

## AVOIDING SHAME: THE ETHICAL CONTEXT OF ABORTION IN GHANA<sup>1</sup>

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*Induced abortion is considered reprehensible by Akan people in Ghana when it causes medical accidents or becomes publicly known. A secret and successful abortion, on the other hand, is approved of. This paradoxical view proves logical if we see how it is related to shame. Both childbirth and abortion are potentially shameful, but the shame of the latter can be hidden and thus avoided. The shame of an unwanted childbirth, however, will always be visible. A smooth abortion, therefore, takes away the shame of both.*

Abortion<sup>2</sup> is reprehensible unless it is successful and remains hidden—this is, in a nutshell, the prevailing opinion of the Akan in Southern Ghana. In this paper I hope to demonstrate that this paradoxical statement is perfectly consistent with the ethical thinking and acting of those Akan who are involved in abortion problems. In the first section of this paper I will give some information about the research on which this essay is based and then, in section two, I will continue by providing some data on the practice of inducing abortion. In section three, I shall dwell briefly on Akan ethics in general and in the fourth section I will discuss ethical thought and behavior with respect to abortion.

### *Research*

This paper is based mainly on research that I carried out in 1973 in a Ghanaian rural town, and on complementary research carried out by Asante-Darko. Both studies were conducted among the Akan, a matrilineal society of approximately 4 million people.<sup>3</sup> The 1973 research included among other things participant observation, in-depth interviews, questionnaires and projective tests. The subject of the research was sexual relationships and birth control, including abortion. Forty-two members of a matrilineage were intensively interviewed and observed, and 100 men and 179 women in the same community were inter-

viewed through questionnaires. The differences and even contradictions between the results of the two approaches were alarming. Information about abortion in particular frequently proved to be distorted and concealed (cf. Bleek n.d.).

The complementary research by Asante-Darko focused on the consequences of unwanted pregnancy and abortion for the education of young women. He sent mail-questionnaires to 206 schools in two regions (secondary schools) and two districts (middle schools) in Southern Ghana. He further interviewed a number of informants about 55 cases of abortion, involving mostly female school pupils.

Research into abortion in Ghana is extremely difficult, as will also be shown by the present paper. With a few exceptions, abortion is illegal and is practiced only in a clandestine way. There are no archives with information about the frequency of abortions, mainly for two reasons: abortions done in hospitals are not entered into the files exactly because it is punishable, and most abortions are probably done outside hospitals by the women themselves and by other individuals. Moreover, the women themselves are very reluctant to disclose anything about their abortions and try to prevent an interview through distortions and concealment (cf. Bleek n.d.).

*Abortion in Southern Ghana*

In this section I summarize some data about the practice of abortion; more extensive information can be found elsewhere (Bleek 1976; Bleek 1978; Bleek and Asante-Darko 1979). All these data should, however, be read with some reservation because reliable information is hard to obtain.

Among the 42 members of the lineage, I came across 29 cases of abortion and 10 women (out of 19) with one or more interrupted pregnancies. This lineage is the only "population" in Ghana about which there is general and reliable information concerning abortion. If we, for a moment, assume that this lineage is somehow representative of other lineages throughout Southern Ghana, we get at least some impression of the possible frequency of abortion. It would imply that about 15 out of 100 pregnancies end in abortion and that over half of the women undergo an abortion at least once.

It is mainly young people who have a wide knowledge of abortive methods. It is striking that these people know more about abortion than about contraceptives. In total I noted 53 different methods of abortion (Bleek 1976:212-215; Bleek 1978:114-116). They were divided into three categories: modern methods, herbs, and miscellaneous. Modern methods include, for example, dilation and curettage by a Western-trained doctor, use of instruments by midwives and unqualified abortionists, and all kinds of pills and syringes which can be bought in local drugstores. Examples of the use of pills are an overdose of APC pills and Alophen, a purgative, without abortive working. The herbs form the largest category. Different parts of the plants are used: leaves, roots, bark, twigs, seeds and fruits. The methods of use also vary. Some herbs are drunk in a solution, others are used in an enema, and still others are inserted in the uterus. Plants and trees which have been mentioned include mango,

pawpaw, pineapple, cotton, lemon, coconut and passion flower. The miscellaneous category includes washing blue mixed with water, extremely sweet drinks, alcoholic drinks and physical exhaustion.

