fondom. They are the *fon*'s advisers; they appoint and crown a successor when a *fon* is 'missing' and they are equally the core of the *kwifon* society. They represent the *fon* in their different areas.

Fon makers are equally very important notables and are usually old princes who are members of *kwifon*. They are princes, three to four generations to that of the *fon*. They can become members of the *kwifon* because of their seniority in the palace. They are part of the ruling class, and as such they together with

sub chiefs administer the affairs of the fondom, advising the *fon* on very important issues and also taking part in the ‘catching’ or appointing and crowning of a new *fon*.

1.3 Economic Activities of the People of Bafut

The Bafut people are engaged in a variety of activities which generate income to support the livelihood of many families. Some of these economic activities are farming, arts (embroidery, sculpture and basketry) and hunting. Most people own farms on which they cultivate cereals (maize, beans, and soya beans), tubers (cassava, colocasia and yams), plantain and banana. Other farmers plant cash crops like palms. The few people who are involved in commercial and tertiary activities, still farm as a secondary activity. A few of the men who own palm bushes from which they tap palm wine used in rituals and for commercial purposes. Many of the palm plants produce nuts which are collected to make palm oil and *meyanga* – oil obtained from the kennels.

Many people are involved in artistic production and prominent among them are embroidery sculpture and weaving. Embroidering of traditional gowns (Togho) of the Bamenda Grassfields is mainly an activity that takes up time for a few of the women. These women produce gowns for almost everyone in the society. But in the past, these traditionally embroidered robes were used only by the members of the ruling class as they (robes) were adorned with emblematic symbols. These traditional wears worn in cultural ceremonies are sold in the local markets and in urban centres.

Some of the people, especially the men are engaged in wood carving, producing objects such as drums, stools, thrones, statues, pots, walking sticks and many more. The *Fon*, notables and secret societies used to be the major clients of these artists. Some of these items are reserved for the royalty and used during important cultural manifestations like the Abine-mfor or *fon*’s dance and death celebrations.

In Bafut women produce different types of baskets using raffia bamboos and fibres. The baskets which are manufactured in varied sizes and shapes are used locally as kitchen utensils in the preservation as well as transportation of food items. These objects are sold in the different markets in Bafut and in the markets of neighbouring fondoms.

Hunting is an activity carried out by many people living in the hinterlands where there are still some patches of forests. These individuals who use dogs and spears to hunt use the games for domestic and commercial purposes.

1.4 Religion in the Bafut People

Majority of the people belief in the traditional religion, a religious belief which consists of worshipping gods, spirits and sacred forces. They believe that these spirits could bless them as well as harm them. There are different rituals conducted to venerate as well as ask for supplication from the gods.

Today, there are many religions in Bafut apart from the traditional religion, these include Christianity and

Islam. Christianity, brought to the Grassfields and the people of Bafut by white missionaries is the belief in the Almighty God. Those who practice this religion are called Christians. At the introduction of Christianity, much of their traditional culture was abandoned, including much native dance and song. Christians believe that God is the creator of the world and everything therein. Islam is a religion practiced by the Muslims population in Bafut. The word Islam means voluntary “Submission” or “Surrender” to the will of God (Allah). Muslims believe that God sent prophets to teach mankind how to worship Him, and the last of the messengers was Muhammad meaning peace be upon them all.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research was done through the following process: study designing, selection of research participants and tools, data collection, and data analysis. This process was guided by the theory of social representation.

2.1. Study design: The researchers used the narrative study design, a design which allowed the participants they interviewed to share their knowledge on what the Bafut people say about childlessness, pregnancy and childbirth. These participants were allowed to discuss just everything they know about these aspects (childlessness, pregnancy and childbirth). This study design guided the collection of data and the researchers’ used methods and analysis that achieved the research objectives.

2.2 Selection of Research Participants: The researchers used the snowball sampling method to select participants for the study. Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling method where new participants are recruited by other participants to take part in a research study. It begins with one study participant and then continues on the basis of references from this participant. The process continues until the researcher reaches the desired sample of a saturation point. The participants were mostly elderly women who have children, pregnant women and some elderly men who have a good knowledge on pregnancy and childbirth. The researchers worked with 10 mothers, 15 pregnant women and 5 elderly men in all. The snowball sampling technique was to ensure that a wide range of the study topic was covered.

2.3 Data Collection: The findings which have been presented in this article are based on interviews (in-depth included), as well as life histories conducted with some mothers, pregnant women and elderly men. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with mothers, that is, 10 women who have had children before, 15 pregnant women and some 5 elderly men. These interviews were to comprehend how the people look at pregnancy and childbirth. The interviews were also to understand how the Bafut people look at childlessness. What they said, helped the researchers to establish a link between their perceptions and where they go to when childless, pregnant or to put to birth. Life histories were done with two persons, one elderly woman of seventy-five years and a pregnant woman of thirty years. The interviews with them were done for long hours and over the period of four weeks to know what they say about women who do not have children, those who have and above all how pregnancy and childbirth are perceived in Bafut.

2.4 Data Collection Tools and Procedure: The researchers used the interview guide to collect data for the study. The questions that featured on the guide were on the perceptions of childless women, pregnancy

and childbirth. The guide also handled questions of where pregnant childless women go to, to become pregnant. In the course of the interviews, the researchers took detail notes in their exercise books. Most of these interviews were conducted in the evenings from 5pm when the participants had returned home from their diverse jobs. Many of the interviews lasted for an hour and those which did not end continued on a later date according to the availability of the informant.

2.5 Data Analysis: The data for this research was analysed during and soon after field work. Information recorded during interview sessions were transcribed verbatim and arranged according to the different themes; childlessness, pregnancy and childbirth, and categories of people interviewed. The data was analysed using content analysis and interpreted with the theory of social representation of Moscovici (1961).

3. Presentation of findings and discussion

Pregnancy is the progression of stages from conception to birth meanwhile childbirth is the action of giving birth to a child, as the culmination of pregnancy. In Africa including Bafut, every woman is expected to have a child as a child or children bring honour to the family, society and the ancestors. The people of Bafut like people the world over, have perceptions regarding pregnancy and childbirth and these could be understood better if childlessness is also examined. The data on the indigenous knowledge of childlessness, pregnancy and childbirth was interpreted using the social representation theory developed by Moscovici in 1961. Social representation theory is a social psychological theory that explains how people collectively construct and share knowledge about social phenomena. This theory describes how groups develop, communicate, and internalize shared beliefs, norms, and values, shaping their understanding of the world. Knowledge is not just scientific or objective but is shaped by culture, history, and social interactions. The perceptions of pregnancy and childbirth in Bafut, Cameroon aligns well with the social representation theory because childlessness, pregnancy and childbirth are not based purely on biomedical knowledge but on shared cultural meanings, traditional beliefs, and social norms.

3. 1. The perception of childlessness to the Bafut people

Childless which means a person or couple who has no child is an important issue in Bafut like in the whole of Africa. All women are expected to procreate especially when they are married to ensure continuity. When a woman gets married, her husband, his family and the entire society award the 'cry' or birth of a baby. But if she remains childless, the husband either gets married to another wife or sends her back to her family. That is, if a married woman does not have a child, she can never find favour from her husband or any of the husband's siblings and her mother-in-laws. Most times a childless married woman may counsel her husband to get married to another wife or she actually looks for a wife who could give him a child or children. The birth is not only a source of joy for the family and society but also an additional member of the family and society.

A woman who does not have a child is referred to as a log of dry wood as a result is treated as an object which does not have any 'use'. This is because she is unable to fulfil her fundamental role of production.

Because of her failure to produce, the mother of the man may force him to get married to another woman. She (the mother) like the other members of the family fear that their brother and son should not die without having someone to remember him.