Most techniques are applied by the women themselves or by acquaintances, but there are also abortionists who are—often mistakenly—considered experts. It is my impression that those abortionists should not be sought among the traditional herbalists but rather among keepers of drugstores and individuals who practice it outside their main occupation. Western-trained doctors are both ignorant and skeptical of most of these methods.

Although the social circumstances leading to abortion are complex and variable it seems reasonable to point out three factors which probably are frequently the most crucial ones in decision-making. In the first place, many cases of abortion occur in a school situation. A pregnancy often means the end of a girl's education. I am convinced that this factor also plays a role in the unequal sex ratio in Ghanaian schools. Completion (and possibly continuation) of one's education enhances one's prospects (for example, of finding a job and marriage partner). The termination of a pregnancy, therefore, is often a question of life importance for the female pupil. Ironically, the school situation also encourages premarital pregnancies; one reason for this is that sexual relationships, both with fellow pupils and with teachers, raise a pupil's prestige (see Bleek 1976:52-56).

A second important factor is that many pregnancies which are terminated are due to premarital or extramarital relationships. In that situation too the birth of a child is disadvantageous for the partner involved. I shall give three examples. First, both partners—or one of them—may prefer to keep their liaison secret to enable them to carry on with it. The arrival of a child would disturb such a plan. Second, it often happens that the male partner refuses to accept moral and financial responsibility for the

child. For the women this may be a reason to seek an abortion. Third, the woman may not wish her friend to become the father of her child.

A third factor which may lead to abortion is a rapid succession of pregnancies. A rather strong norm stipulates that there should be an interval of several years between the births of children. This opinion probably derives from the experience that a woman finds it hard to look after two small children simultaneously.<sup>4</sup> When a second child follows at a short interval, the first child sometimes dies.

There are indications that the medical results of abortion can be very serious. A number of the techniques in use are dangerous and can cause death, sterility or other medical complications for the woman involved. There is a general impression in Ghana that many young women die as a result of abortion.<sup>5</sup>

The consequences for the woman's education are generally favorable, provided the abortion is successful and remains hidden. The abortion enables the female pupil to continue her education, which she otherwise would have had to give up or at least interrupt. When, however, the abortion causes complications or becomes known the pupil will almost certainly be dismissed or stay home herself.

In spite of the fact that abortion in Ghana is still illegal in most cases and punishable with a maximum of 10 years imprisonment,<sup>6</sup> its legal consequences are, in practice, negligible. The most important reason is that usually all parties involved prefer to hush up the affair and keep the police out. It is believed that the police would only profit from the occasion by extracting money from both sides. Moreover, nearly everybody, police officers included, has once been involved in an abortion case, one way or another. During my research there were some cases of abortion which were widely known in the community; one even resulted in the woman's death. But during the whole year preceding

my observations not one complaint concerning abortion had been lodged with the local police office. Even in the capital of Accra prosecutions because of abortion were extremely rare (cf. I.e Poole-Griffiths 1973:120).

### *Shame, Respect and Ethics*

Before discussing the ethical implications of abortion let us dwell briefly on Akan ethics in general. In studying ethical thought and behavior among the Akan, one is struck by the emphasis which is placed upon external phenomena. Honor and respect are mentioned by the Akan themselves as two of their most important values, both in proverbs and in publications by contemporary authors (for example, Sarpong 1974:65-66). Well then, honor is only given to someone as a result of visible deeds and attributes. Social status is only achieved by someone if he is seen and heard by others. Unknown makes unrespected.

One of the first things an Akan child has to learn is to show respect. The child who does not show respect to others is the typical example of a spoiled child. The phrase *ommu asem* (he does not show respect) is the most concise way of expressing general disapproval of a child's behavior.

The same emphasis on external factors lies in ridicule as a social sanction, something which has also been noticed by Rattray (for example 1929:319), who was one of the first ethnographers of the Akan. Ridicule undermines one's position in the community and nothing is as highly regarded as exactly that: prestige. In traditional society prestige was derived from, among other things, political office, polygyny and number of children. Nowadays high education and success in business confer prestige.

The importance of honor and respect in daily life is revealed in many social phenomena. Funerals, for example, are used by the participants to demonstrate their

important position in the community. The fact that a large number of court cases are based on accusations of defamation is another indication. Also, in "family courts" much mediation takes place in conflicts which have been brought about by incorrect greetings and offenses.