A childless man just like a woman will not earn any respect from anyone in his family, among his peers and in the society at large. He may not be held responsible for his situation because a man in Bafut is never impotent. But because of his situation, he will not be allowed to speak where 'real' men, men who have children speak. Real men understand what it means to take and raise a child. Raising a child is challenging and changes the perception of a man or woman as the people think that anyone who has a child is expected to be compassionate and loving. This explains why the people believe that a childless man or woman is usually wicked and heartless. As a consequence, no one will accept to give his/her child to a childless couple to raise. And because of their childlessness, they will not have someone to mourn them when they die. Mbiti (1969) notes that:

If you do not get married and have children, who will pour out libation to you when you die? This is a serious philosophical concern among traditional African people. To lack someone close who keeps the departed in their personal immortality is the worse misfortune and punishment that any person could suffer. To die without getting married and without children is to be completely cut off from the human society, to become disconnected, to become an outcast and so lose all links with mankind. Everybody, therefore, must get married and bear children that is the greatest hope and expectation of the individual for himself and of the community for the individual.

3.2 The perceptions of pregnancy in Bafut

Pregnancy is a proof of fertility and an act which portrays the blessings of the ancestors and gods. It has numerous perceptions in the Bafut society; it is a marital phenomenon, a blessing and a gift from the ancestors, among others.

3.2.1 Pregnancy is regarded as a marital phenomenon

Pregnancy in the Bafut culture is a sacred embodiment of creation which must be acquired only in marriage. It is a taboo for a Bafut woman to get pregnant without being married. When children are born without their parents being married, they are not valued in their family in particular and in the society in general. Such children are often insulted humiliated by their mates, and the society. To avoid stigmatisation, a man and woman before venturing to have a child or children must be presented before the ancestors through marriage to be accepted and united by them, believe to provide babies. An informant stated that:

The Bafut people believe that pregnancy is sacred, a blessing from the ancestors. It is recommended by the culture that before a woman gets pregnant she must get married in a union in the presence of the parents and the ancestors. This union brings honour her culture and the ancestors (Bih, 22/07/2024, Mbebeli).

If a woman gets pregnant when she is not yet married, it is premarital pregnancy which is a taboo. She is disrespected by her family and the society. Even the parents of her friends would not permit them to visit or hang around her (the premarital pregnant girl) for fear that they may copy the same attitude and behaviour. Women who get pregnant in the Bafut socio-culture before marriage are referred to as *Nshüngmīdang*, meaning someone who picks things from anywhere. They are seen as outcasts and as a disgrace to the society. An interlocutor affirmed that:

The time I got pregnant before marriage, I felt so ashamed. I did not even leave my home often. I was always indoors for fear of the judgement of my people. I do not blame anyone because it is a bad thing in the culture. I even had to lose friends because of the premarital pregnancy (Sirii, 10/07/2024, Mambu).

The ill treatment given to premarital pregnant women makes so many young girls to avoid premarital pregnancy. So, they would wait to get married before becoming pregnant. Zwang & Garenne (2008) notes that premarital children born in rural South Africa are called *goyas* meaning wild cats because premarital pregnancy is not accepted in the culture. They continue by saying that in most African societies, premarital pregnancy is considered a disgrace and the stigmatisation with premarital birth has an effect on later marrying for girls.

The father of a premarital unborn child in the Bafut society, is not recognised as the child's father because he has not yet conducted the marriage rites which could provide him paternity of the unborn child. The child is therefore, considered as a maternal family child and the grandfather (maternal) regarded as the father, he names the child when s/he is born and takes responsibility of his pregnant daughter till she puts to birth. An informant noted that:

Here in Bafut, many men have been denied access to their children because they had the children out of wedlock. At times even when they go just for a visit, they are driven like dogs. They are considered as not related to the child, and s/he is known as the child of the family. Some men who find themselves in this situation, get married to the woman so that they have ownership of their wives and children (Ntohnwi, 28/07/2024, Manka).

The parents of a premarital pregnant girl are equally affected by their daughter's action as they are also insulted, humiliate as their daughter's pregnancy is attributed to poor parenting. They are therefore considered as people who could not take care or handle their daughter properly for her to defy the Bafut culture by getting pregnant. The mother of the girl suffers more because it is considered that it is her responsibility to educate her children especially the girls, on sex education and how to manage their homes when they get married. An elderly Bafut woman confirmed that:

When a woman gets pregnant when she is not yet married, she is not the only one who receives the disgrace, her family too does. She is called a prostitute, and her family is mocked wherever they go. But it is not like the people show it openly, but their actions and looks would say it all. At times some even voiced it out to their hearing (Akongwi, 23/07/2024, Mforya).

Furthermore, the family of a premarital pregnant woman may lose their credibility. If they were known and respected in the society due to their social standing or for something they had done for the growth of the fondom, this respect drastically drops. This is because the people believe that as the family is doing something good, they are expected to be exemplary for others to copy or follow. Jamaluddin (2013) records that different reasons may account for premarital pregnancy in girls. In Malaysia, disagreement, dissatisfaction, family problems, irresponsible parents, poverty, broken families and divorces contribute to adolescent behaviours. Lack of care, little or excessive freedom makes young girls involved in premarital sexual activities leading to pregnancy.

Concerning pregnant age, there is no particular age for pregnancy in Bafut, but the people consider 18 years and above, when a girl is mature as an appropriate pregnant age and this could only happen after married. Zwang & Garenne (2008) note that in earlier times in South Africa most marriages were arranged and most girls got married quite early. No matter the age, the pregnancy must be done through marriage.

3.2.2 Pregnancy is a blessing and a gift from the ancestors and gods

Pregnancy is perceived as a gift and blessing from the ancestors. An ancestor according to the Bafut people is a late/dead father, grandfather, great-grandfather and overall forefathers of a person. These ancestors the people believe, are still living and watch over them, by protecting and providing them with many blessings. Pregnancy and subsequent childbirth constitute just some of such blessings. As a recognition of the blessings, a child is given the name of one of his/her ancestors. An informant stated that:

Pregnancy in Bafut comes from the ancestors and the gods. The ancestors of the Bafut land know that the Bafut fondom cannot continue if they do not bless us with the gift of pregnancy (Nchang, 02/09/2024, Mforya).

Pregnancy and childbirth are all blessings from the ancestors, and for someone to get pregnant, s/he must be fertile. That is, s/he must be able to produce or reproduce offspring. All humans are capable of reproducing but biological, lifestyle and cultural factors may prevent this from happening. Fertility is one of the blessing and gift of the ancestors and this explains why whenever a Bafut woman gets pregnant which shows her fertility as a woman, she usually thanks the ancestors for it. Due to the importance of pregnancy, fertility rites are conducted every year during the *Abine-mfor* (Fon's Dance) by the *Kwifor* members known as the *Bukums*. These rites are meant to bring fertility in Bafut for the enhancement of procreation. During the start of the *Abine-mfor*, some very special rites and rituals are carried out by the *Bukums*. They go out of the palace to perform these rituals where they call on the ancestors and gods to bless the community with fertility. Awah (2005) notes that in Bafut, the *Kwifor* or *Bukums* conduct a major annual ritualistic activity surrounding the *Abine-Mfor* called M'ma'abumwi placatory rite, it is conducted just before the Mfor's annual dance to appease the ancestors believed to reside in waterfalls so that they should not cause the failure of the dance. On their return from the *Abine-mfor* sacrifice ask the ancestors for success of the next year, the fertility of crops and women, good health and prosperity.