Not only what is said is important, also when and to whom it is said. Speaking and greeting is strongly influenced by the hierarchical character of social relationships. An important criterion for the hierarchical order is age: the junior has to show respect to the senior. Another criterion is sex: a woman has to show respect to a man. It is a rule, for instance, that a woman gives her seat to a man, that she does not eat with her husband, and carries heavy loads for him. These rules are, however, much less observed if nobody is watching. A man who is seen doing "female" chores is ashamed (*n'ani awu*, which literally means his eye has died). Honor and respect in the domestic domain, therefore, depend on the eyes of others. Women often make clever use of the male concern about outward respect. In public they show deference but behind the scenes they exercise power over men.

Fear of shame influences human behavior in two ways: it stops people from doing things which make them ashamed or it encourages them to perform such "shameful" activities in secret. What is seen by nobody brings about neither shame nor honor; it is withdrawn from the ethical domain as it were. I have placed "shameful" in quotation marks because strictly speaking there is no question of shame, for the activity is seen by nobody. It is also possible that one attempts to prevent a threatening shame by means of another "shameful" deed which can remain hidden. In that case the various alternatives are weighed in an ethical-rational way: visible shame versus invisible. This also applies to the ethical context of abortion among the Akan.

### *Abortion and Akan Ethics*

Earlier in this paper I pointed out three social factors which tend to encourage abortion. It is not my purpose to suggest in this section that these factors are not the crucial ones and that the dominant factor leading to abortion is fear of shame. It is my intention to demonstrate that the fear of shame adds weight to the three factors mentioned above and makes the choice of abortion, however dangerous, more likely. It should first be made clear that abortion itself is potentially "shameful" and reprehensible. There are a number of reasons why this is so. An important contemporary explanation is that the negative medical consequences of abortion are widely known. In my survey of 100 men, 75 disapproved of abortion; 67 of them did so because of its dangers for the woman's health (Bleek 1976:219-225).

Another, more traditional, reason is probably that formerly abortion was a senseless and useless interference. Children were precious and necessary. Two factors which are conducive to abortion nowadays (premarital pregnancy and school education) did not play a role; schools did not exist and girls married before their menarche. Premarital pregnancies were therefore biologically impossible. Extramarital pregnancies did, however, occur and it is no surprise that Fortes (1954:265), who did fieldwork among the Asante in 1945, only heard of abortion in the context of extramarital affairs. With regard to the third factor, spacing of births, I have the impression that formerly the norm of spacing was much less enforced than it is nowadays. At the same time, however, I think that spacing was achieved more regularly in the past than at present because postpartum abstinence, however short, was observed more strictly at that time. In addition, infant and child mortality were more frequent then, which made the inducement of abortion even more wasteful and reprehensible. It is unlikely that

consideration of the human qualities of the fetus played any role in this view, as the Ghanaian philosopher Gyekye (1978) claims. Infanticide on deformed children was commonly practiced and a child was considered a human being only after the eighth day. In summary, there can be no doubt that abortion is regarded as morally reprehensible, on the ground of both contemporary experiences and traditional opinions.

The fact that, in spite of moral disapproval and medical complications, the practice of abortion is common can only be understood if we take into consideration the divergent effects of visibility and invisibility on ethical behavior. This insight into visibility and shame on the one side and invisibility and prevention of shame on the other will now be applied to the three factors mentioned as often leading to abortion.<sup>7</sup>

School education has become nearly indispensable for achieving high status. Giving up education has very unfavorable consequences for someone's future status. But it is not only the future which counts. The very act of giving up implies humiliation and shame. Most teachers who answered Asante-Darko's questionnaire reported that pregnant pupils are usually not dismissed from school but stop of their own accord. The most common explanation for this is that they feel ashamed ("shy, embarrassed, to avoid disgrace, to avoid ridicule, they feel they would be teased," etc.). A pregnancy threatens both a pupil's present and future status. Only an abortion can prevent such a double defeat, provided the abortion succeeds and remains hidden. The risks of an abortion are well known but since the pupil does not see any alternative she chooses an abortion.