The royal family also advocate for fertility in the Bafut socio-culture. Awah (2005) asserts that in the

Bafut socio-culture, the *Kwifor* and the royal family go to the waterfall at Mile 21 where they believe Fon Achirimbi II's spirit rests to perform some rituals during pre-*Abine-mfor*. On their return, they come back with blessings and fertility in every way into the society. These rituals are usually conducted as from February, the start of the Bafut calendar. It is believed that the *Kwifor* and the royal family who go to the waterfall take all the bad things to the ancestors and return with good health, food and fertility to the kingdom. The last group of people who leave the waterfall are the princesses. The princesses return with the offshoots of banana popularly known in Pidgin English as *pikin banana* which translates to, "The younglings of a banana plant." They move into the palace and place them into the *Achum*. These offshoots of banana brought by the princesses signify that they have returned with fortune. One of these fortunes is fertility which brings about the birth of a child, just like the name goes in Pidgin English, *pikin*. During this period of the *Abine-mfor* therefore, a lot of cleansing and blessing take place in the Bafut society which bring about fertility to all women. The only way that this fertility can be seen is when the woman gets pregnant reasons why the Bafut people see pregnancy as a sign of fertility in a woman.

3.2.3 The perceptions of Bafut Christians on pregnancy

Christians in Bafut perceive pregnancy to be a gift from God. God made man and the universe. So, he provides everything man needs including children. For this gift of pregnancy to be properly appreciated and received, it must come through marriage. When a man and woman get married, they become one and form a family. A man leaves his mother and father, gets married to his wife before God, in Church, and from there procreation can begin. The union ought to be accepted by God because if a woman gets pregnant without being married, the child will be considered to have come into the world through sin. As Christians, the child is treated as every other child but their parents must ask God for forgiveness. An informant stated that:

Pregnancy is a gift from the Almighty God, and it must come through marriage. Having a child when you are not married shows that you have fornicated which is a sin. A man ought to find a woman to marry so as to be able to have access to the gift of pregnancy and its blessings which comes from God Almighty (Bih, 22/07/2024, Mbebeli).

3.3 The perceptions of childbirth in the Bafut socio-culture

Childbirth as earlier discussed is the action of giving birth, the culmination of pregnancy. It is believed in Bafut that the real pain a woman has to experience, is the pain of childbirth, and there are several perceptions about this phenomenon. Some of them are confirmation of the ancestors' blessings, increase in family and ancestral lineages, and reincarnation of a departed family member.

3.3.1 Childbirth is perceived as the confirmation of the ancestors' blessing and gifts

Childbirth in the Bafut society is perceived to be a confirmation of the ancestor's blessings and gifts. When the woman successfully gives birth, it is believed that the ancestors' gift through pregnancy has finally been confirmed. Although childbirth is a blessing and gift from the ancestors and gods, a child who is actually born is provided by the ancestors. This is because there are certain children who are not meant to be born. These are those whose birth will bring only misfortune to his/her family and society. In order

to stop such children from being born, *Takumbeng* rituals are performed by the *kwifor*. The rituals constitute the blowing of wood ash in the air by the *takumbeng*, and when this is conducted, most of the children who were not intended to be born are flushed out from the wombs of their mothers. And Awah (2005) stresses that:

In the Bafut socio-culture, during the Takumbeng ritual, the Kwifor take a bundle of blessed wood ash from their lodge and blow it into the air as a sign of sending away misfortune. One of these misfortunes could be in the form of pregnancy; a child who is seen would cause havoc in the society may be affected by this and the child may not be born; as pregnancy is regarded as a gift from the ancestors, this means the pregnancy was not an accepted one. If the woman gives birth, it means it was an accepted one from the ancestors.

3.3.2 Childbirth is believed to increase family and ancestral lineages

In the Bafut fondom, childbirth is perceived to increase the family and ancestral lineage. When a man and a woman get married traditionally and give birth, the child is connected to their parents and forefathers (living and departed). The children they give birth to will grow, get married and give birth to their own children too, thereby, increasing the family, lineage and the entire Bafut fondom. Awah (2005) confirmed this when he noted that, families in Bafut are nuclear and extended which build up into sub lineages, lineages, the clan and the kingdom. Without childbirth, there will be no familial and ancestral lineage. Fru (2008) asserts that, in Mbatu, families desire children because they are the ones to continue the family line after the parents die. If a man dies without a child, his lineage ends. One of the informants stated that:

Childbirth increases the family and ancestry, and a person who has children has nothing to worry about, because even if he leaves the earth, he knows that he has left a part of him behind to continue with his name and ancestry (Ndohnwi S., 19/07/2024, Mankanikong).

In the case where a man gets married and his wife cannot bear him a children or children, he may decide to get married to another wife or many wives in order to have a child who will not only continue his ancestry but will also earn him enormous respect among his peers, family and society. A childless man as discussed earlier will not speak where 'real' men (men with children speak) because he does not understand the responsibilities which go with brining up a child.

Childbirth does not only increase family and ancestral lineages, it does same with the growth of the Bafut population. As more and more women give birth, the population increases, hence the popularisation of Bafut culture. When children are born, they are taught or they learn their culture which is intern transmitted from one generation to the next. That is, the children born learn the ways of life of their people, the language, how to prepare the traditional meal *Achugii*, how to farm among others. This does not only help perpetuate the culture, it also keeps it alive. An interlocutor states that:

The Bafut community is growing because of childbirth. If you look at the population of yesterday and today, we have grown enormously, and through this growth our cultural line has expanded. When children are born, they learn the language and many cultural aspects; dressing, feeding habits, farming such that where ever they find themselves, they exhibit this way of life. This explains

why in twons like Bamenda, Yaounde, Douala even in the diaspora, there are Bafut cultural association which organise cultural meetings, and activities like the 'achu festival' to show case their culture and train the younger generation in their culture (Ngum,25/08/2024, Mforya).

Mbiti (1969) notes that in African societies, there are some duties which cannot be performed if the family is small. Thus, the more the population increases through birth, the easier it is to complete these duties. Moffor & Alexandre (2024) add that, the birth of a child does not only bring joy for the family and society but also an addition to the members of the family and society.

3.3.3 Childbirth is perceived as the reincarnation of a deceased family member

The birth of a child is believed to be a rebirth of a departed family member. When someone from a family gives birth to a child especially of the gender of the late person, s/he is given the name of the deceased, an indication that the departed has been reborn and s/he must be venerated. Most times, if the new born is not given the name of the deceased, the baby or the family may be affected negatively; the child may be constantly ill or his or her family may have lots of misfortunes. This therefore shows that the ancestors control the activities of the living even in naming. A child named after a deceased, sometimes turns out to resemble as well as behaves like the departed. An informant stated that:

When a child is born in the Bafut socio-culture, he or she is named after an aunt or uncle, father and mther, grandfather and grandmother who had died. At times, you will find a child in a family who looks exactly like a late uncle, aunt, brother or sister. Some of the children born do not only come with the physical qualities of the dead person but equally behavioural. We believe that this are the handiwork of the ancestors (Shu, 29/07/2024, Agyati).

Children in the Bafut society like in the most of Cameroon Grassfields, is reincarnation of deceased relatives but these children are not treated the same. Bafut people celebrate male children more than their female counterpart. Male children are referred to as *Juu Ndah* meaning successors meanwhile the females are known as women who have to get married and leave the family. Reason why the Bafut people consider that the woman does not have a “country” or specific place. When she gets married to a male partner, she will adopt his name and she will move to the husband’s family where she will live forever. Even traditional titles are rarely given to women because Bafut is a patrilineal society and lineage is drawn through the man. A male child succeeds the father when he (the father) dies. A female child can succeed the deceased father only when he never had a male child. Awah (2005) underscores that, in the Bafut culture, male children are perceived to be the main and rightful gender to succeed their fathers. Descent in Bafut is mainly patrilineal. With the coming of a male child, it is believed that the paternal lineage will easily continue and there will exist what is popularly known in Bafut as *Juu Ndah* (successor). Fahimullah (2017) state that in Afghanistan, an inhabitant cried out because she is regarded as an outcast for having six (6) daughters. Her daughters were beaten and mistreated for being females. Conservative Afghan tradition is said to have always valued the birth of sons over the birth of daughters. Boys are considered as guaranteeing the family’s economic security in Afghanistan.