There is, however, an alternative. Although there are some directives from the Ministry of Education and other authorities ordering the dismissal of pregnant pupils, there are sufficient possibilities for such a pupil to resume schooling after

giving birth. One possibility is to go to another school without mentioning the birth of the child. The majority of teachers answering the questionnaire were in favor of such a solution. It is, however, not clear whether, and how frequently, this really happens. Naturally, female pupils reporting to a new school always keep back information about their pregnancy, so school authorities have only fragmentary knowledge of these facts. Asked whether they had the impression that female pupils resume schooling after the birth of their child, the teachers responded as follows:

They (or most of them) resume	22
Some resume	34
They resume seldom or never	24

Although we do not have exact figures it is clear that a large number of pupils never resume schooling after giving birth (the above table seems to suggest that about half of them do). No doubt an important reason is that the child's birth has weakened their concentration and their motivation to complete school. Another factor hampering their early return to school is the norm that a mother is expected not to leave her child in another's care until it can walk. A third reason is that pupils who have a child are ashamed to go back to school. Only a secret and successful abortion can prevent these problems.

A similar argument applies to the abortion of a premarital or extramarital pregnancy. In various ways a pregnancy threatens to interfere with a secret love relationship. A pregnancy brings a secret relationship into the open and robs it of its most enticing quality, its secrecy. Often the relationship cannot stand the light of day and "melts" away. If the male partner declares that he is not prepared to accept responsibility for the coming child the woman is faced not only with financial problems but also with loss of prestige. A woman who has a baby, but no male who declares himself the father of the child, is ridiculed. The only way out is an abortion,

provided it is successful and no one finds out about it.

The third circumstance in which abortion is likely to occur—lack of spacing—is also strewn with feelings of shame and fear of ridicule. A woman who becomes pregnant again very soon after the birth of a child is ridiculed. She is compared with certain animals who also have a high fertility, for example pigs (cf. Kumekpor and Kumekpor 1977:9). She is also reproached for her lack of sexual self-control while no such word is used with regard to her male partner. Again in such a situation a secret abortion offers a solution.

### Conclusion

I have attempted to demonstrate that an apparently contradictory ethical opinion about abortion proves to be very logical and consistent when viewed in its social context. Although abortion is generally disapproved of in public, it is frequently practiced in secret. As long as an abortion is successful and remains hidden it is ethically neutral and is—also in secret—judged mildly by the insiders. However, if one of the two conditions is not fulfilled the abor-

tion will be severely criticized. If an abortion does not end well, everybody will say that the woman acted in a foolish and frivolous way; if all ends well the insiders will say that she did the right thing. If the news of an abortion—either successful or not—spreads, the deed will be condemned as well. As a result, the woman is overcome with even more shame than she was trying to escape from.

The contention that abortion should remain hidden is confirmed in a very poignant way by events taking place at funerals of women who died of the consequences of abortion. For obvious reasons, abortions which result in death are the ones which attract the most publicity. Nevertheless, during the funeral this cause of death is not mentioned. Even indirect allusions to it are carefully avoided. Everybody takes part in this game of denial. It is the only possibility for giving the deceased a decent funeral, because traditional rules forbid the family to bury the corpse if the abortion is publically recognized. Thus people are prepared to go in for collective self-deceit in order to save “the deceased and her family the greatest possible shame,” the refusal of a burial.

### NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> “Abortion” in this paper always means “induced abortion.”

<sup>3</sup> “Akan” is a comprehensive name for a number of culturally related societies that speak dialects of one common language, Twi. Some of these societies are the Asante (Ashanti), Fante, Akyem, Akuapem, Bono and Kwahu.

<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, twins are welcome among the Akan.

<sup>5</sup> The following quotation from Pellow (1977: 174) is typical: “Leafing through *The Daily Graphic*, the Mamponhene (paramount chief of Mampon) seriously repeated to me the commonly held belief that every young woman listed in the obituary section has died of abortion.”

<sup>6</sup> Between 1962 and 1969 abortion was even made a first-degree felony, punishable with a minimum of 10 years’ imprisonment and a maximum of the death sentence. Capital punishment has never been applied (cf. Le Poole Griffiths 1973:104, 120; Bentsi-Enchill n.d.).

<sup>7</sup> As I have said before, honor and shame also play an important role in Western societies. To this I must add that shame and honor affect not only the women seeking an abortion (which is the subject matter of this paper), but also those performing abortions. This view is presented by Ball (1970) in his study of respectability in an American abortion clinic.

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