3.3.4 Childbirth is perceived to bring honour to the family

The birth of a child is regarded as an act which brings honour to the families of the man and the woman. Childbirth in general and the birth of twins in particular is celebrated. When a child is born to a family, family members, and friends provide food and gifts to the baby and the baby's family, an act which has to be repaid to the family member or friend when it is needed. That is, when a family member who provided food or a gift to the mother of the newly born baby has her own occasion, the baby's mother has to also provide food or a gift to this family member. This is what Mauss (1923) calls 'gift and counter gift'. He notes that, because gifts are inalienable, they must be returned: the act of giving creates a gift-debt that has to be repaid, gifts are never "free." Rather, human history is full of examples that gifts give rise to reciprocal exchange, and gifts entail three obligations: to give, to receive, and to reciprocate.

The birth of a child is celebrated but the celebration varies according to the type of child; single child, twins (mefa'ah), and a child born with the umbilicus tied around his/her neck. Single children are celebrated with merry making; songs and dances and specific rituals in hour of the baby and family. The birth of twins is celebrated with special rites; songs and dances and the eating of twins' oil and salt. Twins in Bafut are two children born from the same mother at the same time. A family that gives birth to twins has more honour, as the children are regarded as extra blessings from the ancestors. When a woman gives birth to twins, she is seen as a person whom the ancestors has blessed double. The twins' mother is given the title, *Mangiiee* meaning mother of twins, and the twins' father is given the title *Tangiiee* meaning, father of twins. This title is given as an honour to them, and they are addressed by these titles wherever they go. Mbiti (1969) notes that some societies greet the birth of twins and triplets as a great blessing to the community and a sign of very high fertility. One of the informants stated that:

Being the mother of a child, I was greatly honoured in my society, my family and my husband's family as well. The honour just surpassed when I gave birth to twins, my husband and I earned a lot of respect as we were each awarded traditional title of Mangiiee and Tangiiee (Nchangwi, 25/08/2024, Mforya).

A child born with the umbilicus tied around his/her neck is celebrated in a similar manner as twins. His/her birth is not a normal occurrence (the umbilicus tied around the neck) by so doing s/he is considered as a single twin. Such a child is given a twin name and all the rites performed for twins are conducted for him/her all in his/her honour and family. But in this case, his/her parents do not receive any title.

4. CONCLUSION

Childlessness is a state of not having a child or children. Pregnancy is the progression of stages from conception to birth and childbirth is the action of giving birth to a child, as the culmination of pregnancy. These concepts are very important because they are the means through which new members of the family and society are born. Pregnancy and childbirth are perceived differently by different cultures. In the Bafut fondom, pregnancy is regarded as blessings and gift from the ancestors and gods. The ancestors provide children and to venerate them, the children are name after them. Failure to name a child after an ancestor may attract the wrath of the ancestors who may bring courses on the living. Although a blessing and gift

form the ancestors, children are treated differently with the male child given more value since he shall succeed his father and continue his lineage. Twins bring more honour to the Bafut people than a single child. A child born with the umbilicus around his neck is perceived as a single twin hence given a similar treatment like twins due to the condition surround his birth. Childbirth increases as well as perpetuates the Bafut culture.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The researchers declare that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this study. This research was conducted without any commercial and financial relationship that could be constructed as a potential conflict of interest.

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